

Bringing Mi'kmaw Quillwork One Step Closer to Home



(L to R) Summer Paul, Alexandria Francis, master quiller Crystal Gloade, Gerald Gloade, and Sharon Farrell. Photo by Katherine Fogden.

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In March, a group of quillworkers from Mi'kma'ki and staff from the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre journeyed from Nova Scotia to Washington D.C. The mission of MDCC staff members Sharon Farrell and Gerald Gloade, master quiller Crystal Gloade, and her apprentices, Summer Paul and Alexandria Francis, was to visit the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and assess the state of certain quillwork in the museum's collection that will be coming home to the future Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre. The intricately quilled birchbark boxes, containers and other objects, were flagged for requiring specific care owing to their age-related fragility and condition during a prior phase of the effort to bring the collection home.

Certain items require the care and attention of Crystal, Summer, and Lexy to determine the optimal method for their transportation without causing additional damage. The project is anchored in MDCC's practice-centered curation approach, empowering practitioners to guide the care and conservation of Mi'kmaw belongings. The approach

relies on the expertise of the practitioners to guide the protection and treatment of the belongings. Grounded in a Mi'kmaw worldview, this work positions MDCC at the forefront of Indigenous-led curation processes. Farrell, MDCC's Collections Manager, expresses the aim of their journey, stating, "We went down to D.C. to look closely at the baskets and boxes that need to be stabilized for travel. Many of the Mi'kmaw quillwork items at NMAI are pretty stable. They can handle the journey. Some have already handled incredible journeys. Some of the belongings have traveled from Mi'kma'ki to England to New York City and from there to Washington D.C."

At NMAI, the team spent dedicated time with a large number of quilled belongings. Alongside NMAI conservators Kelly McHugh and Caitlin Mahony, the group examined birchbark boxes of various shapes and sizes, emblazoned with the unique geometric designs of Mi'kmaw quillwork. Crystal, Summer, and Lexy played a pivotal role in this work, scrutinizing each artifact with meticulous care. Their close examination revealed not just the physical state of the artifacts but also insights into the techniques and materials used by their ancestors. They were able to identify when in the year the birch was probably harvested

and if the quills had been coloured using natural dyes.

The group identified and discussed issues that could pose a problem if not handled correctly during the future transport back to Mi'kma'ki. One of the most common issues was lifting quills. Over time, on some boxes, quills have lifted and now poke out. Of the issue, Crystal says: "Most of the quills lay beautifully. But some of them, you know, because they are old, a few quills are sticking up. We're trying to make sure that these get transported without snagging or knocking a quill off."

"Seeing the quills that are suspended or sticking up," continues Crystal. "It almost reminds me of first aid. You have this protrusion of glass sticking in and you must transport the person with a donut around it. Maybe that's what we need to do around these quills, so they don't get snagged during the trip because you want to eliminate the movement."

The group – MDCC staff, quillers, and NMAI conservators – discussed the different ways the belongings could be crated for transportation: utilizing Teflon tape or creating negative space for the protruding quills. The Mi'kmaw value of non-interference played a big part in this decision.

Crystal emphasizes the importance of preserving

the objects in their authentic state, saying, "We did not want to change them in any way, leaving them the way that they are." This sentiment underscores a commitment to respecting the skill and intention of past generations while ensuring that future ones can appreciate and learn from it.

Moreover, the journey highlighted the evolving nature of conservation practices. Sharon Farrell remarks, "Some of the old museum practices do not align with today's standards. The boxes and baskets were shellacked or coated with resin." These outdated techniques were revealed when the objects were placed under black light. If they had received a coating prior to their placement in NMAI, they glowed.

The ongoing cross-cultural exchange between the museum and the MDCC contingent is a rich and collaborative experience, characterized by the sharing of knowledge and techniques. During the visit, NMAI conservators opened their labs to the MDCC team, demonstrated proper cleaning methods for the artifacts, like the use of agar-agar, a jelly-like substance that pulls dirt and dust from an artifact without damaging it. Meanwhile, Gerald Gloade, Program Development Officer, shared traditional knowledge about the creation of natural dyes, highlighting the beauty of

the teal dye found on some of the belongings. "Some of the quills are dyed this teal green, this bluish green color, very beautiful," explains Gerald. "That dye was made using rotten birch. You find it in the woods, and I've seen it a thousand times in my travels in the woods and just know that that's where they get that colour from boiling that out. I imagine thousands of years playing with things and finding out what works and what doesn't."

This exchange not only fostered mutual learning and understanding but also deepened appreciation for each other's work. Through such interactions, both institutions were able to enrich their conservation efforts and strengthen cultural ties.

"Looking at the quilled items with the practitioners was an incredible experience," says NMAI Objects

Conservator Caitlin Mahony. "While listening to Crystal, Summer, and Lexy discuss the quilled items, it was clear to all of us the deep layers of knowing and the strong relationships they have to the items, the materials, and the practice. They generously shared stories connected with designs, material processing, an item's use, or about the person who may have made the item. These are essential understandings that help us connect and care for the items while they are at NMAI. As conservators, we also share a passion for materials and techniques, so we were excited for the opportunity to look together at the items and delve into the details of how expertly they were made with artists who can reveal insights due to their expertise and share in the appreciation. When we discussed the condition of some of the items with the practitioners, our conservation team shared approaches to cleaning quill and birch in our practice and techniques we have for stabilizing items for travel and packing. Together, we were able to come up with an understanding of the path to take to prepare the items for their trip home."

Gerald reflected on the significance of bringing these artifacts back to their community, stating, "Having them here, locally in our own area is going to provide that opportunity to a lot of residents

who can't afford to travel. But it goes beyond that, too. Having them here – their home – is everything." Indeed, the return of these artifacts signifies more than just a physical relocation; it symbolizes a reclamation of spirit, culture, and heritage.

As plans for the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre proceed rapidly, the focus remains on ensuring that these pieces are accessible. Sharon Farrell articulated this vision, stating, "Currently, we are designing how the Centre will be organized. How are these artifacts going to live in their spaces? How will they be cared for and how will they be accessible to the community? Accessibility is super important. How do we make the collections readily available for people coming to visit and have access to do their own research? We really need to make sure that those spaces are set up properly for people."

Crystal poignantly captures the essence of their journey, reflecting: "I keep thinking about hands. We used our hands to measure our designs and to inspire us. See the half-moon on our thumbs. Looking at these artifacts, I think about the hands that made them and then the hands that will finally bring them home."

At heart, the journey from Washington D.C. to Mi'kma'ki represents more than just a physical relocation of artifacts; it embodies a journey of cultural preservation, collaboration, and community empowerment. As these find their way to the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre, they carry with them the stories, traditions, and legacies of the Mi'kmaw people, ensuring that they endure for generations to come.

The trip is one of six planned this year as part of preparing the collection to come home. In subsequent months, MDCC staff will accompany a group of Mi'kmaw beaders to the museum, followed by a group of basket-makers. Both groups will develop the best approaches for care and transport, with practitioners leading the guidance and direction. In September, the quillers will return to continue work on the boxes that will one day again call Mi'kma'ki home. ✨