

Totems Tell a Story

Activity Information

Grade Appropriate Level: Grade K-3

Duration: ~three 40-minute periods for introductory lesson & full project

Materials: a variety of posters &/or pictures of different styles of totem poles to display in the classroom, scrap paper & pencils, a large sheet of white paper for each student (ideally cut to their height for a large totem pole design), pastels, smocks or old shirts (optional)



Objective

The purpose of this lesson is to teach students key information about totem poles. They will learn that First Nations and other artists create the poles and also what the carvings represent. These will help them create a drawing of their own personal totem pole.

Prescribed Learning Outcomes

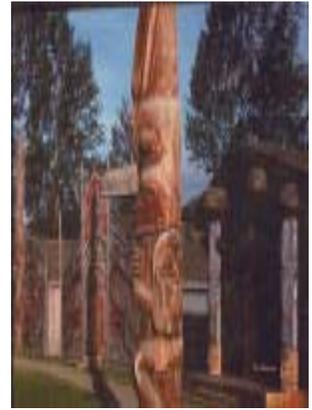
Art, Social Studies, Language Arts

- to communicate experiences, moods, and stories
- create images using the elements and principles to produce a particular effect
- create images in response to objects and other images they have experienced and in response to images from a variety of cultural contexts
- demonstrate awareness of British Columbia's and Canada's diverse heritage
- identify the main information provided in illustrations
- identify and describe details and feelings conveyed by illustrations

Introductory Activity

- Display a variety of pictures of totem poles around the classroom, then engage students in a discussion about them. Some lead questions may include: What do they like about the totem poles? What features stand out to them the most? Can they identify what animals or other images have been carved into the poles? What colours are used? What kind of tools do they think could be used for this type of carving? What do they think are the purposes of totem poles?

- Using the enclosed INAC leaflet, “Stories the Totems Tell: Bringing Aboriginal Poles to Life” as a guide, share some age-appropriate, key information with students about totem poles. Describe for students how totem poles are a traditional way of telling the stories of Aboriginal families and clans. They tell about relationships, accomplishments, adventures, rights and also stories that may be true or based on myth or legend. The stories offered by the poles are intended to be passed down from generation to generation.
- Choose one or two totem poles for a focused discussion. Ask students to study the features of a pole very carefully and to think about what story it may be telling. What story might the carver of the pole have been trying to tell? Why do they think so? What clues are there?



Suggested Instructional Strategies

Lesson

Students will create a large pastel picture of a totem pole that is symbolic of things that are important to them or that tell the story of something important in their family, school, or community life.

- Using the pictures of totem poles as a reference, ask students to think about the symbols they could use to create a totem pole that would represent their life. For younger students, the idea of ‘symbol’ may need to be explained with a few more examples. For some, it may be “fish” because their parents are fishers, or trees because the birds that nest in their trees.
- Provide students with scrap paper and pencils to plan their design. As they think about simple, enlarged features to create, focus their attention on scale and the significance of the height, width and arrangement of their symbols so they will fit together to form a totem pole. Symmetry is an important feature of the totem designs that students should keep in mind while planning.
- Once their rough sketch is completed, students should be asked to explain the ‘story’ of their pole to the teacher. The story they are trying to tell should be evident in their sketch. Students may need teacher guidance to help them complete their pole design.
- Students will use pencil to copy their design onto the large paper and then use pastel to colour in the design with rich colours. Rather than lightly shading in their totems, students should push harder with the pastel to achieve a bolder, more vibrant effect. Students will then outline their totem pole with a dark pastel, like black or brown, to make the features clearly stand out.
- Note: If students are not familiar with working in pastels, the teacher will need to demonstrate how to use this medium to achieve the best results.



Since school pastels are generally oil based, younger students can wear smocks and roll up their sleeves to protect their clothing.

Suggested Assessment Strategies

- Observe how students participate in the introductory activity. Are they sharing their ideas and demonstrating an understanding of the different purposes for totem poles?
- Consider to what extent the students have thoughtfully planned out their design based on the outlined criteria. Do the features of their design represent the story that they want to tell?
- Notice the attention to detail and finishing touches of their work. Has the drawing been completed with care and neatness? Is the design symmetrical, boldly coloured and outlined?



Suggested Extensions

- After the poles are completed, students can be given the opportunity to tell the story of their pole to a small group or to the class.
- Students can write a short story or legend that is based on their totem pole design and publish it. They can share the stories with their peers.
- Display the finished artwork in the classroom or in a high traffic area in the school hallway so that other students can enjoy the artwork.
- Use the student totem poles as a means to analyze the similarities and differences of their poles and those of the First Nations artists and other artists' works that have been displayed.
- Take your class to view a local museum that has First Nations totem poles on display or visit a local art gallery that features artwork of totem poles.
- Use this lesson as an introduction to a unit of study about First Nations culture and explore the works of different artists who have created and contributed totem pole art in your local community and province.

Weblinks:

<http://rbcm1.rbcm.gov.bc.ca/totems/totems1b.html>

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/time/galler07/frames/totems.htm>

http://www.cdli.ca/CITE/totem_poles.htm

<http://www.native-languages.org/totem.htm>

Lesson plan provided by: [Fored BC](#)

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Gander Academy's



Totem Poles Theme Page

[Collections](#)[Theme Page](#)

1. What Are Totem Poles

Totem Poles are not difficult to identify, whether you're looking at a reproduction in a gift shop, or a lonely figure decaying quietly in the forest. As recognizable as they are, however, they defy typically western classifications.

2. Totem Poles

Totem Poles were an important part of tribal life for the people of the Northwest. Tribal and family history were embodied and personified in the totems which all individuals carried with them as an integral part of their personal identity. All family and tribal homes proudly displayed their tribal totems - for all to see.

3. Construcing a Totem Pole

Contrary to what most people believe and understand about totem poles, the Haida people constructed these poles, not for religious purposes, but to preserve their culture and heritage for future generations. To the untrained eye, totems are carvings of religious figures and coastal animals, but to the Haida people these poles held a deeper meaning.

4. Totem Poles: An Exploration

Carved from mature cedar trees by the Native people of the Northwest Pacific coast (British Columbia, Canada and southern Alaska, USA), full size totem poles are outgrowths of the region's aboriginal art forms. Originally an important part of the Potlatch ceremony, a feast with deep meaning to coastal First Nations, totem poles were once carved and raised to represent a family-clan, its kinship system, its dignity, its accomplishments, its prestige, its adventures, its stories, its rights and prerogatives. A totem pole served, in essence, as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry.

5. [Western Red Cedar](#)

The western redcedar is found mainly in Western Canada and the United States. In the past, Amerindians sculpted totem poles and dugout canoes up to 20 metres long from western redcedar logs. One of these canoes is on display at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

6. [Towering Totems](#)

7. [Aesop's Fables On-line](#)

8. [Raven and Crows](#)

Crows, ravens, jays and magpies are all corvids, and are some of the most intelligent of birds. Farmers know that crows can count to four or five: the birds are wary of people and if three hunters enter a blind to shoot at them, the crows won't

come near. Even if one or two hunters come out again, they aren't fooled. Not until five people go into the blind and four come out will the crows think it's safe to return.

9. [Native American Lore Index Page](#)

Below are links to several storys of Native American Indian Lore from several Tribes across Turtle Island. If you have a story of Native Indian Lore you would like to have posted here, send it to me with as much information about the Lore that you can, and I will post it with others found here. Help me to make this site the best Lore site on the Web .

10. [The Story of Totem Bight](#)

A Tlingit myth tells that the people were inspired to carve totem poles after finding a carved log washed up on the beach. The Haida tell of a master carver who created a house front and several poles overnight and then taught the villagers how to carve.

11. [Totem Poles](#)

The totem poles of the Northwest Coast First Nations are probably the most immediately recognizable artifact of the culture. The poles are carved from red cedar with stylized human and animal forms. The figures on the pole represent the ancestry of a particular individual or family, and usually each image has a story connected to it.

12. [Emily Carr; To the Totem Forest](#)

Emily Carr visited Sitka, Alaska, in 1907; there, for the first time, she saw totem poles standing in a forested setting.

Ironically, these were in a park, having been relocated from Haida and Tlingit Indian villages in a scheme to preserve them from vandalism. They so impressed her that she resolved to record all the standing totem poles in British Columbia.

13. [To the Totem Forest](#)

Totem poles, donated by Tlingit and Haida chiefs to the Alaska Territorial government, were shipped in 1904 to St. Louis for display at the World's Fair. Upon their return to Sitka in 1906, the poles were re-erected in a park that was eventually dedicated as the Sitka National Monument.

14. [Totem Pole Ceremonies](#)

Raising a totem pole in the traditional way is a major project. First a hole must be dug to nest the pole in, then the pole is ceremonially carried to the site - depending on the size of the pole, a hundred or more people may be needed to help carry! When the uncarved end is placed in the hole, some people pull with strong ropes while others push from below with long poles, raising the pole in stages, to the accompaniment of drumming, singing and dancing.

15. [Lesson Plans: Religion and Spirituality in Native Cultures](#)

Objectives: Students will gain an appreciation for the central role that religion and spirituality holds in Native cultures.

16. [Emily Carr](#)

Emily Carr's first paintings of B.C. Indians, their villages, their totem poles, the forest and the seas, are those of a documentor.

17. [Totem Poles; An Introduction](#)

While totem poles are thought by many to be a symbol of Native American culture generally, their production was limited to six tribes in British Columbia and southeastern Alaska. The tribes which carved totem poles were the Bella Coola, Haida, Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Tsimshian and West Coast. Pole carving flourished in the 19th century.

18. [Intro to Totems and Totem Poles](#)

Carved from mature cedar trees by the Native people of the Northwest Pacific coast (British Columbia, Canada and southern Alaska, USA), full size totem poles are outgrowths of the region's aboriginal art forms. Originally an important part of the Potlatch ceremony, a feast with deep meaning to coastal First Nations, totem poles were once carved and raised to represent a family-clan, its kinship system, its dignity, its accomplishments, its prestige, its adventures, its stories, its rights and prerogatives. A totem pole served, in essence, as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry.

19. [Northwest Indians: The Totem Pole Search](#)

The Northwest Indian region is located along the Pacific Ocean from southern Alaska to northern California. Some of the Northwest tribes are the Chiook, Eyak, and Tlingit. A common form of artwork among the Northwest Indians is the totem pole. These totem poles were often used to show family ancestry and social rank. Totem poles became even more dominant among the tribes after the white traders brought

iron tools.

20.

21. [The First Totem Pole; A Story Written by Rosa Bell
Illustrated by Christian White](#)

Many, many years ago a Haida family lived in a village called Yan. In that family there was a boy named Sta-th. He was one of the Eagle clan. He wore an Eagle carving around his neck. Sta-th's mother was called Koon-jaat. She was also from the Eagle clan. Her hat had an eagle on top of it. Sta-th's father's name was An-o-wat. An-o-wat was from a different clan. He was one of the raven clan. He wore a Raven crest on his clothes.

22. [Saxman Native Totem Park](#)

In the late 1930's the Civilian Conservation Corps and the U.S. Forest Service retrieved and restored totem poles from abandoned village sites. This resulted with Saxman being one of several Native communities in Southeast Alaska with a totem park. The 24 totem poles in the Saxman Native Totem Park came from ancestral villages at Cape Fox and Tongass Island, Cat Island, and Pennock Island. This is the largest totem park in the world.

23. [Masks](#)

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