

Welcome to the Totem Heritage Center

The Totem Heritage Center houses a priceless collection of 19th century totem poles and other carvings, retrieved in the 1970s from the Tlingit Indian villages at Tongass Island and Village Island, and from the Haida village of Old Kasaan, on Prince of Wales Island. The inhabitants of these villages moved to Ketchikan and other towns at the beginning of the 20th century in order to be near schools, churches, and the canneries, mines, and sawmills that offered employment.

The Alaska State Museum and the Alaska Native Brotherhood, with the permission of Native elders, carried out the retrieval of the totem poles. Elders also provided valuable cultural and historical information about the poles. The Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Forest Service provided technical assistance.

The totem poles in the Heritage Center were carved by Native artists during the heyday of totem pole carving on the Northwest Coast, between the middle and the end of the 19th century. They are preserved as they were found at the old village sites. Though all of the poles are severely weathered, much of their original detail survives as testimony to the skill and sophistication of their carvers. Some still have traces of their original paint; parts of others are obscured by moss and other vegetation that took root in the wet wood of the poles as they slowly decayed over the years.

Traditionally, totem poles were carved to honor important individuals, commemorate significant events, and to proclaim the lineage and social standing of their owners. They are tangible references to the people, events, stories, and legends that figure in the oral histories of Northwest Coast Native peoples. As such, they have great cultural importance; but they are not religious objects, and they have never been worshipped.



Village Island circa 1915, THS 75.11.8.14



Tongass Island early 1900s, THS 70.9.4.4

Many of the figures carved on totem poles are “crests” – animals, mythological beings, or natural features symbolizing a particular group’s origins and history – that have been acquired by clan groups and passed down through generations of descendants. The crests of a particular group, along with the stories and history associated with the crests, are not only prized as intangible communal property; they also serve to define the identity and lineage of the group’s individual members.

While the figures on a totem pole might be readily recognizable, the pole’s significance or “meaning” can only be known if one knows the purpose and occasion for which it was created, as well as the individuals, groups, or stories associated with it. Such information was traditionally introduced when the pole was raised, and then passed down orally from generation to generation, often in the course of potlatches or other ceremonial occasions. Unfortunately, in the case of many of the old totems at the Center, this information has been lost in the mists of time.

Red Cedar, The Tree of Life

The totem poles preserved in the Totem Heritage Center were all carved from the wood of the Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*.)

Dominating the coastal forests from Washington to Southeast Alaska, the red cedar has been the “tree of life” for the Native peoples of the region for thousands of years. Its inner bark provided fiber for baskets, mats, rope, and clothing. Dugout canoes up to sixty feet long were fashioned from the trunks, and large communal houses were built with massive cedar posts, beams, and planks. Straight-grained, easily carved, and highly resistant to rot, red cedar is an ideal material for the monumental sculptures that we know as totem poles.



Old Kasaan circa 1906 , THS 62.4.5.281



Totem Heritage Center Activities

The Center is dedicated to preserving the cultural traditions that gave rise to the magnificent totem poles on display. Classes and workshops on Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian art

and culture are conducted to perpetuate and strengthen these traditions for future generations. Certificates are offered in Basketry & Weaving, Carving & Engraving, and Regalia Making.

Throughout the year, the Totem Heritage Center staff provides interpretive tours.

Special tours for school classes and other cultural interest groups can be arranged.

In addition to the totem poles, interpretive panels and rotating exhibits, the Center maintains a collection of baskets, regalia, carvings, and photographs. These, along with an extensive library of books, magazines, slides, and videos, may be accessed by appointment.



Totem Heritage Center

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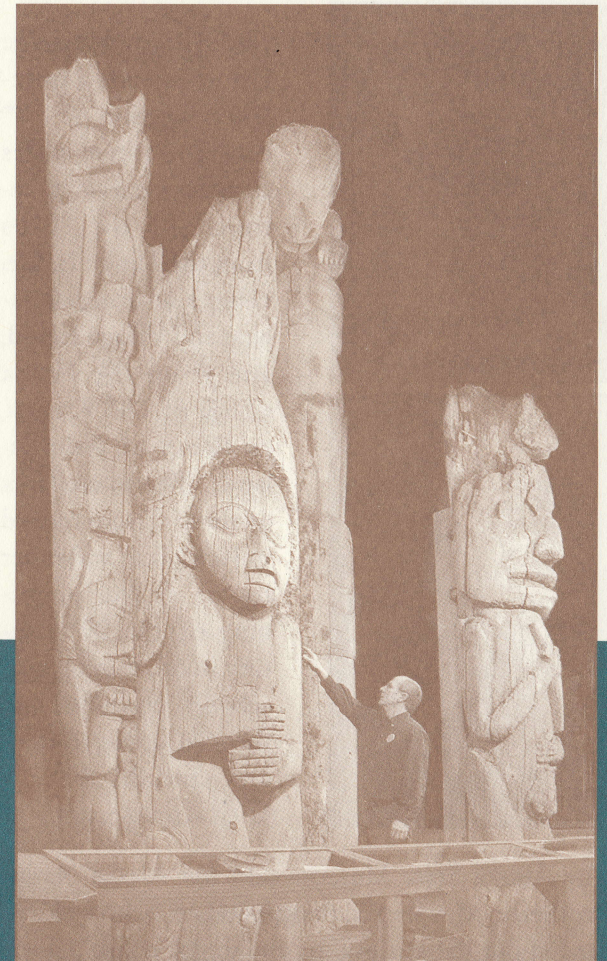
Website: <http://www.city.ketchikan.ak.us/departments/museums/totem.html>

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operated by the

City of Ketchikan Museum Department

Totem Heritage Center



Ketchikan, Alaska