

The Totem Pole

Like Heraldic crests, these poles told of the mythological beginnings of the great families, at a time before time, when animals and mythic beasts and men lived as equals. They told the people of the completeness of their culture, the continuing lineages of the families, their closeness to the magic world of myth and legends. The legends usually deal with the exploits of Raven, tales of migration, the flood, intertribal wars and early contact with white men.

Totem poles are more social than religious and share nothing in common with idols, are never worshipped and never figure in religious ceremonies. The symbols only serve as memory devices to recall a story. These stories reflect the unifying factors of the culture and hence to read a totem pole it is necessary to understand First Nations mythology.

Totems appeared in six different settings, which are common to all five Northwest tribes. They are all carved from red cedar in the conventional art style.

It is important to point out once again that these stories reflect the unifying factors of the culture and hence to read a totem pole it is necessary to understand First Nations mythology. This is not an easy task. Some myths were collected and published while others are lost for all time. The following list is what First Nations scholars consider necessary to fully analyze the totem pole. For some students this list is overwhelming, but it does provide guidelines for the teacher. To read a totem pole certain basic facts should be predetermined:

1. Determine what linguistic group made the pole.
2. Ascertain the type of pole, mortuary, heraldic.
3. Locate and study tribal myths.
4. Identify each figure.
5. Determine which characters are part of the story and which are space fillers.
6. Recall the myth starting from the top.

Totem poles are read from top to bottom. The principal character, clan, or phratry symbol was placed on top. Following this are the characters and objects which recall the legend and at the base of the pole is carved the wife's clan symbol.

Carvers had no say in their work. They were artists hired to do exactly as directed by the totem pole's owner. After the owner selected his tree the first step was to hollow it out. This work made the tree more mobile, and by removing the heartwood, more resistant to checking. The tree was marked off into equal sections. Sometimes different carvers were used for different sections. Separate payment was made for each carved section. After carvings were completed, a uniform texture was applied to the entire surface by scooping out dime-sized uniform chips.

Totem poles were painted with a type of fish egg tempera and colors were limited to subdued shades of red, black, green, and blue. European paints were introduced in 1830 and poles produced after this time displayed a variety of brighter colors.

In 1820, the iron glaze was introduced by the Northwest traders. As a result of this addition, the period from 1830-1880 is referred to as the Golden Age of Totem Poles. This period witnessed the finest and the tallest poles (between 6080 feet) ever constructed.

Raising the finished pole was a great social event called a Potlatch. The purpose of this party was to build up the reputation and social standing of the host. The erected pole would remain to give witness to the celebration that took place. Winter was the time for Potlatch as summer was a time to gather food. Preparations for this feast took several years and the actual celebration could last for months or even years. It was an expensive event to which only the very rich could subscribe. Hosts were required to provide each guest with a daily gift in addition to their food. There were two reasons why tribes would spend this great sum of money. First, he would pay off his debts with great ceremony and personal honor; second he would indebt his guests by giving gifts to them. These gifts were considered loans. After several years these loans must be paid back with interest to the host or his heirs. Hence Potlatches served as a type of Indian life insurance. Our term "Indian giver" is derived from this celebration. Although Indian giver is a derogatory term, the practice from which it was derived was not.

Once a pole was erected, it was never repaired or repainted. It was left to fall prey to the elements. First Nations could not engage in repairs except with great formality and expense and no new honors realized. Socially and economically it was cheaper to erect a new pole. Totem poles were personal monuments that the First Nations were content to have last only one man's lifetime.

Bibles and school books, the white man's written language, the government's outlawing of the Potlatch, the end of slavery, and the coming of canneries all spelled the end for the totem pole. Misinformed missionaries came into the area believing totem poles to be pagan idols and promptly set cut on a campaign to destroy them. Intent on their mission, they were very successful and destroyed a great number.

RESOURCES:

Legend Picture Books:

- Mayuk: The Grizzly Bear A Legend of the Sechelt People, Published by Nightwood Editions ISBN 0-88971-156-9
- Salmon Boy A Legend of the Sechelt People, Published by Nightwood Editions ISBN 0-88971-166-6
- Frog Girl by Paul Owen Lewis, Published by White Cap Books ISBN 1-55285-193-1

Totem Poles: Myths and Facts--

<http://users.imag.net/%7Esry.jkramer/nativetotems/false.htm>

<http://theyee.ca/Books/2011/03/31/TotemPoles/>

Contemporary Carvers:

Susan Point

http://app.vancouver.ca/PublicArt_Net/ArtworkDetails.aspx?ArtworkID=481&Neighbourhood=&Ownership=&Program=

Robert Davidson

<http://www.robertdavidson.ca/biography.php>

Tommy Josephs

<http://www.finewoodworking.com/how-to/article/the-totem-pole-art-of-tommy-josephs.aspx>

Charles Heit

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/ya-ya-charles-heit-carves-strong-messages-into-totem-poles-1.2622422>

Bill Reid

<http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmce/exhibitions/aborig/reid/reid02e.shtml>

<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/arts-entertainment/sculpture/the-life-and-legend-of-bill-reid/haida-homecoming.html>

General Sites:

An Exploration: <http://users.imag.net/~sry.jkramer/nativetotems/>

Brief Introduction: <http://www.evergreen-washelli.com/text/qa73153147.htm>

North American Northwest Coast Totems:

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/guides/1985/6/85.06.01.x.html>

Types of Totem Designs: <http://www.nativewoodart.com/totem.html>

Other:

- <http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/nwtotem.html>
- <http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/wright/index.html>
- <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1985/6/85.06.01.x.html>
- http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/CITE/totem_poles.htm
- <http://members.aol.com/Art1234567/Totemart.html>
- <http://arthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa012302a.htm>
- <http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/grand/grandeng.html>
- http://www.serial-design.com/artists/primitive_art3.htm
- <http://users.imag.net/~sry.jkramer/nativetotems/default.html>

Barbeau, Marius. *Totem Poles of the Gitksan, Upper Skeena River, British Columbia.*

Ottawa: F.A. Acland, 1929. National Museum of Canada, Anthropological Series, No. 12. Bulletin No. 61. Part of an anthropological series with very complete factual information.

Barbeau, Marius. *Totem Poles, Totem Poles according to crest and topics*. Canada: Dept. of Resources and Development branch of the National Museum of Canada. Bulletin No. 119, Vol. I., Anthropological series #30.

Barbeau, Marius. *Totem Poles, Totem poles according to location*. Canada: Dept. of Resources and Development Branch of the National Museum of Canada. Bulletin No. 119, Vol. II, Anthropological series #30.

Csikazentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg Hulton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Garfield, Viola E. and Foreest, Linn A. *The Wolf and the Raven*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961. Interesting reading. Good illustrations, with translations of legends and myths and explanations of various symbols.

Keithahn, Edward L. *Monuments in Cedar*. Seattle, Washington: Superior Publishing Co., 1963. Informative and pleasant reading. Provides solid basic information without too much detail. Excellent illustrations.