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Author(s): Marius Barbeau

Source: *Geographical Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Apr., 1930), pp. 258-272

Published by: American Geographical Society

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# TOTEM POLES: A RECENT NATIVE ART OF THE NORTHWEST COAST OF AMERICA

Marius Barbeau

*National Museum of Canada*

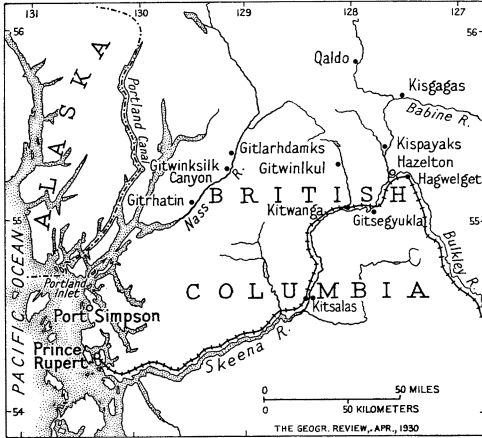


FIG. 1—The Nass and Skeena River basins.

THE totem poles of British Columbia and Alaska on the northwest coast of North America have long since achieved world-wide repute. Their decorative style at its best is unique and so effective that it is nowhere surpassed in excellence among the other forms of aboriginal art at large. They express native personality and craftsmanship in terms impressive and intriguing. The muse-

ums of Europe and America treasure a number of them, principally from the Queen Charlotte Islands; some adorn the parks of our western cities. These picturesque creations, however, can be seen to full advantage only in their true home, at the edge of the ocean, amid tall cedars and hemlocks, and in the shadow of lofty mountains. With their bold profiles, reminiscent of Asiatic divinities and monsters, they conjure impressions strangely un-American in their surroundings of luxuriant dark-green vegetation under skies of bluish mist.

The art of carving poles belongs to the past. Racial customs and stamina are on the wane everywhere, even in their former strongholds. Totem poles are no longer made. Many of them have fallen from old age, decayed, and disappeared. Some were sold, others removed in maritime raids without the consent or knowledge of the owners. Quite a few were destroyed by the owners themselves during hysterical revivals under a spurious banner of Christianity; for instance the poles of two Tsimsyan tribes, in the winters of 1917 and 1918, at Gitlarhdamks and Port Simpson near the Alaskan frontier.

Not even a remnant of the famous clusters of former days remains among the Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Barely a few are still left among the Bellacoolas, the Kwakiutl, and the Nootkas

of the west coast of British Columbia; in a few years these will have totally disappeared.

The only collection of poles that still remains fairly complete is that of the upper Skeena, in British Columbia, a short distance southeast of the Alaskan border, from 150 to 250 miles inland, at the edge of the area where this art is practiced. Nowhere else but on the Nass, where a number of poles also survive, are they to be seen far inland. The Canadian Government and the Canadian National Railways a few years ago inaugurated the policy of preserving the Skeena River poles in their original location. And the Department of Education of the American Government is also restoring some of the Tlingit poles of the Alaskan coast.

Well known as is this striking form of native art, one is apt to suppose that our ethnographic literature is well supplied with data on their features and history. The supposition, however, is unjustified. Casual descriptions of poles or models of poles have been furnished by Dr. Swanton, Lieutenant Emmons, Dr. Boas, Dr. Newcombe, and others; but their notes usually appear without the necessary historical context. It is too late now to recover much of this knowledge. The present writer made a complete study of the poles of the three Tsimshyan nations, while engaged in several ethnographic explorations on the northwest coast for the National Museum of Canada from 1914 to 1927; and a summary of his conclusions is here presented.<sup>1</sup>

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOTEM POLE

The characteristic figures on totem poles consist of symbols comparable to heraldic devices—not pagan gods or demons, as is often supposed. They usually illustrate myths or tribal traditions. They were never worshiped; and if they were held sacred, it was only because of their implications.

Those of the Tsimshyan and the Tlingit in particular—and the same thing is also largely true of the Haida poles—were monuments erected by the various families in the tribe to commemorate the dead. In intent they were the equivalent of our tombstones. Indeed, the natives now have some of their crests carved out of stone or marble at Port Simpson or Vancouver and place them as tombstones in their modern graveyards. The owners' object in thus showing their coat of arms was to publish at large their claims to vested rights and privileges. The emblems or totems varied with each family; they were their exclusive property and jealously guarded. They pictured legends, phenomena, and the animals of the country. The eagle, the raven, the frog, the finback whale, the grizzly bear, the wolf, the

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<sup>1</sup> Published with the approval of the Director of the National Museum of Canada.

thunderbird, and many others are among the most familiar themes. Others less frequently seen appear to be more recent: for instance the owl, the salmon, the woodpecker, the beaver, the starfish, the shark, the halibut, the bullhead, the split person, the mountain goat,



FIG. 2—The mouth of the Nass River near Portland Canal.

the puma, the moon, the stars, and the rainbow. These symbols in the last resort were property marks.

The legendary origin of the emblems is explained in traditional narratives that used to be recited in the winter festivals or potlatch. They are still remembered by the members of the older generation, in spite of the decay of tribal customs. They recount how the ancestors long ago met with tribulations and adventures; how they were harassed or rescued by spirits and monsters of the unseen regions; how benevolent spirits appeared in visions and invested their protégés with charms; and how ancient warriors conquered their enemies. The carved illustrations of the stories served a definite purpose, besides those of commemoration and ownership; they made familiar the legends and recollections of the past to all in tribal life.

Soon after the death of a chief his prospective heirs appointed his leading nephew to his post. His induction took place in the midst of a large number of invited guests during elaborate festivals, where liberality was an outstanding feature. The name of the uncle passed on to his nephew, and the erection of a totem pole crowned the event. Groups of related families mustered all available resources to make the feast memorable, as their standing and influence depended exactly on their resources thus advantageously displayed.

#### MAKING AND ERECTING A POLE

The labor of cutting a large red cedar tree, hauling it overland or on the sea for a considerable distance, carving it, and erecting it often required years. The owners required sufficient time to gather their resources and proceeded with expenditures in instalments, as it

were. A tree was first selected and felled. The allies of the family interested took charge of the work—no relative could accept the stipend. They were fed and paid publicly at the conclusion. A carver was then hired also from among the allies. Should he lack the required



FIG. 3.—Gitwinkul, a Gitksan village on the Grease Trail between the Nass and the Skeena, summer of 1924. Writer's camp in the foreground.

skill, it was his privilege to appoint a substitute, over whom he stood ceremonially, assuming the credit of the work for himself. The carving was accomplished as secretly as possible, the figures being selected by the owners from their list of available crests, which often exceeded the fingers of one hand in number. Far more costly was the actual planting of the pole in the ground. When enough food and wealth were amassed, invitations were sent forth to all the leading families of the neighboring tribes; and the pole was erected in the presence or with the help of the hundreds of people gathered in festivities that were the corner stone of social life until about forty years ago.

These carved memorials as a rule face the water front, and the rivers or the ocean were the main highways. They stand apart from one another, in front of the owners' houses, and dot the whole length of the village in an irregular line. In recent years the villages have been moved to new sites, and the poles seem forsaken in the deserted abodes of the past. Trees have grown up around them in several places, and it is difficult to find them—particularly along the Nass.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART OF THE TOTEM POLE

Enough material has been retrieved from oblivion for a detailed history of Tsimshyan plastic art and the making of totem poles. Our study covers over 150 such memorials. The villages of the upper Skeena are the only ones that still retain some of their earlier barbaric features. Kispayaks, Gitsegyukla, and Kitwanga each claim about twenty poles. Gitwinkul now is the most remarkable of all the tribal villages. It stands on the Grease Trail from the Skeena to the

Nass, claiming the largest number of poles now standing anywhere in a single cluster—about thirty in all. It is impressive. Its poles are among the tallest and best; they are also the oldest.

It is evident that the carving of the poles was a truly popular art. If some artists were at times preferred to others for their skill, their choice for specific tasks was governed by customs largely unconcerned with craftsmanship. Each family of standing had every inducement to resort to its own carvers for important functions in ceremonial life. We have statistical evidence of this. The hundred totem poles of the upper Skeena were produced by more than thirty local carvers and thirteen foreigners. Six of the foreigners were from the Nass, and they had been engaged in the earliest period when the Skeena artists were not yet proficient in the new calling; three others were from the lower Skeena, and four from the Bulkley River, a tributary of the Skeena. The Skeena carvers belonged to independent and widely scattered social groups or families; that is twenty-three of them were of the Raven-Frog phratry; nine of the Wolf, five of the Eagle, and three of the Fireweed. Seventy-eight out of the hundred poles are ascribed to Gitksan artists, while the rest are credited to foreigners.

The art of carving and erecting memorial columns is not really as ancient on the northwest coast as is generally believed. Popular misconceptions that totem poles are hundreds of years old are fantastic. They could not be, from the nature of the materials and the climatic conditions. A green cedar cannot stand upright much longer than fifty or sixty years on the upper Skeena, where precipitation is moderate and the soil usually consists of gravel and sand. Along the coast it cannot endure the intense moisture that prevails most of the year and the muskeg foundation much more than forty years. The totem poles of Port Simpson, for instance, all decayed on the south side first, which is exposed to warm rainy winds. Most of the well known poles now in our parks and museums were carved after 1860; while not a few of those seen in Indian villages, such as Alert Bay, were erected after 1890.

The growth of native technique to its present state is largely confined to the past century. It hinged upon European tools—the steel ax, the adze, and the curved knife—which were traded off in large numbers to the natives from the days of the early circumnavigators—that is after 1778. The lack of suitable tools, of wealth, and of leisure in the prehistoric period precluded the elaboration of ambitious structures and displays. The benefits accruing from the fur trade at once stimulated local ambitions; they stirred up jealousies and rivalries and incited incredible efforts for higher prestige and leadership. The totem pole came into fashion after 1830 through the rise of these ambitions. The size of the pole and the beauty of its figures published abroad the fame of those it represented.

Feuds over the size of poles at times broke out between semi-independent leaders within a village. The bitter quarrel between Hladerh and Sispegoot, on the Nass, will not soon be forgotten. Hladerh, head chief of the Wolves, would not allow the erection of any

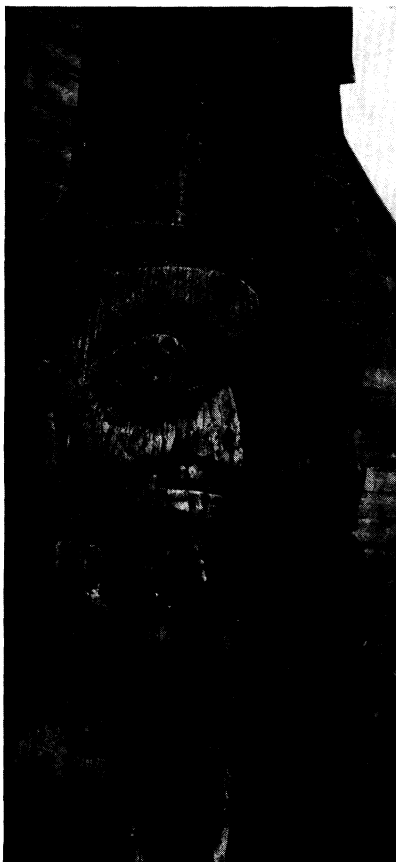


FIG. 4



FIG. 5

FIG. 4—Two poles at Kispayaks, erected at twenty years' interval in the memory of two successive chiefs.

FIG. 5—The pole of Tralarhaet, a Beaver-Halibut clan of the Eagle phratry, at Gitiks. The crests illustrate the myth of a migration southwards of the owners.

pole that exceeded his own in height. Sispegoot, head chief of the Finback Whales, could afford to disregard his rival's jealousy. When his new pole was carved, more than sixty years ago, the news went out that it would be the tallest in the village. In spite of Hladerh's repeated warnings, Sispegoot issued invitations for its erection. But he was shot and wounded by Hladerh as he passed in front of his house in a canoe. The festival was perforce postponed for a year. Meanwhile Hladerh managed, through a clever plot, to have Sispegoot

murdered by one of his own subordinates. He later compelled another chief of his own phratry, much to his humiliation, to shorten his pole twice after it was erected; and he was effectively checked only when he tried to spread his rule abroad to an upper Nass village.

The present crop of poles is the first of its kind to stand on the Skeena, with the exception of a few of the oldest that have already fallen and decayed. The oldest poles of Gitsegyukla (at Skeena Crossing) have stood only since the fire destroyed the earlier village in 1872; those of Hazelton were carved after the establishment of the Indian reserve about 1892. But several of the poles in the other villages—including Kitwanga—are many years older; they are particularly interesting, as they illustrate the growth of totem pole carving within two or three generations in the nineteenth century.

Most of the poles of the upper Skeena were erected in the past forty or fifty years. The oldest five or six may slightly exceed seventy years of age. Not a few are less than thirty years old. It is safe to say that this feature of native life among the Gitksan became fashionable only after 1870 and 1880. Only six out of nearly thirty poles at Gitwinkul—the earliest of these villages to adopt the art—exceed fifty years of age; and only a few poles at that time stood in the neighboring villages.

#### TECHNIQUE AND ITS EVOLUTION

Native accounts and the evidence of the carved memorials lead to the conclusion that, among the Tsimsyan, carved house-front poles and house-corner posts were introduced first, many years before the first detached columns appeared. Several houses and posts of this kind are still remembered by the elders and have been described; a few are still to be observed, particularly at the lower canyon of the Skeena, though most of them are in an advanced state of decay. The archaic style of house decoration was abandoned as soon as the natives gave up building large communal lodges in the purely native manner, and memorial columns that could no longer serve as ceremonial doorways, or traps, became the new fashion. Some of the upper Skeena villages, indeed, never adopted the fashion wholesale; at least four of them boasted of no more than a few poles, and part of these were put up only after 1890.

Internal evidence tells the same tale. The technique of carving on several of the oldest poles on the upper Skeena discloses anterior stages in the art. It is essentially the technique of making masks or of carving small detached objects; or, again, of representing masked and costumed performers as they appeared in festivals rather than the real animals or objects as they exist in nature. These early Skeena River carvers had not yet acquired the skill of their Nass River masters, who had advanced to the point of thinking of a large



pole as an architectural unit that called for harmony of decorative treatment.

Haesem-hliyawn and Hlamee, of Gitwinkul, represent distinctive periods of the craft among the Gitksan. To Haesem-hliyawn goes



FIG. 6

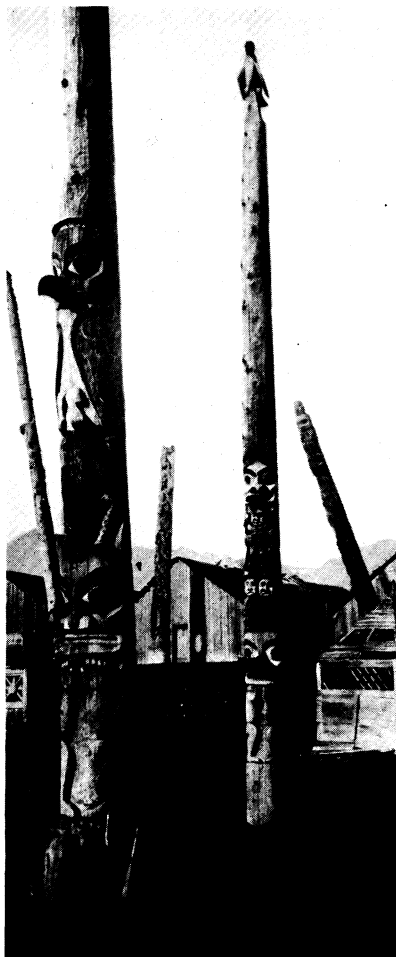


FIG. 7

FIG. 6—Totem poles at Gitwinkul, carved by Haesem-hliyawn, a leading carver about 50 years ago.  
FIG. 7—Totem poles at Gitwinkul, carved by Hlamee, a later-day follower of Haesem-hliyawn.

the credit of carving some of the best poles in existence. He lived as late as 1868, while Hlamee, his junior and follower, died after 1900.

The style of Haesem-hliyawn was of the finest, in the purely native vein. He combined a keen sense of realism with a fondness for decorative treatment. His art sought inspiration in nature, while maintaining itself within the frontiers of ancient stylistic technique.

Haesem-hliyawn belonged to the generation wherein the totem pole art was still in its growth (1840-1880) and all at once reached its apogee. His handling of human figures counts among the outstanding achievements of west coast art—indeed, of aboriginal art in any part

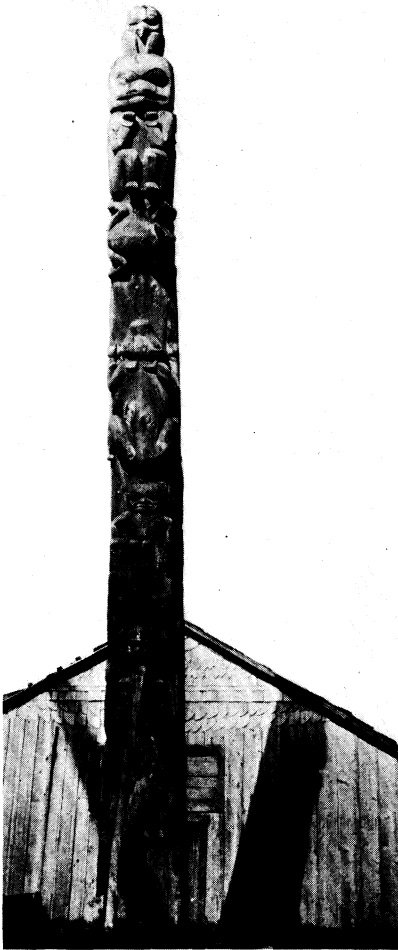


FIG. 8



FIG. 9

FIG. 8—One of the oldest and finest poles in existence, at Gitwinkul; formerly a house-front portal, the ceremonial entrance being through the opening at the bottom.

FIG. 9—One of the finest old poles at Angyederh on the lower Nass.

of the world. The faces he carved, with their pronounced expression and amusing contortions, are characteristic of the race.

Hlamee, a prolific worker, introduced the white man's paint to enhance the features of his carvings. While he used paint with discretion and to good effect, it immediately lessened the sculptural

quality of the work. The new fashion did not compensate for the evident loss of native inspiration and artistry.

The carved poles of the Nass maintain a much higher average standard of art than those of the Skeena; but they are less numerous,

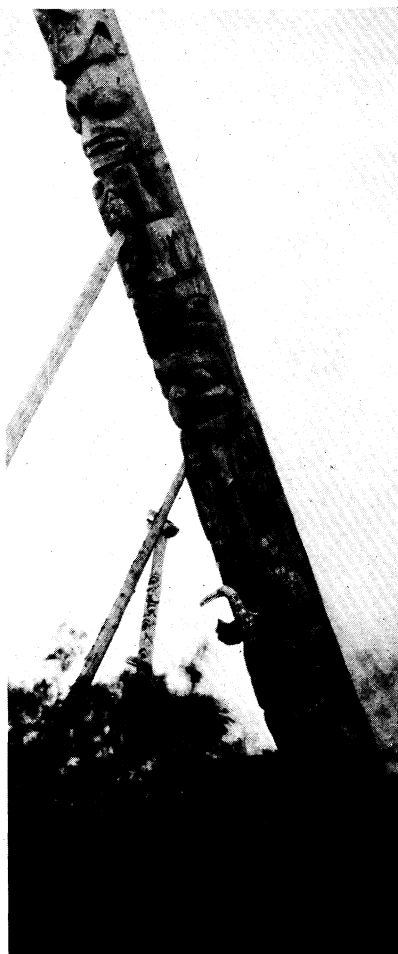


FIG. 10



FIG. 11

FIG. 10—An Eagle pole at Gitiks, the former Nass River village nearest to the Alaskan border. This is one of the finest and tallest poles in existence.

FIG. 11—Totem poles at Kitwanga (the Rabbit-tribe), on the upper Skeena. The nearest pole—that of the ensnared-grizzly—counts among the finest. It was carved by Haesem-hliyawm about 60 years ago.

for the reason that the Nass people gave up their ancient customs much earlier than the Gitksan—that is forty or fifty years ago. The technique of pole carving in both areas represents well the passage from the earlier and better art of the Haesem-hliyawm type to that of Hlamee.

The Tsimshyan of the lower Skeena, on the other hand, never were devoted to the art of carving totem poles. When they were moved long ago to commemorate a historical event of first magnitude, they erected a tall slab of stone. If the Tsimshyan proper as a body were not swayed by the modern fashion of erecting carved memorials to their dead, they retained until fairly late the older custom of



FIG. 12—Menesk, the Eagle head chief of Gitlarhdamsk, on the upper Nass. His carved headdress and old Chilkat robe are among the finest and most valuable of the kind.

painting in native pigments their heraldic symbols on the front of their houses. While not a single totem pole seems ever to have stood in the village of Gitsees, near the mouth of the Skeena, five house-front paintings were still clearly remembered and described a few years ago. And it was related that many houses in the neighboring tribes were decorated in this style, which at one time may have been fairly general along the coast.

The remarkable west coast custom of carving and erecting house poles and tall mortuary columns or of painting coats of arms on house fronts is sufficiently uniform in type to suggest that it originated in a single center and thence spread outward in various directions. The limits of its distribution coincide with those of the west coast art proper which embrace the carving or

painting of wood, leather, stone, bone, and ivory.

This art itself seems much more ancient in some of its smaller forms than in its larger ones. Its origin on the northwest coast is remote. It goes back to prehistoric times. It was already in existence and fully mature and quite as conventionalized as it is today at the time of the early Spanish, English, and French explorers (1775-1800). Most of the early circumnavigators—Cook, Dixon, Meares, Vancouver, Marchand, and La Pérouse—give ample evidence that masks, chests, ceremonial objects were at the end of the last century decorated in the style now familiar to us. They also mention that house fronts were decorated with painted designs. There is, however, a striking lack of evidence everywhere as to the existence of totem poles proper or detached memorial columns, either south or north. For instance,

Dixon examined several of the Haida villages on the Queen Charlotte Islands; but he fails to mention totem or even house poles, even though he minutely described small carved trays and spoons.

But there were already, from 1780 to 1800, some carved house posts in existence. Captain Cook<sup>2</sup> observed a few carved posts inside the house of some chiefs at Nootka Sound, where he wintered in 1780; and Webster, his artist, reproduced the features of two of them in his sketches. Meares, in 1788 and 1789, observed like Nootka carvings in the same neighborhood, which he describes thus: "Three enormous trees, rudely carved and painted, formed the rafters, which were supported at the ends and in the middle by gigantic images, carved out of huge blocks of timber."<sup>3</sup> And he calls them elsewhere "mishapen figures." The earliest drawing of a carved pole is that of a house frontal or entrance pole (not a real totem pole) of the Haidas; and it is found in Bartlett's Journal,<sup>4</sup>



FIG. 13.—Semedeek, an old Eagle chief of Kitwanga, on the upper Skeena. His headdress shows his Eagle crest. His robe is a Chilkat.

#### ORIGIN OF THE TOTEM POLE ART

The custom of carving and erecting mortuary columns to honor the dead is therefore modern, that is post-Columbian; it may exceed slightly the span of the last century. In spite of this, it is not easy to trace back its origin to its very birthplace. Even the simple poles of the Nootkas as described by Cook are not likely in themselves to represent a form of native art of the stone age in its purely aboriginal state, undisturbed by foreign influences. Iron and copper tools at that date were already in the possession of the natives; and they were used everywhere as only they could be by expert craftsmen through lifelong habit. The west coast at that date was no longer unchanged. The Russians had discovered it many decades before,

<sup>2</sup> James Cook: *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (3 vols., London, 1784), Vol. 2, p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> John Meares: *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America*, London, 1790, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "The Sea, the Ship and the Sailor: Tales of Adventure," etc., with an introduction by Captain Elliot Snow, Salem, Mass., 1925.

and the Spanish had left more recent traces of their passage. Moreover, the influence of the French and the English had crossed the continent through contacts between intermediate tribes and the arrival of halfbreeds and *coureurs de bois* west of the mountain passes. From our records of exploration and adventure it appears certain that the northwest coast people were accessible to foreign influence for more than two hundred years, to say the least. The natives themselves were highly amenable to foreign influence. Nowhere in America did they show more avidity or greater skill to acquire and utilize from the sundry goods and crafts of the white man whatever suited their needs.

Precisely where the totem poles, or mortuary columns, first appeared and at exactly what moment is an interesting, though elusive, point. Our evidence eliminates the Gitksan, or the Tsimsyan proper, from among the possibilities. Evidence abundantly shows that the Nass River tribes made totem poles at an earlier period than the upper Skeena people. Many families on both sides were mutually related. Several of the Gitwinkul villagers have their hunting grounds on the upper Nass; and the Gitksan used to travel every spring to the lower Nass for eulachan fishing or to trade pelts or dried fruit cakes with the coast tribes. In the course of time a strong cultural influence from the more progressive tribes of the coast thus resulted.

Likewise the tribes farther south cannot be considered. The Bellabellas were painters rather than carvers. The Kwakiutl and the Nootka plastic art always remained very crude compared with that of the northern nations; and, besides, it reveled in grotesque forms by preference. It seldom was at the service of heraldry as in the north, heraldry being of minor import on the coast south of the Skeena. Totem poles among the Kwakiutl and the Nootka are all very recent; not many of them, as they are currently known, may antedate 1880. The most familiar of the Kwakiutl poles, those of Alert Bay, were all carved and erected since 1890. None of them stood at the time when the late C. F. Newcombe visited the village at that date.

At first sight it seems more likely that the Tlingit, of the southern Alaskan frontier, might have initiated the custom of erecting memorials to the dead. They were closer to the Russian headquarters and must have been among the first to obtain iron tools. There is no doubt, besides, that they were most skillful carvers and weavers, through the whole local evolution of these crafts. Yet there are good reasons why the credit for originating totem poles should not fall to their lot. The early circumnavigators that called at some of their villages made no mention of large carvings that we know, not even of such house or grave posts as they observed among the Haidas farther south. From a keen and experienced observer of these people, Lieutenant G. T. Emmons, who was stationed on the Alaskan coast

for many years in an official capacity, we learn that the northern half of the Tlingit nation never had totem poles until very recently; and the few of those that have sprung up in that district within the scope of his observation are the property of a family or families that originally belonged to the southern tribes and have retained their southern affiliations.

The Haidas must next be dismissed from consideration as likely originators of the art. The Haida poles, as we know them, are partly house poles and partly totem poles proper; the former far more numerous proportionally than among the Tsimshyan. Indeed, almost none of the present Nass River carvings were house poles. The two large posts observed among the Haidas by Bartlett and Marchand in 1788-1792 were house portals. Though the Haida villages were often visited at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first part of the nineteenth, we find no other reference to large poles, still less to the famous rows of poles at Massett and Skidegate as they were photographed about 1880. The Haida poles as we know them in our museums are all of the same advanced type of conventionalism, all of the same period, that is 1830-1880, and presumably all from the hands of carvers that were contemporaries. They were from ten to thirty years old when the Haidas became converts to Christianity and in consequence gave up their customs, cut down their poles, and sold them to white people about the year 1890 or afterwards. It is a common saying, however inaccurate it may be, that the fine row of poles in one of their best known towns had risen from the proceeds of an inglorious type of barter in Victoria. There is no evidence of mortuary poles among the Haidas antedating 1840 or 1850, though a few earlier and transitional ones may have served to introduce the fashion.

The probabilities are that totem poles proper originated among the Nisrae or northern Tsimshyan of the Nass River. It is evident, from traditional recollections, that the custom of thus commemorating the dead is not very ancient among them; yet it certainly antedated that of the Gitksan or the Tsimshyan. It is far more likely that the Haidas and the Tlingit imitated them than the reverse. The estuary of the Nass was the most important thoroughfare of Indian life in all the northern parts. Eulachan fishing in the neighborhood of what is now called Fishery Bay near Gitrhateen, the largest Nisrae center, was a dominant feature in native life. The grease from the eulachan, or candlefish, was a fairly universal and indispensable staple along the coast. For the purpose of securing their supply of it the Haidas, the Tlingit, the Tsimshyan, and the Gitksan traveled over the sea or the inland trails every spring and camped in several temporary villages of their own from Red Bluffs eastwards on the lower Nass, side by side, for weeks at a time. During these yearly seasons exchanges

of all kinds—barter, social amenities, or feuds—were quite normal. As a result, cultural features of the local hosts—whether they were willing hosts or not is an open question—were constantly under the observation of the strangers and were often a cause for envy or aggression. It is doubtful, on the other hand, whether the Tsimshyan ever traveled to the Queen Charlotte Islands or the Tlingit country unless to make a raid or an occasional visit to relatives.

It is agreed among specialists that the Nass River carvers were on the whole the best in the country. Their art reached the highest point of development ever attained on the northwest coast. And their totem poles—more than twenty of which can still be observed in their original location—are the best and among the tallest seen anywhere. The Haida poles are stilted, conventional, and offer little variety in comparison. It is noteworthy, besides, that the Tlingit poles resemble in character those of the Nass River. And the Nisrae assert that a number of totem poles at Tongas (Cape Fox), the southernmost of the Tlingit villages, were the work of their carvers within the memory of the passing generation.

The close similarities between the plastic arts of the northwest coast and those of the various people around the edges of the Pacific Ocean should not be overlooked. Common features in the art and technology of our coast natives and the Polynesians, for instance, are too persistently alike in some aspects to be unrelated, at least in some remote way. The early navigators noticed, about 1780–1790, the striking resemblance between the fortresses of the Haidas and other coast tribes and the *hippah* of the New Zealand natives. Totem poles, as fairly recently carved and erected on both sides of the Pacific, offer the same compelling resemblance. Their technique of erection, besides, was identical. It will gradually become an established conclusion, we believe, that much of the growth of native crafts in wood carving and decoration *as now exemplified in the museums* of the world is far more recent than is generally believed.