

# Native American Totem Poles

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If you saw a telephone pole with carved faces and designs on it, it might seem a little strange. But if you saw a tall, carved cedar pole, you would be seeing beautiful Native American art. Native Americans figured out a way to make cedar trees into incredible totem poles that preserved their history and stunned European explorers.

Totem poles told stories about Indian chiefs, families, historical events, or legends. A "totem" is a symbol used by Native American families or clans. Each group used a different animal for its totem. The word "totem" came from a word that meant, "to be related to someone," and totem poles became an important part of Native American culture since they had no written history.

One famous totem pole told the story of a raven that brought sunshine to Earth. A long time ago, the world was dark. The raven, a smart bird, knew that a family had stolen the sun and had hidden it in a box in their house. The raven decided to become a baby so the family would adopt him. He had the perfect plan to annoy his family into giving him the precious box. He cried all the time so he could get the box.

The family got tired of the baby screaming all the time. They knew that he wanted the box. They decided to give it to him so that he would stop crying. When no one was looking, the baby-raven turned back into his real raven self and flew away. He flew out into the world carrying the box. He opened it up, and sunlight burst over the whole Earth.

Other totem pole legends had unusual characters that rivaled 20th century super heroes. The Thunderbird was the grand lord of the Sky Realm. He ate whales and liked dance ceremonies, although he probably could not dance too well right after eating a whale! He had a dumb brother named Kolus. Another creature, the Whale, ruled the Underwater City. He lived there with other strange creatures. Bear, Beaver, Wolf, Frog, and even Mosquito were also on totem poles. It is hard to imagine that an Indian family would want the mosquito as a totem, though.

A totem pole was like a tall, wooden book. Artists carved each animal in a special way. A bear usually had his tongue sticking out, and a beaver had big front teeth and carried a stick. Even Native Americans had a hard time understanding a totem pole unless they already knew its story. In Northwestern tribes, parents explained the totem stories to their children so that they remembered them and passed them on. Native Americans did not worship totem poles. They used them to remember important people, events, and legends.

Indians of the Pacific Northwest did use two basic shapes. One was an egg shape, called an ovoid. This shape was used to make an eye or a claw. The other common shape that they used looked like a letter "U." The clan animal was on the top of the pole. You might have heard the expression, "low man on the totem pole." Some people believe that the phrase meant that the least important designs were at the bottom of the pole. Today, this expression refers to someone who is the least important person in a group.

The history of totem poles remains a mystery. Unfortunately, no old examples of totem poles exist, and you can probably figure out why. Wood rots! No one knows when Native Americans started making totem poles, but European explorers in the 18th century wrote about seeing them. When the Europeans came to America, they brought many tools like steel axes and curved knives that made it much easier for the Indians to carve totem poles. Some artists painted their poles using natural materials. White was made from clay, yellow came from ochre, black came from charcoal, blue came from copper ore, and red came from iron ore. Even though this art was forgotten for a while, Native American artists today are reviving this ancient craft.

The Native Americans also had to solve some mysteries to erect their totem poles, and it was a lot of work. First, they dug a hole about six feet deep. The end of the pole was placed in the hole during a big ceremony. Then, big wooden scaffolding was built. Hundreds of strong men pulled the pole into its upright position. The pole was steadied and held in place by ropes and cross braces. Sometimes, the artists did a dance around the pole (if they had



the energy after all of that pulling). After all of this effort, a totem pole didn't last more than 100 years.

Unfortunately, these works of art have caused disagreements. Many people want to have the tallest totem in the world. A tall totem pole in Victoria, B.C. Canada stood 185 feet tall. So many people argued about it that it was taken down. In Kake, Alaska, another totem pole is 132 feet tall, and many people believe that it is the tallest one in the world. A totem in Alert Bay, B.C. Canada is 173 feet tall, but it has a small problem. It was made in three sections and then put together. Some people have called that cheating! So the tallest totem debate rages.

It doesn't matter where the tallest totem pole stands. All totem poles are great artistic accomplishments. Besides preserving history, totem poles also represent a feat of engineering for the tribes that erected them. If you would like to see real totem poles, take a trip to the Northwest and try to resist carving any telephone poles on your way!

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. What kind of creature brought sun to the Earth, according to a Native American legend?
- A. a bear
  - B. a raven
  - C. an owl
  - D. a beaver
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What is the meaning of the word "totem?"
- A. to be related to someone
  - B. cedar tree
  - C. carved artwork
  - D. tall pole
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What is the purpose of a totem pole?
- A. to tell a story
  - B. to hold up a large tipi
  - C. to inspire someone to invent the telephone
  - D. none of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In what part of the United States were totem poles used?
- A. Northeast
  - B. Southwest
  - C. South
  - D. Northwest
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Which realm did the Thunderbird rule?
- A. the Sky Realm
  - B. the River Realm
  - C. the Ocean Realm
  - D. the Mountain Realm
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Which kind of animal often had its tongue sticking out on the totem pole?
- A. a raven
  - B. a bear
  - C. an eagle
  - D. a beaver

