

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

To Please the Caribou: Painted Caribou-Skin Coats Worn by the Naskapi, Montagnais, and Cree Hunters of the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula. By Dorothy K. Burnham.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rj4x7wb>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 17(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Graburn, Nelson H. H.

**Publication Date**

1993-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

maps, does not, however, diminish the overall rationale for the volume. To be sure, each of us who edits symposia is bound to see the subject matter somewhat differently.

*Imre Sutton*

California State University, Fullerton

**To Please the Caribou: Painted Caribou-Skin Coats Worn by the Naskapi, Montagnais, and Cree Hunters of the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula.** By Dorothy K. Burnham. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992. 314 pages. \$30.00 paper.

This marvelous book is a catalog raisonné of half of all the remaining painted caribou-skin coats in the world. In fact, it describes the sixty most significant of the 120 or so known examples, now found in the museums of Canada, the United States, and Europe. The author is a retired curator of textiles of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, who started to work there in 1929. This book suits her "background and experience, which combined the history of fashion costume with an abiding interest in native skills" (p. xi). The research for this volume took many years, and the final result is a marvelous culmination of and testimony to her life's work.

The volume opens with well-illustrated chapters entitled "Introduction," "Caribou," "Cut of the Coats," "Sewing," "Quill Wrapping and Beading," "Layout of the Design," "Colours," "Painting Tools," and "Design Motifs." The next two hundred pages constitute the catalog of the coats. The entry for each coat includes its museum location, provenance, probable date, detailed history, and description, with sections on quality, condition, cutting, size, sewing, colors, tools, and design forms, and distribution. Each of the sixty cases is illustrated by a black-and-white photograph and line drawings of the cutting design, the types of painted lines, and all the complex design fields. Thus, this book moves the painted caribou-skin coat from a famous but inconsistently known form of native North American clothing to one of the best described and documented. These coats were collected from about 1700 to the 1930s, with the earlier examples probably coming from the Algonkian cultures in the south of this area (Cree, Montagnais) and the more recent examples—and the only ones known through contemporary ethnographic observations—from

the Naskapi of Nouveau Quebec and Newfoundland-Labrador. They are all made of hairless, untanned caribou skin, painted using caribou bone and antler tools. The complex designs in yellow, red, brown, black, and blue are made from prepared fish eggs, trade vermilion, earth pigments, burned bones, and Prussian or laundry blue, respectively. From the thirty-seven high-quality color photographs, we can appreciate that these are striking and intricately decorated garments.

But a description and attribution of these clothes does not exhaust their interest. According to twentieth-century ethnographic accounts from the northern areas, these coats were made by men's wives "to please the caribou." The key designs on each were probably seen in a man's dreams before caribou hunting, and he instructed his wife to paint them on the coat. It is assumed, but by no means certain, that the older coats from the southern areas of Quebec had the same function, even though caribou were much rarer there. These hairless coats were probably summer clothing, complemented in other seasons by the more common but rarely collected furred skin winter coats.

The mystery is that these body-hugging coats are neither practical nor traditional—"cutting a coat shape from caribou skin makes no sense at all . . . It would be much more practical to make a garment that could be pulled over the head" (p. 5).

Part of the fascination of this book is learning how the author solved a series of interrelated mysteries. She suggests that perhaps this type of coat was first made of larger moose skins, for the animal was more common in the southerly areas, but was copied in much smaller, hence less satisfactory, caribou skin. The main solution to these problems stems from the discovery that, over their two hundred years of manufacture, "there was a sequence of style[s] that followed the visual appearance of garments work by Europeans in the areas where the painted caribou-skin coats originated" (p. 5).

The evidence for this interesting conclusion is presented partly in the form of the many excellent historical illustrations of the various forms of European garments worn in those parts of Canada, usually in the decade or two before the particular features appeared in the native-made garments. But why would these Algonkian Indians follow European styles in constructing their sacred and economically important men's summer coats? Burnham's suggestion is that this was stimulated by the French (and later the British) custom of sending very fashionable fine

clothes as gifts to the most loyal native leaders in the colonies. In turn, the native people, encouraged by local missionaries and officials, made and sent to the French king some very fine examples of their own clothing (one or two of the examples in this catalog may have been such gifts). In this and many other cases, the native tailors made clothes constructed as close as possible to the style of the royal gifts, though using local materials and design motifs. Such garments, as gifts between important leaders, had strong spiritual as well as temporal powers, which may have been transferred later to control over the all-important caribou food source.

In addition to the changes in the design and cut of this garment, the painted designs also exhibited many historical variations, while maintaining some key features. Among the most significant of the latter is the elaborately decorated central gore form, painted on the triangular inset gusset and up to the shoulders on the back. It is strongly suggested that this represented the "Magical Mountain of the Lord of the Caribou" (p. 23). Of the many formal design motifs, the quadrangle (e. g., Union Jack or cross) predominates in the early coats; this form was probably adapted from traditional (folded over) birchbark biting patterns. The well-known Algonkian double curve form became important after the coat form had developed and may again have originated from birchbark bites. Many other shapes—chevrons, circles, dots, leaves, ovoids, parallel lines, zigzags, and even a few stars and hearts—are part of the intricate painted designs; unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if they regularly represented some material or spiritual reality to the wearers. There only two cases of actual depictions (a bird and a fish) among the hundreds of painted designs.

This book is a marvelous example of historical research on a Native American cultural form that exists only in museums. More than display and description, it relates the art of clothing to the changing historical contexts of production and use. Although we can regret that no one ever directly recorded the actions of the makers and the thoughts and words of the users, we can take this work as a model analysis of the ever-increasing amount of historical and museological research that remains to be done.

*Nelson H. H. Graburn*  
University of California, Berkeley