

# Basic Detail Report

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## Parka

### Date

1800-1830

### Primary Maker

George Catlin

### Medium

Whale gut, hair, sinew

### Description

The parka or Kamleika is made of untanned whale gut strips sewn in horizontal sections or bands of descending size. Every third row has a thin strip of red dyed hide or gut. There are tufts of red wool, hair (possibly human) or feathers and small pieces of long white hair of an old man sewn into the seams at intervals where the red strip occurs. The lower hem, cuffs and outer edge of the hood have a light green edging or casing, probably to house the cord used to draw the ends together to prevent water entering. The hood, shoulders and arms are more complex in shape, with gusset inserts allowing for movement of the body. The hood opening is designed to fit very close to the sides of the face. The whale gut is a translucent yellow brown colour and extremely lightweight. When wetted it would have become more pliable and easier to move freely in while still retaining its waterproof capability. The user would dampen the garment down before pulling it on over his clothing. The parkas are not very durable and an active hunter might need two or three in a year. Kamleika were made from the intestines of various animals; sea lions, harbour seals, whales, bears or more rarely sea lion oesophagus, or whale liver and tongue membrane. The sewing thread is made from twisted sinew of sea mammals or caribou or arctic fox. The hair and other materials inserted into the seams may have had a talismanic purpose. Some tribes in Alaska inserted a thin strand of a native grass into the seams of gut skin garments. When this becomes damp it swells and prevents water from seeping in through the seams. Without taking a seam apart it would be impossible to tell if this is the case with the Cuming parka. The skill required to make this garment was very high. The seams and stitches are tiny and were probably made using needles made from the lag bones of gulls, rather than steel. Parkas were made exclusively by women, who would do their sewing during the evening by the light of an oil lamp. A parka would take around two months to make. The parka was an indispensable part of an Aleutian or Inuit hunter's equipment, essential for survival in the extreme cold of arctic waters. The parka would be completely waterproof, allowing the hunter to risk submersion in the icy waters without the fatal consequence of hyperthermia due to his clothing becoming soaked. The sinew cords in the casing of the neck and wrist bands would be drawn closed and the lower edge tied around the top hole of the kayak or baidarka where the hunter sat. Kayaks are designed for speed and manoeuvrability but can easily turn over. A skilled kayaker can turn the vessel back to the surface very quickly and with the parka completely covering his body he would remain warm and dry. The parka has evidence of use, including patches of an

organic oily black substance that has stained the whale gut that are common on these garments, and blood spatters in several places.