

## Shilo Clark, Museum Communications, Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, reflects on his trip to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, for the NATCC conference.

**Background:** In the journey of repatriating Chief Crowfoot's regalia from Exeter, United Kingdom, Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park found itself at the intersection of cultural sensitivity and conservation practices. With the assistance of Gail Niinimaa, with her three decades of experience in the conservation industry, brought to light a profound revelation. Throughout her extensive career, not once had she been instructed to undergo a cultural ceremony to handle artifacts or, in this unique case, cherished belongings. This realization sparked a collaborative effort between Gail and Sasheen Wright, BCHP's collections manager, leading to the creation of a paper that would have far-reaching implications.

The paper, titled "Repatriating Chief Crowfoot's Regalia from Exeter, UK, to The Siksika Nation: Considerations from a Cultural and Conservation Point of View," became a pivotal document. It was not just a recounting of the repatriation journey but a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between cultural understanding and conservation practices. **The culmination of this effort resulted in an invitation to present the paper at the prestigious North American Textiles Conservators Conference (NATCC).**

### **By: Shilo Clark**

On October 22, 2023, I had the distinct honor of representing Blackfoot Crossing at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, for the NATCC conference. The experience was nothing short of a whirlwind, filled with unexpected insights, cultural exchanges, and a global perspective on museum practices. It was an opportunity to engage with professionals from the museum community worldwide, each contributing a unique lens to the conversation.

The conference provided a platform to delve into diverse techniques for preserving textiles, ranging from the intricacies of protecting plastics in high-end fashion garments to the meticulous stitchwork involved in restoring 18th-century clothing for nobility. The wealth of knowledge gained during this event has become a source of inspiration for future exhibits and their presentation.

Navigating this journey from an indigenous perspective brought a unique set of considerations. Speaking at a location steeped in colonial history like Colonial Williamsburg initially raised concerns. However, the realization that the audience was the broader museum community, which exhibited a commendable level of cultural sensitivity, eased those reservations.

Our presentation was met with curiosity, and a profound understanding. The reception of the paper was positive, signifying a growing awareness within the museum community about the importance of cultural nuances. It was a gratifying experience to convey the cultural aspects of the Blackfoot people and, by extension, the diverse cultures across the globe.

Following the trip, I find myself reflecting on the lessons learned and the cultural exchange that took place. When questioned about advice for someone traveling to a foreign tribe, I emphasized the significance of seeking guidance from tribal elders, understanding cultural protocols, and being open to any ceremonies that may be required. Using the Blackfoot culture as an example, I highlighted the face-painting ceremony, illustrating the cultural rights necessary to handle our belongings.

One of the central messages was a paradigm shift in perspective. Our cultural artifacts are not static relics frozen in time; they are living, breathing representations of thriving and evolving cultures. The items in our collections, whether created two centuries ago or yesterday, hold contemporary relevance. The importance of recognizing these items as belongings rather than artifacts became a focal point—a reminder that cultural respect should guide interactions with these objects.

The exposure and connections made at the NATCC conference have positioned Blackfoot Crossing as a trailblazer in the ongoing pursuit of positive change within the museum industry. Cultural sensitivity, preservation, and protection of cultural belongings within institutions are now at the forefront of our mission. The journey of repatriating Chief Crowfoot's regalia not only enriched the collection at Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park but also sparked a transformative dialogue that echoes far beyond the walls of our institution.

As we continue to share our experiences and insights, we are confident that positive change will ripple through the broader museum community, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for the diverse cultural tapestry that enriches our shared history.