



TOTEM POLES

The Northwest Coast Native People carved totem poles out of giant cedar trees. A totem pole is like a book that you might read. Totem poles were a way of passing stories from one generation to another.

The figures on totem poles were symbols, usually of animals and birds. They were not worshipped. They represented a tribe, clan, family or person. Some totem poles told of events that happened to a clan. Other totem poles told about the history of a family. Still others were memorials carved to mark graves.

After cutting down a cedar tree, carvers would begin by carving symbols at the top of the tree and work toward the bottom. A totem pole could be small or large. A large totem pole might be more than 18 metres high and could take two or three years to carve.

The Northwest Coast Natives used handmade tools for carving. The maul or hammer was made of stone with a wooden handle. The adz, which worked like an ax, was made with a sharpened flat, hard stone blade. Chisels for carving were made from sharpened stone or animal horn. After the totem poles were carved, they were sometimes painted with animal hair brushes. The paint colours were made from bark, coal, clay, copper, berries and shells that were mixed with crushed salmon eggs. Black, red, blue, green and white were the most common colours.

When the pole was finished, it was ready to be raised and put into place. If the totem was to be used as a doorway, a large hole was cut through the bottom as the entrance. To set up the giant poles, the people would dig a hole in the ground and put the bottom of the pole in the hole. Then, using ropes, they pulled the pole to an upright position.

