

Photo Credit: Fran Hurcomb



Tanning

Some hides are allowed to bleach in the sun while others are smoke-tanned. To smoke-tan a hide, very hot coals are needed to produce only smoke and no flame.

Smoke from old rotten wood, mixed with dry cones, tans the skin a reddish colour. Using only old rotten wood tans the skin yellow.

The sides of the hide are sewn together and an old canvas cloth is sewn around the bottom to keep the skin from touching the ground. String is threaded through the holes along the top to hold the hide up over the coals. The hide hangs down to the ground producing an airtight structure around the smoking fire.

It takes about four to five hours to achieve the desired colour in the hide. When the hide is smoked enough, it is taken down. Without opening it up, the hide is rolled and left overnight for more smoke to be absorbed. In the morning, the hide is unstitched and hung outdoors to release the smoke.

Traditional tanning of one hide can take up to two weeks to complete. It is well worth the wait though, as the hide is now ready to be made into clothing, decorated with brightly coloured beads, or trimmed with beautiful fur from the Northwest Territories.



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Tanned Hides

From Canada's Northwest Territories



Trade-mark owned by the Government of the Northwest Territories



Artist: Judith Charlo
Photo Credit: GNWT

Transformed into brilliantly beaded moccasins, gloves, and warm jackets, tanned hides are proudly worn by many people in the Northwest Territories.

Some of the most important raw materials used by Aboriginal peoples in the Northwest Territories are the hides and furs of local land and sea animals.

Traditionally Tanned Hides

Traditionally tanned hide is a unique material. It cannot be reproduced by industrial tanning techniques. This customary process was once crucial to survival in Northern communities. Moose and caribou hides tanned in the traditional way are strong, durable, lightweight and warm. Tanned hides are used for clothing such as jackets, pants and gloves.

The technique of hide tanning is very time consuming and takes a great deal of physical strength. Hide prices have remained relatively constant throughout the years, while the cost of living continues to increase. For these reasons, fewer women are tanning hides the traditional way. Most hides today are brought into the communities by friends, relatives and neighbours of

the women who continue this tradition. These tanned hides are generally used for family and a limited amount of tanning is done for commercial purposes.

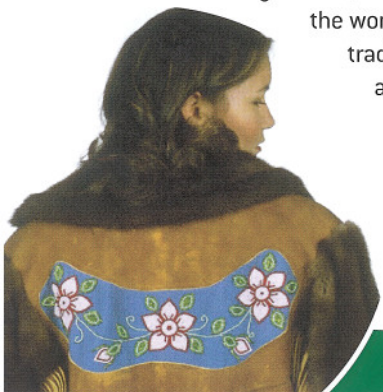


Photo Credit: GNWT

Dene women, with their tradition of intricate ornamentation, often add beautiful floral quilling, beading and other decorative work to the clothing.

Preparing the Hide

The most commonly tanned hides are moose and caribou. Moose hide is thicker and requires more work to soften. A fresh hide is the best for tanning. If a hide must be stored for any length of time before tanning, it should be salted, rolled in saw dust and kept either in a cool place or frozen. The hides from caribou harvested in September are ideal because the hide is thick and the hair is not too long. Moose hides are very thick in the winter months and often require too much work to soften. Spring and summer moose hides are better for tanning.

A hide is soaked for three days to loosen the flesh and hair for easy removal. The wet hide is then draped over a pole. Using a knife, the flesh and hair are scraped off. The bulk of the flesh and hair is removed while the hide is wet and easier to work with.

Once both sides of the hide are fairly clean, holes are made along the outside edge of the hide. It is then tied to a stretcher frame to dry for a few days.

Once dry, the softening process can begin. Using both hands, a fleshing tool is scraped across the flesh side of the hide, in hard downward strokes. It usually takes two days to fully clean the flesh off a hide. The hide is then turned over and a smooth flat board is used to scrape the hair side, to remove any remaining hair and the hair follicles. The scraping and stretching continues until the hide is an even thickness of approximately two millimetres. The more the hide is scraped and worked, the softer it becomes.

Next the hide is removed from the frame and rinsed to remove the blood. Once the hide is clean, it is wrung out

and opened to remove all the folds and wrinkles. This process is much easier with two people since a wet hide can weigh over 45 kilograms. The hide is hung over the frame to dry.

Next the hide needs to be softened by smoking it. Poles are gathered and put together like a tipi, with the hide draped over it. A fire is made inside the tipi using rotten spruce wood. Once smoked on one side, the hide is turned over and the other side is smoked. Each side takes about half a day to smoke.

To further soften the hide, it is soaked in a sudsy solution. Traditionally, hides were soaked in a milky solution made from moose or caribou brains. Today, a sudsy solution of soap and fat is often used. The hide is then wrung out and stretched as it dries.

The smoking, soaking and stretching process is repeated until the hide becomes very soft. The hide is constantly turned over and scraped as it dries. As it softens, the hide becomes fuzzy.



Artist: Elizabeth Whane
Photo Credit: Tessa Macintosh



Photo Credit: GNWT