



# A History of Alaskan Totem Poles

*Ann Chandonnet*

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## **A History of Alaskan Totem Poles** Ann Chandonnet

The totem pole is a carved tree trunk - traditionally Western red cedar, and generally larger in diameter at its base than at the top. Most stand vertically; some are horizontal. It is one of the most famous forms of Pacific Northwest Coast art - hard to miss because of its sheer scale, abstract design and often brilliant colors.

"Totem" comes from the Ojibwa Indian word ninto-te-m meaning clan, armorial bearing/creator protective spirit, Ojibwa clans were symbolized by animals and inanimate objects including eagle, buffalo, pike, birch bark and bear's liver. The word came into English usage about 1750. The term has been applied by anthropologists to carvings which express clan organization, kinship, mythology or ancestry with symbols. By further extension, a "totem pole" is a wooden post sculpted with totem figures and erected by Pacific Northwest Coast peoples in front of or as part of winter dwellings. The term "totem pole" came into use about 1875; the term "totem post" first appeared in a dictionary in 1891....

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