

TOTEM POLES AND THE INDIAN NEW DEAL

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

During the 1930's, the Bureau of Indian Affairs encouraged the appreciation of Native art by non-Natives in the United States. As part of this effort, an Indian Civilian Conservation Corps project in Alaska undertook to restore old totem poles, copy those beyond repair, and carve new ones. Although valuable, the project removed totem poles from their cultural context, such that they took on a new and different meaning.

Dans les années trente, le service gouvernemental des Affaires autochtones encourageait l'appréciation de l'art autochtone par les allophones aux Etats-Unis. Comme partie de cet effort, un projet du corps de préservation autochtone et civil dans l'Alaska s'est chargé de remettre en état de vieux mâts totémiques, de faire des copies de ceux qui ne pouvaient plus se remettre en état, et de découper de nouveaux mâts. Quoique le projet soit de valeur, il enlève les mâts totémiques de leur contexte culturel, de sorte qu'ils ont pris un sens nouveau et différent.

Totem poles have always impressed visitors to the Northwest Coast, from the late eighteenth century sea faring explorers who first saw these carved tree trunks standing before large communal plank houses, and the photographers who explored the region in the late nineteenth century, to the modern day tourists sailing along the coast of British Columbia and Alaska from Seattle and Vancouver to Anchorage on luxury cruise liners.¹ Monumental in size, baroque in imagery, exotic in composition - but sufficiently naturalistic to enable some recognition of human and animal images - these poles intrigue all who look upon them. For the Indians who erected these monuments, the mythic beings stacked one upon the other on totem poles represent the history, privileges and social position of the families who own them (Halpin, 1981). For non-Natives - except for those relatively few individuals who have studied the literature on the meanings totem poles have to the Indians who display them - these monuments have a rather different significance. This significance derives not from a careful analysis of the ethnographic literature, nor from conversations with an Indian whose family owns one of these monuments, but rather, from the representations of totem poles in non-Native culture.

In this paper I will concentrate upon those Tlingit and Haida totem poles displayed in parks in southeast Alaska which many visitors observe when they take cruises on the Inside Passage, a magnificent ship route passing between the Northwest Coast mainland and the myriad offshore islands. These poles were placed in parks during the 1930's and 1940's as part of a New Deal program aimed at promoting Native American self-sufficiency. In order to situate these poles in their proper historical context, I will first describe the growth of interest in Indian art promoted with particular vigor by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, then review the displays of totem poles at two exhibitions sponsored in part by that Board, and finally tell the story of the Indian Civilian Conservation Corps which restored poles in Alaska. As happened with so many other projects carried out during this fascinating period, initiatives motivated by individual good will and social vision had results never envisioned by their designers. Specifically, the totem pole projects of the Indian new Deal served ultimately to create the image of an Indian art captured, caged and controlled by non-Indians in a process which transformed the meaning of the totem pole from one determined by Indian tradition to one determined by Whites. This appropriation of the totem pole by the White dominant society altered the artworks themselves in unforeseen but very real ways.

In the 1920's, a group of artists, writers, and government officials began to expound the notion that Indian arts and crafts were a truly American heritage which could serve not only to stimulate pride among their creators

but which might also afford some measure of economic self-sufficiency among this poverty-stricken population (Prucha, 1984:932-33). Although some efforts were made to legislate support for Indian art during the Hoover administration (see Schrader, 1983:44-48), these were for the most part unsuccessful. Thus, in 1931, Amelia Elizabeth White, a wealthy supporter of Indian art, along with artist John Sloan, organized the privately-funded Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City (Schrader, 1983:48-49).

In the text of their catalog for the Exposition, John Sloan and novelist Oliver LaFarge explicitly described the purpose of this exhibition:

The Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, Inc., was organized in 1930 for the purpose of stimulating and supporting American Indian artists by creating a wider interest and more intelligent appreciation of their work in the American public at large, and to demonstrate to the country what important contribution to our culture the Indian is making. To this end, an exhibition of Indian products in the fine and applied arts, selected from the best material available, both old and new, has been arranged (Sloan and LaFarge, 1931:64).

The show included pieces borrowed from both private collectors as well as institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History, the Peabody Museum at Harvard, the University of Arizona and Williams College (Sloan and LaFarge, 1931:65). "Endorsed and circulated" by the professional organization of art historians and artists, the College Art Association, this show was, according to the catalog, "sponsored by the Secretary of the Interior as well as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs" (Sloan and LaFarge, 1931:65). Despite this endorsement by the federal government, the actual roles played by members of the Hoover administration in support of this exhibit, and other activities aimed at enhancing Indian art production, seem to have been minimal during this pre-New Deal period (Schrader, 1983:49-50).

By 1934, as part of the Roosevelt administration's new pro-ethnic policy, Native arts and crafts enjoyed more widespread support. Early that year, Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, had appointed a committee "to study and make recommendations concerning the whole problem of Indian arts and crafts in their relation to the economic and cultural welfare of the American Indian... [and] to recommend to Secretary Ickes and Commissioner of Indian Affairs [John] Collier practical procedures for organizing marketing methods, for improvements and revivals in the arts themselves, and for the training of new generations of Indians in their production." Ickes

himself made clear his appreciation of the qualities and merits of Native arts as well as their potential for providing the Indian with income and the ability to "live in the modern world without sacrifice of their cultural and racial integrity" (*IAW*, vol. I, no. 11, 1934:18-19).

The Committee's report ultimately led to the foundation of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, created by a legislative act in the summer of 1935 and in full operation in July, 1936. This Board, appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, was expected to promote Indian arts and crafts, ensure authenticity by using a government trademark for works created by Indians, and expand the market for these artworks (Prucha, 1984:975). The Board became doubly active after June 1937, when the artist, writer and university professor Rene d'Harnoncourt assumed the position of General Manager. D'Harnoncourt, a native of Vienna, had lived in Mexico between 1925 and 1929, where the captivating local popular arts and crafts inspired in him a profound devotion to "primitive" art. In 1929 he was asked to organize an exhibit of Mexican art in the United States where he also assumed teaching positions at the New School for Social Research and Sarah Lawrence College (*IAW*, vol. IV, no. 6, 1936:13).

In January 1937, *Indians at Work*, Collier's publication intended to stimulate public interest in and support of government-funded projects designed to improve Indian life (Philp, 1977:122), had an issue almost totally devoted to the Native people of Alaska. An article entitled "Alaskan Arts and Crafts Fund Increasing Market," described the considerable amount of artwork being made by the Alaskans, including the carving of wooden potlatch bowls and model totem poles for the tourist market. Both the U.S. Indian School at Ketchikan and the Sheldon Jackson School at Sitka were cited for helping improve the quality of the work and its marketing. A planning report prepared by the Ketchikan School described its intentions to pay craftsmen to instruct Indians in arts and crafts locally and in other villages, to issue a government stamp to certify "approval" of the authenticity of objects, to advertise on the ferry and travel agencies, and to "repair or rebuild models of famous Indian houses and totems" (*IAW*, vol. IV, no. 11, 1937:24). In 1939, Sitka developed plans to establish an Indian Arts and Crafts store, in the form of a replica of an aboriginal communal house, to improve the distribution of the moccains, totem poles, and metal work made by Natives (*IAW*, vol. IV, no. 10, 1939).

In 1938, Rene d'Harnoncourt had travelled to Alaska and visited Ketchikan as well as Klukwan, Sitka, and Hydaburg in order to study conditions among the Natives and assess market possibilities for their crafts. Demurring from the positive tone of the articles published the previous year in *Indians at Work*, he noted that in Ketchikan, a city second only to Juneau

in size of all the southeast communities, highly acculturated Indians made relatively poor carvings for the tourists who came in considerable numbers during the summer. In his report, D'Harnoncourt expressed the belief that his role should be to encourage the manufacture of finer quality work among these Indians in order to attract the more affluent segment of the market. This would, he felt, result in greater prosperity for the Tlingits of the area (Schrader, 1983:200-202).

In Hydaburg, d'Harnoncourt met an older Haida, John Wallace, who during his youth had worked on traditional carving with his father, a noted artist (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:10). Because of his all-but-lost skill, Wallace had recently been asked to make a forty-five foot pole for the local cannery. So impressed was d'Harnoncourt with Wallace's artistry and interest in traditional art that he invited the Haida to come to San Francisco the following year to carve totem poles for an exhibition of Indian art. This show was to become a major stimulus in the revival of public interest in, and appreciation of, Native American art in general and totem poles in particular (Schrader, 1983:201).

As Director of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, d'Harnoncourt organized two major exhibitions of Native American art, the first at the San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939, the other at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941 (Prucha, 1984:975-76). By all accounts magnificent and very well received, both were designed to present to the American public the aesthetic culture of Native Americans, and to promote ethnic pride among the nation's Indians.

Totem poles held center stage in each exhibit, both within and outside the buildings. At San Francisco, the exhibition hall formed a U partially enclosing an open court separating the Indian building from the other half of the Federal building. During the exhibit, two Haida from Alaska, John Wallace and his son Fred, carved two poles which were erected in that courtyard (Schrader 1983:186). Two years later, one of these poles, a thirty foot high carving depicting raven, killer whale, devilfish, sea lion and shark, was transported to New York and was erected outside the Museum of Modern Art (Schrader, 1983:231; Rushing, in press; Douglas and d'Harnoncourt, 1941:160). The Northwest Coast display at the San Francisco exhibit featured totem poles in a room fifty feet in height, walls painted in gradated bands of grey to suggest the foggy shores of the Northwest Coast; small pieces were displayed in a large dark room with a reddish glowing central fire pit suggesting the interior of a Northwest Coast Indian plank house (Schrader, 1983:188). In the Museum of Modern Art, an assemblage of posts stood before the entrance to a similar large, dark room with central firelight housing dramatically illuminated masterworks (Rushing, 1988).

In addition to displaying Northwest Coast and other Native American art in exquisite museum settings, d'Harnoncourt wanted these shows to convey to the art-buying public the value of Indian art as a commodity. Thousands upon thousands of visitors viewed exhibits which presented art, as in a museum, according to culture areas, and also in a boutique-like setting for sale. San Francisco displayed model rooms of Euro-American homes decorated with Indian art and sold high-quality Indian pieces in its shop. *American Home Magazine* carried an article by Clyde Hall on "Indian Art in the modern Home" that *Indians at Work* reprinted (vol. VI, no. 12, 1939). The introductory paragraph of that piece is of interest:

Indian art and modern art are shades of a common color. Each is characterized by simplicity of line, strength of form, and absence of all extraneous matter. Brought together in two model rooms in the Indian exhibit at the Golden Gate International Exposition, they weld themselves naturally into an effective interior motif for American Homes. Interpreted in wood, ceramic, and textile, they join together happily the romance-adventure of early America and the simple utilitarian requirements of rooms in the home today (p.29).

The New York show included a section demonstrating the uses of the art in the modern world for interior decoration, personal adornment and for presentation as "fine art" (Schrader 1983:184- 95). *Indians at Work* (vol. VIII, no. 6, 1941:11) began its article about the Museum of Modern Art show with the following words:

The contribution of the Indian to the modern American way of life is the subject of a comprehensive exhibit devoted to fashions, jewelry and interior furnishings against a background of living Indian traditions and prehistoric art...

It continued (p. 12) with an explicit statement of purposes:

The purpose of the exhibition is to create a new interest in Indian arts and crafts, to help develop the marketing of Indian products, to disprove the mistaken idea that this country has no native art, and to demonstrate that Indian arts and crafts can have a place in modern fashions and decoration and that the products of contemporary Indian artists are both useful and beautiful. All of this is part of the Government's present-day program of assisting the Indian toward self-support and toward cultural as well as economic freedom.

In both shows, d'Harnoncourt emphasized the commercial value of Native American art and promoted the exhibits as contributions to Indian self-sufficiency. That which assisted Native self-sufficiency took art from its original context and translated it into lovely enhancements of the non-Native American home. It is worthwhile noting that the public's appreciation of totem poles and other Indian artworks would have been colored by the commercial aspects of these shows that, despite the worthwhile intentions of the organizers, ended by equating Indian art with interior decoration.

The government sponsored totem pole restoration program that began in the fall of 1938, also had a commercial aspect. In April 1933, President Roosevelt, urged on by John Collier and Secretary Ickes, had approved the establishment of the Indian Civilian Conservation Corps, the initial intention of which was to improve reservation lands and help Indians learn to make good use of them (Cower, 1972; Philp, 1977:120 if; Prucha, 1984:945-46). Projects in Alaska included draining sections of Saxman village for gardens, building new quarters for teachers and nurses in Hoonah, repairing water damage around the Juneau Government hospital, and the like (IAW, vol. I, no. 21, 1934). By 1938, the projects under the Indian CCC had expanded beyond conservation and rehabilitation to include more aesthetically oriented activities such as the Alaskan totem pole project coordinated by the Forest Service.

Most Tlingit and Haida had stopped making poles by the turn of the century, and those which remained standing were subjected to the moist rot of this humid rainy region. Of the hundreds known to have been standing at the end of the nineteenth century, two hundred remained salvagable for this project (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:8). Funds were allocated by the Indian Civilian Conservation Corps and managed by the Forest Service to support Native craftsmen, first to retrieve from remote villages, then to restore and finally to erect in a central location, totem poles from various villages in southeast Alaska. The intention of the project was to have totem poles displayed along the Alaskan ferry route, and to promote Indian art for sale. As Ruth Underhill and Viola Garfield wrote in their brief historical overview of the program in *Indians at Work*:

In 1938, the United States Forestry Service became interested in this striking form of art. At least 150 of the old poles have been restored or copied, and new ones have been designed. After the war there may be a future for Northwestern art in decorating modern homes (vol. XII, no. 4, 1944:15).

Presumably, visitors viewing the monumental specimens would be inspired to purchase smaller examples available in Alaskan stores.

The project encountered problems created by the very abandonment of Tlingit poles. Whenever the Tlingit left a village in order to find work in a larger community, American law dictated that their property reverted to the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. Thus the Forest Service felt it had the right to remove whatever totem poles it wished and place them in its parks; the Tlingit however, did not believe that leaving their villages meant abandonment of title to their monuments; they argued, some times vigorously, for compensation. As a result, written agreements between Tlingit leaders and Forest Service officials had to be made (Malin, 1986:173). Although many poles ended up in Ketchikan, where many tourists passing through could see them, the residents of Tuxekan wanted their poles to remain closer to the old village; thus the Klawak Totem Park, close to the old village of Tuxekan but far from the tourist route, was established (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:100).

According to Harry Spading of the Forest Service, In his article in *Indians at Work* (vol. VIII, no. 7, 1940:24), the project was a great success:

The poles are being restored with faithful historical accuracy and old skilled native carvers are employed to give technical direction and to instruct the young Indians in the art. The old carvers resurrected ancient knives and adzes used by them and their forefathers. Blacksmiths at the CCC camps turned out copies of these crude implements in sizeable quantities as the activity expanded.

These positive words were at some variance with the reality of the situation. Although John Wallace, head carver at the Hydaburg workshop for this project, had made totem poles before, Charles Brown, head of the Saxman workshop, and Walter Kia of Kita, only had conventional wood-working experience (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:10-11).

The lack of training in traditional style on the part of many members of the carving team seriously affected this project. Although some had experience in wood carving, many could not even claim technical proficiency. The forms they sculpted, the designs they applied, and the colors they used demonstrated little understanding or even knowledge of traditional northern Northwest Coast style. In his recent book on totem poles, Edward Malin (1986:174) states what many have thought about these pieces, "The results [of the totem pole project], as might be expected, were disastrous. They were lifeless, adhering to the originals neither with any degree of fidelity nor painted in the proper colors. As gross failures, they were an affront to the past, an injustice to the artists who originally created them..." These crude carvings that displayed no understanding of the formal rules governing tradi-

tional two-dimensional art (see Holm, 1965) were made worse by equally crude applications of paint.

Despite these flaws (and despite later post-war efforts to restore the restorations), the final products of this project were installed in several totem parks, the Klawak Totem Park mentioned above, and three in the Ketchikan area, one in the city center, one in the Saxman Park (Plate 15), and one in Mud Bight Village (Plate 16). Saxman Totem Park, three miles south of Ketchikan, is easily seen from boats approaching the city. Standing on the slopes of the park grounds are about twenty-five poles salvaged from a variety of villages. Although many of these monuments are restored originals, some, such as the Blackfish Pole (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:23-25) are copies of originals and others, such as the Three Eagles (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:49) were made for the Park.

Seventeen miles north of Ketchikan is Mud Bight Village, originally selected by the Forest Service as the site of a model town, which was to have included plank houses, smokehouses, grave structures, totem and mortuary poles. Restored art from the Haida and the Tlingit as well as newly made art would have resulted in a magnificent park. The outbreak of World War II prevented the realization of this project. The central feature of Mud Bight today is the one house completed from this project, made by the CCC workers in the Saxman workshop under the leadership of Charles Brown (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:71-72). John Wallace made two Haida poles intended for the village, both of which currently stand there (Garfield and Forrest, 1948:90). As was the case in Saxman, some of the fourteen poles were restored while others were made anew.

In all, the CCC project employed about 250 Indians and restored 48 poles, copied 54 that were beyond salvage, and created 19 anew (Barbeau, 1950:855). Because of this project, Ketchikan now has the largest number of totem poles of any easily-accessible Northwest Coast community. Virtually all the ferries and cruise ships sailing the Inside Passage stop at Ketchikan; Saxman and Mud Bight are frequently-selected land tours for passengers on these vessels. Tourists come through this city, look at the poles, many of which are flawed translations of traditional monuments, and feel they have "seen" authentic, traditional Northwest Coast art. Sometimes these monuments inspire the tourists to purchase smaller poles to take home; replicas equal in crudeness to the larger versions, many by non-Indians, can be found in abundance in local shops. These become the representation of Northwest Coast art on the non-Indian's mantelpieces.

The majority of observers of totem poles do not read the literature on what these poles signified in the past; they understand artistic reality to be what they see in these particular settings. In Ketchikan, clusters of unrelated



Plate 15: *Sun and Raven totem pole, located at Saxman Park outside Ketchikan, Alaska*

poles stand in the domesticated environs of a park which in itself has a meaning that affects the meaning of those objects displayed within it. Accessible via paths, tamed by lawn and controlled by plantings, the park is a man-made artifact that transforms nature into culture. Humans (in this case, non-Native people) first makes their mark upon the Alaskan Wilderness by carving out a park and then erect within it totem poles completely decontextualized from their original meaning. This is not to say that the totem poles have no meaning. Indeed, they signify a tremendous amount, but not about Northwest Coast Indian culture, for access to that information is hidden in ethnographic texts separated from the objects they describe. These totem poles in Alaskan parks signify a disembodied tradition now enveloped, contained and domesticated.

Totem poles have assumed a rather different meaning from that which the Indians originally intended. Appropriation of any artwork from a Native people, and consequent transfer into the domain of the institutions of the dominant culture, transforms the artwork into something different from what it was originally. Much recent literature has focussed on how the display of ethnographic artworks affects the assessment of the artwork itself (Center for African Art, 1988; Clifford, 1985, 1988; Dominguez, 1986; Stocking, 1985; Vitart-Fardoulis, 1986; Jonaitis, in press). On the most basic level, for the Whites who now look upon Northwest Coast carvings in totem pole parks, these are emblems of a monolithic yet non-existent entity, the "Northwest Coast Indian." While at first glance all Northwest Coast carvings may look alike, and all Northwest Coast cultures may seem identical, that is by no means the case. The subtleties among Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakiutl are lost in this homogenization of cultures in which totem poles become representations of an area rather than artworks made by specific peoples.

Devoid of its cultural significance, the pole has also come to represent in the minds of non-Natives not only all the Native people from a remote region but also that region itself. Totem poles now symbolize The Northwest Coast. As Edward Malin states in his book on totem poles, "if any one symbol epitomized the strange, wondrous, and enigmatic character of the Pacific Northwest, surely that symbol was that heroic figure, the totem pole" (1986:172). It is now standard to include a totem pole in any promotional literature on the cruise ships which sail the Alaskan and British Columbian waters. As often as not, a photograph of one of these less-than-perfect WPA-restored poles appears next to a glacier, a bear and a bald eagle. The totem pole, in this literature isolated even from its park environment, becomes equated with other large impressive natural sights of this wild region, to be

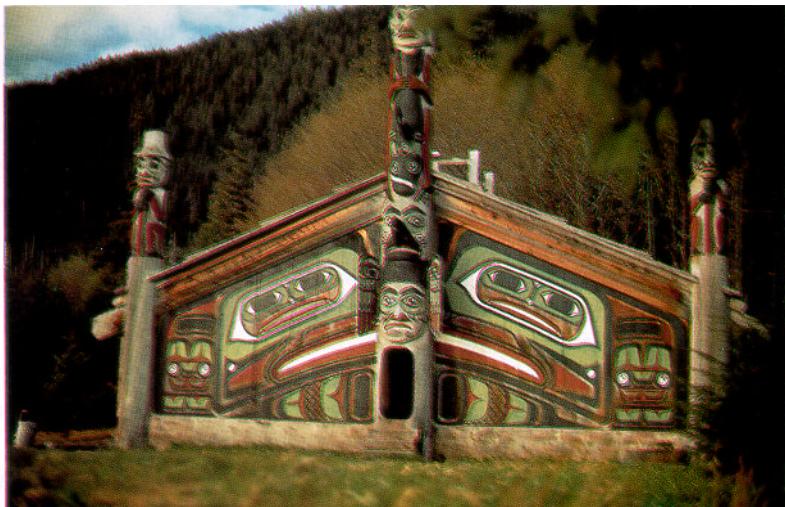


Plate 16: *Tlingit tribal house front located at Totem Bight Park outside Ketchikan, Alaska.*



Plate 17: *Contemporary Tlingit artist Nathan Jackson carving a totem pole in Sitka, Alaska.*

viewed by sumptuously fed and elegantly attired passengers from the decks of their cruise liners.

It is one of the many ironies of Native/non-Native relations that the United States government officials who, with such a gesture of paternal protectiveness, tried to "save" Indian heritage, in the process homogenized the peoples for greater comprehensiveness to the viewers. In reality, they did not so much save Indian heritage as possess it. They hired Indians to do work for which they had no training, to make an art that was no longer part of their tradition.² The end result, moreover, was a totem pole park that displays pieces of far less artistic merit than the traditional art of these people. Indeed, for anyone with educated tastes, the Ketchikan displays communicate mere monumentality rather than fine aesthetics. How deeply unfortunate for a people whose art was without question some of the finest in the world.

Today the situation looks brighter in terms of the aesthetics of Alaskan carving, for young Natives are now carving finer quality totem poles. This is in part due to the large-scale renaissance of northern Northwest Coast art that began in the late 1950's and early 1960's with artists such as Bill Reid and Bill Holm, who literally reconstructed traditional northern Northwest Coast style.³ In the 1960's and 1970's, the United States Interior Department's Indian Arts and Crafts Board allocated funds for workshops in which apprentice Tlingit and Haida artists could receive sound professional training by artists who had become masters of this sophisticated style. At Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan and the Sitka National Historic Park, Alaskan Natives are now producing fine totem poles for Indian villages as well as for ferry terminals, government buildings, and private companies (Plate 17). In Ketchikan today one can balance the WPA poles with Nathan Jackson's Raven-Fog Woman Pole outside the Totem Heritage Center, and Demsey Bob's Raven Stealing the Sun Pole standing before the Tongass Historical Museum.

Exquisitely carved as they are, these new totem poles can be considered part of the 20th century tradition of appropriated Northwest Coast Indian heritage. They are finer than the monuments erected in Alaskan totem pole parks, and convey to the non-Native tourists a more sophisticated message, but are not in fact true recreations of a past tradition. They are, instead, handsome creations that grew out of an interaction between Natives and Non-Natives; unlike their mid-twentieth century ancestors they seem suffused with an expressive vitality of a proud people living in the world of contemporary Alaskan society. It is this essence, rather than any greater authenticity, that separates them from the New Deal totem poles to which, in Ketchikan, they stand in such close proximity.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the American Indian Workshop meeting held in Berlin, March 28-31, 1988, during the European Association of American Studies congress. My thanks go to Christian Feest and Joelle Rostowski for having facilitated my participation in this marvelous workshop. I also wish to express my appreciation to Janet Catherine Berlo, David Penny, and Jackson Rushing for having read an earlier version of this paper. Thanks as well go to Diane Keown of the Alaska Division of Tourism for help with the illustrations.
2. This is of course quite different from the situation in British Columbia, where genuinely well trained Native artists such as Mungo Martin were hired by the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the British Columbia Provincial Museum to restore and carve new poles. Unlike Tlingit artistic traditions, Kwakiutl art production continued uninterruptedly throughout the 20th century.
3. See Jonaitis, 1988:241-249 for a summary of how this artistic revival occurred.

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Plate 15: Sun and Raven totem pole, located at Saxman Park outside Ketchikan, Alaska. Photograph courtesy of Alaska Division of Tourism. No. 1948.

Plate 16: Tlingit tribal house front located at Totem Bight Park outside Ketchikan, Alaska. Photograph courtesy of Alaska Division of Tourism. No. 1047.

Plate 17: Contemporary Tlingit artist Nathan Jackson carving a totem pole in Sitka, Alaska. Photograph courtesy of Alaska Division of Tourism. No. 1974.