

Totem Poles

A totem pole is a carved and painted log, mounted vertically in the ground. They are principally constructed by the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast of the United States and Canada. The word totem refers to a guardian or ancestral



being that is respected and revered. Usually symbolic animals and spirits are depicted on the poles to represent and identify the lineage of the head of the household –similar to a family crest. These pictures follow a standard from which all Native Americans in the Northwest are familiar with. There are also totem poles that narrate a complete story using these symbols. These are usually more elaborate pictograms that when combined with each other, tell a complete family legend. In order to actually read these poles, one has to be familiar with the symbols as well as knowledgeable about the family's history.

There are seven main purposes for which totem poles are used:

Memorial or heraldic poles: These are erected in front of a house when a change of ownership takes place. It is used to commemorate the past owner and to identify the present one.

Grave markers: This type of post is used as a tombstone for graves.

House posts: This totem pole is used as a decoration in front of a house and it also supports the roof.

Portal poles: This totem pole has a hole in it through which a person enters the house.

Welcoming poles: These are placed at the edge of a body of water to identify the owner of that particular waterfront area.

Mortuary poles: These poles are where the remains deceased people are placed.

Ridicule poles: This pole is literally meant to ridicule people - important people who have failed in some way. Their likeness is carved upside down in some fashion.

Totem poles were a sign of wealth, as hiring an artist to carve one was very expensive. The carving of totem poles reached its peak in the beginning of the 19th century, due to the ability of chiefs to pay for them. At this time there was a surplus of money from the fur trade. There are few poles left from this period though because the moist weather causes the cedar poles to rot. They usually only last 60 to 70 years.