Uncoverings 1983

Volume 4 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Applique Button Blankets in Northwest Coast Indian Culture

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The button blanket is a textile artform peculiar to Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Not a bedcovering, the button blanket is a robe-like garment worn for ceremonial occasions. It carries special significance for its wearer, and denotes his or her family association within the complicated social order of the coastal tribes.

Aptly named, the traditional button blanket is just that: a blanket decorated with buttons, most often made of mother-of-pearl or abalone shell. Contemporary button blankets are made from a variety of yard goods—including both light and heavy weight felt and Melton—rather than a ready-made blanket, and sequins are sometimes used in place of buttons. The buttons are used chiefly to accent the design of the wearer's family crest, which is appliqued onto the center of the blanket in cloth of a contrasting color. These applique designs give button blankets both their symbolic reference and their striking visual impact.[1]

A button blanket is made to be worn for a ritual occasion, such as a name giving ceremony in which a person takes on an Indian name, or the raising of a totem pole. These events would be celebrated at a "potlatch" (an elaborate Northwest Coast Indian ceremonial feast at which gifts are distributed by the host). Draped over the shoulders and fastened by a clasp under the wearer's chin, a button blanket is a spectacular means of "showing one's colors."

Originally, button blankets were worn for dancing at these ritual occasions. This practice started to die out in the 1880s, when the Canadian Government made potlatching illegal. Around the same time, traditional activities were also altered through the influence of missionaries. Button blankets continued to be made, however, and their ritual importance remained intact—they were worn to church. The ban

on potlatching was repealed in 1951, and during the last 20 years, button blankets have once more begun to be worn for ceremonial dancing. Even more recently, young Indians have shown their cultural pride by wearing button blankets for high school and college graduations.

Very little has been written about button blankets, and it is not known why certain of the coastal tribes began making them. Sources agree, however, that the button blanket is a relatively recent addition to the Native people's rich creative repertoire, being a by-product of the fur trade that began in the last quarter of the 18th century.[2]

By 1827, when the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Langley near what is now Vancouver, British Columbia[3] and thus provided a stable center for trade, "Stroud cloth" blankets were in constant demand as trade items. Stroud was a coarse plain weave wool named after a woolen manufacturing center in Gloucestershire, England.[4] Eventually, the blanket became the standard unit of value in economic transactions, including those strictly within the Native culture. Other articles used to make button blankets, including mother-of-pearl buttons, abalone shell from Mexico and California (which was more colorful than the northern abalone), needles, thread and scissors were also popular both as articles of trade and as token of the traders' goodwill.[5]

Dorothy Grant, an accomplished weaver and button blanket maker of the Haida tribe, tries to imagine the satisfaction with which her ancestors incorporated trade goods into their creative process:

> When the traders brought in Stroud cloth blankets, our people latched onto them right away. It must have been such a pleasure to have fabric already made up that could just be designed into things and decorated; . . . You can see in museum pieces that it was such prized material even the scraps were used for designs. If they didn't have a big enough piece for the blanket, they scrapped pieces together and stitched them finely to make up a design. They were very valuable.[6]

While the goods of trade provided the means to an end, it was the native artists' remarkable ability to create and execute strong graphic images that gave the button blanket its compelling quality. The art style developed by Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast is so sophisticated and powerful that it has become admired throughout the world. The

Fig. 1. Ceremonial masks and button blanket (raven crest design?), ca. 1920. Photograph courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library (Photo No. 14089).

intricate designs on button blankets belong to the same aesthetic tradition which is perhaps best known through totem poles, ceremonial masks and argillite carvings. That aesthetic sense is virtually inseparable from the spiritual and familial aspects of the coastal Indian culture.

The way in which a button blanket is made gives some insight into the nature of this interwoven relationship. Each button blanket is made for a particular individual who is a member of a clan. A clan is a cross-tribal kinship group which is symbolized by a totem, an object (usually an animal) which serves as a reminder of ancestry and with which there are mythical and historic connections. Examples of totems include the Wolf, Bear, Eagle, Killer Whale, Raven and Fireweed. Membership in a clan is by birth, and descent is through the maternal line. Therefore, the children of a Wolf mother and Eagle father are members of the Wolf clan. It is the graphic representation of clan totems which forms the primary basis for all coastal native art, including button blankets.

Prior to a ceremonial occasion, an individual will ask a skilled woman to make a button blanket adorned with the requestor's totemic crest.

If the woman is a member of the same clan, she will make the blanket for free. If she is a member of a different clan, she will expect to be compensated for her work. Either way, it is an honor to be asked to make the blanket. Once made and accepted, a blanket cannot be given away, although it may be loaned to a member of the same clan.

The making of a button blanket is almost always a joint effort between a man and a woman. The design of the blanket is drawn on paper by a man. A woman then translates the design to fabric. Dorothy Grant describes the process:

> It's a different way of thinking, working with button blankets. . . . A man most often creates the design for the woman and expects her to do it justice. There is a working together on a piece. A woman has to be able to understand the man's design and be able to work with it, be able to show it in a clear way. . . . That reflects back into the past where men and women always worked closely together. It was natural in our culture that the men designed. . . and the women had control over the execution of the piece. Women knew their materials and they made choices on how a piece was to go together. Women's and men's creativity complemented each other.[7]

Another tradition influencing button blankets is the choice of colors. Only four are used: black, dark blue, red and green in combinations of red on black, red on blue, red on green and blue on red. Green blankets are associated with the Kwagiutl tribe and red blankets with the Westcoast tribe of the eastern and western portions of Vancouver Island, respectively. Blue and black blankets are made by the more northerly tribes of British Columbia. According to Grace Allen, a button blanket maker of the Nishga tribe, the colors are symbolic, with black representing "dark waters," blue, the "river of grief," and red, the "dance of happiness" or "coming alive." The buttons signify "wealth."[8] Dorothy Grant believes that the association of particular colors with certain tribal groups is a convention rooted in practicality. Initially, the colors used were the only ones available, until long use established the current custom.

In the same way that colors can assist in identifying a blanket's origin, stylistic conventions can sometimes help distinguish the blankets of one tribe from those of another. For example, Haida blanket makers tend to outline crest designs with buttons, while others let the appli-

Fig. 2. Quatsino village dance party wearing button blankets, ca. 1920. Photograph courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library (Photo No. 14044).

que designs stand alone and use the buttons as border decorations. Button blankets of the Tlingit tribe often feature a square flap on the portion of the blanket that falls over the wearer's upper back. (This panel may have been patterned after the collars on sailors' uniforms. Clothing styles of the white culture were admired and copied by Indians after the fur trade began.) Interestingly, button blankets with this panel usually do not have an appliqued crest design.[9]

In coastal Native culture, textile arts are women's arts. For centuries skills have been handed down through generations of mothers and daughters in such a subtle, selfless way that only the artistry itself recalls the nameless artists. Today this crucial transfer of knowledge is in danger of becoming equally obscure, as decades of social upheaval and rapidly changing lifestyles have all but stopped the flow. Not many young women know how to make button blankets now. But Dorothy Grant and others are working to maintain the continuity and quality of this textile heritage. Older women artists are receiving recognition through exhibits and their skills are being sought after and studied. It is hoped that this effort will be successful. The extinction of so splendid a traditional artform as the button blanket would be a loss indeed.

Notes and References

1. Not all button blanket designs are appliqued; some are formed solely of buttons.
2. In describing items for trade with Indians, the journal of Captain Joseph Ingraham, kept during his 1790-92 voyage to the Northwest Coast en route to China, states, ". . . I had some garments of blue cloth made with buttons sewed on in a curious manner which likewise fetched a good price." The exact nature of these "garments" is unknown, as is the precedent for adorning them with buttons. The date, however, is significant, in that it establishes the decorative application of buttons to cloth within the early days of trade. (Joseph Ingraham, *Journal of the Brigantine Hope on a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of North America*, 1790-92, (Barre, Massachusetts: Imprint Society, 1971), p. 117.
3. Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: The Impact of the White Man*, Vol. 1 (Victoria, B.C.: Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthroplogy, 1964), p. 54.
4. Fabrics other than Stroud cloth were traded with Northwest Coast Indians, although the term "stroud" is often used generically in describing trade blankets. I have observed a number of old button blankets in museum collections, but cannot say whether any of them are, in fact, made of Stroud cloth. My feeling is that none are, as the likelihood of early trade blankets surviving to this time would be remote. All of the blankets I've seen are made of wool; however, there is a variance in the weights of the fabrics used. One patched button blanket in the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology's collection (which has a tailor's label sewn on a patch of the fabric) contains a Melton-like material as well as a lighter weight wool. Patching fabrics was apparently not uncommon, and even pieces of calico can be seen in some old blankets.
5. Duff, p. 57.
6. Dorothy Grant, "A Quiet Wealth: Textile Arts of Coastal Native Women," exhibit poster, (Cartwright Street Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, 1983).
7. Ibid.
8. Author's interview with Grace Allen, Vancouver, British Columbia, August 5, 1983.
9. Author's interview with Dorothy Grant, Whonnock, British Columbia, September 16, 1983.