



## Totem Poles

**Objective:** Visitors learn the purpose of totem poles and design their own.

**Related Exhibits:**

Totems

**Format Options:**

*Three totem options are provided, accounting for variations in time available, mess tolerance, and audience.*

Table top walk-up

Make and Take

Content for class

**Age Appropriateness:** Families; Grades Pre-K and up with adult assistance, Grades 4 and up independently.

**Staffing Prerequisites:** 1-2 people

**Vocabulary:**

Symbol: character or image that represents an idea, concept, or other abstraction.

**Materials Provided:**

Masters of totem images

**Additional Materials Needed:**

Totem Pole #1:

1. Paper towel tubes
2. Copies of totem images and blank paper for drawing own
3. Crayons or markers
4. Scissors
5. Tape or glue sticks

Totem Pole #2:

1. Cardboard egg cartons, with lids removed and cut in half length-wise
2. Tempera paint or markers
3. Scissors
4. Glue

Totem Pole #3:

1. Collected small boxes, cans, or plastic bottles

2. Masking tape or duct tape
3. Copies of totem images and blank paper for drawing own
4. Markers, crayons, or paint for creating pictures

**Demonstration Notes:**

The Totem Pole is a sequential arrangement of symbols or memory devices, created to tell a story or commemorate a historical event. Totem poles also serve to proclaim a clan's status, symbolize their mythological history, and convey the rights and privileges enjoyed by them.

Totem Poles are read from top to bottom. The top figure is usually the clan crest. The figures under the crest represent parts of the story. The story may be a myth or legend, or it may be a story from the life of a person in the tribe. Poles are social rather than religious. They are not worshipped and never figure in religious ceremonies. The symbols only act as memory devices to recall an important story.

Totem poles were traditionally commissioned by a clan (a group of families within a tribe) and designed to sit in front of the clan's house. Usually the carver, who was always from another clan, was told what figures or family crests to put on the pole, but is always free to create the design. Carvers tried to create beautiful and original carvings, so they would be considered the best craftsmen. Early carving tools were made of bone and rock, but later traders brought iron tools that were better for carving. Some poles were painted with animal oils and blood, salmon eggs, charcoal, graphite, ocher, and moss.

Totem Poles are thought by many to be a symbol of Native American culture as a whole, but their production was limited to Northwest Coast tribes. The totem nations were the Tlingit and Haida in Alaska, the Quilliate and Coast Salish in Washington and Oregon, and the Kwakiutl, Nootka, Bella Coola and Tsimshyan in British Columbia. Today, native people throughout the Northwest Coast raise new poles to honor deceased relatives and celebrate family histories and important events in their lives.

Totem poles were never sold between clans because no one had any interest in owning someone else's pole. A pole was personal and represented a family's history, so was of no value to those outside the clan.

**To Do:**

Totem Pole #1: (the 5-10 minute, next-to-no-mess version)

1. Trim totem images or strips of blank paper to the proper height and width to wrap around the paper towel tube.
2. Color the black-line masters, or create your own images for your pole.
3. Wrap the images around the pole and secure with tape or glue.
4. (optional) Add paper wings or arms to your images by taping/gluing to the back of the pole.

5. (optional) Add two craft sticks to the bottom of the pole so it stands on its own. You may need hot glue for this!
6. Tell the story of your pole.

**Totem Pole #2:** (the 20 minute (not counting drying time), moderate mess version)

1. Create the images for your totem pole. Either draw or paint symbols directly on the outside of the egg carton cups.
2. If you wish to add wings or arms to your characters, cut them from paper (or the egg carton lids) and decorate.
3. Glue together the two egg cup sections, back-to-back, with the wing or arm pieces slipped between.
4. (optional) Add two craft sticks to the bottom of the pole so it stands on its own. You may need hot glue for this!
5. Tell the story of your pole.

**Totem Pole #3:** (the bigger 10-15 minute, next-to-no-mess version)

1. Choose 3-4 boxes, cans, and/or bottles for your totem pole. Use masking tape or duct tape to attach your treasures into a pole shape.
2. Trim the totem images or strips of blank paper to the proper height and width to wrap around your new totem pole.
3. Color the black-line masters, or create your own images for your pole.
4. Wrap the images around the pole and secure with tape or glue.
5. Tell the story of your pole.

#### **Extensions:**

Make larger totem poles from wrapping paper tubes, food service-sized aluminum cans, or coffee cans.

Make a HUGE totem pole from large, square cardboard boxes. Have visitors contribute to decorating the pole with images that represent your museum or community.

Make messier totem poles by carving Model Magic™ or another air-dry clay, by creating papier mache forms that visitors help wrap and then paint, or by threading marshmallows on string and painting them.

