

## REVIEW

### *WOMEN'S WORK, WOMEN'S ART: NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORTHERN ATHAPASKAN CLOTHING*

*Judy Thompson, 2013. McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Studies Series no. 68. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal. Paper, 307 pages, photos, line drawings, maps, index. ISBN 978-0-773541-59-7; \$59.95.*

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Northern Athapaskan clothing is largely an unfamiliar subject. Northern Indians are seldom, if ever, seen in movies and have never, as far as I know, been photographed by Edward Curtis. Descriptions of Northern Athapaskans in aboriginal dress are scattered in obscure journals, academic monographs, and museum catalogs. Examples of clothing are found in museums spread around the world: some of the oldest in Finland and Russia. A Plains Indian chief in an eagle-feathered head-dress is a relatively common sight. Few, though, have seen a Northern Athapaskan chief in caribou skin tunic decorated with porcupine quills and smeared with red ocher, his ears and nose pierced, and his long hair parted in the middle, each lock rubbed with grease and red ocher, so that each strand was about the size of a finger, then gathered behind his head with a band of dentalium shells and powdered with swan's down.

Well, no one should have to wonder about Northern Athapaskan clothing again. Judy Thompson has compiled practically every conceivable reference to this topic, producing a model publication that combines lavish illustrations with detailed garment research and historical and ethnographic data. My favorite image, "Rat Indian[s] of Russian America drawn by themselves," shows a man with a huge head of hair and pierced nose and ears. Thompson focuses on clothing made and collected in the nineteenth century, although there are references to earlier and later times. Her stated goals are to bring attention to the central importance of women in the production of clothing; describe in detail technology, design, and decoration of

major nineteenth-century clothing styles; and reconstruct traditions in dress and self-adornment specific to particular Northern Athapaskan groups.

There are four chapters, an epilogue, and appendix. Chapter 1 provides an overview of traditional life and the importance of clothing in Northern Athapaskan culture. Prior to contact, Northern Athapaskans wore skin garments that covered them from head to toe summer and winter; painted and tattooed their faces; applied grease, ocher, beads, and feathers to their hair; and wore earrings, bracelets, and necklaces made from bones, beads, and shells. Clothing and personal adornment denoted social status or relations between individuals, and a person and his or her clothes were intimately connected. A piece of clothing could be manipulated to cause harm, predict the future, or cure illness.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Northern Athapaskans began to transform their personal appearance as they became absorbed into the fur trade. Thompson identifies four trends in this transformation. First, old styles and materials, especially winter clothing, were often retained well into the twentieth century by older people, poor people, and those living more remotely. Second, people quickly abandoned traditional styles of personal adornment. Third, people adopted clothing cut along European patterns and made with foreign materials; and fourth, they developed totally new aboriginal styles combining new materials and designs. These include moccasins, coats, and dresses made from smoke-tanned hides and decorated with floral beaded patterns.

In Chapter 2, Thompson provides a how-to guide to the production of Athapaskan clothing. Traditionally this was a woman's domain. They prepared the hides, cut and sewed the garments, and added decoration. Women were judged on their sewing skills. In Upper Tanana culture, for example, a woman sewing with large stitches was called "rabbit woman" while one using finer stitches was "mouse woman." The latter was considered a good woman who would make money with her fine stitches.

Clothing was made from a wide variety of materials. Caribou skins were probably the most common, but clothing was also made from skins of hare, marmot, ground squirrel, mountain sheep, moose, salmon (used to make waterproof boots), and bear (including bear intestines made into rain gear). The use of bird skins was considered a sign of poverty in some groups. Sinew was used to stitch the clothing together, while bone, antler, claws, hooves, and teeth provided materials for tools, such as sewing awls and fleshing tools, and for decoration. Plant materials, such as rotten wood, were used to smoke skins, while bark was used to dye both skins and porcupine quills. Ochres were mixed with water and grease and applied to all variety of things, including clothing, bows, faces, and snowshoes. Prior to contact with Europeans most clothing was decorated with porcupine quills, and Thompson illustrates the variety of techniques used in quill decoration.

Tanning large skins from caribou and moose was a grueling process requiring considerable physical labor, know-how, and cooperation. Over a period of weeks or months hides had to be scraped, washed, soaked, and then softened with more scraping. Brain matter from caribou or moose, which coated and lubricated the hide protect-

ing it from water damage, decay, and stiffening, was an essential ingredient in the process. Sometimes hides were lightly smoked. The final product was something as soft as the supplest felt.

In Chapter 3, Thompson describes major clothing styles and analyzes and illustrates design elements. Northern Athapaskan clothing was designed for easy movement but maximum coverage against the cold in winter and hordes of mosquitos in the summer. Summer outfits came with gloves and a hood. Trousers had the feet attached so there was no opening for drafts or insects. Most summer clothing was made from tanned caribou hides with the hair removed. Winter clothes were cut similar to summer clothes but with the fur on. Thompson describes some of the most widespread fashions, beginning with tunics cut to a point and moccasin trousers. Two interesting features of these garments are their ubiquity and their sophisticated design. Tunics are three-dimensional. They don't lie flat on a table. The garment is cut with forward movement in mind, and the arms curve out. A fascinating addition to this chapter is the line drawings by Dorothy Burnham illustrating the construction of the clothing.

In the final chapter, Thompson describes dress and adornment traditions for twenty-three Northern Athapaskan groups. Some of the same ground is covered here, leading to a bit of repetition, but the chapter provides a sense of basic similarities in style while pointing out differences in detail. In an epilogue, Thompson closes the circle by describing efforts to pass on or revive traditional knowledge of clothing manufacture. In sum, Thompson has produced a useful and beautiful book destined to become the standard reference for Northern Athapaskan clothing.