

THOMPSON, Judy, 2013 *Women's Work, Women's Art: Nineteenth Century Northern Athapaskan Clothing*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, Gatineau, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 307 pages

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THOMPSON, Judy

2013 *Women's Work, Women's Art: Nineteenth Century Northern Athapaskan Clothing*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, Gatineau, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 307 pages.

Women's Work, Women's Art: Nineteenth Century Northern Athapaskan Clothing by Judy Thompson will undoubtedly become a classic text in Native Studies curricula. An encyclopedic study of Northern Athapaskan/Dene clothing, this beautifully illustrated publication combines archival images and historical clothing from museum collections with the cultural insights of Athapaskan elders and community scholars as well as ethnographic observations by early collectors, historians, and anthropologists. As the culmination of a noteworthy museum career, Thompson's curatorial expertise is evident in the selection of clothing items, in the description of material resources and sewing techniques, in the attention to regional clothing forms and stylistic details, and in the appendix with its in-depth study of over 20 garments and clothing items presented in the text.

With a comprehensive knowledge of the northern Athapaskan collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC, now the Canadian Museum of History), the author builds upon 40 years of research and publications. As a member of the curatorial committee that the Glenbow Museum (1984-1988) formed to prepare the exhibition *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Thompson carried out an extensive study of Athapaskan historical collections in museums throughout Great Britain, Europe, and the (former) Soviet Union, many unknown and unpublished at the time (Thompson 1987). Shortly thereafter, this study was followed by Thompson's (1990) monograph, *Pride of the Indian Wardrobe: Northern Athapaskan Footwear* and landmark exhibition and catalogue, *From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing* (1994), incorporating fieldwork with Dene seamstresses and elders in the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

Beginning with the identification of 23 Athapaskan groups resident in northern Canada and Alaska, *Women's Work, Women's Art* provides a detailed description of the ecology, social history, and clothing design of Dene communities in three geo-cultural regions. Chapter titles convey the scope of the publication: "In the Old Days," "Doing the Job Right: Preparation of Materials and the Art of Sewing," "From Head to Toe: Major Styles and Cuts of Garments," and "Regional Styles." In addition to the choice selection of historical garments, the publication features 200 illustrations, including diagrams illustrating clothing patterns, stitching, and decorative elements, such as quillwork and fringe-wrapping. These diagrams, the result of a close collaboration between the late textile curator, Dorothy Burnham, and CMC curators, Judy Thompson, Judy Hall, and Louise Tepper, represent an exceptional contribution to the study of indigenous clothing design in northern Canada (see Thompson et al. 2001).

Historical illustrations highlight the significant time and attention devoted to dress and personal representation in Athapaskan society. The 1854 watercolour, entitled "Tukkuth or Rat Indian [Gwich'in] of the Upper Porcupine River" (Figure I.1), by British surgeon Edward Adams, captures the image of a finely garbed, well-adorned

figure of a Dene hunter in which every aspect of his clothing and hunting equipment is rendered with exceptional care. An 1890 sketch by Father Morice (Figure 1.14a, b) portrays a high-ranking Dakelh man wearing a ceremonial wig of dentalia, human hair, and sea lion whiskers in a striking cascade down his back. In demonstrating the importance attributed to cultural ideals of self-presentation in 19th century Athapaskan society, such images raise disturbing questions about the diminished status of Indigenous clothing traditions over time and its effect on issues of social prestige and personal self-image within Athapaskan society.

Chapter 2 extensively describes the regional ecology with a comprehensive description of the natural resources available to Dene seamstresses in the form of animal hides, sinew, bone, antler, claws, hoofs, teeth, plant material, minerals, and shells. In noting that young girls are taught not to sew “lazily” and that faulty stitching must be removed to be redone properly, the author provides an important insight into cultural attitudes governing the nature of artisanship.

The primary focus of the study is presented in chapters 3 and 4, which cover the core tenets of clothing production as well as variations in garment cuts and regional styles. Hide garments from over 30 museum collections provide a solid foundation for describing the pointed tunics and moccasin-trousers historically worn by Dene men, women, and children, as well as the open-front smoked hide coats worn in the interior subarctic and changes in clothing styles and materials during the historical period.

Regional variations in northern Athapaskan clothing styles embrace an expansive geographical area stretching across the subarctic from the interior of Alaska to the west coast of Hudson Bay. Three regional maps (Figures 4.1, 4.40, 4.82) illustrate the geographical proximity of Athapaskan, Inuit, and Yup’ik communities in Alaska and northern Canada. Artifacts and historical illustrations indicate the borrowing and/or adaptation of fur clothing and design features among these cultural groups. Figure 4.10, for example, presents a fur garment made of horizontal tiers of ground squirrel skins decorated with red flannel epaulettes. Hoodless, it is closely akin to the ground squirrel clothing worn by Yup’ik families in southwestern Alaska. The 1851 illustration by Edward Adams, identified as Trigalik Indians (Deg Hit’an; Figure 4.26), portrays a man and a woman in Inupiat-style fur parkas. This, however, appears to be an error in the original caption, for the Adams collection also includes individual portraits of the same figures, noted as “Inuit Man” and “Inuit Woman.”² The question of trade, adaptation, and/or adoption of clothing design across cultural boundaries remains a most interesting one introduced by Thompson, particularly with regard to two hooded gutskin garments (Figures 4.11, 4.23). Clothing items made from fish skins (Figures 4.24, 4.25) also indicate the shared use and treatment of material resources among northern Athapaskan, Yup’ik, and Inuit seamstresses.

² Edward Adams Collection, Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI), Cambridge University: see Y.83.11.22 and Y.83.11.23 at <http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/museum/catalogue/polarart/search/?q=adams>. The image illustrated may have been mis-identified by Adams’ colleague, Lt. Francis Skead, whose descendant donated the collection to the SPRI.

In sharp contrast to Inuit fur parkas, Athapaskan hide and fur garments are often made without an incorporated hood. Rather, a separate head-covering with hide fringing or fur falling over the wearer's shoulders accompanies garments worn in summer and winter (Figures 1.4; 3.3a-c, 3.13, 3.22a, 3.24, 4.6, E.2). A special aspect of hood-wear is its use by adolescent girls during puberty (Figure 1.5). The large skin hood "hid her face and obstructed her vision, preventing her from looking at men or game [...]. Noisemakers—caribou hoofs or pieces of bone—sewn on the hood ensured that men and animals would be alerted to her presence and also prevented the girl from hearing talk of game" (p. 14). Historical illustrations also demonstrate the use of a separate peaked head-covering worn by adult women (Figures 1.22; 4.85), while 20th century photographs illustrate women's preference for cloth scarves, even in winter (Figures 4.20, 4.49, 4.50). A young girl's hooded summer outfit (Figure 3.36), apparently made for Rowena Stringer, daughter of the Anglican minister Reverend I.O. Stringer, is one of the few garments to incorporate a hood, although others also include children's outfits (Figure 3.40, 4.27, 4.45a-c, 4.52a, b, 4.66, 4.83, 4.93), as well as a gutskin parka (Figure 4.23), and Inupiat parkas illustrated in a historical sketch by Edward Adams (Figure 4.26). The presence or absence of an integrated hood provides an interesting point of contrast between northern Athapaskan and Inuit clothing design.

Another key difference between Dene and Inuit clothing design relates to the means of carrying infants. Rather than incorporating a formal carrying pouch within the mother's clothing (known as an *amaut* in Inuktitut), Dene women transport infants and toddlers using a wide, often well-embroidered baby strap or carry a child in a light, wooden (often birchbark) cradle on the mother's back. Through artifacts as well as historical images, the author discusses a variety of baby-carrying methods and carrier-types, suggesting a rewarding area for additional research, particularly in comparison with the cultural traditions of neighbouring First Nations.

The conceptual framework of *Women's Work, Women's Art* emphasizes the significance of Indigenous clothing design as a functional response to the environment as well as a cultural expression of self and community. Similar to theoretical descriptions of Inuit clothing design, the author discusses northern Athapaskan clothing as an aesthetic embodiment of the person's social and spiritual identity. Key to this concept is the sacred marking of clothing as a spiritual rather than decorative reference. In this regard, the use of ochre, fringes, and bands of porcupine quills or beadwork at specific sites, including seam edges, neck openings, wrists, sleeves, and across the back of a garment, serve a protective rather than simply decorative function—a function also served by *pukiq*, the white fur underbelly of the caribou in Inuit clothing design. Within both Athapaskan and Inuit societies, clothing clearly exists as a long-established, well-defined, and creative expression that not only represents but also empowers the individual and the social community (Chaussonnet 1988; Driscoll 1987; Thompson 1987).

The comprehensive breadth of the author's research in illustrating and describing hide garments, dressed dolls, and historical images in museum and archival collections, and the author's collaboration with community seamstresses, not only creates a solid research foundation for northern Athapaskan clothing design, but also serves as a

model for embracing and sharing the rich cultural legacy of First Nations and Inuit artifacts preserved in museum collections. For this reason, *Women's Work, Women's Art* is of special interest to all those engaged in First Nations and Inuit cultural studies. Seamstresses across the North will appreciate the comparative use of materials, the details in clothing design and production, and the shared respect for clothing design as a creative expression of self and community. Students and researchers will be grateful for the identification of Dene archival and museum collections, many of which also include Inuit collections. In terms of future research, the incidence of cultural borrowing and clothing adaptation tests the strength of geo-cultural boundaries. In this regard, *Women's Work, Women's Art* provides a vital insight into understanding the rigidity and/or fluidity of cultural boundaries among Indigenous communities.

In summary, *Women's Work, Women's Art* is a comprehensive publication shaped by a profound respect for the artistic skill and cultural practice of northern Athapaskan women across time and place. The author's respect for the creative work, pragmatic achievements, and artistic contributions of Indigenous communities—in place long before the arrival of Europeans—contributes in a major way to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the cultural legacy of Canada's First Nations. A significant addition to the growing list of publications in McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series, *Women's Work, Women's Art* is sure to become a seminal text in Native Studies curricula, laying a solid foundation for community study and helping to define the next generation of undergraduate and graduate coursework. Truly encyclopedic, the reader will come back often to discover new information and once again appreciate the author's fine scholarship and attention to detail.

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