

TOTEM POLES IN THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM

The Royal BC Museum has a large collection of monumental carvings, including historical and contemporary totem poles. Some of these carvings are on exhibit in Thunderbird Park on the east side of the museum complex. Others are behind glass near the museum's east entrance, in the main lobby of the museum and in the First Peoples galleries on the third floor of the Exhibits Building. This article presents information and images about totem poles in general and about the poles in the main lobby and at the east entrance of the museum. Information about Thunderbird Park and its poles can be found in another area of this website.

AN INTRODUCTION TO TOTEM POLES

Totem pole is a commonly used but deceptive term. These monumental carvings are not totems; they are concrete manifestations of the owner's family histories and rights. The images displayed are crest figures, many of which represent supernatural beings, or ancestors who encountered supernatural beings, from whom hereditary rights and privileges were obtained. These rights include lands, resources, house designs, images, names and ceremonies, including the songs, masks, dances and regalia that are shown in the ceremonies. Poles proclaim and validate a person's lineage and importance.

There are several different kinds of poles. House posts stand inside the house and support the main beams of the roof. House frontal poles stand against the façade of the house and, traditionally, have an oval or arched opening at the base of the pole through which people enter the house. Memorial poles and figures commemorate the dead. Mortuary poles contained the remains of the dead in grave boxes that were incorporated into the pole. Potlatch figures demonstrate the wealth and power of the chief giving the potlatch. Welcome figures greet people arriving in the community.

There is considerable variation in the carving traditions of the Northwest Coast. Each language group and community has its own stylistic and oral traditions; working within those strict traditions, each artist has his own style. The poles on exhibit at the Royal BC Museum illustrate some of the varied styles and traditions of coastal First Nations.

Article by Dr. Martha Black, Curator of Ethnology, Royal British Columbia Museum

Oral histories and documentary evidence indicate that poles and other monumental carvings predate contact with Europeans. Very few of the early carvings survive, however. It is customary to let carvings deteriorate naturally and create new ones to mark significant events, changes in social status and the assumption of cultural responsibilities. With the advent of metal tools and new wealth from the fur trade after European contact, the number of poles increased. Most of the poles seen in late-nineteenth century photographs of First Nations communities had been erected in that century.

Poles continue to be made and erected in the traditional manner throughout the Northwest Coast. Pole raising remains an important, prestigious and expensive undertaking; it must be done with appropriate ceremony and witnessed through a potlatch. In addition to carving for traditional purposes, artists make model and full-size poles for the collectible and fine art markets.

POLES IN THE MUSEUM'S MAIN LOBBY



KWAKWAKA'WAKW

A'wa'etlala

Dzawadi, Knight Inlet

Pole

RBCM 1863

Carved some time after 1875, this pole once stood in the village of Dzawadi at the head of Knight Inlet on the British Columbia mainland. The figures are (from the top) a chief holding a copper (a symbol of wealth), Raven, and a family ancestor.

The pole was acquired for the museum in 1914 from Chief Harris.

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The pole does not appear in this photograph of Dzawadi taken by Edward Dossetter in 1881. BC Archives B-03564.

Haida

Tanu, Haida Gwaii
Memorial Pole
RBCM 1391

About 1880, Checkgath raised this memorial pole to his wife in the village of t'anuu 'Ilnagaay (eelgrass town, also known as Tanu) on Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands). The figures depict some of Checkgath's family crests. At the top are three Watchmen, guardians who are said to call out in warning at the approach of enemy canoes. The long-beaked bird may be Cormorant; the inverted face below its talons represents the bird's tail. Collection records indicate that the human figure below is a Shaman holding a Frog but this is likely the Eagle clan ancestress, jilaa quns, who is also known as Frog Woman, Copper Woman and Volcano Woman. Below the Frog is an inverted human whose face appears in the blowhole of the bottom figure, a Killer Whale.

Dr. Charles F. Newcombe purchased the pole for the museum in 1911. A replica stands in Thunderbird Park.



This panoramic view of t'anuu 'Ilnagaay was taken in 1901. The village appears to be uninhabited. BC Archives D-00549.

GITXSAN

Kitwancool, Skeena River

Memorial Pole

RBCM 15563

This is the All Frogs pole which stood in front of a house of the Laxsel (Frog) clan in Gitanyow (Kitwancool) village. Erected about 1875, it depicts episodes in the history of the House of Gweenu.

The carvings refer to the story of Neegamks, a clan ancestress. Many generations ago she was abducted by a chief of the Frogs and gave birth to several Frog children. The figure on top of the pole represents Neegamks; those below depict her offspring.

As part of an agreement with the House of Gweenu and the people of Gitanyow, the pole came to the museum in 1958.



The All Frogs pole is on the left in this 1910 photograph of Gitanyow. BC Archives A-06904.

NUU-CHAH-NULTH

Huu-ay-aht

Keeshan, Vancouver Island

Welcome Figures

RBCM 2102 (female figure), 2103 (male figure)

These figures stood, facing the beach, in front of a house named Quaksweaqwul at the Huu-ay-aht village of Kiix'in (Keeshan). They were erected in preparation for two potlatches given for the Neah Bay people before 1900. The figures may have belonged to the village chief, Louis Nookmiis.

The female figure represents Hominiki, a woman in some way connected with the moon, who married a Huu-ay-aht ancestor. The male figure represents Nutchkoa, a possessor of supernatural powers. He is watching for people to come, ready to draw their canoes up and invite them into his house for a potlatch.

Dr. Charles F. Newcombe purchased both figures for the museum in 1911. The facial decorations, depicting small marine animals and a drying frame for clams, were painted later by Chakes George of Port Alberni.



Only the frame of the house named Quakswealqwu was standing when Newcombe photographed the figure at Kiix'in about 1905. PN 4659.

POLES AT THE MUSEUM'S EAST ENTRANCE



COAST SALISH

Cowichan

Oukwemkwemiyimet, Vancouver Island

House Posts

RBCM 5705, 5706, 5708, 5709

These house posts are four of five that originally supported the roof in the house of Puykwilum, a famous shaman in the village of Oukwemkwemiyimet (Many People Getting Out of Their Canoes) on the Cowichan River. The house collapsed about 1903 and the poles were moved to an adjacent house that belonged to Puykwilum's son, Edward Paul.

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The images on the posts represent ancestors and ancestral privileges. They relate to magical words used in cleansing or purifying rites performed at times of life crises and to wipe out shame. The small animals depicted have been identified as members of the weasel family. They evoke a cleansing ritual in which the stuffed body of one of these animals was made to move up and down the afflicted person, wiping away impurity or shame. One of the posts (RBCM 5708) illustrates four of these animals climbing on a human figure and may commemorate such a cleansing rite. Another (RBCM 5705) depicts a human figure holding a single animal. This may represent a personal vision power. Puykwilum was a famous shaman. It is said that he had mink as his "power."

Edward Paul's house was taken down about 1935. The museum acquired all five posts in 1944.



This photograph, taken by Arthur Church in 1903, shows Edward Paul's house with the five house posts from Chief Puykwilum's house. Now placed on the outside of the house, the posts appear to have been newly painted. PN 1479.

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COAST SALISH

Pentlatch

Comox, Vancouver Island

House Posts

RBCM 2355, 2356

These two inside house posts probably stood in a house in the Pentlatch village at Comox. The upper figures likely represent Eagles. The lower ones may depict family ancestors.

Dr. Charles F. Newcombe purchased the posts for the museum in 1912 at Nanaimo.



Before the present museum buildings were erected in the mid-1960s, the collection was housed in the British Columbia Legislature building where the poles from Comox flanked a portrait of the museum's curator, John Fannin. PN 11114 (detail). The posts do not appear to have been photographed in situ at Comox.

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NUU-CHAH-NULTH

Huu-ay-aht

Numukamis, Vancouver Island

House Post

RBCM 2104

This is one of a pair of house posts that stood in the Huu-ay-aht village of Numukamis at the mouth of the Sarita River.

They are said to have belonged to John Mack and were purchased for the Museum by Dr. Charles F. Newcombe in June, 1911.



The traditional big house, of which it was once an integral part, had been replaced by European style houses when Newcombe took this photograph of the post. PN 11465.

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NUU-CHAH-NULTH

Ucluelet

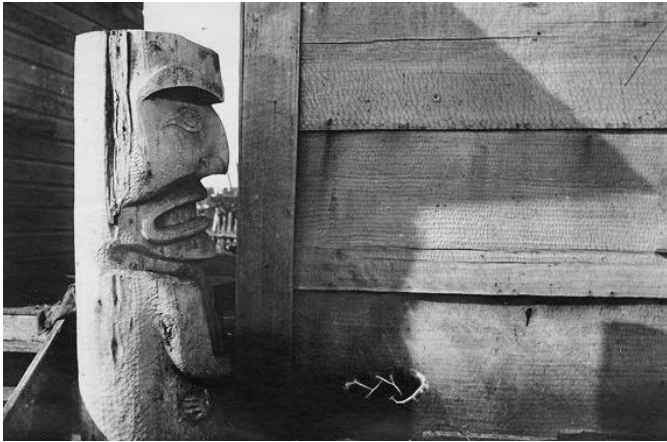
Ihatso, Vancouver Island

House Post

RBCM 2106

This post is one of four that stood in a house near the Ucluelet village of Ihatso. The house was built about 1880. Each of the posts represents an ancestor of the family that occupied the house. This one depicts a chief of the family's ancestral village at Long Beach.

All four posts were purchased for the museum by Dr. Charles F. Newcombe in 1911.



Newcombe took this picture of the post at Ihatso in 1911. PN 4966.

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KWAKWAKA'WAKW

Gusgimaxw

Quatsino, Vancouver Island

Potlatch Figure

RBCM 1855

This figure, called Ready to Chop, proclaims a privilege of the Tsetseya lineage to whom it belonged. It was used ceremonially at potlatches to simulate the splitting of coppers or canoes before the objects were actually broken. This was done to demonstrate the greatness of the chief who could afford to destroy such valuable property.

Dr. Charles F. Newcombe acquired the figure at the Gusgimaxw village of Xwatis (Quatsino) in 1911.



Newcombe took this photograph of the potlatch figure at Xwatis in 1913. PN 654.

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KWAKWAKA'WAKW

Kwikwasutinexw

Gwa'yasdam's, Gilford Island

House Post

RBCM 14680

This is one of a matched pair of house posts that stood at the back of a partly-constructed house in the village of Gwa'yasdam's on Gilford Island. The house was begun in 1935 but was never finished because the owner, John Nelson, died in 1937. Herbert Johnson is said to have carved the posts.

The top figure depicts a man holding a copper, the traditional symbol of wealth. The image at the bottom represents the Sisiyutł, a supernatural double-headed serpent.

Both house posts were purchased by the museum in 1955. The mate to this post can be seen in the First Peoples exhibit on the museum's third floor.



Wilson Duff took this photograph of the house posts standing at Gwa'yasdam's in 1955. PN 2180.

HEILTSUK

Bella Bella, Campbell Island

Memorial Figure

RBCM 4

This carving of a figure holding a copper, the traditional symbol of wealth, stood as a memorial near the village of 'Qélc (Old Bella Bella).

According to Phillip Jacobsen, who collected it in 1893, the figure depicts the "man who first brought copper to the Indians." The carving may represent the deceased's ancestor who first acquired the copper, or the supernatural being from whom the copper was obtained.



In this photograph, probably taken in 1879 by Oregon C. Hastings, the memorial figure stands behind a plaque that reads "In Memory of . . . Bella Bella." In the background is a large wooden disk decorated with two painted images of coppers. At the top of the disk, two wooden coppers flank a crouching human figure with a copper attached to its hat. Note the box drum with painted Whale design suspended on the side of the disk. The memorial commemorated a chief called Boston. PN 2404.

NUXALK

Talio, South Bentinck Arm
House Frontal Pole
RBCM 2308

This pole stood in the village of Talio where it functioned as the entrance to a building named Raven House that belonged to Chief Hemas. The figures carved on the pole depict creatures involved in family histories.

The main figure is Raven with a long beak. Beaver is the secondary figure on the pole. Beaver's face, with its prominent incisor teeth, appears above Raven's forehead; Beaver's stylized body and tail appear in the centre of the pole below the projecting beak. Birds, perhaps Eagles, are shown in profile beside both parts of Beaver's image. Two more profile faces, with curving lower jaws and clearly defined teeth, are visible between the heads and claws of the lower birds. The rest of the lower faces are missing. At some time in the past, the door opening was enlarged and part of the design cut away. In one interpretation, these images represent Wolf, a crest acquired by Hemas' family through marriage with the Wuikinuxv people of Rivers Inlet.

Dr. Charles F. Newcombe purchased the pole for the museum in 1913. According to his records, the pole was made by Skyuswalus of Talio.



The pole forms the doorway of the house on the right in this view of Talio taken by Newcombe in 1913. PN 10978.

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In this photograph that Newcombe took at Talio in 1913, a European-style window has been added to the traditional house front. PN 7174.

Haida

Skidegate, Haida Gwaii

House Post

RBCM 2

This house post comes from hragilda 'Ilnagaay (Skidegate) where it stood at the back of a dwelling belonging to Chief Nestaqana of the Big House People lineage of the Eagle division of the Haida. The name of the house, which refers to its great size, can be translated as House So Large That People Must Shout To Make Themselves Heard In It.

There are several possible interpretations of the images on this post. One is that the top figure is Raven with a broken beak and the other figures illustrate the story of Nanasingit. Nanasingit's wife, who can be identified by the labret in her lower lip, was abducted by a Killer Whale. Nanasingit journeyed to the Killer Whale's undersea house and rescued her. The main image on the pole represents the Killer Whale.

The post was purchased at hragilda 'Ilnagaay by James Deans in 1892.



Richard Maynard took this photograph of the post at hragilda 'Ilnagaay in 1884. PN 5840.

Haida

Tanu, Haida Gwaii
Pole Section
RBCM 15557 b

This section was part of a pole which stood at t'anuu 'Ilnagaay (eelgrass town, also known as Tanu) in front of a dwelling called House That Makes a Noise. The house and pole were owned by Gwiskunas, a member of the Those Born at Qadasgo Creek lineage of the Raven division of the Haida.

There are several interpretations of the main figure on this pole section. The most likely is that it represents a mythical Sea Chief who lives close to the north end of Banks Island. At night the eyes of the Sea Chief drop from their sockets and hang down to his waist. At meal times his friends put his eyes back in their sockets, hold them there, and support his eyelids so that he can see to eat. The Sea Chief's principal food is hair seal, which he must swallow whole because he has no teeth. After several hours he spits out the undigested bones with great force.

The Sea Chief is shown with hanging eyes; the eye balls take the form of small human figures. On his torso is an image of a Frog. Above his forehead, a Hair Seal is depicted. The Hawk-like face flanked by talons at the very top of this section is part of a bird image on the top section of the pole (not on exhibit).

In 1954, by arrangement of the Totem Pole Preservation Committee, this pole was purchased and moved from t'anuu 'Ilnagaay to the museum. In 1966, Henry Hunt and Tony Hunt carved the replica of it that stands in Thunderbird Park.



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Pole 15557 is second from the left in this photograph taken at t'anuu 'Ilnagaay by Dr. Charles F. Newcombe in 1901. PN 104.



Wilson Duff photographed the pole being moved from t'anuu 'Ilnagaay in 1954. PN 5746.

Haida

Ninstints, Haida Gwaii

Memorial Poles

RBCM 15558 a, 15558 b

These two memorial poles stood in front of a house in sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay (red cod island town, also known as Ninstints). It is likely that the house and poles belonged to Kanskinai, a chief of the Sand Town People lineage of the Raven division of the Haida.

Kanskinai had moved to sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay from the village of Kaidju (songs of victory town) and it is said that he brought the poles with him when he moved. This would have been some time before about 1885-90, when sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay became uninhabited.

The poles were purchased by the Totem Pole Preservation Committee and moved to the museum in 1957.



The memorial poles can be seen on either side of the mortuary pole in the centre of this photograph of sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay. PN 836.



This photograph of the removal of the memorial poles was taken by Bernard Atkins at sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay in 1957. PN 7465.

Haida

Ninstints, Haida Gwaii

Pole Section

RBCM 15559 b

This is a section of a pole which stood in front of Raven House in sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay (red cod island town, also known as Ninstints). Raven House was a house name brought from Kaidju (songs of victory town). This pole may have belonged to Kanskinai, the same man who owned memorial poles 15558a and 15558b.

A large figure holding two small humans is depicted. The small humans wear ringed hats, a symbol of status. At the bottom of the pole section is a row of small, inverted figures which can be interpreted as forming the kilt or dance apron of the large figure. The carvings may depict an ancestor or illustrate an episode in the history of the family that erected the pole.

In 1957 the pole was acquired by the Totem Pole Preservation Committee and moved from sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay to the museum.



This photograph, taken by Bernard Atkins at sgang gwaay 'Ilnagaay in 1957, shows preparations for removal of the pole. PN 7662.

(Note: Reverse image – the pole should face left)

GITXSAN

Kitwancool, Skeena River
Memorial Pole Section
RBCM 14684 d

This is the uppermost section of a pole belonging to the House of Gamlakyelk. It stood, together with two other poles, in front of a house of the Laxsel clan in the Gitxsan village of Gitanyow (Kitwancool). Erected about 1870 in memory of a household member, it is said to have been made by Hrstseeyae, a carver from a related household at Gitlakdamix.

The figures represent crests of the household group. The human figure symbolizes the People of the Smoke Hole or Real People of the Ladder crest. The bird carving depicts Mawdzeks, a mythical bird resembling a hawk or an eagle. Now missing is a carving of a bird which, as one can see in the accompanying photograph, perched on top of the pole. This figure depicted the On Sleeps the Raven crest.

The pole was acquired by the museum in 1962.



The People of the Smoke Hole pole can be seen on the right in this photograph taken at Gitanyow in 1910 by George T. Emmons.