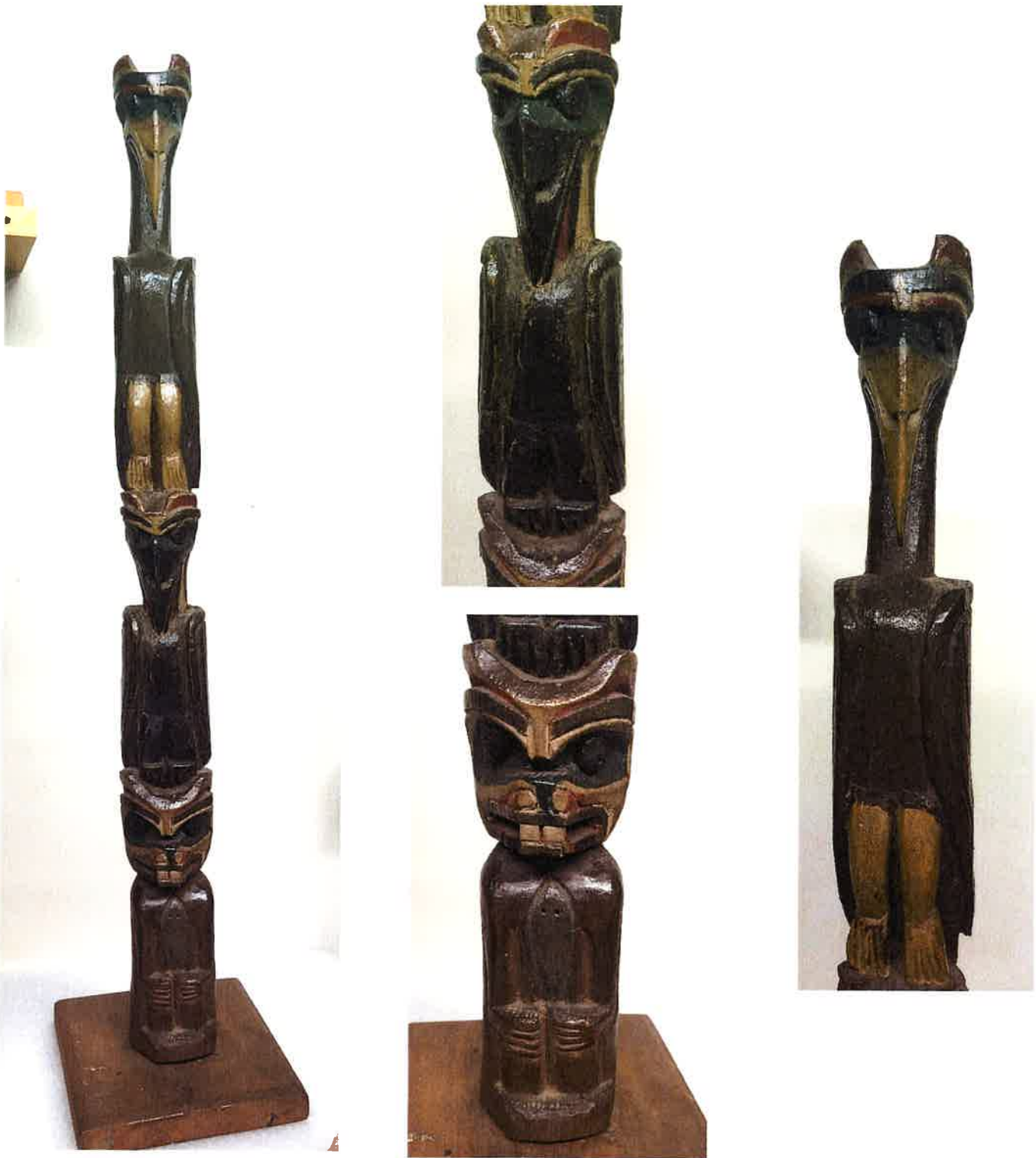


Lesson Plan: What Represents You?



(The totem in these pictures measures just 26 inches in height. Full size totems usually measure anywhere between 10 feet to 59 feet in height but can reach up to 65 feet.)

When people travel or live in other places, they often want to collect items to remember their time spent there and to show others. Sometimes, those souvenirs are later donated to a museum as in the case of a miniature totem from Alert Bay, British Columbia.

Totem poles, while thought to be representative of all First Nations, were only created by a few tribes on the Pacific coast. First Nations is a term used to describe Indigenous peoples in Canada who are not Métis or Inuit. First Nations people are original inhabitants of the land that is now Canada.

Tall multiple-figure poles, like the one above in miniature form, were first made by the northern Northwest Coast Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian peoples in Southeast Alaska and British Columbia. The Kwakwaka'wakw and Nuu-chah-nulth people further south, and the Coast Salish people in Southern British Columbia and western Washington carved large human welcome figures and interior house posts. Totems are carved using cedar trees which resists rot better than some other woods. But some totems are not kept up and are eventually allowed to return back to the earth. Totems are emblems of a family and the significance of the carvings on them are often known only to the carver and the family.

But aren't totems generally quite tall? So why is this one so small? Well, miniature totems were, and still are, made for few different reasons. They could be made as a prototype for a larger totem or made as a copy of an existing pole or a pole that is no longer standing. Miniature poles are also made as souvenirs but can be considered authentic if made under the rules of protocol carvers follow.

If you would like to view a map of where the tribes discussed above traditionally lived, visit native-land.ca.

Activity:

Have students examine the totem pole.

Have them sit in groups and discuss what types of animals they think are represented. Once they've decided on the animals, have them think about the characteristics of those animals and what they might represent.

Have students discuss what animals they would put on a totem for themselves and why. If you want to add a hands-on element, have students create their own totem in art by drawing, clay, or any other art medium.

A potlach was held on the occasion of significant events which could include a birth, death, or marriage. The potlach was also often associated with the raising and erection of a new totem pole. A potlach was a chance to show wealth by distributing that wealth to friends and other members of the group. They in turn would host another potlach where the wealth would be redistributed. Things that were gifted might include furs, blankets, canoes, or food.

In their groups have students discuss what things they might distribute to show and share their wealth. What things do they consider valuable? Things considered to have value have changed over time. For example, furs or canoes don't hold the same value as they once did because of modern attire and transportation.

So what animals are represented on the totem? It's likely the bottom animal is a beaver due to the two large front teeth. The middle bird could possibly be a raven while the top bird could be an eagle. Many totems have a thunderbird (a supernatural creature depicted in the art and culture of Pacific Northwest Coast cultures) represented on top. Thunderbirds are always depicted with outspread so we know one is not depicted on this totem.

Further resources on totem poles

University of Washington (<https://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/wright.html>)

First Nations & Indigenous Studies, University of British Columbia
(https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem_poles/)