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Tunic, Northeast Plains, United States, Eighteenth century, Inv. 71.1878.32.145, Previous collections: Bibliothèque Nationale de France ; Musée de l'Homme.

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Tunic

Northeast Plains, United States

Eighteenth century

Skin, porcupine quill, paint

32 x 21 in. (81 x 53.5 cm)

Inv. 71.1878.32.145

Previous collections: Bibliothèque Nationale de France; Musée de l'Homme

The precise origin of this shirt from the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale is unknown. Donations of entire collections, gifts presented to the king of France as pledges of alliance on behalf of a people discovered by his representatives, or keepsakes bestowed following an encounter or parley on some newly conquered territory: the provenance of the majority of artifacts in the collection, issuing from cabinets of curiosities dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, remain doubtful.

In the Revolutionary period, the garden of the king, created by Louis XIII in 1633, was converted into a natural history museum. On September 16, 1797, Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton packed off the section of the royal collection dealing with “savages” to the Muséum des Antiques in the Bibliothèque Nationale, until then known as the Bibliothèque Royale. An inventory,¹ signed by the Minister of the Interior of the time, François de Neufchâteau, demonstrates that two shirts, including the one described here, were indeed transferred. One of the shirts is briefly described as “very small, decorated with fringes,” while the other is a “tunic in reddish skin, adorned with fringes and rosettes in feather shaft.” It is possible that both these artifacts were transferred to the Musée d’Ethnographie in the Trocadéro in 1878.

¹ Archives Nationales, series AJ 15-839.

This ceremonial shirt might belong to the Mandan people of the mid-Missouri, whom P. Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur du Tremblay came across in 1738². The Mandans then maintained trade relations with the French.

We do not have any direct information about this antique tunic, but we have followed up a path suggested by the writings of nineteenth-century travelers—those by George Catlin in particular.³

Mandan religion featured many ceremonies derived from Amerindian mythology. These rituals are common to several Plains tribes, and include the O-kee-pa,⁴ the intricate cornerstone of their whole culture. It is rite carried out with the very existence of the Mandan in mind. Synonymous with abundance, it dramatizes the creation of the Earth, its inhabitants, plants, and animals, which then compete to earn their current status in Amerindian cosmogony. Rhythmic chants, songs, and rites are performed by men who have acquired the rights by virtue, inheritance, or purchase. The omission of the ceremony would spark a succession of calamities whose occurrence in the past is recalled by the ancients. In that distant epoch, the entire human race was wiped out by ancestral catastrophes, save for one person, the Lone Man. According to George Catlin, however, this narrative is not unique to Mandan culture.

As interpreted in the O-kee-pa, the people of the Buffalo were created by the Lone Man following the formation of the prairies. The four-day-long animal rites in this festival originated with these people, and the dances then act out the release of the beasts into the wide open spaces they once roamed. The ceremony derives from a visual experience, during which buffalo recite the chants of the O-kee-pa. The individual experiencing the vision would then appeal to initiates of the religious society of the O-kee-pa for an interpretation. He could then form part of the circle of

² P. Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur du Tremblay (1685–1749), lieutenant in the Brittany Regiment.

³ George Catlin (1796–1872) was an American painter and author who traveled extensively throughout the Americas. He specialized in recording the lives and manners of the Native Americans of the Far West, producing hundreds of portraits, many of which are now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

⁴ George Catlin's terminology.

Buffalo Dancers. If, however, a man ever received this vision at too tender an age, those holding the rights of the O-kee-pa would advise him to wait until he was longer in the tooth before seeking enlightenment. In their turn, they would pray for his welfare, offering him various garments and objects to dress in if ever he was called to battle. A close-fitting shirt was then made in the hope it would one day be worn at the dance commemorating the arrival of the buffalo.

Maximilian de Neuwied writes that the men would put on these festive costumes on the second day of the ceremony. Made of skins taken from bison, stag, or antelope, these garments have plackets and are loosely stitched. The craftsmen who made them were patently masters of embroidery with porcupine quill, such elements being occasionally replaced by beads or rachis (the distal part of a feather shaft). The large rosettes disposed over the body piece and shoulders make this shirt a particularly fine instance of such appliqué work. The shoulder-pad-like features might represent joints in the buffalo whose bone structure was painted onto the dancers' bodies.⁵ Here, traces of paint testify to abstract ornaments resembling symbolic designs that were frequently painted by a seasoned warrior near the spherical motifs. The ceremony was to survive until 1889, when it was prohibited by Christian missionaries. The Buffalo Dance was thus performed each summer on the last day of the O-kee-pa in an effort to ensure an abundance of game and the good fortune of the clan. The youthful possessor of this garment was then to observe the performers scrupulously in the hope he might, one day, become a Buffalo Dancer in his turn.

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⁵ See the drawing by George Catlin, "Body Painting of a Buffalo Bull." In *O-kee-pa, A Religious Ceremony*, 1867, 42.

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