

## Examining the provenance of a Native American Shirt from the 19th Century

Arni Brownstone, Royal Ontario Museum

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, warfare was a dominant feature of Plains Indian life and it was perpetuated and intensified by a number of social mechanisms. One such mechanism, the cultural interest in self-aggrandizement, drove warriors to maneuver for social recognition. They engaged the enemy while competing with their fellow tribesmen for social position within a system of warrior etiquette and formal accomplishment through which men's deeds were scored and compared. Heraldic systems —conventions by which deeds were recorded and accredited— were adopted by most, if not all, the plains tribes.

Rising through the ranks was marked by the right to recite vivid accounts of war achievements in public and to wear heraldic emblems of achievement, including war exploit paintings. Executed in a pictographic or pictorial narrative format, such war paintings comprise one of the richest genres in Native American art. Created to publicize a man's war record



Electronic re-drawing of the shirt, front (below) and back (above). Electronically redesigned by Arni Brownstone. ETHAM K000207, Geneva Museum of Ethnography.

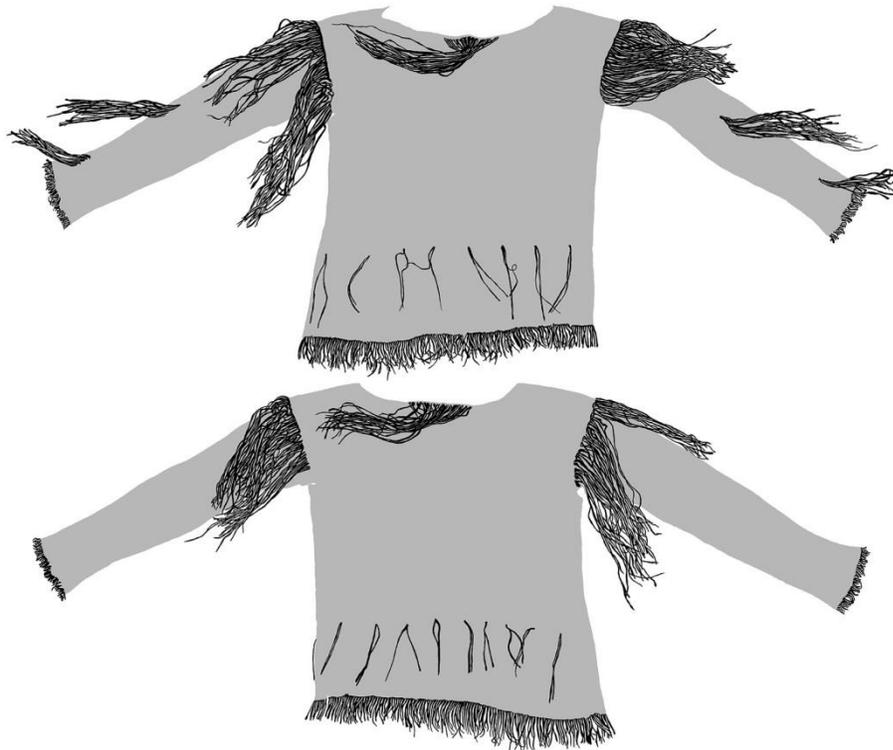
within his community, they

were painted on highly visible supports including animal hide robes, shirts, tipi covers and tipi liners. Less than forty paintings have survived from the period 1800 to 1860 and the hide shirt illustrated here is the only extant example from the southern plains.

On April 21, 1838, the botanist, Moïse-Etienne (Stefano) Moricand (1779-1854), deposited this shirt described as "Habit des Indiens du Texas" in the Geneva's natural history museum, Musée Académique, where he was the founding secretary-treasurer. It was later transferred to the Museum of Ethnography, Geneva. There are circumstances that strongly suggest Moricand's colleague in Geneva, Jean-Louis Berlandier (1803–1851), collected the shirt. Between 1828 and 1831, Berlandier gathered

plant and zoological specimens for the Musée Académique while serving as the botanist on the Mexican Boundary Commission's expedition in Texas. Moricand was tasked with registering Berlandier's botanical specimens as they arrived from Mexico, as well as to use his connections to build the museum's collection. Such a gift from Berlandier seems especially likely in light of a letter written on December 20, 1838 where he offered his services to the museum (see Muller in Berlandier 1980). The bulk of Berlandier's Texas ethnographic collection was posthumously acquired by the Smithsonian's US Museum of Natural History. All but one of the twenty or so items, are documented as Commanche, and they comprise the earliest collection from that tribe under preservation. Most probably the shirt under consideration is also Commanche.

Its midriff length construction with tight-fitting sleeves and torso that are completely closed except for about 4 cm at the armpit, represents a significant departure from the standard "war shirt"



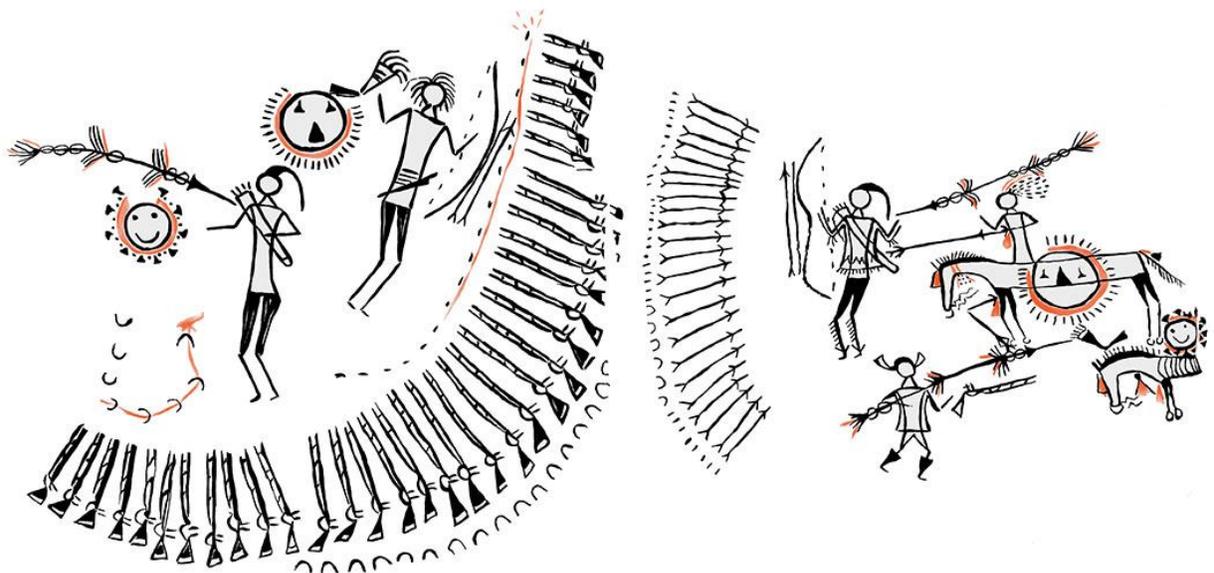
found throughout the plains region with the exception of several southern tribes. Perhaps most noteworthy is the sophistication and complexity of its fringing, as illustrated in the adjacent contour schematic. The fringing at the cuffs, elbows, mid-torso and neck is produced by a series of thongs doubled and pulled through holes in the shirt. Pending from

Electronically re-drawn schematic of the contours and fringes of the shirt, front (below) and back (above). Electronically redesigned by Arni Brownstone. ETHAM K000207, Geneva Museum of Ethnography.

the hem is a double row of fringe, composed of both self fringing and an added fringed strip. Finally, fringed welts are inserted at the shoulder seams. While there are several other localized areas in the northern plains where short-cut shirts coexisted with standard war shirts, special attention to fringing and tight long sleeves seem to be particularly associated with the southern plains. Adding further weight

to the Commanche attribution is the fact that they were the largest tribe in Texas and the one with whom Berlandier had most contact. The collector mentioned in his journals that the Commanche wore two types of shirts, a “very short” type and another, further west near Santa Fe, that was knee-length.

The small number of extant war exploit paintings on hide from tribes of the southern plains might suggest that the genre lacked popularity in the region. Nonetheless, the social mechanisms that underpinned war paintings, particularly in the recognition of personal exploits, were much the same there as in other parts of the plains. Furthermore, the artist who painted this shirt shows great proficiency in the genre. The images painted on the shirt depict two exploits on the front (illustrated on the left) and two on the back —all seemingly occur in context with larger battles, as suggested by the



Electronically re-drawing of the painted passages on the front (left) and back (right). Electronically redesigned by Arni Brownstone. ETHAM K000207, Geneva Museum of Ethnography.

rows of guns and arrows. In three of the four events, the protagonist is not delineated but his shields stand in for him. In two of those scenes it is the shield’s bear paw, acting as the protagonist’s supernatural “medicine helper,” that attacks and overcomes the enemy. However, in none of the four events are the injuries inflicted by the protagonist, and his medicine helper, delineated in explicate detail, although in one case flowing blood make it clear that he and his horse were shot with arrows. On the front, two bloody trails are delineated, one on horseback and the other on foot, but again the details are unclear. In this regard, it is important to remember that verbal recitation was the most important means of communicating detailed descriptions of war exploits to the wider community, while their painted counterparts preserved a more generalized account of those events.

Spanish/Arabic equestrian and military equipment had a strong and pervasive influence upon material culture across the plains but particularly among the tribes in the south. Both Hispanic and Indigenous men used eight to nine foot spears with long metals points, as depicted on this shirt, for both warfare and hunting buffalo on horseback. Hispanics and Indigenous soldiers alike sometimes wore sleeveless, multi-layered hide armour to protect the torso in battle. It's possible that the lowest figure on the back of the shirt is wearing such armour, especially when compared to the figure directly above who wears a long sleeved shirt. The cultural identity of the lower figure may be Lipan Apache, as that tribe sometimes wore high-topped moccasins, while the moccasins with turned over cuffs on the upper figure suggest that he may have been Osage. These tribes were the chief enemies of the Commanche at the time of this painting.

## References

- BERLANDIER Jean-Louis, 1980, *Journey to Mexico: during the years 1826 to 1834*. Translated by Sheila M. Ohlendorf, Josette M. Bigelow, and Mary M. Standifer. Introduction by C.H. Muller. Texas State Historical Association.
- BERLANDIER Jean-Louis, 1969, *The Indians of Texas in 1830*. Edited by John C. Ewers. Washington: Smithsonian Publication 4745.

## Arni Brownstone

BFA (Honours), Visual Arts, York University, 1974

Arni Brownstone is the curator responsible for the ethnographic collections from the Americas at the Royal Ontario Museum. His responsibilities include the development of exhibitions and galleries drawing on material from those areas. His scholarly focus is on the visual culture of the northern Plains Indians, with a special interest in Plains Indian pictographic painting. He is currently working to complete a survey book based on his re-drawings of some ninety large-scale war paintings.

<https://www.rom.on.ca/en/collections-research/rom-staff/arni-brownstone>