

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
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INDIAN TOTEM POLE ARRIVES AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A thirty-foot Indian totem pole carved from a red cedar log in the images of a raven, a killer-whale, a devil-fish, a sea lion and a shark was delivered Monday, December 16, to the Museum of Modern Art where, on January 22, it will be set on top of the marquee in front of the building to serve as a sign of the exhibition of Indian Art of the United States which will open to the public that day.

The pole was carved by John Wallace, a Haida Indian of Prince of Wales Island, Alaska. Wallace, whose Indian name is unpronounceable and unspellable, was born in the eighteen-sixties. He is the son of one of the great totem pole carvers of the Northwest and worked as his father's assistant on many of the most important poles now standing in Alaska.

The exhibition of Indian Art of the United States, organized by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the United States Department of the Interior, with the cooperation of universities and museums of science throughout the country, will be on view at the Museum for approximately two months, after which it will tour the country. It will be the largest and most representative exhibition of its kind ever assembled and will present contemporary Indian works of art against a background of their ancient traditions.

"That guy, he's my wife"

Contrary to popular belief, totem poles have no connection with Indian religion. Their significance is more nearly related to the European coat of arms. Totem poles represent the various animals and mystical beings identified with individual Indian families or clans of the Northwest. They also serve as historical monuments to a family or clan. Occasionally, like the pole to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art, they illustrate family legends.

The totem pole at the Museum tells by means of its carved and painted figures the legend of the clan ancestor who first learned to

carve totem poles. In explaining some of the figures on the pole Mr. Wallace, the carver, pointed out the face of a sea monster and said: "That guy, he's my wife." He meant it was the clan symbol of the wife's family.

The fundamental idea back of this clan identification with animals and mystical beings is, of course, the age-old belief that the individual or clan absorbs the qualities of the animals or beings with which he identifies himself: the soaring speed of the eagle; the strength of the bear; the cunning of the fox; the industry of the beaver, and so on. The figures and symbols on a totem pole need not be read in any particular order; they may be read from top to bottom, or vice-versa, or they may start at any intermediate point and go in either or both directions.

Like a European coat of arms with its lion rampant, griffin couchant, or thistle in a field of azure, the totem pole may show the head of a bear, the servant of a whale, or the magic power of rock. It is doubtful, however, if the owner of a European coat of arms can give the story of each heraldic symbol on his 'scutcheon in such exact though often interchangeable detail as that used by John Wallace in relating the story of his totem pole. Here it is, interspersed with descriptions of each figure, as Wallace himself gave it:

"Raven was flying over the sea, saw something on the surface, flew down and lit on it. It was a bunch of kelp caught on a log."

(Raven, who might be called the hero of northwest coast Indians, sits on top of the pole. Under his feet is the head of Kelp.)

"While sitting there he heard a voice calling him from under the water. This was the voice of Bullhead."

(The third face from the bottom is that of Bullhead. His body goes to the top of the second face from the bottom.)

"Raven followed Bullhead to the bottom of the sea and found a village where there were big carved poles in front of the houses. He saw that what he had been sitting on at the surface of the ocean was the top of one of these tall totem poles. It was in front of the house of Killer Whale, the town chief."

(Killer Whale is the first big face at the bottom of the pole. It has a fish in its mouth. Killer Whale is doubled over so that his tail is seen just below the fish in his mouth. His back fin is the dark ridge running from the top of his head up on Bullhead's body.)

"Raven asked Bullhead how he could get a pole. Bullhead told him to visit an old woman who lived in the village. Raven went to the old woman's house but was scared by Devil Fish guarding the door."

(The old woman is the little seated figure near the middle of the pole. The head of Devil Fish is just above hers and his arms are on each side of her.)

"The old woman told Raven not to be afraid of Devil Fish, but to watch out for Shark which guarded the door of Killer Whale's house."

(Shark is the little face at the very bottom of the pole right under Killer Whale's tail.)

"The old woman said that the big totem pole before Killer Whale's house was alive and must be killed before Raven could get it. She told him to light on the top of the pole at dawn next day and cry out as loudly as possible. He did so and cracked the pole with the magic power expressed through his loud cry."

(The split in the forehead of the face directly below the feet of Raven is the crack caused by his cry.)

"This crack killed the pole, which floated to the surface. Raven carried it to the Indians on the shore. They copied it and have been making poles ever since."

(There are several figures on the pole which do not appear in the story but are carved on this pole because they are believed to have been on the original pole killed by Raven. These figures are as follows: the magic power of rock; a sea lion; a watcher or servant of Killer Whale who warns him of danger; and a sea dog, one of Killer Whale's hunters.)

(Rock is the second face from the top of the pole--not counting Raven--and Sea Lion is stretched along his body head down. Below Rock is the Watcher, with very big ears, and on his chest is Sea Dog.)

There are no very ancient totem poles, as the tradition sprang up only about one hundred and fifty years ago and was at its height in the mid-nineteenth century. The art is more or less contemporary with the great period of wood folk-sculpture on the eastern seaboard of the United States, particularly the carving of figure-heads for ships, which is now almost a lost art. Totem pole carving is still practiced, however, in the Northwest.