

Threads of the Land: Clothing Traditions from Three Indigenous Cultures.

CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION. Mounted at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull. 3 February 1995 - 14 September 1997. Accompanying publications: Judy Thompson, *From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing*, 134 p.; Leslie H. Tepper, *Earth Line and Morning Star: NLaka'pamux Clothing Traditions*, 136 p.; Judy Hall, Jill Oakes, and Sally Qimmiu'naaq Webster, *Sanatujut, Pride in Women's Work: Copper and Caribou Inuit Clothing Traditions*, 136 p.; *Threads of the Land: Clothing Traditions from Three Indigenous Cultures / Liens à la terre: traditions vestementaires de trois cultures autochtones* (booklet).

On the day that I visited *Threads of the Land* to make notes for this review the European Community voted to put in place a ban on the importation of furs caught with leg-hold traps. This ban, long opposed by the First Nations and the Canadian government, puts in jeopardy both the economic well-being and the cultural survival of many Canadian aboriginal people. The irony of my timing--and, more importantly, the timeliness of the show--became immediately evident as soon as I entered the exhibition, for the commonly-taken visitor path begins in the Dene section with what must be one of the most graphic didactic displays on hide-tanning ever mounted. Practically the first thing the visitor sees is a display of caribou hides in successive stages of preparation, preserved by some alchemy of the conservator's art with their flesh, blood, and fur intact. The consummate technical mastery of native tanners is demonstrated across the narrow corridor where samples of the finished products--fox, beaver, caribou, arctic hare--irresistibly draw visitors of all ages and both sexes to stop and stroke their seductively silky and soft textures.

The text panels and photographs in this introductory section make the connection to the theme of the exhibition: the way that aboriginal people affirm and express with beauty and clarity in the design and embellishment of their clothing, their intimate interdependence with the land and all its life forms. "From the land," as George Blondin is quoted as saying in one of the panels, "came our religion...from the land came our life...from the land came our powerful medicine...from the land came our way of life."

Threads of the Land, is, in fact, three exhibitions in one, each of which is the fruit of years of research by staff curators on the rich collections of the CMC and related objects in other institutions. "From the Land," curated by Judy Thompson, focusses on Dene clothing traditions of the Northwest Territories; "Earth Line and Morning Star," curated by Leslie Tepper, presents NLaka'pamux (Thompson River) clothing from the Plateau area of British Columbia; and "Sanatujut, Pride in Women's Work," curated by Judy Hall, is about Copper and Caribou Inuit clothing. On the level of archival and historical research each of the exhibitions and its accompanying catalogue makes a major contribution to scholarly knowledge. The generous number of high quality illustrations and the clearly written, well-organized texts make this knowledge uniquely accessible to the general public, both native and non-native. A great deal of new information about historic and contemporary clothing is brought to light from unpublished archival sources, collated from often obscure works of ethnography or revealed in little-known museum collections. The publications, which closely follow and faithfully record the material presented in the exhibitions, are bound to become standard reference works.

On the whole, the parallel presentation of the three regional clothing traditions and the common format adopted by their publications add to the impact of each of the individual components. By providing opportunities for comparison they invite an appreciation of the inventiveness and seemingly endless variation human beings devise in response to the eternal problems of protection, warmth, and self-presentation. They also reveal the culturally-specific ways in which members of different societies express the components of individual identity such as gender, stage of life, personal achievement, aesthetic sensibility, and taste. These comparative resonances are, however, left largely up to the individual viewer/reader to draw out. An introductory video or other enhancement to the exhibition might have made some of the comparisons clearer to the general public. Such an addition might also have commented more reflexively on the differences in historical depth and interpretive ethnographic information that are available for each of the three areas as a result of different histories of contact and collecting. Both the Dene and the Inuit, for example, have been in contact with Westerners since the eighteenth century, and their cultural artifacts have been collected by many different people throughout that period. The NLaka'pamux, in contrast, are less well known, and we are almost exclusively dependent on the early twentieth-century collections made by James Teit for knowledge of their traditions. Teit, having married Lucy Antko, an NLaka'pamux woman, was well-positioned to collect. He was enlisted by Franz Boas to aid in his comprehensive project of salvage ethnography, and engaged in the common practices of the time, including the re-creation of objects no longer in common use. A comparison both of the limitations and of the unusual resources offered by such an historically specific collection with the extant Inuit and Dene collections could have been better drawn out.

The three exhibitions are models of the collaborative museological practice urged by the report of the 1991 national Task Force on Museums and First Nations. All the curators worked closely with community experts on clothing and the knowledge, insights, and perspectives of these consultants are well and respectfully integrated with the historical research. The exhibitions are also rich in displays on contemporary clothing. In this respect the difference between "Threads of the Land" and earlier exhibitions on similar topics is subtle but significant. Although past exhibition projects have certainly included contemporary examples, the presence of the contemporary is much more vivid and its authenticity asserted much more successfully than has been common in the past, even when the new examples of clothing present a dramatic contrast with those of the past.

Both for museum curators and for contemporary seamstresses, one of the most valuable legacies of the exhibition project is the recovery of knowledge about historical clothing. All three curators acknowledge a debt to Dorothy Burnham, Curator Emeritus of Textiles from the Royal Ontario Museum and Research Associate at the CMC, who put her unique knowledge of garment construction at the service of the project, analyzing lost techniques of construction and drawing out patterns for older types of garments that have long gone out of use and memory. Here too, however, the expertise available from contemporary consultants varied from area to area in relation to the different histories of contact and white settlement. The early establishment of the fur trade among the Dene made for the longest history of contact and for the most gradual process of change in clothing styles and materials. Among the NLaka'pamux such

changes have been no less profound, but happened much more rapidly during the late nineteenth century, while in the Arctic, of course, similar changes are still within living memory. Inuit consultants, in consequence, are thus able to provide much more detailed information about the reasons for the use of particular materials and types of construction and about the symbolic meanings of particular images and forms than can modern Dene or NLaka'pamux about their historic clothing traditions.

Threads of the Land is a rich and multifaceted exhibition that will reward repeat visits--indeed it is impossible to see it properly in a single trip. It is also the first major exhibition of historical materials produced by the ethnology division since its move to the new building. As such, it is a shame that the museum was not able to provide it with a more spacious layout. It is hard to see how the designer could have done much else with the small space that he was allotted than to present us with the rather cramped and sometimes confusing winding corridors that house the exhibition. (The lack of ceilings overhead adds to the discomfort - the experience is rather like travelling through an Elizabethan maze placed inside an airplane hangar.) The ethnology division is currently at work on the museum's new Native Peoples' Hall. *Threads of the Land* has set a high standard of scholarship, research, clarity of content, and collaborative interpretation. If more attention is paid to a successful spatial realization of the curatorial content in the new installations it will surely provoke equivalent words of praise to those spoken at the *Threads of the Land* opening. The Inuit section, Rosemarie Kuptana noted, tells "many untold stories of the people." while Chief David Walkem of the Cook's Ferry Band of NLaka'pamux said that, "Going in [to the show] was a very powerful experience," and welcomed it particularly as a way of transmitting knowledge and traditions to the young. And surely no praise could be greater than the words of Jane Dragon, one of the consultants for the Dene section, who said, simply, "I wouldn't change one thing in the show."

Ruth B. Phillips
Carleton University