From Living Skin to Visionary Art

The hide canvases of the Plains Indians.

by Brooke Chilvers

THE WOMAN in the subway yanked my arm and yelled, "Do you know what your coat's made of?" I should have replied, "weasels that protect themselves by ejecting a fetid fluid," but the words failed me. Mark Twain's observation a century ago that "clothes make the man" is timeless and universal: We judge each other's wealth, cast and politics by our togs.

Nowhere was this more apparent than when members of different tribes crossed paths in the pre-19th-century American wilderness. Then, the colors, symbols and animal "jewelry" decorating their deerskin war shirts and buffalo-hide ceremonial robes declared the wearer's age and marital status, war honors, sacred spiritual helpers and membership in the cult-like brotherhoods called Warrior Societies. The warrior's clothing not only contributed to his mental attitude toward himself but also made him an immediately respected foe to anyone he encountered.

Popular literature of the American Indian tells us little about this hide clothing made from deer, elk, and especially buffalo by the Sioux, Cree, Blackfoot, Arapaho, Mohawk, Huron, Ojibwa and other tribes. But we know that their clothing was both a sacred gift of nature and an important expressive art. The people we Europeans called "naked savages" in fact wore skins ingeniously transformed into efficient and often beautiful ochre-painted hide robes, softly tanned deerskin breechcloths smoked to a warm saffron color and porcupine-quill-embroidered tunics. Whether feathered and fringed, whether the figurative pictographs painted by men or the abstract symbolic motifs typical of women, these hide robes are imbued with a mysterious spirituality that reaches out to us through the glass enclosures of museums.

We can sense how the very act of coaxing deer and buffalo into clothing, then decorating it with swans' legs, deer hooves, quills and moose-hair embroidery is a metaphorical expression of a people's spirit. It is their recognition of the link between themselves and their prey.

Judy Thompson, author of several books on American Indian clothing and traditions, explains it best: "Given the close personal links between an individual and his clothing, and the importance attached to achieving spiritual harmony with animals... the fear of offending animal spirits is implicit in the conscientious care given personal clothing," along with shelter, shields and weapons.

In the cosmic structure of the Plains Indians, the creator, or Old Man, controlled the six Sacred Powers: the Four Directions, and the Sky and the Earth. He intended humans to be the hunter, not the hunted, but didn't endow them with the sacred powers of nature. Instead, humans depended on power transferred to them by animal spirits.

Animals were visible representations of the spirits and their power over health, hunting, weather and victory in war. For the hunter, wearing animal skins not only camouflaged him but also allowed him to show reference for, identify with and even embody the animal's spirit—assuming, for example, the predatory skills of the bear or wolf.

All wild animals had spiritual ancestors to guide them. Grass eaters were in the care of the buffalo spirit, meat eaters of the wolf spirit, and the Thunderbird looked after birds and flying insects. Individuals received sacred power from the spiritual guardians of life and their manifestations (animals, thunder, lightning, the stars) through shamans, who acted as intermediaries and interpreters for dreams and visions. The recipients expressed this power through art. Art acted as a channel between the people and the spirits that control animals, some inanimate objects and natural phenomena such as weather and game migrations. Yet there is no word for "art" or "artist" in the languages of the

Plains. One contemporary Wala-Wala artist described painting simply as "an event of nature."

The colors, geometric shapes and symbols that represent these powers, and the instructions for painting, burning and sewing the robes, were "given" to individuals in "vision quests." Dances often re-enacted the vision that gave rise to the garment, celebrating the events that led to a man's acquiring its specific blessings and power. Wolf Dreamers had the power to stop arrows. Bear power, associated with the powerful spirits of the underworld, could heal the severely wounded. And Elk power, associated with the bull's bugling during the rut and his willful control of his harem, gave a man the ability to arouse sexual passion in women.

"Look close at him who is your spirit now, for you are his body," spoke Black Elk, a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux who decorated his own battle robe in the sacred manner of his vision. "I wore an eagle relic... a lightning power I wore... the power of hail I wore... I myself made them fear me."

Indian boys were encouraged early to seek a revelation in order to obtain powers. When a founder and 10 to 20 others experienced a common animal spirit vision, they came together in Warrior Societies whose job was to preserve order in camp. The power of the Crow Big Dog Society, for example, was its total determination in war, its pledge to never retreat and its courage in rescuing any tribesman in danger.

Buffalo was to the Plains Indian what pigs are to country cooks. Every sinew was used for survival, and any item made from its hide—saddles, bridles, cooking utensils, rope, containers for storage and transport—was a sacred symbol for the earth. Buffalo were hunted for food in their prairie-fattened prime in early September, and for their hides in July and August, when the hair was thinner and easier to work. In a year, a woman might produce 10 hides for her family and another 35 to exchange at trading posts for beads, guns, ammunition and coffee. But most important was the decorated hide robe that every Plains tribesman owned.

Robes were draped or wrapped differently depending on whether a man was addressing an audience, meditating or demonstrating anger. Any animal's head was on the wearer's left, figures faced left and action flowed to the left. To express a spirit's power to protect the owner in war, heal his wounds, find game or change the weather, the robes carried fringes and twisted thongs; small birds and animals like ermine; bells, shells and berry beads; bones and even grass and tobacco. For example, because weasels were admired as ferocious fighters, their dried skins trimmed war shirts and rawhide shields; their different summer and winter coats represented the power to effect change. Blue and green connoted war and bravery; yellow and blue, the sacred power of Thunder.

Symbols and figures were painted in bold solid monochromes or simple black outlines in profile without any background. Reds were made from berries; greens from vegetation, lichens and mosses; yellow from the soil or pulverized buffalo gallstone; blue—the rarest—from baked duck guano. Placing the more distant figures behind, rather than reducing them in size, created perspective.

Buffalo-hide robes were a vital part of "medicine bundles." "Medicine" meant the unexplainable power controlled by shamans to obtain man's needs and defeat evil forces, the power to communicate with and procure the intervention of the spirits during drought and illness. Different bundles, like the Weather Dance or Thunder Medicine Pipe bundles, conveyed to the owner different blessings and powers that must then be proved in public.

"Record robes" artfully displayed the warrior's accomplishments in raiding horses, capturing weapons, wounding or killing enemies or "counting coup," which means striking the enemy (not necessarily killing him) with a special stick.

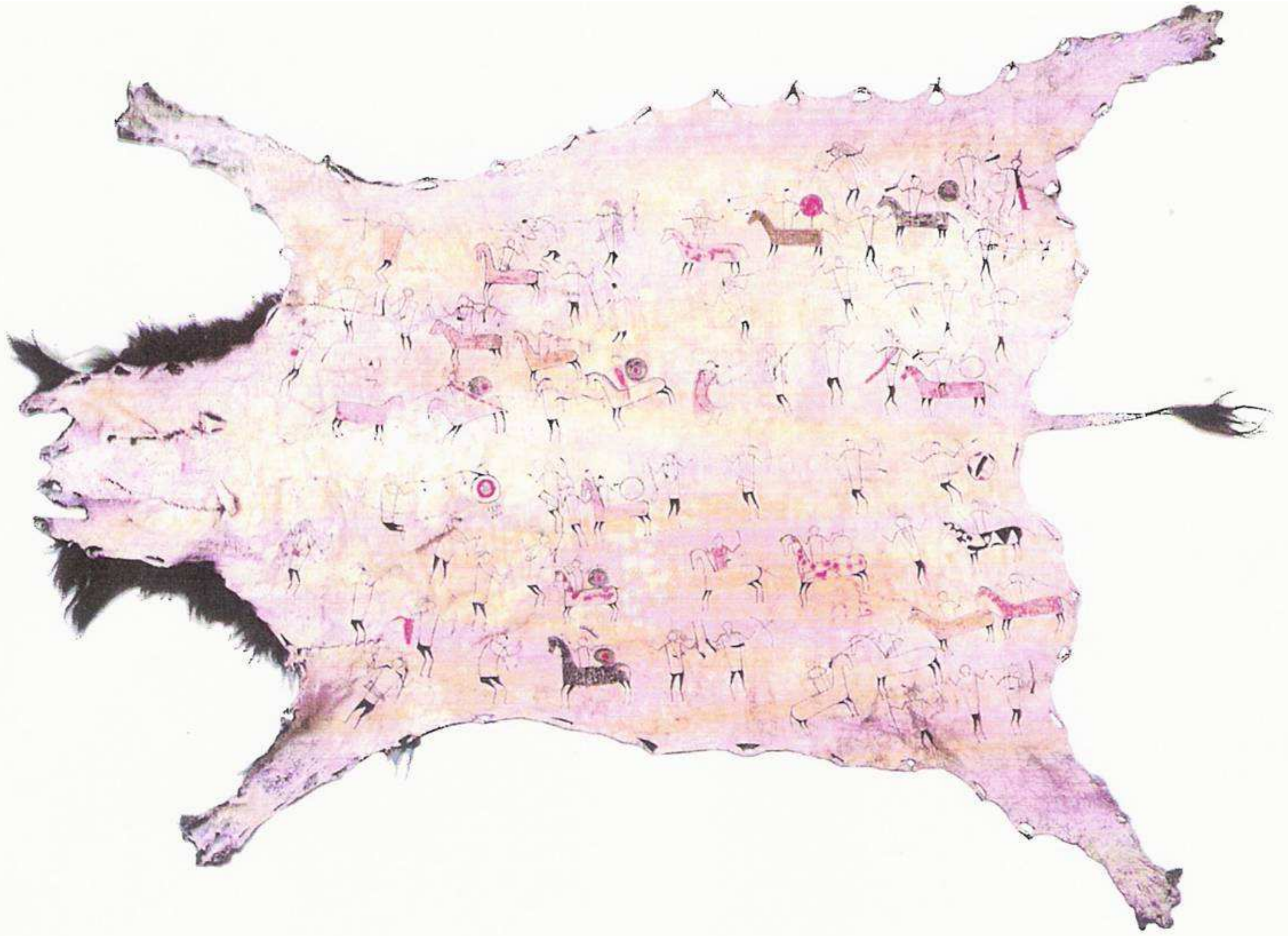
And then the world changed.

The orgy of killing that ultimately devastated buffalo populations began in earnest in 1870 and was nearly complete by 1883. In a landscape of grass with no grazers, a way of life was gone forever. Whiteman's trade cloth replaced buffalo hide. Clothing—whose bones and feathers were intended to jangle and sound in imitation of nature, whose beauty was intensified by the motion of swaying rawhide fringes, whose embroidered quills caught the light of the campfire or plumes backlit by a setting sun, intrinsically expressing man's profound relationship with the spirits of nature—was replaced with woven fiber bedecked with symbols of military heraldry and inanimate glass beads that had no life of their own.

One hardly dares imagine what all this says about our own polyester-infested culture.

All this—and so much more—I should have explained to the unkempt young woman in pink Polartec, its bold brand label the only expression of herself. In the 12-degree weather, I should have told her that my polecat-fur coat was a sacred gift from a nature- and man-loving God, passed from my mother to me. ■

After writing this article, Brooke put down on paper her desire to become her own sacred bundle by being buried—someday—in the cherished wolf skin of the animal she took in Nunavut in 1998.



Buffalo Robe Painted with Pictographic Battle Scene. Courtesy Monticello/Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc.