



Coat

Unknown Innu (Naskapi) artist

ca. 1785-1800 113.03cm x 167.64cm

T0630

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1406/coat?ctx=936862469ca66e545cf8ff9edffdfb9122e5b8ed&idx=0>

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Hybridity is powerful notion when used to challenge the concept of authenticity. Authenticity assumes that a true version is possible when in fact it is based in the imagined reality where cultures are not in contact, do not mix and are superior for that purity. Colonial understandings of authenticity were (and continue to be) brandished as a tool of control and violence against Indigenous people.¹ Allowing for the hybridity of objects acknowledges the complexity of human and material interactions in the world. By thinking about objects as materializations of relationships between people, places and non-human animals across cultures, time and species enriches the concept of hybridity. The Innu painted coat in the Thaw collection is all the more interesting for its multi-valence hybridities that extend beyond Indigenous/non-Indigenous hybridities and into human/animal hybridities and relationalities.

At first glance, the coat looks similar to a coat one might see on a European man in France in the 18th century. The large flare can easily be connected to the fashionable *Justaucorps* coats of the late 1600s (Figure 1) while the back collar seems to represent the hood of the French and Métis capot with its hood worn over the shoulders (Figure 2).² Some debate exists over whether a coat with an open front such as this one is truly an Indigenous design. The pull-over style of the Athapaskan and Inuit uses less skin and is warmer than the open front of the Innu coats. All of these factors may be signs of European influence. Regardless of its origin, the brilliantly painted motifs, the methods of construction and the very purpose of the coats are distinctly Innu.

Innu painted coats were made for nearly 200 years, the last were made in the 1930s. The purpose of these coats was to honour the caribou and therefore convince the caribou to give itself to the hunter.³ Innu know that the outcome of a hunt is dependent on the hunter's relationship with the animal as much as his or her skill.⁴ The painted coat is therefore a physical attestation of the integral relationship between Innu and *minashkuau atik* (woodland caribou). Made of a minimum of two caribou skins, the skins were scraped and tanned, cut and then carefully painted and sewed into this striking coat. It may be understood as a hybrid object in that it materializes the relationship between the hunter and the caribou. The act of the hunter wearing the coat made from the skin of the caribou, has significant cosmological implications. Transformation from human to animal and vice-versa is an important feature of Innu cosmology. The acts of dressing, undressing and imitation are ways that the human and non-human animal transformations occur.⁵ This cosmology is even more explicitly expressed through the painted designs which came from hunters' dreams. The hunter would describe the patterns he wished to have painted on his coat to his wife, who would undertake the work to tan, sew and paint the coats. The central design on the

¹ Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast 1700 - 1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998) 3.

² Dorothy K. Burnham, *To Please the Caribou: Painted Caribou-Skin Coats Worn by the Naskapi, Montagnais, and Cree Hunters of the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 8–11.

³ Burnham, 1.

⁴ Kaneuketat and Georg Henriksen, *I Dreamed the Animals: Kaniuekutat: The Life of an Innu Hunter* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 187.

⁵ Kaneuketat and Henriksen, 19.

gore at the coat's back (Figure 3) indicates the coat's major theme, and its triangular shape represented the magical mountain of Katipenimitak (the caribou spirit).⁶

Dorothy Burnham describes the pattern on this coat as a 'growth pattern' of two leaves and a lozenge shape in the centre.⁷ The theme is similarly emphasized in the bottom border of the coat with a double curve motif alternating with another growth pattern with a horizontally oriented lozenge rather than the vertical one of the central gore and has a crosshatched circle surrounded by dots to fill the curves (Figure 4). The double curve motif depicted in this coat is typical for coats of this region and period.⁸ Adding a growth pattern out of the centre of the double-curve motif is also typical of these coats. These designs represent the relationship between the hunter's ordinary world and the dream world. They also denote the importance of communication between the hunter and the woman who painted the coat per his instructions.⁹ The dreams and their physical representation serve as another way of thinking about hybridity by describing the interface between the dream world and the physical one.

The relationship between Innu, the land, the animals that they interact with and the spiritual world are all embodied in this fine caribou skin coat. Using this many skins for a summer coat followed by a similar number for a winter coat was simply no longer possible by the 1930s because of the dramatic decline in the number of woodland caribou from both the George River and Leaf River herds. The end of the period they were made also reflects the changes brought on by colonisation in the Innu world that resulted in the loss of territory and Innu sovereignty.

Cite as:

Williamson, Christina. "Coat (T0630)." *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 6. (2017) [<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/williamson.pdf>].



Figure 1: *Don Luis* by Jacob Ferdinand Voet (c. 1684) depicts Luis Francisco de la Cerda in a particularly ornate *justaucorps* coat.

⁶ Burnham, *To Please the Caribou*, 23; Kaneuketat and Henriksen, *I Dreamed the Animals*, 36.

⁷ Burnham, *To Please the Caribou*, 78.

⁸ Frank Speck, "The Double-Curve Motive in Northeastern Algonkian Art," *Anthropological Series* (Ottawa: Department of Mines, 1914).

⁹ Burnham, *To Please the Caribou*, 1.



Figure 2: A Quebecois man wearing a capot and ceinture flechée. *Canadian Habitant in Winter* by F.A Hopkins, 1858.



Figure 3: Central Gore theme showing growth patterning. Photo by Christina Williamson, 2017.



Figure 4: The bottom border of the coat has an alternative pattern of a double curve motif and a growth pattern motif. Photo by Christina Williamson, 2017.

Bibliography

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