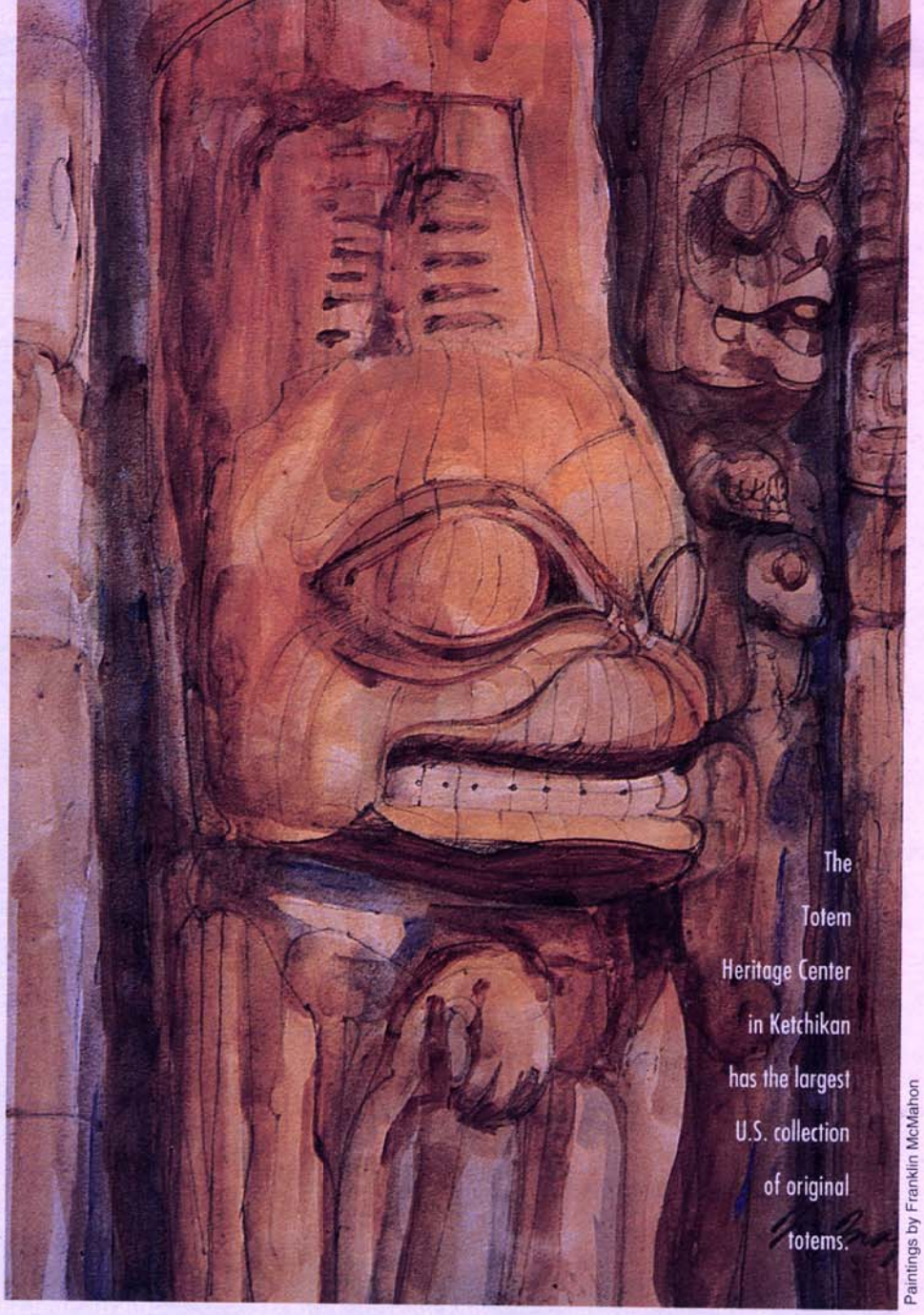
Totem Poles of Alaska

By Irene McMahon



The Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan has the largest U.S. collection of original totems.

Paintings by Franklin McMahon

A new totem pole, Raven-Fog Woman, carved by Tlingit master carver Nathan Jackson, stands outside the Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan, Alaska. It portrays the story of the mythical hero, Raven, and Fog Woman.

Raven, while fishing for the winter's food supply, caught only bullheads. Discouraged, he was returning home when a heavy fog engulfed his canoe, and he lost his way. Suddenly a woman appeared and asked him for his spruce root hat.

As she held the hat in her hand, all the fog disappeared into it, and he found his way. He took Fog Woman for his wife, and she provided him with salmon out of baskets of spring water until he had enough to fill many smoke houses. Then Raven began to mistreat her, and she left him, returning to her father's house. As she walked into the sea, all of the salmon followed her, leaving Raven with nothing to eat but bullheads.

Like the original totem poles in the Totem Heritage Center, most of the Raven-Fog Woman pole is natural red cedar with accents of red, black and green. On the pole are fine carvings of Raven with a bullhead on his line and Fog Woman with a spruce root hat in one hand and a salmon in the other.

Young Indian artists are rediscovering their cultural roots as this painting indicates.

TREASURES OF ANTIQUITY

"It was an article in a 1947 *Saturday Review* by art critic Katherine Kuh that made us aware of the value of our abandoned totem poles," said Roxana Adams, director of the center's museum department. Kuh had criticized the neglect of the great, tall wooden carvings of ravens, whales, eagles, human faces and figures that had been left behind in the abandoned Tlingit and Haida tribal villages. Around the turn of the century, these skillful wood-carvers had moved away, searching for employment or attending schools.

Soon after Kuh's article, Adams received a letter from the anthropology department of Stanford University asking for these historic tree trunks.

"Then we realized we had local treasures that must be protected," she said.

For special occasions, a pole might be erected as a housepole or sometimes raised outside the community house. But once raised, the poles were never changed or repaired by the Tlingits and Haidas, and were allowed to deteriorate and fall in place, where the rain forest soon rotted them.

By the 1940s, many of these monumental sculptures had disappeared or deteriorated beyond restoration; some had been purchased for small amounts of money by dealers and collectors, some given away by the chiefs and some just taken. With the approval of the Alaska Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood Ketchikan Camp and assistance from the Forest Service and the Alaska State Museum, a totem pole survey was made in 1967, and plans were made to save what was left.

Moving the poles was a mammoth project, but finally, in 1976, by chartering boats and planes, several particularly good examples were dropped by cranes through the roof of the newly constructed Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan. The Center now has the largest U.S. collection of original totems: 33 poles, houseposts and fragments retrieved from the deserted Tlingit villages of Tongass and Village Island and the Haida village, Old Kasaan, each within 50 miles of Ketchikan.

TRADITION AND SYMBOLISM

Alaskan totem poles have never been worshipped as religious objects. The five original poles in the central gallery of the Totem Heritage Center are representative of themes for which the poles were carved: to honor the dead, record history and oral tradition, and document social events. Here it's possible for present and future generations to view the handiwork of the old master carvers; and these great art forms teach and inspire contemporary artists.

Throughout the summer months, Center lecturers explain the symbolic meanings of the poles to visitors. From October through May, Totem Heritage Center becomes a place for training students in the Southeast Alaskan Indian arts of design, wood carving, basketry, beading, silver engraving, metal smithing, and the making of moccasins, button-blankets and vests.

"Prominent Tlingit artists are beginning to provide apprenticeships and make the culture self-perpetuating. Younger people are rediscovering their traditional roots. It's percolating up and is a very healthy movement," says Tim Wilson, director of development for Sealaska Heritage Foundation, a non-profit agency based in Juneau.

Roxana Adams has declared it more than just a renaissance of old native arts. Many of today's artists work in a more contemporary style. "A young person who has studied at the university will bring another dimension to his native arts," she says, "and while many of the totem poles have been copied, it is never possible to carve them exactly the same."

Ketchikan boasts two totem parks, Totem Bight State Park and Saxman Village, both within short rides from downtown. At Totem Bight, a spectacular collection of poles perches on a hill overlooking Tongass Narrows. Some of the totems are copies of originals, and some are newly made for this site.

Southeastern Indian totem poles are also found at Chief Shakes House, Shakes Island, Wrangell; at Totem Square in Sitka and Sitka National Historical Park; in Juneau at the State Court Building, the top of Seward Street, and the Alaska State Museum. ■

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