

Editor's Letter

Until I went to Alaska this past summer, I hadn't given much thought to totem poles. My only personal encounter with them before my trip was at my high school in Shreveport, Louisiana. Our school mascot was (and still is) an "Indian" and I remember days when there were totem poles and teepees all over the front lawn. Even way back then, I knew that the Native American tribes that populated the Louisiana area never used teepees or totem poles, and that no Native peoples used the two forms together.

In Alaska at the Saxman Native Village near Ketchikan, one of the largest totem parks in the Pacific Northwest, I was able to see many totems, visit a clan house, participate in a dance, and meet Nathan Jackson, one of the foremost totem pole carvers today. Everyone in our group had the same question, "What story does each totem tell?" We didn't know the stories, but we knew, just by looking, that each totem had a story to tell, and we wanted to know what those stories were.



Nancy with a totem at the Saxman Native Village near Ketchikan, Alaska.

In totems, I learned, the "story" is read from the top downward. The carved figures are not read literally, but have symbolic meanings. Early missionaries misinterpreted them as objects of worship (unfortunately, an all too common occurrence); as a result, many were destroyed. Nowadays, many totems are commissioned and may cost as much as \$1,500 per foot.

To me, experiencing the totems was a reminder of how we all seek to understand our lives and the lives of others through stories. As art teachers, we want to share diverse cultures and artistic practices with our students, but how can we share such stories without trivializing the intentions or copying the style of the originating culture? Can we interpret historic practices through the lens of contemporary culture? Can we share with our students this challenge itself? (Think of the rich aesthetic discussions that could develop.)

Please share with *SchoolArts* your thoughts and successes concerning these issues and concerns. Tell us your stories.

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Nancy Walker

Nancy participating in a performance at the Saxman Native Village near Ketchikan, Alaska.

