

THE BLACKFOOT ELDERS PROJECT:
LINKING PEOPLE AND OBJECTS IN MUSEUM RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the fall of 1985 and for much of 1986, I had the opportunity to coordinate a most unusual project on behalf of the Ethnology Department of Glenbow Museum. This project involved the hiring of Indian elders from the Blackfoot Reserve near Calgary as professional consultants to review and assess our collections of Blackfoot Indian material culture as well as archival photographs and documents pertaining to Blackfoot history and culture.

The Glenbow Museum holdings of Northern Plains material culture include approximately 10,000 pieces, which are drawn from the contexts of religious rituals, in addition to what may be described as the secular contexts of everyday life. With only a few exceptions, most of the Plains Indian artifacts and, for that matter archival photographs and documents, originate in the twentieth century, with the majority of pieces being made after the 1920s. Most of these items are of Blackfoot Indian origin. Therefore, this was the particular area chosen for emphasis in the project. Unlike other institutions where "Blackfoot" becomes a generic label for all Northern Plains Indian artifacts, the Glenbow collections are differentiated into Blackfoot, Blood and Piegan groupings and are organized physically by reserves.

What has appropriately become known as the Blackfoot Elders Project was designed with a number of objectives in mind. The first objective was to supplement, revise or otherwise augment the existing documentation for ethnological and archival collections pertaining to Blackfoot culture and history. Other collections classified only generally as Plains Indian, for which specific cultural origins were unknown, were also included in this review process. Another objective determined for the project was the

gathering of additional biographical and genealogical data on specific Blackfoot individuals who had been key donors to the present Glenbow Museum collections. Although comparatively well-documented, the collections do suffer from what I like to term an "unhealthy level of anonymity"; that is, we know very little about the individual contributors to the collections, their life histories and background let alone anything of the decision-making processes they employed in the production of the cultural objects represented. It was these types of deficiencies which we sought to redress through the Blackfoot Elders Program.

We were also interested in obtaining recommendations so that present collection management policies at the Glenbow Museum might better reflect Native concerns as well as a sensitivity to those concerns. In this regard, information was sought as to Native methods of conservation of material objects as well as the care of sacred religious objects--the latter topic a concern to which I will return. Throughout the program, specific means for establishing the participation of the Blackfoot elders on an ongoing basis at the Glenbow Museum were explored, as were possibilities for facilitating greater access to the collections for the Native American community generally.

CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES IN MUSEUM RESEARCH

In museum research, there is a tendency to utilize highly generalized models in the analysis and presentation of Native American material culture. In the most public and visible area of museum research--the exhibition--Native American material culture is presented according to a framework which most often, but not exclusively, utilizes the "culture area concept" as a point of departure. Museum exhibits tend strongly to be object-oriented, with artifacts selected to exemplify those traits which characterize a given culture area and which delineate it from others. Similarly, collections policies and the physical management of collections follow and/or are influenced by this very fundamental conceptual framework.

This use of the culture area concept and its attendant features has come under increasing criticism in recent years. This is because of its lack of clear temporal focus and for its portrayal of Native American cultures as static and isolated entities seldom accommodating the changes which have taken place since the "contact-traditional" period, itself constructed on the recording of memory culture of contemporary Indian informants. Moreover, the accuracy and validity of such approaches, as well as the moral and ethical underpinnings of the images of Indians which are portrayed, are being questioned by Indian people who increasingly are developing their own museum philosophies.

In contrast, the Blackfoot Elders Project presented a unique opportunity to record for the first time the conceptual framework which the Blackfoot elders themselves employ in their own interpretation of Blackfoot material culture. In according Indian elders the role of professional consultants, the project itself was an important means of acknowledging the validity of these interpretations, whereas previously this had been the almost exclusive domain of non-Indians within the museum context. As well, the recording of the elders' perceptions of museums and the objects placed in them provided a very important basis for comparison with conventional approaches to Blackfoot material culture and their inherent biases and limitations.

THE PROJECT AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

Preliminary planning for the project began in May and June of 1985. The next step in organizing the Blackfoot Elders Program was to contact representatives of the Blackfoot Cultural Studies Program so that the logistics of the elders program and its overall acceptance could be determined. The initial response to the proposed project was one of overwhelming enthusiasm and support. This positive spirit carried through the entire project.

To familiarize the Blackfoot elders with the Glenbow Museum and its collections, a tour of the museum was organized. A computer printout of the catalogue records of the Blackfoot collections, as well as summary lists of the collections, donor lists

and photocopies of file photographs of key pieces in the collections, were deposited with Blackfoot Cultural Studies for reference. Throughout the summer, I personally attended a number of meetings with the elders, attended a survival camp held on the Blackfoot Reserve and attended various powwow and rodeo events.

The project itself commenced in September of 1985 with the elders visiting the Glenbow Museum for one or two days each month. Four Blackfoot elders participated: Mrs. Margaret Bad Boy, the late Mrs. Emily DuckChief, Mrs. Beatrice Poor Eagle and Mrs. Lioba Yellow Sun. Ramona Low Horn and Julia Wright of Blackfoot Cultural Studies acted as both chaperons for the elders and translators for the duration of the project. Gerald Sitting Eagle coordinated the project on behalf of Blackfoot Cultural Studies. Russell Wright, a Blackfoot elder as well as Curator of the Blackfoot Museum, instructed me in Blackfoot etiquette and social customs throughout the course of the project.

The selection of the individual elders who participated in the program was a decision made by the Blackfoot elders themselves as a group and not by Glenbow Museum staff. Those appointed were selected on the basis of their knowledge of Blackfoot history and expertise in various aspects of Blackfoot tradition and culture. The fact that these four women were key sources of the present Glenbow Museum holdings was another important factor which contributed to their selection. Moreover, all elders selected were women because this was deemed appropriate in light of the fact that they would be working with a female staff member of the Glenbow Museum.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

In the course of the Blackfoot Elders Project, over 2,500 black and white photographs from the Glenbow Archives were reviewed. In examining the archival photographs, the Blackfoot elders were asked to identify the individual or group of individuals portrayed. Whenever relevant, additional information about the date of the photographs and the circumstances depicted were

sought. Direct questions as to a given individual's biography and history were not asked. Instead, this information was often volunteered.

In addition, a total of 443 catalogued artifacts, representing individual items or groups of items, was examined. Because the latter refers only to the total of catalogue entries represented, it is somewhat misleading. In actual fact, approximately 2,500 individual objects were examined because individual catalogue entries most often included more than one item. For example, a suit representing one catalogue entry might include anywhere from two to eight or more individual items. Of the total of 443 items, 415 had been previously identified as being "Blackfoot" with the remaining 28 being undocumented and therefore designated as "Plains Indian" in origin. With the exception of sacred objects, virtually all types of objects representative of the Glenbow holdings of Blackfoot material culture were examined. Each artifact was physically removed from its permanent storage location and then handled and examined by the elders. A special examining table was set up in the Ethnology Department storage area for this purpose.

At the beginning of our work, I told the elders that I would be interested in learning what they could tell me about the artifacts which they would be examining. I informed them that the items had been previously identified as "Blackfoot" or as "Plains Indian" by museum staff members. I asked the elders for their advice in five general areas of inquiry pertaining to each piece: who made it, where was it made, when was it made, how was it made (including methods and materials used in its manufacture), and its purpose. For the most part, documentation was not solicited in the form of direct questions. Instead, I prefaced my requests for information with statements, such as "I would be interested in knowing when this bag was made" or "I would like to know about this headdress and its history."

Every attempt was made to avoid measures which might obstruct the investigation. The Glenbow Museum policy which stipulates that cotton gloves must be worn when handling certain

types of artifacts was not adhered to. Similarly, both audiotaping and videotaping were rejected in favour of the less interventionist, but more onerous task, of recording information in written form as the project progressed. Direct questions were asked only when information was sought as to Native methods of conservation and care, or when clarification was required, as in the case of an alternate term for a given type of object. Only rarely were catalogue records consulted in the course of identifying a piece. Instead, they were used to corroborate later the initial comments of the Blackfoot elders.

RESULTS OF THE BLACKFOOT ELDERS PROJECT

To summarize all of the results--both specific and general--of the Blackfoot Elders Program is beyond the scope of this paper. The project was very successful with all five objectives being met. In certain cases, it was possible to obtain far more extensive documentation than had been previously gathered for specific pieces. Hundreds of archival photographs were also identified, where previously no documentation had existed. The entire ethnological collection of Blackfoot material culture, as well as all archival photographs identified as possibly Blackfoot and all relevant document files presently housed in Glenbow Archives, were reviewed.

For those artifacts previously classified as Blackfoot (see Table 1), sixty-two percent were confirmed as being of Blackfoot origin and the remaining thirty-eight percent were determined to be other than Blackfoot in origin. In the case of the undocumented artifacts previously identified as Plains Indian, sixty-four percent were identified as Blackfoot and thirty-six percent designated as non-Blackfoot (see Table 2). In both groups, artifacts were described as Blackfoot according to three categories--individual source/maker, of definite Blackfoot origin or style, and possibly of Blackfoot origin. Where artifacts were refuted to be of Blackfoot origin, they were classified as belonging to another group or as being of unknown provenance.

TABLE ONE

ARTIFACTS PREVIOUSLY CLASSIFIED AS BLACKFOOT IN ORIGIN
(Total Number = 415)

	Total Number	Percent of Total
A. Confirmed As Blackfoot in Origin		
1. According to Individual Owner/Maker	87	21
2. As Blackfoot/Blackfoot Style	67	16
3. Could Be/Possibly Blackfoot	104	25
TOTALS	258	62
B. Refuted as Blackfoot in Origin		
4. Unknown Origin	70	17
5. Another Group/Region	87	21
TOTALS	157	38

TABLE TWO

ARTIFACTS PREVIOUSLY CLASSIFIED AS PLAINS INDIAN IN ORIGIN
(Total Number = 28)

	Total Number	Percent of Total
A. Confirmed As Blackfoot in Origin		
1. According to Individual Owner/Maker	1	4
2. As Blackfoot/Blackfoot Style	13	46
3. Could Be/Possibly Blackfoot	4	14
TOTALS	18	64
B. Refuted as Blackfoot in Origin		
4. Unknown Origin	1	4
5. Another Group/Region	9	32
TOTALS	10	36

On the surface, these results appear to reaffirm the type of generalized models and typifications used in conventional museums of Blackfoot material culture. In employing typifications such as "definitely Blackfoot," "probably Blackfoot" and, in the case of other groups, "Sarcee, Stoney or Cree" and others, it does appear that the elders themselves were classifying material culture according to clusters of traits whose degree of similarity or difference diminishes as one moves away from a core "Blackfoot" area. Their typifications also appear to lend further credence to the notion that material culture itself is emblematic of cultural identity or ethnicity. There thus appears to be, on the general level of comparison, a convergence of Indian models of Blackfoot material culture and those used within a museum context.

But wherein lie the differences? Given the fact that the elders identified as Blackfoot only sixty-two percent of the artifacts which had all been previously identified as Blackfoot, it is readily apparent that such differences did exist. Historically, the Glenbow Museum collections have been labelled as being of Blackfoot origin either because they are traceable to a Blackfoot source or because topologically they conform to those traits determined primarily by non-Indians to represent what "Blackfoot" is. However, very little is often known as to the precise cultural ancestry of a given individual and research is sadly deficient in the area of topology and chronology in Blackfoot material culture.

In sharp contrast to what I term museum conventions for labelling and interpreting objects are those used by the Blackfoot elders themselves. It was often difficult for them to make explicit the criteria and rules they employed in classifying objects as they did. It was apparent that each participant had a deep intuitive sense of what constituted the constellation of artifacts which might be termed "Blackfoot" but was less concerned with the inherent ambiguities of museum classifications than is true of most museologists themselves.

For those items designated as being "Blackfoot" according to an individual owner/maker, the elders could make a link with a

specific individual or family of origin. For the eighty-eight artifacts from Tables One and Two identified in this category, a total of thirty-nine individuals were identified as makers and/or original owners. In fact, it was this singularity of individual ownership and individual expression that first struck me as being at variance with usual methods for classifying. These individuals were often portrayed in terms of their relatedness to others as well as their role and status in the Blackfoot community, past and present. Objects were being perceived as hallmarks of individuals or families and not of groups or as things.

In cases where artifacts were designated as being either "Blackfoot" or of "Blackfoot style," individual owners/makers were not known. However, specific types of beadwork designs or a given style of artifact were recognized as "Blackfoot." In instances where pieces were refuted as being of Blackfoot origin, group designations such as "Sarcee" and "Stoney/Cree" or regions such as "further South" (i.e. Southern Plains) were identified. There was general recognition among the elders of both a general Plains style as well as of group and regional variations within the Plains culture area.

Other artifacts were described as "could be or possibly Blackfoot" if they lacked certain elements characteristic of Blackfoot work (i.e. specific beadwork designs, types of edgings, characteristic shape etc.). In such cases, a certain degree of stylistic similarity was acknowledged between Blackfoot, Blood and Piegan material culture. For example, costumes were identified in this manner but moccasins most often received more definitive labels according to the specific stylistic traits they exhibited. This type of designation was employed only for certain types of objects and only if they could not be linked with specific Blackfoot individuals.

The designation "unknown," used for artifacts which "could be anything" or "from any Indian group," was one which I found most interesting. The Blackfoot elders themselves identified the emergence of what might be termed a "Pan-Indian style" of material culture. In such cases, the objects were more recent

generic pieces which lack either diagnostic design or decoration or association with a specific individual or group. The influence of the Calgary Stampede and of other public venues on the expression of Indian culture was often cited by the elders as the origin of the trend towards this greater uniformity in the appearance of Plains Indian material culture.

For the most part, the particular form of an object mattered less than did design motifs, specific methods of manufacturing and decorative finishing. Designs, particularly those employed in beadwork, were deemed as being distinctive of particular individuals or families. My queries as to the meanings of these designs were often met with such comments as, "only White people worry about the meanings . . . they are just decorations." Different beadwork designs were named according to their resemblance to real objects and contemporary convention. "Hourglass," "diamond," "tadpole," "mountain," and "arrowhead" were the most common terms used by the elders in describing beadwork designs.

In identifying the chronological framework of an item, what mattered most was the particular generation with which the piece was associated. The precise chronological age of a given item was deemed to be irrelevant. Descriptions of objects were often prefaced with such remarks as, "made by the old people," "made by an old lady" or "made by a young girl," followed by the name of a given individual who had either made the piece or was of the same age.

The precise history of ownership of a given piece was also important in determining whether or not it was of Blackfoot origin. In a number of cases, items were recalled as gifts from Cree relatives, in which case they were termed as Cree and not as Blackfoot. In discussions pertaining to the biographies of specific individuals, what mattered most were one's parentage and where one lived. Individuals were termed "Blackfoot" if both parents were Blackfoot and lived on the Blackfoot Reserve or if a person simply lived on the Blackfoot Reserve regardless of whether one parent was "Cree" or "Sarcee" etcetera. Gifts or trade items were

acknowledged as such. However, if the owner was a known Blackfoot individual, they were deemed to be of Blackfoot origin.

The assessments by the Blackfoot elders reflected a considerable degree of cultural pride and an almost acute consciousness of the quality of one's work. If a given piece fit within the constellations of traits determining a Blackfoot piece, but was inferior, it was "made to sell," "inferior," "not done in the right way" or "made by a young girl." In much the same vein, ideas regarding the authenticity of a given artifact were often based on whether the materials used in construction were "real" or "not real." Thus, the appearance of decorative elements, such as "fake horns" or "fake eagle feathers," was noted. In other instances the addition of fringing "not characteristic of Blackfoot work" but "essential for quick sale" was noted as a necessary compromise in articles produced for sale only.

Throughout the project, I noted that the Blackfoot elders did not include "traditional"--the most overused word in museums--in their vocabulary other than to describe certain types of powwow dance costumes. I also noted that whereas museum artifact descriptions tend to gloss over the incorporation of European materials as "clever" and ignore matters of sheer expediency, both the practical concerns of cost and availability of materials were often the two main criteria identified by the Blackfoot elders in the production of objects. A good example of such different perceptions are the wide belts with multiple buckles which Plains Indian women wear over hide or cloth dresses. The particular ornamentation of these belts is very distinctive and consists of a series of fully beaded panels. In examples which date to the first part of this century, one often notices panels which instead of being ornamented with beadwork are filled and outlined with brass tacks. Although this has often been construed as a clever innovation, the Blackfoot elders informed me that the use of brass tacks was more a matter of practicality than anything else. Although wishing to retain the older conventions of ornamentation, they recalled that it was extremely difficult to obtain good quality softer hides at this time. Being constrained to work with very

hard commercially tanned hides, this meant that beadwork was extremely difficult to do and that brass tacks were an ideal decorative solution. Moreover, the beads themselves were costly and difficult to obtain.

The conservation and care of museum objects are two other areas which I wish to highlight briefly to illustrate the often quite different perceptions of the Blackfoot elders. Throughout the project, I attempted to record the methods used by the Blackfoot elders to store and care for objects in order to ensure their preservation. Without explicitly recognizing my own bias at least initially, I asked questions from a museum perspective. That is, my concern was with the intrinsic value of the object and its preservation and not with the knowledge or particular association it represented. In the course of the project, I was able to gather a lengthy list of conservation recommendations but when a given piece was in extremely poor condition, I was told that it should be replicated. This latter recommendation underscores the radical differences which exist in the cultural perceptions of Indian elders. They have a firsthand knowledge of the use and manufacture of material culture and of the values which are implicit in museum work which, by definition, stresses an object-orientation and emphasizes the authenticity of the original object. For the elders, the intrinsic nature of an individual object mattered far less than did the periodic need for its physical and, in certain cases, spiritual renewal.

The Glenbow Museum holdings of Blackfoot material culture also include a large number of sacred objects, specifically medicine bundles. These objects are physically stored apart from the rest of the ethnological collections and access to them is restricted. During their initial visit to the Glenbow Museum in the fall of 1985, the Blackfoot elders group reviewed the entire collection of Blackfoot medicine bundles. The deep emotive and intellectual ties to these objects which were conveyed on this occasion have left a lasting impression.

The category of the sacred, as it pertains to Native American material culture, is the least understood by museum staff members

who have little or no familiarity with the cultural contexts in which these objects originate. Moreover, there were certain types of "medicinal" objects used in sacred rituals for which the Blackfoot elders did not stipulate specific proscriptions for handling and care. In certain cases, the elders noted that items once sacred and used in religious rituals had been "made over" for use in secular contexts.

Although the Blackfoot medicine bundles included in the Glenbow Museum collections were not reviewed specifically in the course of the project, general recommendations were made by the elders for their care and management. Over the next year, we will be working closely with a Blackfoot Elders Committee so that some of these recommendations may be implemented. Certain objects previously placed in other areas of the collection have now been placed among those collections where access is restricted.

CONCLUSION

In summary then, conventional museum approaches to the interpretation of Blackfoot Indian material culture rely on generalized models which have a tendency to stress the group versus the individual; the object versus its creator(s). When generalized to the group level, the classification process is deceptively easy; if reduced to the individual level, it is exceedingly complex. Thus, the interpretations which the Blackfoot elders offered were often at variance or in opposition to those which have assumed an "official" status within a museum context.

The opportunity to incorporate such alternative viewpoints as part of the presentation and management of collections of material culture is a compelling challenge. If museums are to be perceived as meaningful to Native people, then it only seems reasonable that the concerns and perceptions of Native people are reflected in the museum environment. When the Blackfoot elders first started to work on the project, they told me that the museum was "a place to sell things" and a place of "dead things." At the conclusion of

their work, they expressed an interest in ongoing participation in the museum and for a renewed role for the Blackfoot Museum within the Blackfoot community.