

TOTEM POLES

The indigenous groups of the Northwest coast, such as the Haida and Salish, were masters of woodworking. They used the cedar tree for totem poles, houses, canoes, clothing, and dishes, and it was done without metal tools or nails.

A totem pole is like a story in a book. Each figure on a story is a symbol, and it is a way of passing a message from one generation to another. The birds and animals on a totem pole represent a tribe,



clan, family or person. Some totem poles tell about an event. Others are made to honour a family.

Tools such as a maul (hammer) and adz (ax) were used to create the totem poles. After they were carved and chiseled, the poles were often painted. Paint was made from bark, coal, clay, copper, berries, and shells. The most common colours used were black, red, blue, green, and white. Each colour has a meaning. For example, blue stands for sincerity and happiness, while black represents power.

There are four basic types of totem poles:

Frontal poles were built at the front of a longhouse with a large opening at the bottom which formed the entrance to the house.

House posts supported the main beams of the house.

Memorial poles were carved and raised in honour of someone who died. The heirs raised the poles and gave a memorial potlatch in order to gain their rights as heirs.

Mortuary poles had a hollowed-out box at the top to contain the body of the deceased. A carved plaque covered the box.



Frontal pole



Mortuary pole