

Stories the Totems Tell: Bringing Aboriginal Poles to Life

When you and your friends think about Aboriginal people in Canada, chances are one image that comes to mind is the totem pole.

Well, you're partially correct!

Many people think of the totem pole as belonging to Aboriginal cultures all across Canada. But guess what? Only six West Coast First Nations are responsible for all that publicity!

Totem poles are a traditional way of telling the stories of Aboriginal families and clans, and of keeping records of important historical events. The six West Coast First Nations that carved totem poles before the arrival of the European explorers were the **Haida** ("hydah"), the **Nuxalt** ("nu-halk"), the **Kwakwaka'wakw** ("kwak-wak-ya-wak"), the **Tlingit** ("kling-kit"), the **Tsimshian** ("sim-she-an") and the **Coast Salish** ("say-lish") people. When you see a plastic totem in a Canadian souvenir shop or you watch a chainsaw artist thousands of miles from our Pacific Coast "carving" a totem, you're witnessing a non-Aboriginal copying of a vital First Nations tradition that dates back thousands of years.

You have probably noticed on a walk in the woods how quickly fallen trees decay. How have the totems we see in museums and in old-time photos survived for generations, so that we can learn from them today? Well, most of those totem poles were carved from mature red or yellow cedar trees. The Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest knew that cedar resisted rot like no other trees in the forest. They used cedar for thousands of years for shelter, clothing and tools. Cedar therefore was a natural choice for totem pole carving, because each family and clan wanted the stories of its ancestry preserved for many future generations. Modern totem pole carvers still use cedar for those very same reasons.

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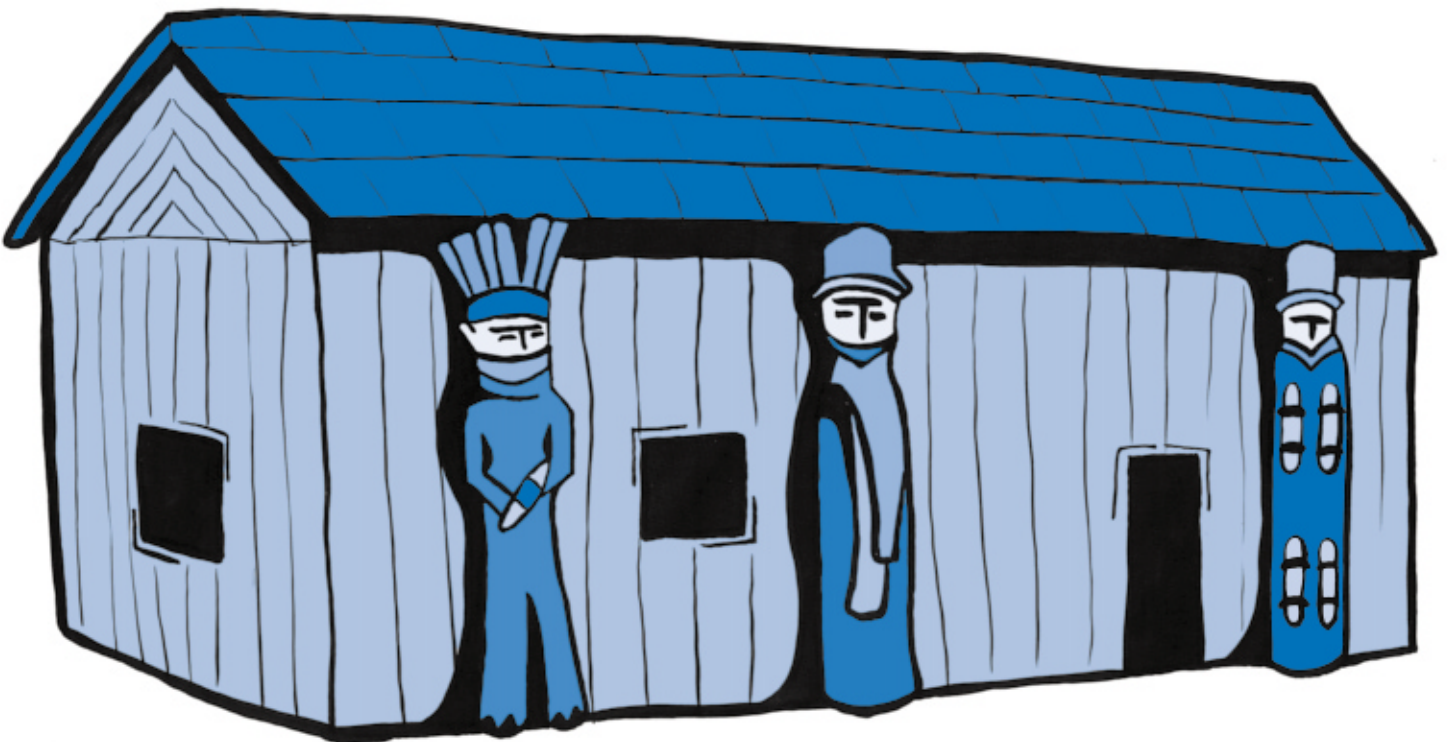




You can often tell where a totem pole comes from, based on how it is carved. Try testing yourself by looking for some of the details in the drawings on these two pages.

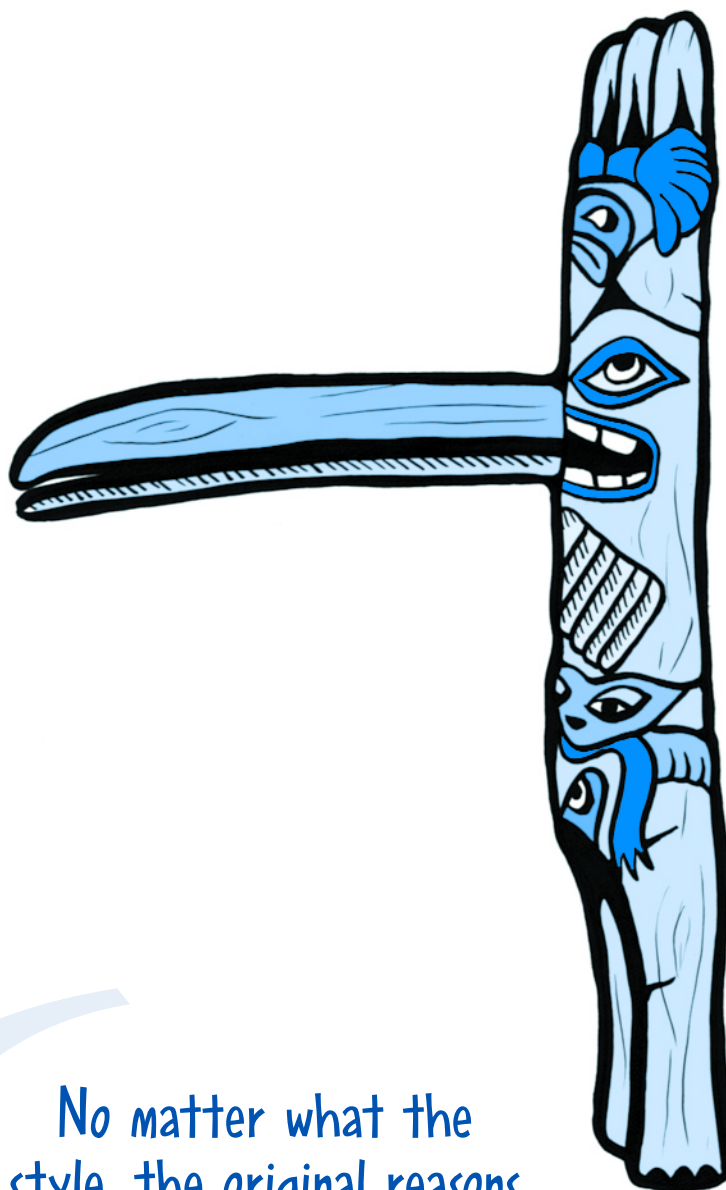
Imagine how hard it was to carve totem poles before European steel tools were brought into Aboriginal cultures about two centuries ago! Today we admire the beauty and the detail of what these ancient carvers created with nothing more than sharpened stones and cedar tools. The next time you see totem poles from the olden days in photos or in a museum, take a close look. The oldest totem poles tend to be shallow and flat compared to the ones carved after steel tools became common. Try carving a piece of soap or a potato with a sharp stone. You'll really get a feel for the challenges faced by early totem pole carvers! With the arrival of steel tools such as the axe, the curved knife and the adze (a tool shaped like a sharp garden hoe), Pacific Northwest artists carved a lot more poles.

You can often tell where a totem pole comes from, based on how it is carved. Try testing yourself by looking for some of these details: *Kwakwaka'wakw* carvers designed narrow eyes and deep carvings that jugged out from the poles. *Haida* poles often boasted huge bold eyes and deep carvings with a very grand, stately style. The *Trimshian* and *Nuxalt* were noted for very fancy carvings of supernatural beings, while the *Coast Salish* people often carved human figures on their house posts.



No matter what the style, the original reasons for carving and raising totem poles have remained the same for all Pacific Northwest Aboriginal peoples. The traditional poles are emblems of individual families and clans. The carvings remind them of their ancestors. They tell about family and clan relationships, accomplishments, adventures, rights and stories. In the last century, traditional pole carving nearly died out. Fortunately, today's Aboriginal carvers are succeeding in bringing back the crests and the stories of the poles for families and clans to pass along to their future generations.

Aboriginal people are not the only ones who use crests. Does your family have a crest or a familiar symbol that reminds you of your ancestors? Many Canadians come from cultures around the world that possess crests, coats of arms or other symbols that strongly identify them. Nations have coats of arms, too. You may wish to check out the Canadian Coat of Arms. (Look it up on the Internet!) Canada's coat of arms is a symbol of our national identity. Like a totem pole, it identifies who we are and what we stand for.



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Can you imagine the raising of a new pole in an Aboriginal community? What an occasion for a gathering! Poles are usually raised in the presence of hundreds or even thousands of people. Imagine your family hosting a dinner for that many guests! The family, clan or village that raises the pole gives suitable gifts to each and every person who honours them by witnessing the event. Has a family ever invited you to a wedding or another important celebration? If you've been to a wedding, you know the special feeling of honouring the family. You've witnessed the traditional symbolism of wedding rings, wedding cake and gifts.

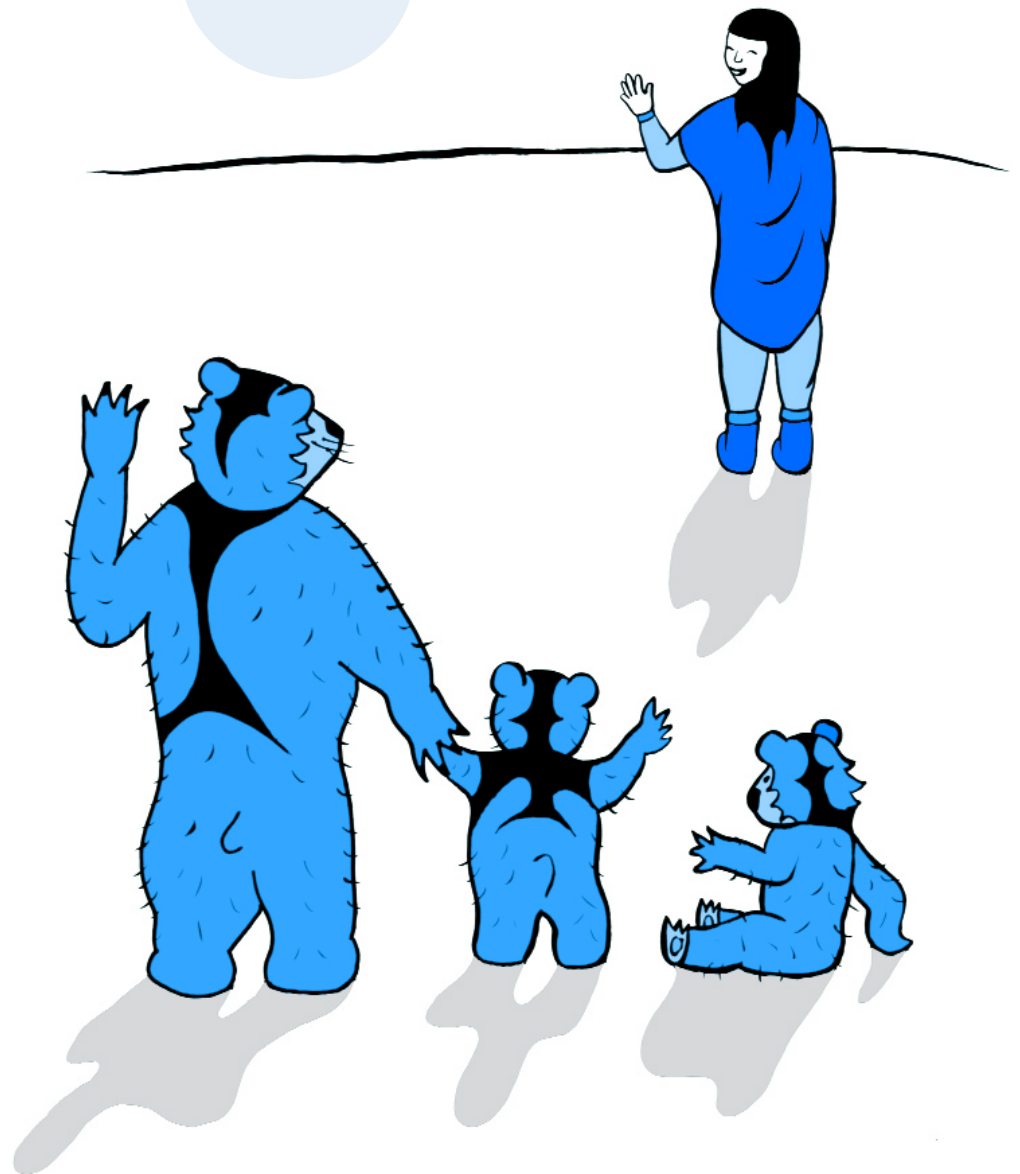
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In the same way, totem poles honour Aboriginal people through symbols. The crests on a totem pole belong to a family and tell its story. The story may be a myth or a legend, or it may be a story from the life of a person honoured by the pole. The most common crests of the Pacific Northwest peoples include the eagle, the raven, the thunderbird, the bear, the beaver, the wolf, the killer whale and the frog.

It's easy for you to tell the difference between many of these creatures in nature. But sometimes it's harder to identify them on a totem pole! Here are some helpful hints. Eagles and thunderbirds have sharply curved beaks, while the raven has a much straighter beak. The thunderbird, a mythical creature, has outstretched wings. Bears and beavers both have ears on top of their heads, but beavers also have two very large front teeth. The killer whale has a big fin on its back.



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When you know the stories of each crest, the totem poles really come alive. Have you read stories of "morphing" creatures, where animals or supernatural beings transform into humans? Or stories where people become animals or superhuman? If so, you have experienced the wonders of myth-time. In myth-time, creatures such as these continue to exist for those whose eyes are opened by the stories. Once the crests have been identified and the stories have been told, the totem poles come to life!

The totem poles that you and your friends picture when you think of Aboriginal people can come to life for you one at a time! Here's a story to get you started. It is represented on a pole in Skidegate, British Columbia. The pole was designed by the late Bill Reid, a Haida master carver. And away we go into myth-time...

"One day a woman was picking berries. By accident, she slipped on some bear droppings and spilled the berries. The woman became angry and blamed the bears for her bad luck. The bears heard the woman call them names and became very angry with her. They captured her and took her away to their village.

"At first the woman felt very sad. She missed her family and her own village. But Bear Father was kind to her. She married Bear Father and they had twin bear cubs. Many years later the woman went back to her village. She taught the people to always respect the bears and all living creatures."

On the pole in Skidegate, Bear Father can be seen holding the two cubs. The people of Skidegate are proud to honour the Bear Mother story and to have their respect for nature represented on their village pole.

Today, Pacific Northwest artists carve totem poles both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The poles are raised in locations of honour in First Nations villages and throughout the world. The totem poles truly represent Pacific Northwest tradition and pride.



You Too!

You have a family or a group with which you are proud to associate. It might be your immediate or extended family. It might be your organized youth group, a group you have joined at your place of worship or even just your good ol' bunch of friends!

What makes you special?

What is your history and what are your stories?

What images remind you of your family or group?

What are your special symbols?

What are your accomplishments? What makes you proud?

Design a "celebration pole" that shows the world who you are. In response to some of the questions above, draw, carve or mould symbolic images on your pole. Share your celebration pole with your family, your group, your classmates and all the others who you'll find are interested in your project!

Now just imagine if your celebration pole could still tell its story, one hundred years from now....

This information is also available through the Internet at www.inac.gc.ca



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