

Name _____

Totem Poles

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

The figures on the 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 totems told about the history of a family. Still others were memorials carved to mark graves. Having a totem pole was an honor, and often families would trade all of their possessions for the honor of having a pole.

After felling the 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 60 feet high and could take two or three years to carve.

The Coastal Indians 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. And 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 colors 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 colors painted on totem poles.

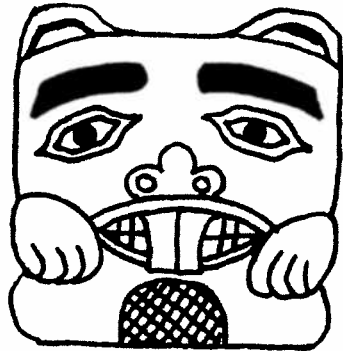
When the pole was finished, it was ready to be raised and put into place. If the totem pole was to be used for a doorway, a large hole was cut through the bottom as the entrance. To set up the giant poles the Coastal Indians dug a hole in the ground and put the bottom of the pole into the hole. Then,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



Make Your Own Totem Pole



Cut out or trace the figures and assemble your own totem.



The BEAVER was the symbol of patience, wisdom, healing, and wealth. He had two big front teeth and a cross-hatched tail.



The WHALE was the symbol of power, strength, and bravery. He had a dorsal fin on his back and a large mouth.



The THUNDERBIRD was the symbol of power in the sky. He controlled the thunder and lightning. He is usually at the top of the totem pole. His wings are always outstretched. He was a messenger from the sky.



The BEAR was the symbol of power on the earth. He had a short snout, large teeth and was usually shown with his tongue sticking out.



The EAGLE was the symbol of wisdom and power. He warned and guarded the Indians. His curved beak points down toward the ground.