Rosettes Abloom
Solving a Beadwork Mystery

Fred Stimson did everything in a big way, from managing one of the world’s largest cattle ranches between 1882 and 1902, to collecting beadwork from the Blackfoot Indians in Alberta. Among the 300 bead pieces donated to the ROM by Fred’s son, Bryce, in 1944 and 1946 are almost 100 decorative panels removed from articles of clothing. Most of these were in matched pairs and their functions were readily apparent, such as the large rosettes typically sewn on the front and back of “war” shirts. Determining the function of small pairs of rosettes proved to be the most problematic—that is, until Frank Kodras, a volunteer in the Anthropology Department, noticed that the rosettes bore almost indiscernible remnants of hide thongs. This discovery indicated that the rosettes were once used as closures on women’s robes like the two connected by a button in the “sunburst” clasp shown above. Three unmatched rosettes, however, required further explanation. The mates to two of these were eventually located; they had been sewn around the brow band of a feather headdress. These rosettes are absent in the photograph above of Fred Stimson wearing the headdress with its original painted design around the brow. Taken in 1893, the photograph also unlocks the secret of another, larger, single rosette. Its mate can be seen below an existing chest rosette, obviously added by Stimson to the otherwise conventional Plains Indian shirt. In Stimson’s love for beadwork embellishment, we have found the answer to the problem of the unmatched rosettes.

—Arni Brownstone