

BLACKFOOT ROBE

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Armed conflict between North American Indian tribes featured prominently in nineteenth-century life on the Great Plains, and out of this activity grew the important genre of war painting. Usually, such paintings recorded personal war achievements and were executed in a pictographic or pictorial narrative form that rendered their content readable. They employed highly stylized figures and economical ideograms tailored to quickly convey the essential aspects of the events portrayed. The protagonist usually painted his own war deeds on his animal skin teepee, shirt, or robe — encircling himself with a legible display of his exploits and signalling his elevated status within the community.

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Our example is one of nineteen extant pre-1850 war robes. While it came with no cultural documentation, it almost certainly belonged to a Blackfoot warrior, whose people occupied southern Alberta and Montana. It displays a number of features common to Blackfoot paintings: stiffly styled figures, either with rectangular torsos and V-neck shoulders or elongated X-shaped torsos, often rendered with missing limbs; an emphasis on captured trophies, sometimes enumerated in discrete tallies; and a preponderance of scalp and abstract hand motifs.

One can identify twenty-one separate vignettes, depicting more than eighty war deeds, including the capture of some thirty-nine weapons and the injuring or killing of thirty enemies. Fifty-two hand motifs stand in for the robe's protagonist — a short-form device identifying his many exploits.

The robe's previous owner, Deborah Wolton, discovered it in 1958. She was fifteen at the time and rummaging through a jumble of fabrics, hangings, and rugs on a large kitchen table, at a contents sale at Poltalloch House — home to the head of the Malcolm

clan in Argyllshire, Scotland. After the ROM acquired it in 2006, a member of the Malcolm family suggested that when he was a child it belonged in the house's "dressing-up room." There, along with other exotic clothing, it was kept under lock and key, until such time as his parents performed skits in costumes for their guests.



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Although the robe came with no documentation regarding its Indigenous origins, there is a glimmer of hope that information may yet surface. In a letter written to the ROM in 1960, Letitia Macfarlane noted that Cree or Blackfoot chiefs presented a robe to her great-great-grandfather Governor MacTavish of the Hudson's Bay Company. It left her home when she was a young girl, at about the time of World War I, and she could only recall that it was covered in black marks like a crow's foot. If those marks were one and the same as the hand motifs on the ROM's robe, then it would be certain that ownership had transferred from the Mactavishes to the Malcolms. Should further research confirm this, we would have an opportunity to learn even more about one of the most important and interesting Plains Indian paintings in existence.





JOSEPH BOYDEN

Photography by Takumi Furuichi

1. *Blackfoot*

Nobody knows which warrior was honoured with this robe. His name, the one possession that can never be taken away, a name he possibly found on a vision quest during puberty or after he experienced his first military action, is lost to history. But that's him, right there, either wearing his feather bonnet or carrying his painted shield, counting coup or outright killing his enemies, at least thirty of them on the hide.

I'm no Blackfoot expert, but I know they call themselves Niitsitapi and are made up of three lines: the Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika. The Piegan, the Bloods, and the Blackfoot. They possess these names. One of them, a war bearer, once possessed this robe. It was the highest honour to have one, highlighting your bravest achievements, painted for you.

An untrained eye might comment that the robe's illustrations are childlike. But if you look closely, you'll see our protagonist represented by a skilled abstract hand. You'll see single actions or whole sequences of them. You'll see ideographic devices: dashes for footprints and dots for gunshot traces. Don't let this robe's simplicity fool you. It possesses the story of a warrior's life.

This robe was once possessed by a person whose name we do know. A Scottish woman named Deborah Wolton. When I heard that, I asked myself, how did a Scottish woman come to own this unknown Blackfoot man's history?

2. *Piegan*

When I was a child and enthralled with learning everything I could about the First Peoples of North America, I distinctly remember hearing the phrase "Piegan Indian" and mistaking it for "Pagan Indian." Being an altar boy, I knew that pagans were bad. They didn't believe in Jesus or God or Catholics. Pagans were wild and

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drank wine and had things called orgies where everyone got naked and touched one another. I wanted to know more about these Pagan Indians.

I wonder if Deborah Wolton, the Scottish woman who once possessed this robe, was as fascinated by Pagan Indians as I was. I bet she was. I read the story of how she came to the robe, and it to her. She and her three half brothers used to play cowboys and Indians as children on the windswept western shores of Scotland. She liked being the Indian best, making headdresses out of seagull feathers, fashioning bows and arrows from hazel wood, and constructing teepees to live in. Perhaps she had been a pagan in an earlier life.

Deborah's family attended an estate sale of another family downsizing from a sprawling Victorian mansion to a castle. Apparently, castles are actually smaller than sprawling Victorian

mansions, and this family had to get rid of some stuff. When Deborah stumbled across the Blackfoot robe in one of the mansion's many rooms, she begged her mother to bid on it. From what she remembers, her mother was the only one to make an offer. They paid little for the pagan artifact.

Deborah loved the robe very much, using it sometimes as a bed cover, sometimes as a floor rug, and sometimes as a thick blanket thrown across the back of her pony. If this sounds like disrespect of a historical artwork to you, I say Deborah was just a kid. And my money's on the spirit of that pagan Blackfoot warrior, who once and still possesses this robe, feeling good and even smiling in the knowledge that his hide was used for its purpose. His art, in some small way, imitated life.

3. *Blood*

The Blackfoot are known for their practice of corralling wild bison, forcing them into natural funnels created by the knifed-out curvature of certain prairie landscapes, where the animals, herded now and panicked, stampede headlong over cliffs. The most famous of these places is called Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. You might think the name came from the poor creatures that fell to their deaths, but it's supposedly taken from the legend of the boy who was so fascinated by raining bison that he stood below the precipice and had his own head caved in by the tumbling beasts.

I feel more than a little uneasy speaking only about the violent ways of a people — the hurt meted out and the anguish absorbed. This robe, commemorating a warrior's greatest feats, does not only celebrate war but also celebrates a life. Yes, it is complex and ironic, as complex and ironic as how a Scottish woman came to possess this robe because a family had to downsize to a castle, and how now it rests in the Royal Ontario Museum. Because this skin celebrates violent accomplishments, it will always be judged through that lens. But we should never judge a people solely in this way.

Did that young Scottish girl who once used this robe as her blanket and her rug and her saddle understand the importance of her possession? She relates that more than forty years after she'd grown out of playing cowboys and Indians, when she was a full-grown woman, she cleared out the detritus from under her bed and rediscovered a warrior's heart song, folded into a carrying case. I picture the moment: this woman pulling the long lost hide from under the place where she slept and dreamed, the sound of a thousand hooves pounding prairie earth in a great rumble, the greatest pounding you could ever imagine; and how she spreads it out onto her floor and recognizes the bonnet, the shield, the red hand of her old friend, the silent hooves that leave earth and scramble for purchase — a purchase they will not possess until they meet the ground below.

