

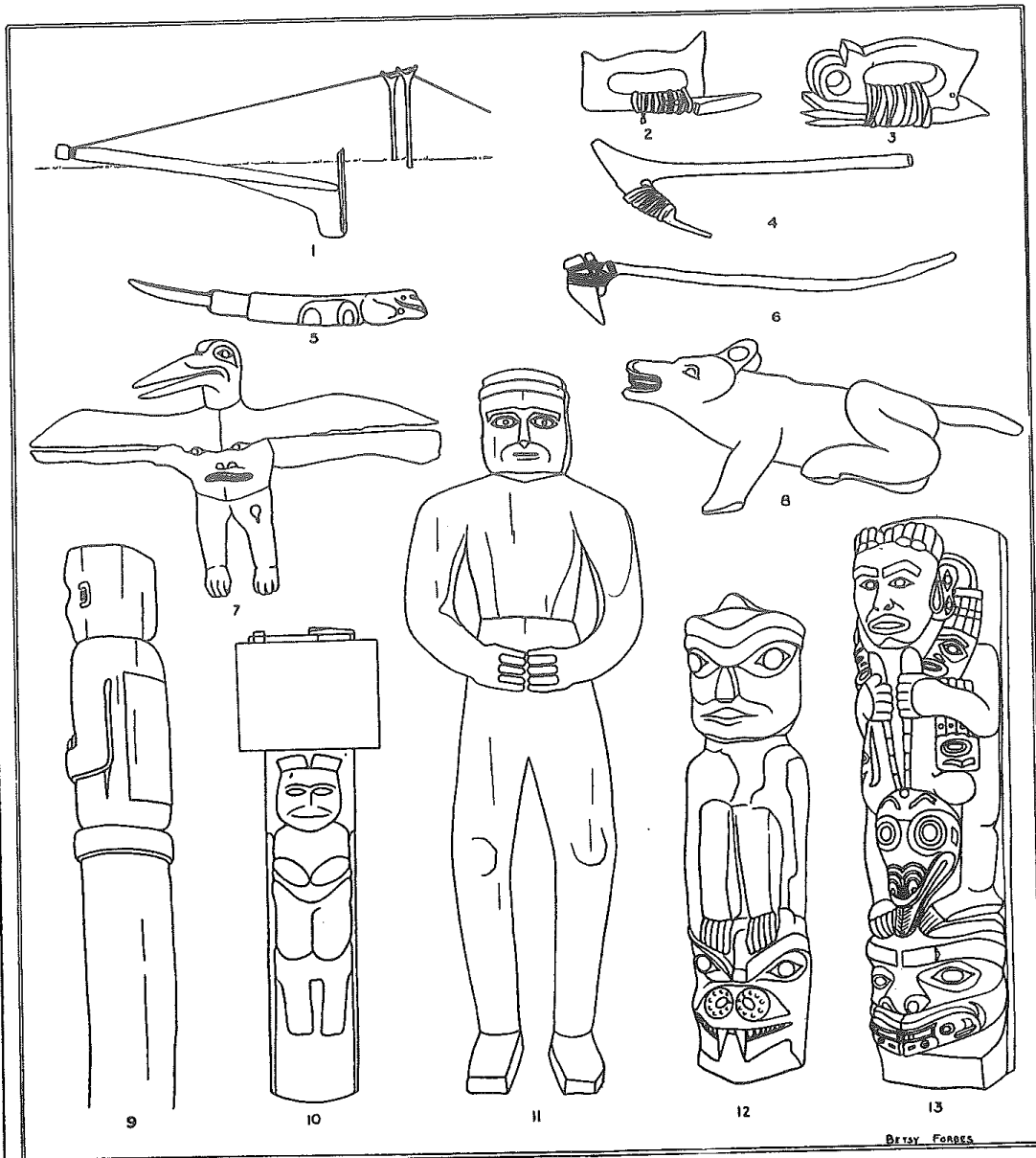
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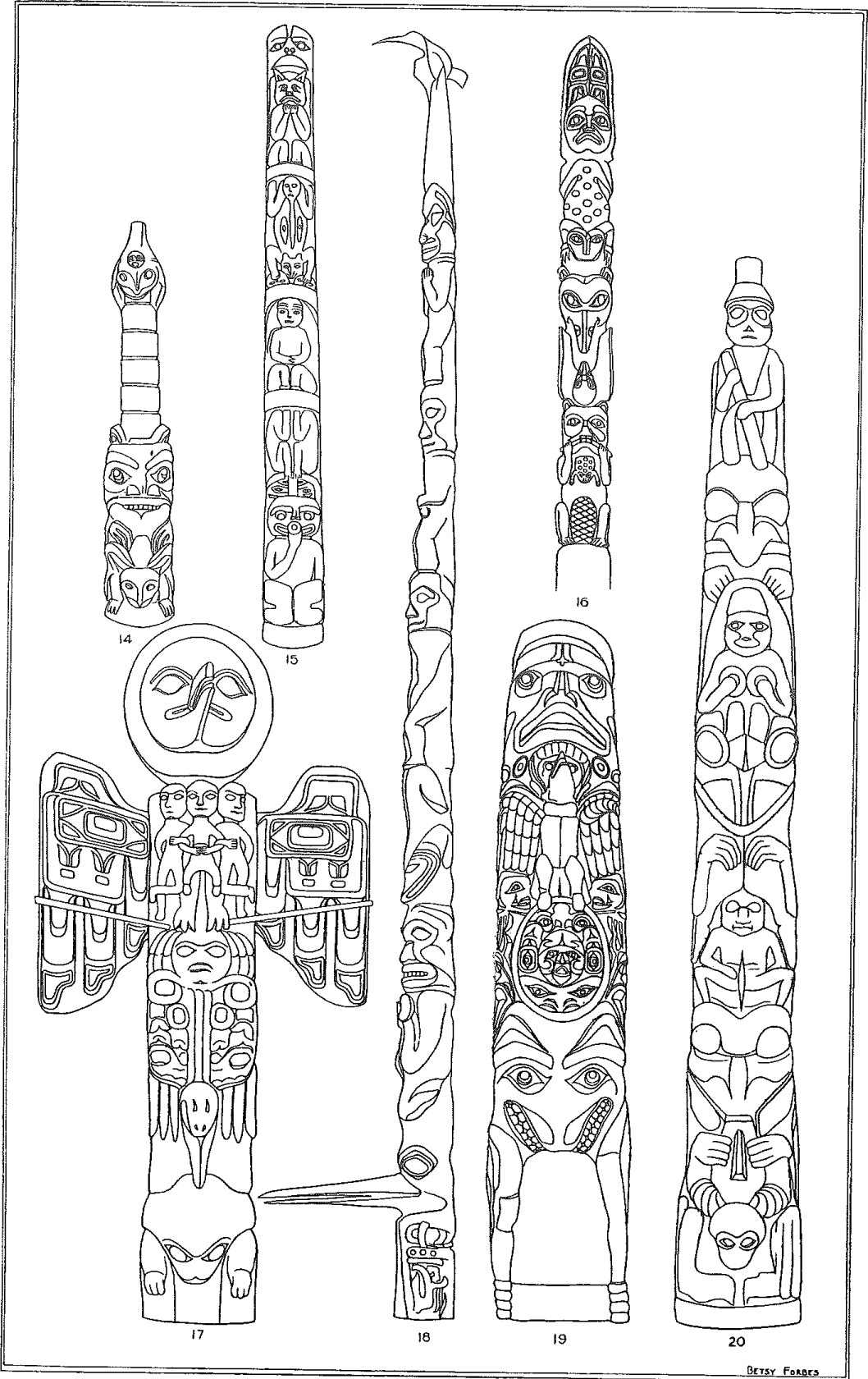


TOTEM POLES

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1. **TOTEM.** This word is derived from the term *ototeman* which occurs in slightly differing forms in Ojibwa, or Chippewa, and various related dialects of the Algonkin linguistic family. In these dialects the word means "his brother-sister kin," that is, the group of brothers and sisters born to one mother, and persons adopted into such a group. Like many other Indian words which have been taken into English, *ototeman* has been shortened without regard to its native grammatical construction. Totem has one letter, *t*, from the first section of the word, three letters, *ote*, from the second, and one, *m*, from the third section.

Many native races in different parts of the world clearly recognize the close connection between groups of persons who are related by blood. To symbolize this relationship a system has grown up of naming groups for different living creatures, such as the bear, eagle or whale, which are thought to be the actual ancestors of the group or to have been very closely connected with its ancestors in the distant past. Thus we find a Bear gens, a Snipe clan or a Raven phratry; gens, clan and phratry being the names of 3 kinds of social groups.

Anthropologists, who are scientists engaged in the study of mankind, have applied the term "totem" to those living creatures which have been chosen as the symbols of these various social groups. The bear is called the totem of the Bear gens, and so on.

2. **TOTEMISM** is the name of the system outlined above. There is a great deal of variation in the working out of the system and the origins of many of its details are very poorly understood. Space does not permit any further discussion of these questions.

3. **NORTHWEST COAST TRIBES.** The mountainous coastline, river valleys, and many off-shore islands of British Columbia, Canada, and the adjoining portion of Alaska are occupied by a number of tribes which have highly developed the totemic system outlined in the previous sections. Beginning at Vancouver Island, just north of the national boundary, and moving north these tribes are: Salish, Nootka, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola, Tsimshian, Haida and Tlinkit. The Tlinkit and part of the Haida live in Alaska, the other groups in British Columbia. For further information about these tribes see Leaflets 1 and 72.

4. **CHARACTER OF COUNTRY.** On both mainland and islands the mountains rise sharply from very near the shore. The climate is very damp and quite mild, a factor which has covered the lower slopes of the mountains with dense forests of very large trees producing wood suitable for carving and building. Because of the roughness of the topography the tribes have no agriculture, obtain most of their food from the sea and travel almost entirely by boat.

This combination of circumstances, added to a strongly developed sense of pride of descent and family, produced among these tribes a great school of sculpture in wood, for which the totems of the social groups are the highly favored subjects. The most celebrated products of this school of sculpture are the various kinds of immense carved wooden columns which are commonly known as totem poles.

5. EARLY HISTORY. The Northwest Coast tribes were first generally investigated by Europeans in the last quarter of the 18th century, beginning in 1774. The Russian explorer Bering had visited the northern part of the area in 1741, but he only saw a few natives from his ship. The southern part of the area was visited by several expeditions in the next 15 years, but the whole area was not carefully examined until the 1790's. Most of the exploration was from ships, but at least one expedition, that of Mackenzie in 1793, came overland from eastern Canada.

The first explorers make little mention of carvings which might come under the head of totem poles. Large posts supporting roof beams are mentioned as being carved, but a profusion of carved columns does not seem to have existed. It is true that many of the earliest explorers did not land, contenting themselves with what could be seen from their ships. This was very little, as the villages could not be easily seen from large ships moving carefully through strange and dangerous waters. It seems safe to conclude that though the carving of large poles was done it was not a common practice of wide distribution. The great development of the custom in later days was largely due to the introduction among the natives of metal tools.

6. IRON was found among these tribes by the first explorers. As it is not produced in the region it must have come from elsewhere by way of long established Indian trade routes north and south. The Russians had been in eastern Siberia and on the Aleutian islands long before the discovery of the coast, and iron could have passed from their settlements to Alaska and south along the American coast. Iron could also have come north from the Spanish colonies in California. It has been suggested that iron may have been obtained from Chinese and Japanese vessels which had been wrecked on the American coast. Such wrecks have occurred in historic times.

When first extensively visited the Indians knew about metal tools and wanted iron more than anything else offered in trade by the whites. The naval explorers and the traders who soon followed them supplied this demand, so that by the early years of the 19th century enough metal tools were available to make possible a great extension of the carver's art.

7. LATER HISTORY. The coming of the fur traders brought a great increase in wealth to the coast Indians. They have a great respect and desire for wealth and a strong sense of family and descent. The totem pole was the means of displaying their family connections, and their new wealth made

possible the setting up of larger and more numerous poles. As a result of these circumstances the practice of carving totem poles of all kinds received a great impetus. The fullest and widest development of the art was between 1830 and 1890, though among the Haida it was well established by at least 1800. Since 1890 there has been a great decline, though the custom is not entirely extinct.

8. TYPES OF TOTEM POLES. The term "totem pole" is rather loosely applied to 5 groups of large carved wooden objects; 1, immense tall columns standing erect before long rows of houses, the memorial column (15, 16, 18, 20); 2, similar columns attached to the fronts of houses, the house frontal pole (19); 3, columns containing openings in which coffins were placed (9), or having the coffins set on their tops (10), the mortuary column; 4, comparatively short thick posts set inside houses to support the roof beams, the house post; (12,13); 5, grave figures—representations of single human (7), and animal figures (8, 11)—placed as memorials in cemeteries. Poles of the first type, of rather small size, were also sometimes placed in cemeteries (14,17).

9. MAKING A TOTEM POLE was an expensive and difficult task. The many elaborate customs connected with the process cannot be described in this leaflet. A suitable tree was selected in the forest, cut down and trimmed. Unless very near a village it was dragged to the sea or river, towed to the village and laid out on land on supports which brought it within easy reach of the carver's tools. The carver was hired by the owner of the pole and was told by him what designs to use (see section 14). The subjects having been chosen, the carver marked out the outlines of the design on the log. As many details of these designs were fixed by custom it was sometimes possible to use patterns of cedar bark or hide to assist in laying out the design. To make the pole lighter and easier to handle much of the back was often hollowed out. This was especially true of types 2 and 4, which were reduced to crescents. Poles were not necessarily carved from top to bottom. Some examples, notably older ones, were carved at the bottom only, or at top and bottom (14). The designs on the oldest poles are likely to be single figures placed one above the other. Closely interlocking arrangements of figures came later. The carvers of the oldest poles seem to have been mask makers who cut these familiar objects in a row on the pole. The idea of a unified design especially adapted to fit on the long narrow tree trunk came with the expansion of the custom of erecting poles. The older poles had little painting, while later ones show a great deal. The old native mineral colors, chiefly red, green and black, were applied only to important features such as eyes, lips, ears, etc. The later commercial paints, of many colors, were used much more extensively.

The poles were erected by digging a pit with one sloping side, dropping the butt into this pit and bringing the top upright by pushing and pulling with poles and ropes (1). The problems of moving very large timbers were thoroughly mastered by these Indians, though they had no machinery.

After erection poles received little care from the owners and their descendants. The green, untreated wood rotted fairly fast in the damp ground and climate. Most poles fell in 40 to 50 years, though some might last 75. Once fallen they were allowed to decay or were cut up for fire wood. Only a tiny percentage of the poles set up in the 19th century still survives. Government agencies have restored certain groups.

10. TOOLS. Are shown on the cover (2-6). Before metal was obtained the blades were made of jade or other stone, shell or bone. Jade made the strongest and sharpest blades. Adzes were the chief tools even for fine details.

11. KIND OF WOOD. The red cedar, *Thuja plicata* (*Thuja gigantea*), provided the raw material for totem poles in its range, which is from southern Vancouver Island to Frederick Sound, about as far north as Sitka. This tree is very tall and relatively slender, with soft wood which splits and carves easily.

North of Frederick Sound, among the northern Tlinkit, the only available trees for totem pole carving are the yellow cedar, *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*, and the Sitka spruce, *Picea sitchensis*. Totem pole carving was extremely uncommon in this area, and reference 18 suggests that these trees must have been used. Definite information is lacking.

12. SIZE. (Refer to section 8). Poles of the first type ranged from 15 to 70 feet high and from one to three feet in diameter. 40 to 50 feet was an average height. The poles of the Haida, type 2, which were attached to the fronts of houses and through which round door openings were cut, were much thicker through the bottom in proportion to height than the poles of that and other tribes which stood detached from the buildings. Diameters were up to 5 feet. Poles of the third type were shorter and thicker, averaging about 30 by 3 to 4 feet. House posts were still shorter, 10 to 15 feet, and about 3 feet in diameter. Grave figures, the fifth type, were 3 to 10 or 12 feet high. Their diameter depended on the subject. Human figures were slender, while birds and animals were more bulky.

13. PURPOSE OF TOTEM POLES. Type 1 poles were erected as memorials to the dead and to preserve the name and fame of these persons by means of their carved designs. House frontal poles, type 2, served to indicate the family of the house owner by displaying his totemic crests. Both of these varieties might display figures illustrating or telling myths connected with the owner's family. House interior posts, type 4, showed either family crests or legendary characters, according to the customs of the various tribes. Thus Haida house posts usually showed family crests, while those of the Salish, Nootka, Kwakiutl (12) and Tlinkit (13) had to do with legends. The purpose of the coffin-bearing and grave-marking posts, types 3 and 5, is indicated by these descriptive titles.

A motive for erection common to all of these types was pride of family. Each group tried to glorify itself and shame its rivals by setting up the largest and most elaborate poles possible.

Totem poles have nothing to do with religion and are not idols.

14. DESIGNS. The totemic system (see section 1), is highly developed among these tribes and the totems are the chief subjects of the carvings on poles. The designs are relief carvings representing the more or less conventionalized figures, or important parts of them, of humans and animals, both real and imaginary, which are hereditary family crests, or characters in the tribal mythologies. Each well-born person owns one or more of these crests and sets forth his or her family membership by displaying them. Certain myths are connected with each family and these are illustrated on the poles by carving the characters occurring in them.

15. ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF POLE CARVING. The carving of tall, slender poles of the first two types seems to have originated in the central part of the area, among either the Haida or Tsimshian, and these tribes produced the greatest development of the practice. The tribes to the north and south were carving house posts and grave figures in the late 18th century, but they do not seem to have adopted the custom of erecting tall totem poles until somewhere around the middle of the 19th century or later. Grave figures and house posts were apparently common to all groups from north to south, but among these groups the number and quality of the tall types of poles depended on the nearness of each group to the center, those farthest away from it having the smallest development. Thus the Salish had only a few crude grave figures. The Nootka, next to the north, had some rough totem poles. The Kwakiutl and Bella Coola, toward the end of the 19th century, made quite elaborate poles and grave figures. North of the center the southern Tlinkit carved poles much like those of their Tsimshian neighbors, while the northern Tlinkit made nothing but grave figures, house posts and coffin poles. In 1882 Emmons found only about a dozen very poor poles among the 8 northern Tlinkit tribes.

16. TRIBAL STYLES. This subject is much too large for extended discussion in this leaflet, but a few general remarks may be made. Haida poles have a more evident taper than other types (20). The figures are rather square-cut, detailed, and closely knit. Tsimshian poles are notably slender (18). The figures are inclined to be simple and curving, and flow into each other rather than interlocking in the Haida manner. The relief is less high than on Haida poles. Tlinkit poles (16, 17) have both Haida and Tsimshian features, having the square-cut style of the former and the simplicity of the latter. The poles of the Bella Coola may be distinguished by their shape (19). They are notably short and broad, with a distinct taper, and are hollowed out behind to an extreme degree. Their relief is low and the details of the carving much smaller than on the northern poles. Northern Kwakiutl poles (15) are inclined to be somewhat spiritless imitations of a combined Haida-Tsimshian style. They have the outward forms to a considerable extent, but little of the artistry of conception and execution shown by the two leading nations. Poles of the Nootka and southern Kwakiutl are chiefly distinguished by their crudity. They are only pale echoes of the great styles.

Since about 1890 some Tlinkit (17), Nootka, Salish, and Southern Kwakiutl poles have been trimmed with wings, sun figures, etc., made of rather thin boards projecting from the sides. Bird beaks (18) and various figures set horizontally on top of poles were made of separate pieces of wood and attached to the main poles. Those groups which placed coffins on the tops of mortuary columns often made columns with a board cut to the size of one side of a coffin box set across their fronts at the top.

To indicate which of the two great types is the best is of course impossible. Some authorities feel that the Haida excel in technic and elaboration, while the Tsimshian display more purely esthetic feeling and composition; others reverse this opinion, or judge by different standards.

Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:

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