

Discover...

# THE HAIDA TOTEM POLE



▲ The totem pole on display in the Museum; 1901.39.1

The totem pole is from Star House in Massett village on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), Canada.

## Background

At 11.36m high the totem pole at the Pitt Rivers Museum is the largest object on display in the Museum. It is carved from a Canadian Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*), which was hollowed out at the back before carving to make it easier to transport and erect. The totem pole is from the Haida community of Massett. It originally stood outside Star House in a village called Massett (Haida name Uttewas), on Graham Island, Queen Charlotte Islands (which the Haida call Haida Gwaii) in British Columbia, Canada. The house was built around 1882 and belonged to chief Anetlas (c.1816 - 1893). This pole is well documented in its original village. There are several pictures of the pole outside Star House, and also a rare photo showing the interior of the house.

The pole came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1901, donated by Professor E.B. Tylor. C.F. Newcombe, Reverend J. Keen, and the Hudson's Bay Company all helped to obtain the pole, which was purchased for \$36 and shipped by rail and steamer. To make transporting the pole easier it was cut in two and the Raven's beak removed.

The pole was originally raised at a potlatch marking Anetlas' adoption of a young girl. A potlatch is a ceremony held by peoples of the Northwest Coast at which a person is given traditional family rights; it involves reciting family lineages and rights in front of witnesses from other families. The guests are given gifts and a feast, and their acceptance of these marks their agreement to uphold the rights transferred to the person in that potlatch.

# Carving

The pole is carved with crest figures that relate to family lineages, status and rights, just as noble European families had crests depicting their status. On the Northwest Coast today such poles are often referred to as “crest poles,” the word “totem” having been adopted inaccurately by anthropologists who had worked with Great Lakes tribes (Ojibwa *dodem*, clan).

Carved figures on crest poles remind viewers of the stories of how ancestral beings bestowed certain rights and property on a family. The figures depicted on this pole are, from the top:

Three seated figures or watchmen.

Bear with a frog in its mouth and a bear cub between its legs.

Bear holding a human with two bear cubs at its feet.

Raven with a human between its wings.



▲ Detail of the totem pole depicting a bear holding a human.

Today, these figures and their stories are still well known amongst families around Massett, and such crests are worn with pride on button blankets and other ceremonial regalia. They are also still being carved on totem poles. Northwest Coast carvers often study museum pieces such as this pole to learn about traditional carving. Chip Tait, a Nisga'a carver, has said, “Visiting [a] museum gives me and most of the younger guys some insight into what’s expected. It’s a boost and it’s also very spiritual. We’re standing there looking at an old pole and saying, ‘that’s incredible. How did the carver do that?’ And then you realize that one day people are going to be looking at our pole and saying ‘I wonder how they managed to get something like that done?’ (in Jensen 1992:49).

## The Mystery

One mystery about the pole that we are trying to solve is that it has lost some of the rings on the hats of the top figures - but we don’t know when, or why. Early photographs of the pole outside Star House show it as having more rings on the watchmen’s hats than it now does. The central figure had 9 rings and now has 4, the figures on either side had 4 and now have 3. These rings symbolise previous

potlatches held by the owner of the pole and are an indication of his status in the community. One old story in the Museum suggests that the Haida themselves removed rings as the original number was felt by them to be excessive for the status of its new location at Oxford University. However, museum staff now think that perhaps the rings were removed to fit the pole in the rail container on which it was shipped across Canada.

## **Conservation**

While the museum was closed for re-roofing in 1999, the conservation section had a rare opportunity to work on this pole. To allow access to the totem pole, the scaffolding, erected inside the museum as part of the building work, was specially designed to include working platforms around the pole. Health & Safety considerations meant that hard hats had to be worn whilst on the scaffolding. Prior to doing any work the conservators also had to be equipped with laboratory coats, masks and gloves to protect themselves against the dust. The conservators then removed the layers of dust that had accumulated over the years. The whole pole was very dusty, especially its top half, which had not been cleaned since it was erected in 1901. The pole was brushed with soft brushes while holding the hose of a vacuum cleaner next to the area, making sure as much dust as possible was collected and not re-deposited on the pole.

Although the working positions were at times difficult it was very exciting to be so close to such a large object. The scale of the individual carvings is much larger than imagined from the floor and as the dust was removed, the beautiful tool marks and exquisite colours added a new dimension to the superb craftsmanship. To ensure the pole's care in the future, a detailed drawing was made of it to record its condition, and paint samples were taken for future analysis.

## **The Future**

The Pitt Rivers Museum seeks to work with source community members and with outside scholars to further understand its collections and to care for and display them as appropriately as possible. We would very much welcome any thoughts or information about our collections that you are willing to share with us; please contact Dr Laura Peers, Curator (Americas), Pitt Rivers Museum, South Parks Road, Oxford, UK, OX1 3PP, email: [laura.peers@prm.ox.ac.uk](mailto:laura.peers@prm.ox.ac.uk)

## Further Reading

JUNE BEDFORD, 'Haida Art in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, and the Rev. Charles Harrison'. *European Review of Native American Studies*, Vol. XII, no. 2 (1998), pp. 1-10.

JENSEN, VICKIE. *Totem Pole Carving*. Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver/ Toronto, 1992.

GEORGE MACDONALD. *Haida Monumental Art: Villages of the Queen Charlotte Islands*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

LINDA MOWAT, ed., *Catalogue of the Native American Collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum*. PRM 1993.

CLAIRE WARRIOR, "'Small Meetings Across Cultural Boundaries': Model totem poles and the imagination of cultures on the Northwest Coast of America." *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 11(1999), pp. 105-120.

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