

Returning Home: Mi'kmaw Beadwork And Belongings Prepare For Their Journey Back To Mi'kma'kik

by Kamden Nicholas, Nik Phillips, & Ross Nervig

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Mi'kmaw beadwork Nik Phillips (Millbrook) and Jocelyn Marshall (Membertou) recently completed their final key visit to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., as part of ongoing efforts to prepare historical items for their return to Mi'kma'kik, tentatively set for 2027.

The visit highlights the strong partnership between the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre (MDCC) and NMAI, built

on mutual respect and a shared commitment to co-stewardship. The two teams worked with Nik and Jocelyn to understand and explore the current planning stages for MDCC's future galleries, ensuring beadwork and other cultural items are carefully integrated to tell the stories of Mi'kmaw resilience, existence and vibrant ways of doing and being.

"This process is a testament to what we can accomplish together," says Nik. "NMAI has cared for these artifacts with diligence, and we're collaborating to ensure their return honours their journey and cultural significance."

During the visit, Nik and Jocelyn selected pieces that

highlight the diversity of Mi'kmaw beadwork, ranging from ceremonial garments to everyday items, while addressing preservation needs and planning for a community curatorial space where members can engage with these items in meaningful ways. The team also collaborated with the Smithsonian's Feather Identification Lab to identify the feathers on several of the belongings, determining the species to which they belong.

"It's cool to know some of these feathers are also part of our legends. It only confirms how interrelated and connected we are," shares Jocelyn.

The importance of birds and feathers is not only



Nik wears Mi'kmaw ceremonial coat as part of the display planning.



Jocelyn wears a blazer highlighting the connection between tradition practices and a contemporary context.

highlighted in Mi'kmaw stories and legends they are reflected in our objects. Feathers that are both domestic and foreign (likely due to trade) adorn multiple objects in the collection. The stories that they lend themselves to are endless.

A memorable experience for Kamden Nicholas, Curatorial Associate for Collections for the MDCC, was discovering a feather that was featured on multiple peaked caps in old photographs. This feather, which was able to be removed and replaced onto different peaked caps has

left the MDCC team with a lot of questions. During the initial survey in 2022, it was believed that this feather was a piece of fur. Upon closer examination, the barbs of a feather were visible, and experts were able to determine that the feather belonged to a flightless bird. Through macro-analysis, we were able to verify that this feather belonged to cassowary bird, which is native to New Guinea. This lends itself to new questions about how this the feather made its way all the way to Mi'kma'kik.

Another discovery

happened with a pair of arrows that had feathers attached to the shaft. Documentation provided by anthropologists Wilson and Ruth Wallis states that the best feathers to put on arrows belong to woodpeckers. Through macro-analysis at the Feather Identification Laboratory, we were able to determine demonstrate that these feathers belonged to a gray jay; a bird that is featured in the Mi'kmaw legend of "Muin and the Seven Bird Hunters."

The week concluded

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Mi'kmaw arrows featuring the feathers of the gray jay.

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with discussions on display techniques, ensuring the items will be presented respectfully. While the galleries are still in the planning stages, this work reflects the shared vision of the MDCC and NMAI to bring these items and stories home to Mi'kma'kik.

“It is important for us to display our objects in an intentional way,” say Kamden Nicholas. “Usually in a museum, a garment is mounted upright on a mannequin form, and like many conventional museum practices, this didn't fit

the vision at MDCC. When brainstorming how we should display a beautifully beaded coat, we went directly to the documentation: an image of a man playing waltzes in the coat. By dressing Nik in the coat, he was able to pose in several positions until we found the one that best mirrored the image. It is amazing to think about the last time that this coat would have been worn in this context in relation to waltzes.”

In D.C., Nik also shared a teaching on traditional governance. When people think of governance, they often picture men in suits sitting in boardrooms. In Mi'kmaw

ways of being, governance is rooted in connection to the land and takes place in spaces like the waltzes board, where people gather to share, discuss, and decide as a community.

“This isn't just about returning objects; it's about creating spaces where their stories can live on,” said Jocelyn. “Our partnership ensures their care and legacy for future generations.” ✨



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