

What is a totem pole?

A **totem** is an emblem of a family or clan. This emblem can feature a natural object, an animal or a spirit being.

A **totem pole** is a monument of a single log of red cedar that is carved by First Nations peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. A pole includes an arrangement of several totems.



Sisiutl, a double-headed serpent, one of the many crests of the Hunt family.

What is it used for?

A totem pole can be used for different purposes: to welcome visitors, as a memorial for important members of the tribe, as a tomb or headstone, to celebrate a special occasion, or as a supporting column inside houses.

What figures are displayed on a totem pole?

A totem pole typically features symbolic and stylized human, animal, and supernatural forms. They are visual representations of family stories and ancestry. Families acquire the rights to display specific figures, or crests, over many generations. These crests can be acquired through supernatural encounters that ancestors had and were handed down to their descendants, through marriage, or in a *potlatch*. A *potlatch* was a ceremony to mark important life events, including the new use of a family crest.

Some common figures are:

Human figures

Chief

Sky elements

Sun, moon

Animals of the forest and mountains

Bear, wolf

Sea beings

Seal, whale, salmon

Sky beings

Eagle, raven, owl

Supernatural

Thunderbird, *Sisiutl* (double-headed serpent)



Henry Hunt totem pole
Photo by Mark Davidson, 2019

How are they designed?

Figures are characterized by two elements:

Formline

A combination of thin and thick lines that help to divide figures and structure the design.

Basic colors

Black - Used for the formline

Red – Adds detail

Blue-green - Used as a tertiary to help distinguish between multiple figures.

However, styles can vary by clan, and other colors like brown, white, green, and yellow are sometimes used.

All figures face the center front, because this is the point of visual interest of the totem.



Make your own

If you were making a totem pole to tell a story about your family, what figures would you display on it?

Think about some of the qualities or features of the family members you want to include. Is there an animal that embodies those qualities? Or can you invent a special character? How would you represent them?

All you need:

Cardboard tube, markers, colored paper, scissors, glue, and other recycled materials.

Here are some examples of standard representations you can use as inspiration:

Human figures

- Compressed or seated position
- Head, features, torso, arms and legs represented
- Torso upright, arms fall straight
- Face with eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth
- With or without adornment (cloak, hat, ring)

Birds

- Seated position, facing center front
- Wings and beaks are essential
- Wings either folded or extended
- Feathers indicated by texture and contrasting colors

Instructions:

- Think about how many family members you want to include in your totem pole. This will help you determine the proportions of each character and how your totem pole will be divided.
 - Use the markers to draw the main features of your character on a piece of paper. You can use colored paper or add color later using markers.
 - Cut your figures and glue them to the totem pole.
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Glossary of some of the terms used in this activity

Clan – A large family, a group of people of common descent, or a group of close-knit, interrelated families.

Crest – An emblem or formal design used as a symbol to represent a family, town, group, or organization. For many tribes of the Pacific Northwest Coast, the crest emblem represents an entity with which the clan claims a significant relationship.

Potlatch – A ceremony to commemorate important events in the host's life such as marriage, the birth and naming of a child, mourning the dead, a new social rank, and the transfer of rights. These ceremonies often included many guests, speechmaking, feasting, gift giving, and dance performances.

Tertiary – Third in order. In art, it refers to the colors created by mixing the primary and secondary colors in various ways. Primary colors are red, blue, and yellow. Secondary colors are green, orange, and purple.

Resources:

- *Reach for the Sky: Tradition + Inspiration* – Access the catalog of the exhibition, photos, and a coloring page of a traditional Northwest Coast Symbol. <http://sunnylands.org/on-view-reach-for-the-sky/>
- Book: *If You Lived With The Indians Of The Northwest Coast* by Anne Kamma.
- Book: *Kwakiutl Art* by Audrey Hawthorn

Here are some links to help you explore more about this topic:

Biographies of members of the Hunt family:

- Henry Hunt - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Hunt_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Hunt_(artist))
- Stanley C. Hunt - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_C._Hunt

Museums that care for collections that include art and artifacts from the Pacific Northwest Coast.

- The Royal BC Museum in Victoria, British Columbia - <https://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/>
- National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. <https://americanindian.si.edu/>
- Burke Museum in Seattle, Washington - <https://www.burkemuseum.org/>