

Totem Sculpture

Use animal symbolism to create a personal, stackable totem

(art + social studies)

The first totems were carved from mature cedar trees and were meant to represent the emblem of the family, and as a reminder of family history.

Each carving on a totem tells a story, revealed only if one knows the meaning assigned to various animals, fish, birds, and designs and where they are placed on the pole. Sometimes, in addition to the symbolism of a particular animal, the animal may be placed on a pole as a result of a special gift from the animal, fish, or bird spirits. Some Native American clans even claimed to be descended from certain totem figures.

The meaning of many totem poles has been lost over time. Even some of today's totem poles can only be understood by one person — its owner. Totems and their figures have never been worshiped like a religious icon might be. They were also never used to ward off evil spirits. Instead, a totem pole may be compared to the symbolism portrayed by a Coat of Arms. It is meant to be a way to recognize and learn about a specific family or clan.

Totem poles are carved today by both native and non-native people. They have become a highly valued art form and a symbol of pride and tradition for many.

The following are general references of totem pole symbols, although interpretation varies among peoples.

Raven - The mercurial trickster of Northwest Coast Native lore. Curious and mischievous, often misbehaving but never boring.

Sea Turtle - This totem is representative of Mother Earth.

Thunderbird - A mythological bird known to manifest the rolling of thunder while beating its wings and creating lightning when blinking its eyes. Known to kill whales.

Eagle - Intelligent and resourceful. He rules the sky and is able to transform himself into a human.

Wolf - Very powerful totem that can help people who are sick or in need.

Bear - A teacher symbol. It is believed that Bear taught the People to catch salmon and pick berries.

Frog - Known for bringing wealth.

Otter - The otter is a mischievous creature that is also a symbol of laughter, curiosity, grace, and empathy.

Salmon - The salmon symbolizes instinct, persistence, and determination.

Owl - The owl is a very respected animal and is thought to symbolize the souls of the departed.

Killer Whale - Whales are honored as strong and brave animals. The mythology of the killer whale is that it will bring food and assistance to a chief or other important person lying helpless and/or wounded.



Materials (required)

[Kemper Fetting Knife](#), hard (30349-1020); share five across class

[Amaco Stonex White Clay](#), 25 lb; (33247-1025); share two across class

[Jazz Gloss Tempera](#), 16 oz (00014-); share at least five colors across class

[Creativity Street Wooden Dowel Rods](#), package of 12, 1/4" x 12" (60448-1412); need one per student

[Creativity Street Wooden](#)

[Dowel Rods](#), package of 12, 1/2" x 12" (60448-1212); share one package across class

Optional Materials

[Liquitex Professional Acrylic Inks](#) (21148-)





Step 1: Create a base for the totem with air-hardening clay and a 1/4" dowel.



Step 2: Model four separate animal totems, then punch a hole through the center of each using the 1/2" dowel.



Step 3: Allow to dry, apply color, and stack!

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GRADES 3-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Research meanings of totem carvings and placement.
2. Provide each student with 2 pounds of air hardening clay and one 1/4" dowel.

Process

1. Make the clay base for the totem pole first. Starting with a ball of clay about the size of an orange, mold it into a pyramid shape. It can be sliced with a fettling knife, or paddled with a wooden paddle or the tabletop to create flat sides. Impress texture on the sides if desired. Lastly, press the 1/4" dowel into the narrow end of the base all the way down to approximately 1/2" from the bottom. Make sure the dowel is straight from front to back and side to side. Allow to dry in place.
2. Choose four animals as symbols that describe the personality or clan attributes of the creator of the

totem. Model the animals out of air-hardening clay. When an animal totem is complete, press the 1/2" dowel through the center. Clean the edges of the hole, if necessary, by trimming with a fettling knife. Position the first animal on the totem pole by sliding it down the 1/4" dowel, being careful not to move the dowel.

3. Repeat the process in step 2 for each of the other three animal symbols. The totem dowel does not need to go all the way through the top animal. Try to construct each animal so that four of them will cover the dowel. If necessary, the 1/4" dowel can be cut with scissors for a perfect fit. Allow the totem animals to dry on the dowel.
4. Now add color! Any acrylic paint can be used; however, younger students can apply Jazz Tempera for bright, glossy color. Older students may want to experiment with Professional Liquitex Acrylic inks for a more traditional sophisticated and stained look. Either way, the totems will come alive!



National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Connecting

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.