The people of the Northwest Coast have been living off the land for thousands of years. The Northwest Coast starts in the United States at northern California, into the coastal parts of Oregon, Washington, and even into southeast Alaska. Canada is included into the Northwest Coast as it involves coastal British Columbia. Totem poles are a distinct form of Native American art found throughout the Northwest Coast culture area. Totem poles are made for several reasons but one of the most common reasons for crafting a totem pole is to respect or remember someone important to the tribe.

Introduction

History of the Art Form

Totem poles have been around for hundreds of year. Native Americans on the Northwest Coast made statues and poles that were for the inside of plank houses. The tall poles then moved to be raised outside of the houses. In 1791, the first known outdoor poles was documented by an explorer named John Bartlett. More poles started to pop up around the Northwest Coast after colonization occurred, as trade began between the whites and the Native Americans. Poles in many villages, prior to colonization, did not exist or were rarely made.

Materials and Technology

As totem poles have been made for hundreds of years, some techniques and materials have changed over time. Tools that were used in the early 18th century are different than the tools used in the creation of totem poles today. To make totem poles, some tribes use carving styles as a form of identification to separate their work. Tribes believe in different mythical creatures and respect certain animals and plants differently. If a tribe values a certain animal, plant, or creature, that species may not be harmed or killed. Some tribes include people or family members, which are wealthy, a higher-up in the village, or important to the community on totem poles. Tribes use tools like chainsaws and ax for cutting and carving the cedar wood.

Cultural History and Context

Totem poles are an important part of the Northwest Coast culture. These pieces of art are taught generation to generation and are valued in a celebration called a potlatch. Every member from the tribe attends the celebration, as it’s a big part of the culture of these people. They are also a form of communication. Totem poles may look very similar to one another, while they are each unique to the tribe that crafts them. Some tribes use carving styles as a form of identification to separate their work. Tribes believe in different mythical creatures and respect certain animals and plants differently. If a tribe values a certain animal, plant, or creature, that species may not be harmed or killed. Some tribes include people or family members, which are wealthy, a higher-up in the village, or important to the community on totem poles. Tribes also include slaves at the bottom of poles if they are part of the village. Each part of the totem pole represents a different message. Totem poles are also used for education, as they educate others about what totem poles are specific to the culture of the tribe.

Interesting Fact

Totem poles range in size. The totem poles that tourists buy on their travels to see totem poles can be carved miniature poles, all the way up to 6ft tall souvenir poles. On average, the totem poles that are made to stay in villages are anywhere from 10ft tall to 60 feet tall. Since cedar trees can grow to very tall heights, the tallest totem pole is almost 130 ft tall.

Current Status

To live in the village. Paint and other objects can be specific to a tribe, as some groups do not paint totem poles or include projected pieces from the sculpture, such as wings or fins on an animal or mythical creature. Each part of totem poles is specific to the culture of the tribe.

References


Vancouver : Douglas & McIntyre.


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