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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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January Artifacts of the Month: Three Painted Tlingit Model Totem Poles

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum Artifacts of the Month for January are three painted Tlingit model totem poles with zoomorphic designs (SJIA501, SJIA467, and SJIA799). The first pole is very finely painted and carved and includes a bear without teeth, a frog, a mosquito, a figure of a raven, and a young raven wearing a chief's hat. This pole was carved for A.P. Johnson when he graduated from the Sheldon Jackson School in 1921 by Xon-de-dah', a Kaagwaantaan, like Johnson's father.ⁱ In the mid-1980s, Johnson described the pole's symbolism to museum staff – the chief's hat shows status and clan membership; the mosquito, educational instruction; the frog, his house and personal emblem; and the bottom, a bear "representing a stump...a symbol of something that is well established that could not be uprooted."

The second pole is a replica of the Chief Johnson Pole, which stands in Ketchikan and tells the story of Raven and his wife, Fog Woman, his two slaves with the Kijak bird on top, and explains the yearly migration of salmon. The bottom of the pole is marked, "Sample, Nat. Park," indicating it was probably carved at Sitka National Historical Park. The carver's identity is unknown. The third pole, also made by an unidentified artist, is carved on a solid background and features the figure of a bear at the base, a goat head, and a beaver or possibly a marmot head, on top.



Tlingit model totem poles
SJIA501, SJIA467, and SJIA799

Model totem poles like these have suffered from the pejorative label, "tourist art," and been written off as culturally vacuous and ethnographically irrelevant, but contextualized, model totem poles are compelling, aesthetic testimonials of Native identity and cultural endurance and reveal much about the intercultural encounter between Natives, settler societies, and non-Natives.

Originating in the Northwest coast, the tall, freestanding cedar totem pole, the precursor to the model pole, has historically served and remains a monument to convey family history, and status. Totem poles traditionally include heraldic crests and figures of ancestors, express lineage identity, memorialize deceased chiefs, mark special claims to territory and hereditary tangible and nontangible property, tell stories, and commemorate significant events.

Totem poles in the form of columns and carved house posts existed long before European and Euroamerican contact with Northwest Coast peoples, but the world's longstanding and enduring infatuation with them commenced with the arrival of explorers to the area in the late 18th century.

Captain James Cook, sailing on the *Resolution* from England to Vancouver Island in 1778, was the first non-Native to record a Northwest Coast column, which he saw in the interior of Chief Maquinna's house at the village of Yuquot. Other explorers, artists, and botanists documented carved house posts in the years that followed. In 1789, while at the village of Dadens on Haida Gwaii, Captain John Meares described the first iconic multi-figured totem pole as opposed to a house post, façade image or mortuary.ⁱⁱ As Europeans and Americans were increasingly drawn to the Northwest Coast by the burgeoning fur trade, steel tools became increasingly available, wealth, for some Natives involved in the trade, increased, displays of wealth were enhanced, and the totem pole flourished. By the 1870s, nearly a century later, the totem pole was increasingly coveted by foreigners as natural history museums and international fairs began sponsoring collecting expeditions to obtain totem poles, the greatest ethnographic prize of the day, to compliment displays of other large scale things – Egyptian and pre-Columbian stelae and whale and dinosaur skeletons.

The naissance of the steamship industry in the late 19th century and passengers' demand for small, portable curios generated the market for the model totem pole and did the most to embed the iconic image in the American psyche.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1884, steamships began coming to Alaska and tourism companies appropriated the totem pole, transforming it into an iconic promotional tool and image for pamphlets and brochures. Steamships sailed to Native villages, offering passengers views of poles in situ. To facilitate tourists' access some poles were relocated along steamer routes and to urban parks where they were frequently photographed for postcards. Passengers disembarking at ports were eager to bring home remembrances of Alaska and in response to the new market for souvenirs Native artists of southeastern Alaska and western British Columbia began carving small totem poles for sale and trade. The models were sold directly to tourists by Natives at wharves and were later sold to curios stores at ports of call including in Juneau, Wrangell, Seattle, and Vancouver. Mail order catalogues were developed by retailers to sell model poles to people who could not make the trip to the Pacific Northwest.^{iv} By the early twentieth century, model poles became the most popular souvenir bought by Northwest Coast tourists.

Despite their popular appeal, collectors, curators, and anthropologists have often dismissed model totem poles as “tourist art,” disparaging their potential aesthetic and cultural value and capacity to reveal important information about the Native carvers who made them and the non-Native consumers who purchased them. Some models were carved with less care than others, but many early model totems have imagery similar to that of full-scale poles, and reflect the artistic sophistication of their carvers and specific local, regional, and tribal carving traditions. Many tourists buying models had little understanding of those traditions and projected onto the carvings their own remembrances, stereotypical ideas about Alaska, and generalized views of Natives. Yet the commercial value of model totem poles and their marketability made it possible for Native peoples to continue traditional carving and explore artistic conventions at a time when missionary and government pressures to assimilate prevented them from carving full-scale totem poles. In this sense, model totem poles were artistic expressions of cultural resilience and endurance despite and in some ways because of their legacies as commodities.

The three model totem poles will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum until January 31st. Visit the museum to see these three model totem poles and nearly two hundred other models produced for curio commerce, including model paddles, kayaks and canoes, snowshoes, sleds, boats, houses, caches and kashims, and more. Winter hours at the museum are 10a.m. to 4p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

Bronner, Simon. *Consuming Visions: Acculturation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

Hall, Michael and Pat Glascock. *Carvings and Commerce: Model Totem Poles 1880-2010*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011.

Jonaitis, Aldona and Aaron Glass. *The Totem Pole*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010.

ⁱ Xon-de-dah’ , whose name is sometimes recorded as Konkitaw, Konketah, Kouk-de-kah, Kon ke ta, Kon de dath, Khnkitah, and Kanketa, etc., was a Native fisherman who according to the Sitka Tribune, dated July 30, 1925, died of tuberculosis. In addition to this model totem pole, the museum has a drum and beater made by the artist as a Christmas gift for Robert and Dale De Armond in either 1916 or 1917.

ⁱⁱ The first known drawing of the Dadens pole is in the Peabody Essex Museum’s collection and was produced in 1791 by John Bartlett, a seaman on the ship *Gustavus III*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Long before steamship tourism’s outset, the Haida had initiated tradition of carving miniatures for sale to outsiders. Haida sculptures in argillite may have been made prior to contact, but they proliferated in that medium after the 1840s. The collapse of Haida’s fur trade resulted in the pursuit of new income sources. Haida first produced exceptional ocean-going canoes they sold up and down coast to other Native people and then, recognizing appeal of souvenirs for foreigners, made miniature carvings in wood and argillite. Early argillite carvings intended for those who landed at Haida Gwaii on trading trips depicted a variety of subjects, Euroamericans and their vessels, included, but by the end of the 19th century, model totem poles became the preferred souvenir of tourists. The Haida were the major model totem producers working during what Michael D. Hall and Pat Glascock term as the Emergent Phase (1880-1910) of model totem production.

^{iv} Shop owners focused on walk-in business but many added mail-orders to their repertoire. The most well-known turn-of-the-century American dealer, Joseph Standley, who founded Ye Olde Curiosity Shop in Seattle in 1899, sold model totem poles by catalog for every budget and was so successful, he had to hire artists, notably Sam Williams, a Nuu-chah-nulth born in 1880 in Nitinaht on Vancouver Island, to make poles so he could keep up with the increase in volume.