

Art Project: Canadian Totem Poles

Grade: 1st – 3rd

Summary: A painting of Canadian Totem Poles

Artist/Creator: Totem Poles from British Columbia

Subject: Totem Poles created by **indigenous people** of the Pacific Northwest Coast



History: Totem poles are large carvings found on the Northwest Coast. They consist of large wooden posts carved with symbols, animals or figures. The totem poles are usually made from large trees, mostly western red cedar. Totem poles were found in Alaska, Washington and British Columbia, Canada.

The word totem comes from the Algonquian word meaning “(his) kinship group”. There are six basic types of upright, pole carvings.

House frontal poles: This type of pole is usually 20 to 40 feet tall and are the most decorative. The carvings tell the story of the family, clan or village who owns them.

They were located outside the clan house of the most important village leaders.

Mortuary poles: These poles are among the tallest and most prominent poles because they represent important individuals from the community who have passed away. They are also incredibly rare and include a box for the ashes of the deceased person placed in the upper portion of the pole.

Memorial poles: This type of pole usually stands in front of a clan house and is erected about a year after a person has died. The pole’s purpose is to honor the deceased and identify the relative who is taking over as his successor within the clan or community. Memorial poles may also commemorate an event.

Welcome poles: Most of these poles include large carvings of human figures and can be 40 feet tall. These poles are placed at the edge of a stream or beach to welcome guests and/or intimidate strangers.

Shame poles: These poles were used to publicly ridicule, shame or embarrass an individual or group of people who did something wrong. The detailed carvings would represent the person who is being shamed.

Sadly, most of the totem poles carved before 1900 are gone due to decay from the moist rainy climate of the coastal Pacific Northwest. In 1938 the United States Forest Service began a program to reconstruct and preserve the old poles, salvaging about 200 totem poles.

Fun Facts:

- The few Totem that still exist are on display in museums and parks in the Pacific Northwest and Canada.
- Several memorial totem poles were erected by the **Tlingits** (Tel-ink-it) clan to honor Abraham Lincoln to symbolize the hope for peace and prosperity following the American occupation of Alaska.
- Before the 19th century the totem poles were very simple as they were made with stones, shells and beaver teeth.



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Discussion: What do you think about the totem poles? Do you think of them as art sculptures? Did you realize that there were six different types of totem poles? Have you heard the expression “low man on the totem pole”? Do you know what it means? The expression refers to the least important or uninformed person in a group, at work or in a home. This is the exact opposite of what it means to Indigenous people. The person on the bottom of the totem pole actually has the most important job of holding the others up.

Art Supplies:

- 8 ½ x 11 wood, cardstock or cardboard (back of a pad of paper)
- Pencils
- Permanent Black markers (or black markers)
- Rulers
- Acrylic Paint or Tempera paint (light blue, light green, dark green, white, brown and any other colors you would like to use)
- Cups for water
- Q-tips
- Paint brushes (small and medium)
- Paper plates or paint palettes for paint

Art prep: N/A

Art Directions:

1. Place your piece of cardboard vertically on the table.
2. Draw a slightly curved horizon line approximately 2 inches from the bottom of the cardboard.
3. Use the ruler as a template for the first totem pole. Place the ruler in the center of the cardboard and trace around it so it looks like it is coming out of the ground.
4. Draw two more totem poles of different heights on either side of the first totem pole.
5. Place the ruler horizontally and draw lines on each totem pole. The line should be a few inches apart.
6. Now is the time to get creative and turn the boxes into animals. You can add wings, ears or other details.
7. Add some patterns to the totem poles.
8. Trace the totem poles with a black marker.
9. Use a medium paintbrush to paint the sky a shade of light blue.
10. Use the small paint brush and dip one side in dark green and one side in light green. Using a flicking motion up draw blades of grass. You should be able to see the two shades of green on each blade. Do not go back over the grass a second time.
11. Use the Q-Tips to color in some of the totem poles. Leave some parts brown, like the real totem poles made from wood.
12. Add a little bit of brown paint to the sections of the totem poles that are not painted.
13. Use a Q-Tip to draw some wispy clouds. Draw a short line and then draw rainbow shapes on top of the line. Fill in the clouds dabbing the Q-tip. You should still be able to see some blue color through the clouds. Do not use too much paint.
14. After the painting dries add some horizontal lines for shading to the right sides of the totem poles.

Tips and Art Tricks:

- This art project can be done with a variety of different art supplies.
- Q-tips are easier to control when painting small shapes.
- Paint on cardboard dries very quickly.

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Images of Art Project:



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