

Background Paper to Executive Committee Report: Request to repatriate items associated with Chief Crowfoot to the Siksika Nation, Canada.

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Extract from the 'Indigenous Repatriation Handbook' www.RBCM.ca/RepatriationBook

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How Did Indigenous Ancestors and Belongings Wind Up in Museums?

Museums are amazing places of wonder and education. They provide opportunity for the general public to see and learn about people, places, things and ideas that might not have been accessible otherwise. But Indigenous people don't always feel this way about mainstream museum experiences. This is because a great many of the Indigenous treasures in museum collections were acquired during a very dark time in the history of Indigenous Peoples and the nation-state of Canada.

North America had been home to Indigenous people for millennia by the time the British and other Europeans began to arrive on the east coast of what is today called Canada. On the west coast, interactions between Indigenous people and settlers began in the latter half of the 1700s. Early relationships were mainly economy based (though not without conflict), and in BC, were largely driven by the maritime fur trade (ca. 1790–1840). Indigenous people traded their furs, food, commercial art and even some personal belongings, among other things, in exchange for iron, wool blankets and other exotic materials, including some personal belongings of the foreign traders. As the fur trade waned, British colonizers began to establish settlements, seeking new resource-based economies and the land itself. Relations between the two worlds had already become complicated at this point, but things were about to get much worse.

Along with foreign people came foreign epidemics, which drastically impacted Indigenous Peoples, decimating their populations by as much as 90 per cent or more—wiping out entire families, villages and sometimes even Nations. Following the devastating impacts of several smallpox epidemics, missionaries were able to entrench themselves within surviving Indigenous communities with the goal of converting them to Christianity.

In 1876, the Canadian government passed the Indian Act, with the intent of assimilating Indigenous people into Canadian society and erasing Indigenous identity, rights and territories. This included making Indigenous people wards of the state, removing them from their expansive territories and putting them on tiny reserves, and creating “legal” mechanisms for Indigenous disenfranchisement. In 1884, the Indian Act was amended to render the Potlatch and other traditional cultural ceremonies illegal, which ultimately outlawed the social, economic and legal systems of Indigenous Peoples in BC, with “offenders” facing confiscation of their treasures as well as imprisonment. The Potlatch Ban was quietly dropped during a revision to the Act in 1951.

In 1892, Canada's residential school system was formalized, removing children from their homes. It denied Indigenous children their lands, language, family and greater community for most of their childhood, and subjected many to abuse or even death (thousands of children died in residential schools). The last residential school in Canada only closed in 1996.

Hand in hand with colonial regimes came a collecting frenzy and the birth of (then-modern) anthropology. Nation-state museums and world fairs were hungry for collections representing Indigenous people and their cultures. By the 1880s, colonizers were actively “collecting” Indigenous people and heritage as they pleased, asserting that Indigenous Nations and cultures were going extinct, and that our existence and way of life should be “collected” in the “interest of science” and preserved for the “benefit of humanity.”

There was also notoriety and revenue to be gained in the field of collecting. Land surveyors, anthropologists and others were commissioned by nation-state governments and institutions to collect Indigenous heritage. There were also independents who dealt in “Indian curios,” buying and selling to museums, collectors and other dealers. Museums also “dealt” in the open art market: buying and selling Indigenous heritage with great freedom. The Ancestors and belongings that were taken from Indigenous communities were traded around the world, most landing in museum and university collections, some others in private collections.

The height of what was ultimately unethical and often illegal collecting occurred between the latter half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, though the practice carried on in a quieter manner through the 1970s and '80s. Indigenous graves were desecrated, with human remains and burial goods stolen. Personal belongings were taken by theft, force or “sale.” Purchase records from this period document what one could perceive as “legitimate” sales of personal belongings by Indigenous people. However, given the circumstances of these times, it should be understood and accepted that most of these transactions occurred under duress, particularly sales that occurred during the Potlatch Ban era.

Unethical collecting still occurs today. Some cultural belongings and ancestral remains are still being stolen or bought under duress and sold on the black market. It is important to become aware of the collecting that is still happening and to educate community members about this, so that the old belongings in the community do not disappear.

More recently, archaeological belongings and Ancestral remains have also ended up in museums as a result of archaeological excavations and recovery by the RCMP. Archaeology as a discipline began to take off in the 1960s, and since that time, all archaeological material recovered under permit is required to be sent to repositories (many of which were also museums). This material includes archaeological belongings and Ancestral materials as well as maps, photos, field notes, animal bones and soil samples. In these cases, the documentation is often very good.

In some cases, Ancestral material was sent to the Royal BC Museum and other museums by the RCMP. If human remains were reported to the RCMP, and were not of current forensic interest, they were turned over to the provincial museum. In cases such as these, the documentation can range from very general to quite specific.