



What is a Totem Pole?

Totem poles are monumental sculptures carved from great trees, typically western red cedar, by a number of Indigenous cultures along the Pacific northwest coast of North America. The word "totem" is derived from the Ojibwa word *odoodem*, meaning kinship group.

The meanings of the faces and designs on totem poles are as varied as the cultures that produce them. Totem poles may recount familiar legends, clan histories, or remarkable events. Poles were carved to illustrate stories, to commemorate legendary ancestors, to represent shamanic powers, and to provide objects of public ridicule.

"Some of the figures on the poles constitute symbolic reminders of quarrels, murders, debts, and other unpleasant occurrences about which the Indians prefer to remain silent..."

The most widely known tales, like those of the exploits of Raven, are familiar to almost every native of the area. Carvings that symbolize these tales are conventionalized, which means they are easily recognized by people from different clans.

Inspired by and adapted from
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totem_pole

House pole by Ch. Edenshaw, 1914.
 Photo: Canadian Museum of Civilization