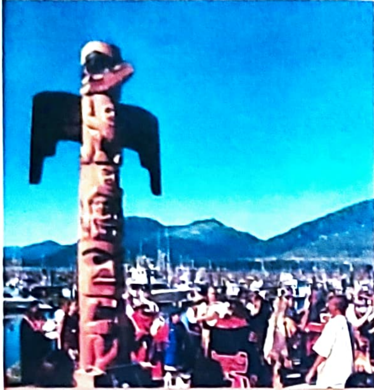
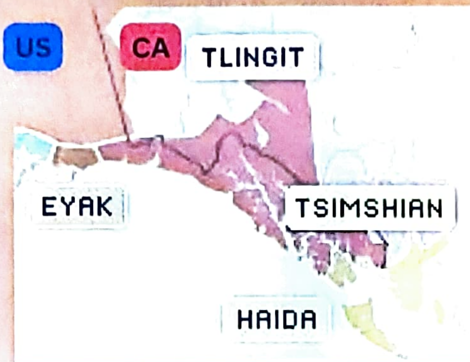
# THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TOTEM POLES





Alaskan Native communities heavily rely on animals for sustenance and inspiration, especially in regard to the basis of their social structure. The tradition of stories being passed through families and communities spans generations, leading to much of the various clans' unique identities. Each animal holds its own story and spiritual meaning. These meanings have translated into the identities of several Alaskan Native clans in the Southeast region. The spiritual representation of an animal is often embodied and eternalized through a totem pole. The word "totem" is a misnomer that stems from totemism, which "was thought to be the primordial religion" of the communities that create totem poles. 1 While this name provides an appealing mystery to the carvings, it is entirely inaccurate. These totem poles are symbols of a community's history, values, and traditions, but are not the base of a religion. Each aspect of a totem pole is as essential and individualized as the animal it is based on. The four clans that have a vibrant history involving the totem pole are the Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures. These communities are marked on the map below by a totem pole.

## Traditions

The use of animals in totem poles is not only traditional, but it is also highly important. The animals chosen to be on a specific totem pole carry great significance and demonstrate each culture's interpretation of the spiritual meaning of the wildlife around them. The way a pole is constructed also holds importance. Different clans and regions will carve different types of poles depending on their inter-clan traditions. For example, the Coast Salish of the Lower Fraser tend to carve house posts rather than single stand-alone poles, whereas most clans carve single poles that suit an occasion or family. Most commonly, totem poles range from 9 to 59 feet tall, though height varies greatly depending on clan and culture. The Haida and Tsimshian generally carve taller poles, often reaching over 100 feet. Every aspect of a totem pole holds cultural significance,

even the wood it is carved from. Due to the coastal environment in which the Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian have made their homes, totem poles are usually made from a large red cedar tree, though totem poles were also made from yellow cedar.

## Types of Totem Poles

Different types of totem poles are erected to serve various architectural and ceremonial purposes. Most longhouses had house posts, carved with human or animal forms, to support the main beams of the building. Similarly, some longhouses featured a house frontal pole, which would be located at the main entrance and often contained an opening for passage into the house. Mortuary poles, which contained the remains of the deceased in grave boxes, served as both a tomb and a headstone. Likewise, a memorial or commemorative pole was often created to honor an important deceased person, usually by his or her successor. Memorial poles tend to be the tallest type of pole, particularly among the Tsimshian of the Nass and Skeena Rivers in central British Columbia. Less commonly, some First Nations carved "shame poles" to ridicule neighboring groups who had unpaid debts. Shame poles were more common in the nineteenth century, but today, some First Nations erect these poles as a form of protest against the loss of territory or violations of political rights. One well-known shame pole, which stands in Cordova, Alaska, was carved by Tlingit fisherman Mike Webber to protest the environmental disaster and political mishandling of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound.

## Modern Day

For generations, First Nations peoples have made major efforts to maintain their cultural traditions in the face of assimilationist policies. Following the repeal of discriminatory legislation in 1951, a new generation of artists began to learn and promote the artistry of totem pole carving as a form of cultural revitalization. Famous totem pole carvers include Henry Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw), Mungo Martin (Kwakwaka'wakw), Martin's grandson Doug Cranmer (Kwakwaka'wakw), Ellen Neel (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Bill Reid (Haida), who all have works exhibited at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC and some at the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria.15 Other First Nations sought to repatriate totem poles that have been taken away by non-Aboriginals as collector items or "curiosities," as well as poles previously sold to Indian agents and museum collectors.

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