The use of porcupine quills in Mi'kmaq artwork is a long-standing tradition, from simple patterns on clothing and moccasins to beautifully crafted quillboxes. Mi'kmaq quillboxes became popular in the "made-for-trade" economies of the 18th century, with quillwork expanding later to chairs, tables and cradles. Some motifs are linked to particular families (e.g., Thomas or Williams), who have passed their styles down through generations.

Quillboxes are made from quills, birch bark and spruce root. Sections are created separately, and then fit together to create a finished box. Each box includes a base made of birch bark or wood, the inner birch bark liner, rings of spruce root (often decorated with quills), and the lid. Over time, the tools and techniques have evolved from bone awls to modern hole punches. Animal dyes came into use after 1860, though some artisans still use natural dyes.

Design is an intricate process. Imagine entire boxes, tables, or chairs being covered with quills, that are no longer than two inches each. Design methods include using a drawing compass and birch bark biting (an art form in its own). Much time is spent creating these exquisite patterns, which require great patience to execute. The final step is to assemble the box—fitting the sections into each other like a puzzle.