

OUR TOTEM:  
A MULTIMEDIA PROJECT ANALYZING HOW THE  
CULTURAL APPROPRIATION OF TOTEM POLES HAS  
AFFECTED NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ARTISTS IN  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

by  
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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Thomas H. Bivins

My project consists of two parts: a website, in which I use multimedia to communicate how the cultural appropriation of totem poles has affected the Seattle art community; and an essay that details my process and the stylistic choices with regard to the creative aspect of my project. The written component of this project also provides information about the history and evolution of totem poles; shares in-depth research on cultural appropriation defining and conceptualizing it with regard to native artwork; and discusses how native and non-native artists have responded to the introduction of totem poles in Seattle.

In an increasingly globalized world, understanding the culture and traditions of different minorities and analyzing how those cultures are presented in the media is extremely important. As the media continues to leverage technology to create dynamic and global multimedia stories, journalists have the power to change how people discuss

and conceptualize culture. When developing this project about the cultural appropriation of totem poles in Seattle, I drew inspiration from other successful examples of multimedia journalism to assure that I was presenting my findings in an ethical and influential way.

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1. Application download/website: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/81e51d43-9743-4936-b9c2-f2d5f1ed552a>

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## **Introduction**

Unique to the indigenous Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest, totem poles are monumental sculptures that communicate various cultural beliefs, clan lineages, and important tribal events through intricate and bold designs. They serve as cultural cornerstones providing unity and strength to their community as well as passing on teaching and collective values. For this reason, many totem poles were destroyed in the late nineteenth century as a way of discouraging traditional native practices.

However, in the early 1900s the Seattle Chamber of Commerce began using native artwork (specifically totem poles) to market Seattle as the “Gateway to Alaska” in an attempt to create more tourism and revenue for the city. Businessmen sailed to tribal villages in Alaska and British Columbia in order to find, cut down, and send totem poles back to Seattle. Both native and non-native artists were also commissioned to carve totems that would decorate the city with symbolic art during this time.

Unfortunately, this renewed interest in totems was misguided and led to a distortion of cultural traditions, as the city continued to misrepresent the indigenous people of Washington, who did not traditionally carve freestanding totem poles. Marketing Seattle in this way also contributed to the great misunderstanding of different native tribes in the area, portraying them as all having the same northern native culture. While local native communities are more respectfully represented in society today, issues with underrepresentation, racial discrimination, and cultural appropriation remain. Cultural appropriation can be defined as, “the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of a different culture” (Young, 2010). My project will aim to provide an in-depth history of the cultural appropriation of totem poles in the Seattle area,

communicate the perspectives of both native and non-native artists regarding cultural appropriation, and discuss how totem poles should and should not be integrated in modern society.

Along with providing an in-depth history of the cultural appropriation in Seattle, my thesis will compare and contrast northern totem pole design and Coast Salish story pole design. In response to the northern totems that Seattle placed in the city, local native tribes created story poles to raise awareness of the First Peoples of western Washington. These story poles portray traditional Salish stories and have distinct design elements that differ from northern totem pole design. The creation of many of these design standards is credited to Salish carver, William Shelton, who played a huge role in the revival of local native traditions after they were nearly destroyed in the white migration to the Pacific Northwest. Sharing his legacy reveals a small part of what the native tribes in this area had to go through in order to keep their culture alive. By researching the significance of both northern totem poles and Salish story poles, my thesis will provide a better understanding of the insights these designs reveal about the indigenous peoples who created them. Further, by more specifically looking at how Salish artwork has evolved over time, my thesis will discuss how this artwork has helped Salish communities share, and continue to share, their culture with society.

The existence and incorporation of totem poles throughout cities along the Pacific Northwest speaks to their dynamic importance today, but understanding how and why totems became icons of the Pacific Northwest are questions that need be answered through direct interaction. For this reason, I visited Seattle repeatedly in order to interview native artist, Andrea Sigo, non-native artist, Duane Pasco, and expert

historian and curator of Native American art, Robin Wright. Through these interactions and through my own observations of the city's totems, I was able to realize the affects of cultural appropriation. Documenting each of these interviews and several iconic totem poles around the city, I gathered material for the creative component of my thesis: an accessible and original digital publication. This aspect of my thesis involves designing a website that utilizes the Adobe skills that I've learned in the School of Journalism and Communication to present my research and findings in a visually appealing and innovative way. When discussing how to create an environment of respect with regards to native culture, allowing people to interact with that culture helps them understand its importance. Through videography, photography, and writing, my creative component will aim to personalize cultural appropriation and its affects, allowing audiences to relate directly to native and non-native artists today. Creating work that is easily accessible to audiences of all backgrounds while still being innovative in the field was very important to me in deciding which platform to utilize and how to present my work. My reasoning behind this publication, my stylistic choices, chosen subjects, and production will all be discussed throughout the written component of my thesis. I will also identify other interactive publications and collections that inspired my designs.

Most importantly, both my written and creative thesis will aim to initiate a conversation about cultural appropriation and question how society should continue to cultivate creativity in an increasingly connected and multicultural world. I will discuss what the Seattle Arts Commission has created to promote local native artwork as well as talk about the current environment for native and non-native artists, which continues to

reveal racial inequalities and challenges in the community. Based on this information, I will conclude with possible solutions and ways of discussing cultural appropriation that frame the conversation in a more positive light. To confine each person's culture and creativity to their specific ethnic background is not productive. Culture in itself is always changing and evolving as people interact and discover new perspectives. It is important not to limit this discovery by regulating who can and cannot appreciate the craftsmanship and design of a specific culture. The problem with cultural appropriation is that in many cases it involves disrespectful "borrowing" of a minority's culture without giving proper credit to those people. My thesis will argue that in order to create an environment that promotes the creative process, people must be comfortable sharing cultural experiences; however, if cultural exchange inspires artwork or other innovations, it is important to recognize that through accreditation.

## **A History of Appropriation**

While the concept of appropriation has only recently come into the American consciousness, the history of appropriation is timeless (Avins, 2015). For ages, dominant groups have capitalized on minority's cultures and traditions for their own advancement and economic progression. This has led to great cultural misunderstandings, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the development of ignorance and disrespect in society (Nittle, 2015). In order to change this environment, it is important to heighten awareness and understand relative history so that the abusive mistakes of the past are not repeated. When studying the appropriation of totem poles in Seattle, realizing the history of where these totems came from, the significance of their designs, and how they have evolved over time was my first step. This section will lay the groundwork for further discussion about the effects of cultural appropriation by providing an in-depth description of the designs, origins, and traditions surrounding northern totems, sharing the history of their integration into the Seattle area, and introducing how Salish story poles revitalized indigenous traditions.

### **Northern Totems**

Originating from the Algonquian word *odoodem*, meaning "his kinship group," totem poles are intricate parts of Native American tribal culture in the Pacific Northwest (Stewart, 1993). They are traditionally made out of rot-resistant western red cedar that comes from the *Thuja plicata* tree and while they are not considered a religious object, totem poles are used to communicate many aspects of native culture (Stewart, 1993). Each totem has a unique purpose depending on its classification, which can be separated into six main categories: the house frontal pole, the interior house poles, the mortuary

pole, the memorial pole, the welcome pole, and the shame pole (Huang, 2010). The size, position, color (or absence of color) and placement of the pole are all important characteristics that can link the pole to the specific Native American tribe that created it and identify the purpose of the pole (Reid, 1979). Further, the animals and characters on totem poles demonstrate how symbols are used in native culture to visually tell a story. Each totem pole has its own story and purpose (Reid, 1979). While some are used to remember past ancestors or events, others are created to welcome or even mock individuals (Huang, 2010). This section will talk about the different motifs and designs seen in totem pole types and provide a better understanding of their importance and role in native cultures. It will also discuss how European contact influenced totem pole design and simplified the carving process.

There are several tribes throughout Alaska and British Columbia that created totem poles including the Tlingit, the Haida, the Coast Tsimshian, the Nuu-chah-nulth, the Nuxalk, the Bella Coola and the Kwakwaka'wakw; however, not all tribes carved the same types of totems (Halpin, 1981). For this reason, anthropologists are able to distinguish totems between tribes by examining variations in style and design. Welcome totem poles were most commonly found facing the water on the outskirts of Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakwaka'wakw villages. These totems traditionally depicted a large figure with outstretched arms, extending to greet visitors and other tribes into the village, or had a hand shading its eyes in a scouting manner, awaiting the visitors arrival (The Bill Reid Centre). In contrast to the welcome poles, shame poles were designed to humiliate and embarrass individuals. One of the most famous shame poles is the Tsonoqwa figure at Gwayasdums. This pole was created in order to show contempt for a chief with an

unpaid debt. Until paid off, the shame pole would stand facing the chief's house as a public display of his misdeeds and unfulfilled social obligations (The Bill Reid Centre).



Figure 1: **Tsonoqwa Figure** facing a debtors house with empty arms to signify an unpaid debt. Photo by E. Curtis at Gwayasdums, 1914 (The Bill Reid Centre).

Another famous shame pole is the naked totem of Alexander Baranof, a Russian governor and Russian American Company manager (Sutton, 2008). Originally created to commemorate a peace treaty between the Russians and Tlingits, the U.S. Forest Service commissioned a totem pole to be created by George Benson, a Sitka carver; however, when Sitka carvers were not available to work, members of a rival tribe were hired to create Benson's design instead. As a result, the totem depicted Baranof's body

without clothes on. While it remained standing, The Sitka Sentinel reported, it was "said to be the most photographed totem [pole] in Alaska" (Haugland, 2010). Along with welcome and shame poles that focused on people outside the tribe, interior and exterior poles were found on tribal houses. Depending on the style of the house, either one or two large interior house posts would stand as support beams (The Bill Reid Centre). These interior house posts were often found in houses with some spiritual purpose but wealthy Kwakwaka'wakw families also had them. Common among the Haida tribes, exterior house posts either stood next to a doorway entrance or above it. The latter case was known as a "portal pole," where the pole had a hole carved out of it, allowing people to walk in and out of the room through an oval shape in the pole (Stewart, 1993).



Figure 2: An example of a **Haida portal pole** from the the chief whose name means Highest Peak in a Mountain Range, at Haina (Maynard, 1888).



When totems stand outside a house but are not directly attached to that house as interior and exterior poles would be, they are usually memorial or mortuary poles. Memorial poles were found in the Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Nuxalk tribes and often told the story of a wealthy chief's family history. For this reason, memorial poles usually incorporated a family crest or representative figure of the family lineage; however, they could also represent a specific event or achievement as well (Stewart, 1993). More specifically, the mortuary pole was carved to commemorate the life and death of a deceased chief. Created from an inverted pole that allows for more width at the top, this totem housed the remains of the deceased chief in a small cavity on the upper end of the pole behind the "frontal board" (Stewart, 1993). The frontal board is representative of a burial box and acts as a cover, hiding the remains of the deceased. It is usually painted and carved with memorable figures in the chief's life (The Bill Reid Centre). While these poles were less common in the Tsimshian tribes, plenty were carved by the Haida and Tlingit peoples (Stewart, 1993).

Just as each tribe was known to carve different types of totems, they also employed a variety of figures and supernatural creatures unique to their individual tribal culture. While there are many images found on totems, the main symbols include people, animals, spirits, or mythological creatures. The ownership of these specific designs are the property of the particular family or clan they represent, so while artists may draw inspiration from particular symbols they are not meant to be repeated by anyone outside the clan (Stewart, 1993). Part of this reasoning is due to the spiritual nature of how clans acquired a family crest, which was often the result of a dream or supernatural experience with that particular being. Stories of the interactions with

spiritual symbols often resulted in the animal transforming into a person, which is suggested through the combination of human and animal figures on totem poles, or a person from the clan killing the animal. Some of the most well-known figures are: Thunderbird, Watchman, Raven, Eagle, Hawk, Bear, Frog, Beaver, and Killer and Humpback Whale (Stewart, 1993). Thunderbird is the most powerful of all the spirits and mainly appears in Kwakwaka'wakw tribes (Stewart, 1993). He is said to fly down from the sky and capture whales with his huge talons. As his name suggests, Watchmen, which was mainly found in the elaborately carved Haida exterior house poles, watches over the village providing protection (Stewart, 1993). The symbolic birds all have similar bodies but different heads. While Raven has a straight but mid-length beak, Eagle has a short downturned beak, and Hawk's beak is downturned and curves inward. The larger animals such as Bear and Beaver can be distinguished by the shape of their teeth and facial features. Bear has round flared nostrils that demonstrate his fierce power and Beaver has a tall forehead with two big buck teeth. Symbols like Frog and Killer Whale are usually found among northern tribes and often are portrayed as full bodied. Killer Whale has a large fin that extends out past the pole while Humpback or Grey Whale has a smaller fin.

Regarding the style of traditional northern totem poles, the animals and figures discussed above are all portrayed vertically on the pole. Humans and humanlike beings are usually crouched but can also be standing as well as four-legged animals like Bear and Beaver (Stewart, 1993). While the common phrase "low man on the totem pole" suggests that the highest figure on the totem pole is the most important, the largest figure, which is usually at the base of the pole, is often the most important (Wright,

2012). Most commonly, these figures were carved from a straight angle; however, there are some exceptions where animals were carved from a bird's eye view. The animals best suited for this treatment include: Whale, Dogfish, Salmon, Frog, and Wolf (Stewart, 1993). Smaller, less important figures would also be intertwined or combined to add intricacy to the totem. While they do represent some meaning, their significance has been lost over time (Stewart, 1993). Each northern tribe had different stylistic variations with regard to the design of their totem poles, but most northern totems were created through a variety of ovoid and s-shapes (Reid, 1979). Further, totem poles are designed to decay over time just like the life of a person or any other living thing. According to Roy Henry Vickers, an artist of Tsimshian and Haida ancestry, "each tree is like a human being; it has its own personality and uniqueness" (Huang, 2010). Part of this decaying is symbolic of the idea that no living or natural creation is meant to last forever. This difference in cultural ideology has led to several conversations about whether totem poles should or should not be preserved in museums. While preserving these iconic pieces is contrary to their traditional design, the totem poles withstanding act as an artistic doorway into the native tribes that created them.

The incorporation of new technology has contributed to a wider variety of design capabilities as well as improved efficiency when it comes to carving totem poles. Before European contact, the process of felling a tree, transporting the log, stripping the bark, adzing away the sapwood, carving and painting the totem, and eventually raising the pole was an extremely labor intensive and energetic process. Hundreds of people were involved in the creation of totems this way; however, with the incorporation of European carving tools, rope, and paint, the process became much easier. Instead of

falling a tree through controlled burning, chiseling, or splitting, it was possible to simply saw through the tree. Instead of creating paint by mixing minerals with a binding agent (such as the glutenous part of salmon eggs), commercial paint offered a wide variety of colors that broadened design possibilities for the artist. Instead of using tightly twisted cedar withes to raise the totem pole, stronger, more durable rope helped prevent pole swaying, providing more support for raisers and carriers (Stewart, 1993). In this respect, European contact during the maritime fur trade actually benefited native communities, making the carving process less strenuous (Huang, 2010). Anthropologist, Marius Barbeau even argued that totem poles originated from the stimulation provided by the maritime fur trade agreement, but this argument is no longer accepted as drawings of totems were discovered from expeditions as early as 1778. Still, “there is little doubt that the trade did facilitate an increase in native American Indian wood carving, particularly among the Haida” (Fisher, 2011).

### **“The Gateway to Alaska”**

When Europeans first traveled through what is now British Columbia and Alaska in the late 1700s, there were few drawings of totem poles; however, the small number of depictions suggest their existence before European contact. The first account was on Captain James Cook’s 1778 expedition through the Pacific Ocean when artist John Webber sketched the first known image of a totem pole. This illustration was published in Cook’s three-volume journal *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (Stewart, 1993). Several expeditions followed Cook’s, but few had documentation of northern native totem poles, suggesting their scarcity. In 1791, there was another sighting by John Bartlett in the Langara Island Village while traveling on board the ship, *Gustavus*.

This sketch, though lacking intricacy and detail, was the first picture of what is now classified as a Haida portal pole. In his journal, Bartlett wrote: “We went ashore where one of their winter houses stood. The entrance was cut out of a large tree and carved all the way up and down. The door was made like a man’s head and the passage into the house was between his teeth” (Stewart, 1993).

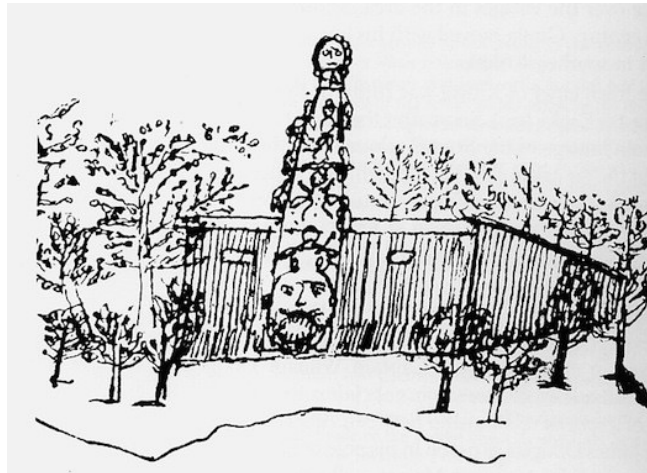


Figure 3: John Bartlett’s illustration of the first known **Haida totem pole** from the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1791 (Stewart, 1993).

During the years of the maritime fur trade at the beginning of the 1800s, native carvers acquired European tools that simplified the process of creating totem poles. This led to growth in production as newly wealthy chiefs commissioned carvers to create totem poles to document their family lineage, commemorate significant events, and welcome visitors to their territory. Totem poles grew in size, height, and diversity as artists incorporated new colors and designs into their work. The wealth brought to natives during this period also helped to support the celebratory *potlatch* ceremonies that occurred after the raising of a pole. While anthropologists have shown that

potlatching and totem production increased in the years after European settlement, this came at a price, as widespread diseases (such as smallpox) began killing off entire tribes, and government policies were created to ban cultural native practices. When the Point Elliot Treaty was passed, natives were forced to relocate to new government delegated territories. This treaty was signed on January 22, 1855, stating, “tribes and bands of Indians hereby cede, relinquish, and convey to the United States all their right, title, and interest in and to the lands and country occupied by them” (Stevens, 1859). Along with relocation, the treaty included other sections prohibiting war and alcohol among native tribes, requiring natives to hunt and fish in specific areas, and stating that the government would provide schools, teachers, farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and other annuities to natives as payment for the land instead of actual money (Stevens, 1859). The disturbance of culture in the 1860s was something that eventually all native tribes would experience. Young natives were sent to Christian boarding schools to learn English, and tribal elders were forbidden to speak their native language or practice their traditional customs. In 1884, another treaty was passed banning all potlatch ceremonies. As every totem had its own potlatch ceremony, the Potlatch Ban marked the decline in production of totem poles. Throughout this period, carvers died without passing on their knowledge to their children, and collectors from Europe and the United States gathered artifacts from abandoned villages, often without permission or payment.

Among these collectors was a group of businessmen from Washington who came to the village of Tongass in Alaska in August 1899 searching for Seattle’s first totem pole. Prior to the trip, entrepreneurial civic leaders and the Seattle Chamber of Commerce decided to position Seattle as the “Gateway to Alaska” by taking a totem

pole from the north and placing it downtown. They hoped that this large iconic attraction would boost the economy and bring more tourists to the area (Wright, 2015). Upon arriving in “the Tlingit village of Tongass, which appeared to be abandoned as most of the residents were temporarily away fishing for the summer, the Seattle group sawed through a 60-foot-tall mortuary totem pole belonging to Chief Kininook’s family” (Wright, 2015). They disposed of the remains of the Chief-of-all-Women which the pole had previously housed for nine decades, and presented the new “Seattle Totem” to the Seattle City Council on October 17, 1899 (Silverman, 2013). The totem was formally raised at Pioneer Place the next day in honor of the “Chief-of-all-Women” (Wright, 2015). Images of the pole were then plastered around the city in tourist pamphlets and became souvenirs in local curio shops that sold various native-inspired trinkets. While this pole did bring notoriety to Seattle, its true history wasn’t revealed until decades later when University of Washington anthropologist, Dr. Viola Garfield, published a piece correcting this misinformation (Garfield, 1980).

Following the erection of the Seattle Totem, the city continued to aggressively appropriate native culture in the summer of 1909 during the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition (University of Washington Special Collections). The Alaska Yukon Pacific (AYP) Exposition was a four-month-long World’s Fair endorsed by the state. It was created to publicize the development of the Pacific Northwest and showcase all that the territory had to offer. Over four million people attended the booths, buildings, and stages that were set up on the University of Washington campus. While the AYP Exposition was a large economic success, the marketing for the event as well as the entertainment at the fair is an example of how Seattle further appropriated native

culture. Below is one of the many brochures for the event that illustrated northern native totem poles, connecting their design with the city of Seattle even though local native tribes did not carve totems.



Figure 4: **Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition brochures** depicted northern native totem poles as representative of Seattle in order to draw more people to the culturally diverse event (Doyle, 2015).

Another highlight of the AYP was James Stanley's Ye Old Curiosity Shop, which marketed model totem poles and promoted them as a symbol of the fair (Wright, 2015). "A loose sketch of the Kininook 'Seattle' pole appeared on the cover of each AYP official daily program. An image of the pole was also placed on a poster and used on the handles of AYP souvenir spoons, postcard, and other memorabilia" (Wright, 2015). While some native artists were hired to whittle these mini souvenirs, many were made by white woodworkers who had no understanding of the cultural significance of totem



poles. Instead of learning about the culture, they examined northern native traditional design and replicated figures, mixing and matching them to create an aesthetically pleasing design. Pseudo-totem poles with light bulbs in the eye sockets were also combined with Japanese style gate design to create an entrance that would light up at night (Wright, 2015).

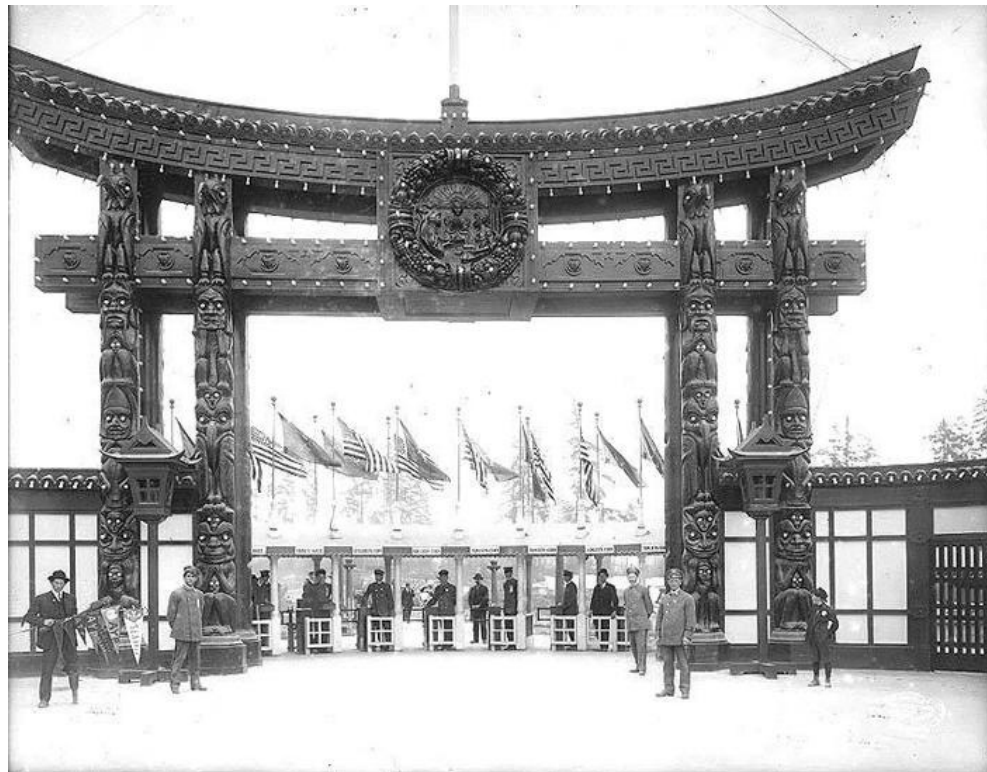
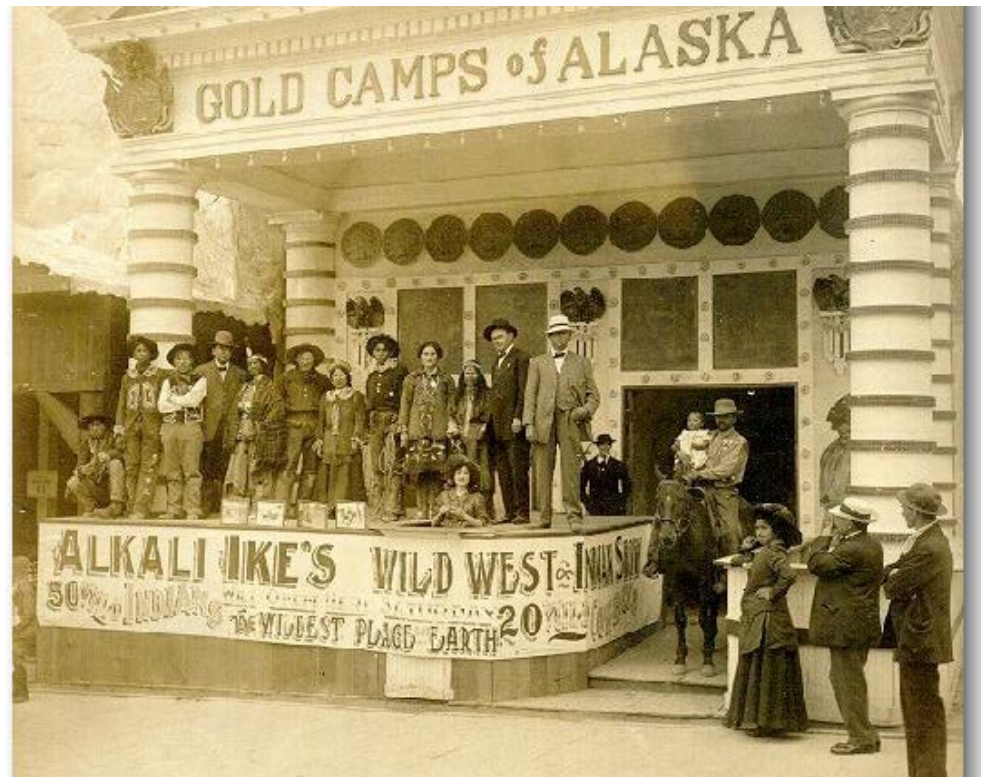


Figure 5: **AYP Tori Gate** combining Native American and Japanese art forms to create a magnificent entrance that lit up at night (Wright, 2015).

For entertainment, there was also a stage at the AYP where Native Americans, cowboys, and miners performed plays for audiences to showcase the exotic and diverse people of Seattle (University of Washington Special Collections). This was one of the

many ways Seattle made money by promoting stereotypes about a native culture they did not understand.

Figure 6: **AYP Concession exhibit** highlighting the Seattle's diversity of people



(University of Washington Special Collections).

Not only was this display of diversity misguided and unrepresentative of the native people of Seattle, but it propagated an idea, which still exists today, that all native cultures are the same regardless of their background. It was not until the 1920s, when William Shelton began carving Salish-style story poles, that Native American tribes originally from the Seattle area were able to share their true culture.

## Salish Story Poles

In response to the appropriation of northern totem poles in Seattle, Salish carvers began crafting their own poles to represent their culture and their stories. Known as *story poles*, these Salish totem poles differed from the traditional northern totems in many ways. Mainly, the Salish story poles told morality stories that taught humans how to behave responsibly and with integrity, and revealed the cultural beliefs of the people; they did not represent any person or family as totem poles did (Block, 2009). While there was some resistance to the creation of story poles from the U.S. government, which had spent the last few decades trying to assimilate local tribes, their creation, “was a key figure in the preservation of Coast Salish culture” (Riddle, 2009). The introduction of Salish story poles into the Seattle area is largely attributed to Tulalip carver and storyteller, William Shelton (1868-1938).

William Shelton was of Snohomish, Puyallup, and Wenatchee ancestry and grew up on the reservation studying to become a tribal leader and Indian doctor; however, when he was 17, Shelton ran away from home and enrolled in the Tulalip Mission School to learn English (Riddle, 2009). Through this multicultural experience Shelton realized his life goal to bring together white and native cultures.

I know the only future for my people is assimilation by the white brothers. I think we can teach them some things too. We are the children of nature. We are closest to the trees and the birds. We can teach the love of nature and the great, generous spirit of the Potlatch feast.... Our race must vanish so our spirit may live. (Block, 2009).

After learning from both cultures, Shelton believed that native stories were similar to non-native stories in that they were meant to teach the young and non-religious people how to live a successful and happy life (Riddle, 2009). Having developed his skills and

professional network working in the old Tulalip lumber mill, Shelton got government permission to build a Salish-style totem for the native longhouse, the center of the tribal community. His correspondence with the government is as follows:

He said, "We will not make many totem poles. We will put all these sklaletuts, these guiding spirits, on one pole." Months later he got an answer. The answer came to the agent and it said, "William Shelton, you can go ahead, but just don't allow the Indians to revert back too much to old days." My father went to La Conner and he called a meeting...The Indian men talked. They cried tears remembering the old days. One man sang his song. It was the first time he'd sung that song for about thirty years, more, fifty years. (Rygg, 1977).

Carving a series of representational figures from the stories of local elders, Shelton created the first Salish-style story pole in late 1912, which he named the Spirit Pole (Riddle, 2009). The stories of this pole as well as some of the other poles Shelton made during his lifetime were all published in the *Indian Totem Legends of the North West Coast Country by one of the Indians* (Riddle, 2009).



Figure 7: The first Salish style story pole created by William Shelton in 1912, called the **Spirit Pole** (Poles, Posts, and Canoes, 2014).

After carving the Spirit Pole, Shelton was commissioned to create several other poles in this style, one being the Everett pole. This was Shelton's second pole and was originally raised in front of Redman's Hall at the corner of California Avenue and Wetmore Avenue on July 26, 1922 (Riddle, 2009). Children and service groups raised the money for the Everett pole and its story was created in honor of Chief Patkanim, the Snoqualmie chief who signed the Point Elliot Treaty for the Snohomish tribe (Riddle, 2009). The pole has been moved several times and was approved for \$12,000 worth of restoration in 1996 (Riddle, 2009).



Figure 8: **Everett Pole** created by William Shelton in 1922 (Smith, 2011).

Shelton continued carving until the late 1930s when he died of pneumonia while in the process of carving the William Shelton pole which had been commissioned by Washington Governor Roland Hartley to honor Shelton's work (Riddle, 2009). After his death, other tribal carvers finished the work in his honor and raised the pole on the capital grounds in Olympia (Riddle, 2009). "The Olympia pole represents a period in which the Coast Salish people were attempting to not only hold onto, but to share their traditional cultural beliefs and practices" (Ancheta, 2013).



Figure 9: **William Shelton Pole** commissioned by Washington Governor represents Shelton's legacy bringing together his own Indian heritage and the teachings of his white teachers (Wright, 2014).

Examining the design of Shelton's story poles in comparison with northern traditional totem poles, it is clear that there are many stylistic differences. Both the Everett, Spirit, and Shelton poles are good examples that highlight the highly sculptural Salish design aesthetic. Instead of combining figures through various ovoid and s-shapes, the skelalitut (spirit) figures stand out from the background of the totem, extending outward past the pole. This is typical of Coast Salish design that relies on the use of negative and positive space to create an image and tell a story. In the image below, the black background would be considered the positive space and the white cutouts would be the

negative space. The main design elements of the Coast Salish that consist of circle, crescent, trigon, and extended crescent can also be seen in the image below. How these design elements work together helps define what should and should not stand out in a design.

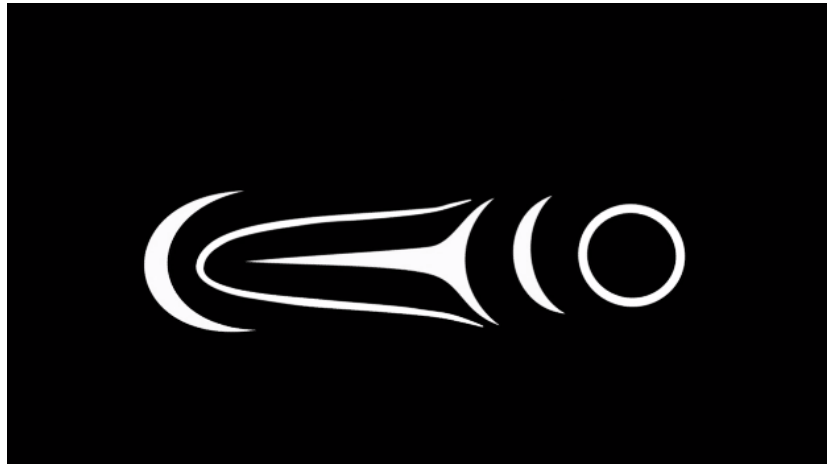


Figure 10: **Coast Salish design elements** consist of the circle, crescent, trigon, and extended crescent (Peterson, 2013).

Further, the Coast Salish design elements reveal insight into their culture, which was largely connected to a strong relationship with nature. When imaging a droplet falling into a body of water, it is possible to see each of these design elements individually. As the droplet falls, it reflects the circle shape and as it bounces up, crescents ripple out around it and the trigon and extended crescent follow the droplet up into the air. Not only does this imagery demonstrate the Coast Salish design elements, but it helps to reflect the fluidity and movement found in each of their design pieces. Just as crescents move away from the center of a water droplet, this design element often expands outward from a central circle design element. That said, “the distribution of design elements are not always equal,” describes Shaun Peterson, Coast Salish native



artist (Peterson, 2013). Peterson, who has been creating innovative and modern Coast Salish designs for several years, explains some of the misconceptions about Coast Salish design in his video about how it differs from northern native artwork. While many people refer to Coast Salish design as formline artwork, this term actually refers to design elements from northern native tribes. Formline artwork is created by building positive ovoid and u-shapes upon one another. This is in contrast to Salish artwork, which is created by taking away negative shapes from one positive shape. The intricacies of formline design are based on how the artist decides to combine positive shapes, while the intricacies of Coast Salish art are found in the ways in which negative elements are cut out of positive elements. Traditionally, it is easy to distinguish Coast Salish artwork from other native pieces because the negative elements (white in the example below) will never touch and the positive (black in the example below) elements are connected throughout the entire piece. In northern native design, positive elements can be separated from one another and the design elements differ from the circle, crescent, trigon, and extended crescent model seen in Coast Salish designs.



Figure 11: **Comparing Coast Salish and formline design** it is possible to see how non-touching negative elements are emphasized in Coast Salish design (right) and how connecting positive elements are highlighted in northern native artwork (left) (Peterson, 2013).

The revival of northern totem pole artwork, which began with the 1938 United States Forest Service Restoration Act, led to the preservation of the old totem poles. Today, these tall, monumental totems are protected and open for the public to view in museums and parks around Seattle; however, knowledge of Coast Salish design is lacking in comparison. While both native designs have their own allure, it is important to be knowledgeable about their differences in order to appreciate and recognize each individually.

## **Totems Today**

While Native Americans are more respectfully represented in society today, problems with under-representation, racial inequality, and cultural appropriation still remain. With regards to the history of the northern totem poles in the Seattle area, many of their unflattering origins have surfaced; however, the city continues to have an overall lack of awareness about Coast Salish tribes indigenous to the area. Out of the dozens of totem poles I personally photographed in the city, only two of them were story poles created in the Coast Salish style. Although the Seattle Arts Commission has made an effort to support the creation of more Coast Salish art pieces, the limited number on display demonstrates an overall disregard for Salish culture and misrepresentation of the Seattle area. If cities outside of Seattle such as Tacoma and Olympia have Coast Salish story poles that represent local native tribes, why are there so few in Seattle? The Coast Salish have a unique artistic style that is different from northern designs. While northern native artwork should be appreciated for its beauty, using it to represent Seattle has contributed to the ideology that all native tribes are the same. According to Susan Point, native carver, Coast Salish designs almost became a lost art form. She believes the Salish style continues to be relatively unknown to people today. To change the misconceptions about native artwork and promote the continuation of Coast Salish design, there must be greater knowledge and support for Salish artwork.

One recent initiative the Seattle Arts Commission has undertaken was the sponsorship of a new Salish art piece to be installed at the Seattle Waterfront which is currently being renovated. This project, which was created in partnership with the Office of the Waterfront and the Seattle Department of Transportation, began a year ago

when the city sought a local native artist to create a site-specific installation. While the plans for the art piece are still preliminary and will most likely not be completed for five to seven years, Salish artist Shaun Peterson was chosen to work on the project and has proposed creating welcome figures for the city. This proposal is still subject to change and is extremely recent as the media have not published any story on the proposal; however, the addition of a Salish welcome figure alongside the northern totem poles in that area would help Seattle more accurately represent the people indigenous to the area. Peterson hopes that his work will show that the Salish people are still thriving and involved in the city. “Our people are part of this land and its history, but most importantly we are part of the present. The art I create will aim to communicate that, and in the process, create space for dialogue” says Peterson (Lopez, 2015). Further, in the words of Mayor Murray, “This is an historic opportunity to have an artwork by a Native artist on our Waterfront. Peterson’s artwork will be a tribute to the cultural significance of the waterfront to the Coast Salish first peoples and our city. The waterfront will finally reflect the origins of our vibrant City...” (Lopez, 2015).

With regard to issues among the native and non-native art communities, there are still very strong feelings about cultural appropriation and intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples. Through the course of my interviews, there were very mixed opinions about whether non-native artists should be allowed to create native style artwork, if artists should innovate traditional designs or maintain their historical integrity, and how the Seattle Arts Commission currently chooses which artists (native or non-native) to sponsor for the creation of public art. Some artists, like native carver, Andrea Sigo, believe only natives can truly master Coast Salish art because they bring a

certain history that non-natives will never have. Others, like non-native carver, Duane Pasco, believe that as long as non-natives learn the art form respectfully, everything is fine. For art curators like Robin Wright, the combination and mixing of symbols from different tribes makes identifying the original artist very difficult; however, contemporary artists like Shaun Peterson argue that art is like culture and should be subject to innovation and evolution over time. These contrasting ideologies reveal a need for discussion and open conversation about how cultures can combine in a collaborative and positive way and in turn, how the government can support this type of work.

## Reimagining Appropriation

Beginning this project, I thought I understood cultural appropriation. I believed that the cultural appropriation of native artwork in the Pacific Northwest and greater Seattle area was disrespectful and damaging to local tribal culture. Seeing totems around every corner of the city and looking at curio shops with miniature totems made me question how culture could so blatantly be used for profitable gain. In my mind, native culture was being portrayed in society as a souvenir to be coveted by the same people who conquered native land and attempted to destroy native history. How then, in the United States, a cultural melting-pot, could this misrepresentation and exploitation be accepted? That was my initial mindset going into this project. I wanted to uncover the problems with appropriation and share the damage it had caused and continues to cause; however, after interviewing native artist, Andrea Sigo, non-native artist, Duane Pasco, and curator of Native American art, Robin Wright, I realized that my initial impression of cultural appropriation was incomplete. While there are several definitions for cultural appropriation that attempt to demonize it inherently, the word *appropriate* originally stems from the late Latin word *appropriatio* which means “to make one’s own.” In this respect, cultural appropriation can simply be defined as the act of taking a culture and making it one’s own. Where problems arise, which is often included in modern definitions, is when culture is appropriated without permission and for the purpose of making money. This often involves a dominant group taking the intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expression and artifacts from a minority group without really understanding the significance and using it for their own benefit. Since the early 2000s, when the term was first brought out of academia and into pop Internet

culture (Avins, 2015), conflicts and arguments about cultural appropriation have been on the rise.

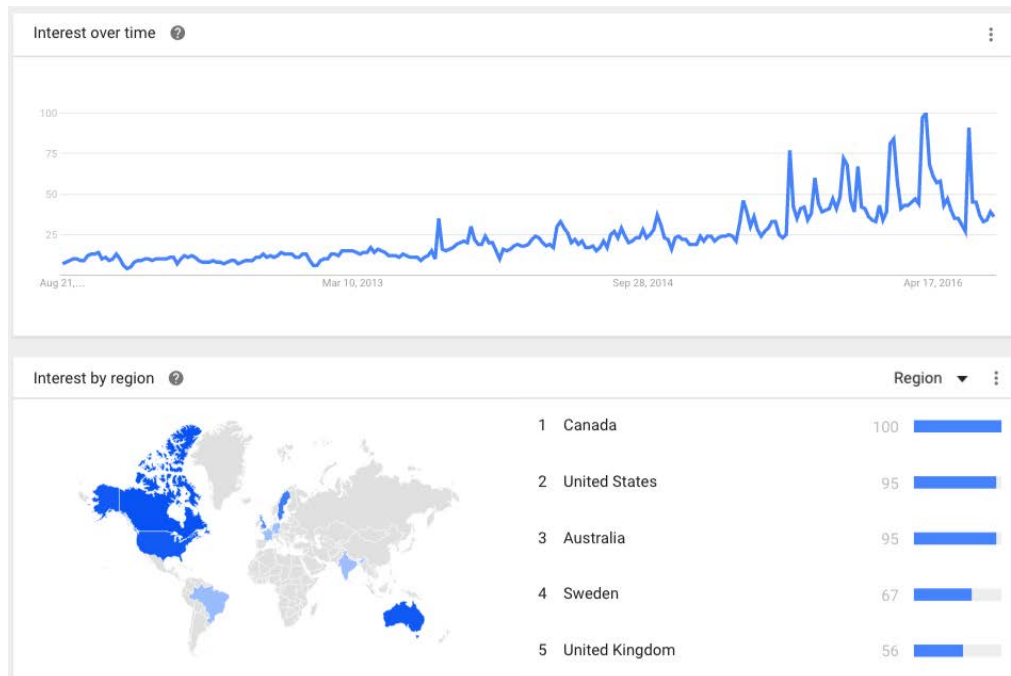


Figure 12: This **Google trend report** shows that search results for cultural appropriation have increased greatly in the last five years mainly in Canada, the United States, and Australia.

Several circumstances of cultural appropriation in musical performances, fashion, and art have been ridiculed for being disrespectful and communicating false and damaging stereotypes of minority groups. However, borrowing from other cultures has also led to new innovations that celebrate the exchange of ideas, traditions, and styles. If anything, culture and creativity are both naturally fluid. In an increasingly globalized world, it is unrealistic to believe that cultures will remain the same despite their constant mixing. Instead of trying to control who is allowed to identify with a

specific culture by birthright, it is more productive to celebrate today's multicultural society and promote the preservation of culture without hindering its progression. When treated as a collaborative exchange, it is possible for everyone to benefit from the sharing of cultures.

This year, the Portland Art Museum had two different exhibits that exemplified this ideology and addressed issues of cultural appropriation for native communities. The first exhibit was titled "Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy" and juxtaposed how Edward Curtis, a non-native photographer, portrayed native tribes with a variety of modern native artists' work. While some criticized this exhibit for showcasing too much of Curtis's work, having visited the museum myself to see it, I think the way the work was presented helped create a space to talk about culture and the challenges natives face today. The exhibit began with work from Curtis's renowned book *The North American Indian*, featuring portrait and landscape shots of natives that were usually alone in nature and dressed in traditional garments. While these photographs provided an important historical record of tribes from the past, they were romanticized to portray Native Americans as a "vanishing race." In contrast, the contemporary native artists featured, such as Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson, showed the vivacious and thriving aspects of native culture today. My favorite pieces were by Jackson and Star, who I thought dismantled stereotypes and broke down barriers with their work. Jackson, who was the first Native American photographer to enter the Library of Congress' distinguished photography collection, shared politically satirical photographs of native subjects wearing traditional garments in modern cities. His work, while somewhat humorous, made audience members think critically about



how natives are treated in society today. Addressing similar issues in a different way, Star cut out the outlines of the men from fifteen of Curtis's photographs to "give them their power back" after their images were reproduced countless times (Portland Art Museum, 2016). After walking through the entire exhibit, there was a board asking for written responses about whether audience members think Native American culture is really vanishing and their reasoning. The range of responses was incredible. People were drawing arrows responding to another person's comment, writing about how the museum is asking the wrong people this question, and more. While the responses have not been uploaded online, I had the opportunity of reading through them at the University of Oregon symposium on this exhibit. There, I also got to meet the curators of the exhibit and talk about how the discussion will continue digitally in the near future.

The second exhibit, *Native Fashion Now*, which I was unfortunately unable to attend, was the first large-scale fashion show featuring Native American designs from all over the United States. Modern and contemporary garments with traditional patterns and materials instigated conversations about cross-cultural boundaries and the future of the fashion industry. Specifically in fashion, Native American designs and prints have been misappropriated for several decades. In 2011, Forever 21 and Urban Outfitters sold "Navajo" labeled merchandise with generic Native-looking patterns completely unrelated to the Navajo tribes, ASOS had a "Go Native" line the next year, and in 2013, Jeremy Scott designed a collection of totem pole Adidas tracksuits (Leiber, 2016).

These are just a few examples of the many offenses where large companies have taken Native designs for their own profit. This continuous misappropriation has led to a

growth in discussion about misunderstanding culture and how to promote Native artwork positively. Native Fashion Now addresses these misunderstandings by showcasing the clothing of contemporary Native American designers, who use their native culture to inspire new and modern creations. According to the designers, stereotyping is their biggest obstacle to this type of creation. Patricia Michaels of the Taos Pueblo said, “There was all this stuff that we were expected to reproduce as contemporary Native American designers, and if we tried something new, we were told, ‘Oh who do you think you are? That’s not Native enough’” (Leiber, 2016). Many think this is because so many Native patterns and designs were used for American tourism during the 1900s that today people have preconceived notions about Native design. While tourism may have helped preserve Native culture, it is important to recognize there is no singular Native design that contemporary artists are limited to creating.

“There's so much understanding that needs to happen about the individuality of Native culture and how innovation and self-expression is a tradition for us,” said Kristen Dorsey, a Chickasaw jeweler from Los Angeles (Leiber, 2016). “We don't make the same thing over and over again. Culture does not exist in a box. It is constantly transforming based on what materials you have access to, what people you interact with. It's constantly changing” (Leiber, 2016). Not only did Native Fashion Now display new Native designs, but the exhibit also featured three pieces by non-Native designers, one being the totem pole dress from Isaac Mizrahi from 1991 (Portland Art Museum, 2016).

While Mizrahi’s use of Northwest Native design would be condemned in today’s society for being cultural appropriation at its worst, Michaels “saw a part of

herself in this dress, accepted by mainstream America. She saw Native American culture accepted by mainstream fashion and for her, it opened the doors into the fashion world and gave her inspiration to become a designer” (Leiber, 2016).

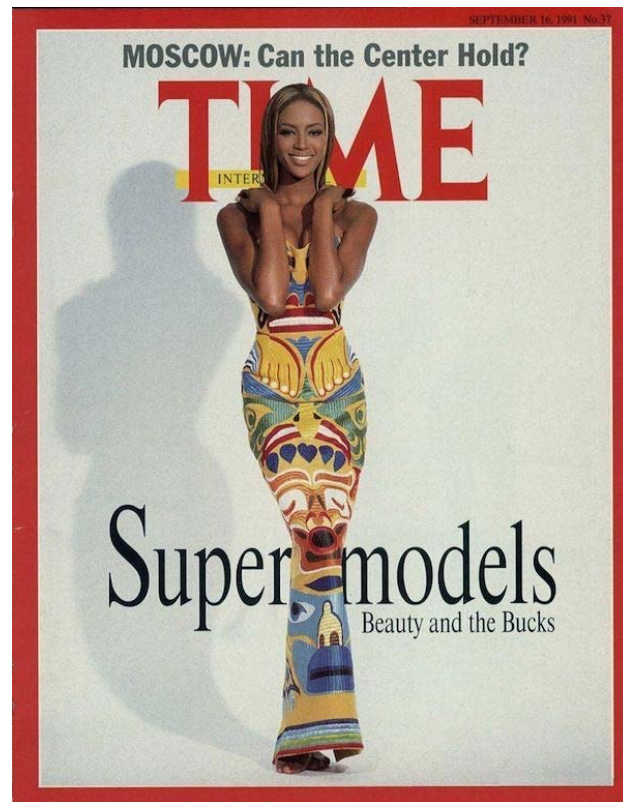


Figure 13: Mizrahi’s **Totem Pole Dress** inspired some artists to create new and innovative Native fashion.

Questions about cultural appropriation and what is and is not acceptable will always be present in this industry; however, as consumers begin to discuss the effects of cultural appropriation, it is important to turn to Native people for their perspective. Rather than being afraid of exploring Native fashion, people should turn to Native designers if they want to purchase Native clothing.

Further, brands like Pendleton, which have sold Native American blankets for over 100 years, are good examples of how non-Natives can use Native designs collaboratively, involving them in the design process and trading with them or compensating them for their involvement.

## Design Choices and Inspiration

Before developing the creative aspect of my thesis, I looked to several other successful and innovative publications for design inspiration. It was very important to me that the project is accessible to a wide range of people. This was why I chose to use Adobe InDesign to publish my work online. Using this platform also allowed for growth of the project, as my InDesign document could be adapted across different platforms. I also knew that I wanted the style guide and theme of my project to relate to the evolution of totem pole design, so I drew a lot of inspiration from the design elements in Bill Holm's book *Northwest Coast Indian Art An Analysis of Form* as well as Duane Pasco's book *Life Is Art*. I liked how the designs in both of these books focused on the traditional red, black, and white colors used to decorate totem poles. I also enjoyed how the design of these books relied heavily on photography and the combination of historical and modern images. Working with the images that I took and those that I found through the Burke Museum's historical archives, I was able to incorporate a similar design aesthetic in my work.

*The Five Days From Nowhere* project and *Planet Money Makes A T-Shirt* were also great examples for me as I considered the user experience and interactivity elements of my project. *Five Days From Nowhere* is a short but well-designed Adobe-promoted story that helped me think differently about my choices with regard to interactivity. In this example, design elements were made interactive intentionally to add a specific function to the story. When considering my use of interactivity, I wanted to do the same and use it to create a more relatable story for my audience. By creating an interactive map of the Seattle area as it is today, my project succeeded in relating

issues of cultural appropriation to the audience's present instead of discussing the issues solely as it relates to the past. I also liked how Five Days From Nowhere used their logo as a button to reveal more information. Doing this was a simple way to develop a cohesive design aesthetic and also metaphorically communicate that the project itself is a gateway to discovering more information. Similarly, my project incorporated the thunderbird logo throughout the design to help my audience navigate between different pages. Lastly, *Five Days From Nowhere* inspired the timeline interactivity in my project; however, instead of having the timeline be one animated feature with different historical events moving across the page, my design sectioned the history into three different time periods. The reason I decided to section the history was that I wanted to communicate the beginning, middle, and end of the historical part of my story immediately without requiring my audience to wait for an animation to tell them the information that they needed. Further, designing my work in this way empowered my audience with the ability to learn however little or however much they wanted to about the history of totem poles in Seattle.

My other interactivity and layout choices came from the environmental website project, *Planet Money Makes A T-Shirt*. I liked how this project used a series of short videos to communicate big ideas about the process of making clothing and then allowed the user to scroll through additional information as they progressed through the project. In designing my layout, I adopted a similar approach, beginning with a short summary video and then progressing to a more in-depth version of my story. After learning about how totem poles were appropriated in the past through the history section of my design, the user is directed to a page about where Seattle is today in terms of totem pole

appropriation, then reads through the opinions of different artists and curators related to this project, and finally discovers what the plans are for the future of Seattle's waterfront. Designing the project as it progressed through time was a choice inspired by the Planet Money project and was something I believe simplified the issues of my topic into a more digestible story.

With regard to typography and logo design, many of my decisions were made after getting advice from my committee member, Steven Asbury. Over the course of several drafts, we agreed that using a classic and easily read type was the strongest way to present this topic in a credible way. Then to add some diversity, we incorporated bold use of scale in the typography to highlight the most important parts of the project. An example of this is names of each subject in the sharing thoughts section. For the logo design, I wanted to communicate the great diversity in feelings about the effects of cultural appropriation. As a symbol, Thunderbird is one of the most dominant icons in Native American artwork, but its significance and what it represents differs between Native American tribes (Alchin). This is why I thought using this icon in my logo would be the best way to communicate how people can have different ideas about cultural appropriation depending on their personal experience and history. For the same reason, the logo does not relate to specific tribal form of design to communicate how one symbol can mean many different things to many different native peoples, thus exploding the idea that all native artwork and cultural traditions are the same. To continue the bold design elements from my logo and not overwhelm the spreads with photographs, I decided to illustrate each subject's portrait. This also visually ensured that all my subjects were given an equal voice with regard to their opinions.

## **Project Limitations and Effectiveness**

For all the opportunities I was lucky enough to have while working on this project, I faced an equal number of challenges. The biggest challenge involved difficulties with accessibility to information and people and being at the right place at the right time. In itself, working on a multimedia project based in the greater Seattle area required me to travel to the city several times to gather footage, but before traveling I needed to establish a relationship with credible people who were willing to work with me. The Burke Museum was very helpful in putting me in contact with people; however, many of the artists and tribal groups I reached out to did not want to speak with me. While I was able to establishing enough trust with the people that were willing to help me, finding the right time to visit with regard to their artistic projects and schedules was difficult. Duane Pasco was not working on any big art pieces when my videographer and I came to visit, so we had to brainstorm another way to establish him as a credible artist visually. Robin Wright had just retired from her position at the Burke Museum and was mourning the recent death of her mother during the course of this project, so finding a time we could meet was another challenge. Andrea Sigo was working on completing a Salish weaving the weekend I visited and almost cancelled our meeting the day of the interview. Without these people's kindness and willingness to work with me through these challenges, the project would not be what it is today. That said, these challenges of accessibility and timing definitely had an effect on how this project came together in post-production.

Finding information on totem poles specific to Seattle was also a challenge. Since I don't live in Seattle, it was difficult for me to access the most current



information about the totems and if they were still standing in the place I expected them to be. The document that Wright sent me that listed all the totem poles she documented in the city was very helpful in planning my travels; however, even following this expert curator's notes, I was still unable to find certain totems that had been taken down due to renovations on the waterfront for restoration projects. This affected the project in that I was only able to photograph totems that I could access. As some totems are owned by the city and others by private parties, it was also difficult to find quantitative data and statistics about how many totems are actually in Seattle. In writing and creating my thesis, I was careful to qualify my statements about the number of totem poles in Seattle because comprehensive information on this does not currently exist.

With regard to the creative aspect of my thesis, the biggest challenge was figuring out how to use my knowledge of the Adobe suite to best present this story. While it is a requirement in the School of Journalism and Communication to learn about some video editing programs, I did not specialize in video editing and am by no means an expert in this area. Luckily, I had the help of my friend Jacob Mehringer when producing the first drafts of the video; however, as the project continued to develop and change over time, it was my responsibility to edit and produce the work. This required learning a new Adobe editing program on my part. Along with this, I also designed and wrote everything in the creative thesis. My background working with the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite (DPS) in InDesign was extremely helpful throughout this process, but the program itself still has coding complications that often resulted in time-consuming obstacles. When my knowledge of this program fell short, I was able to work with expert designer Shan Anderson to find a solution to the problem. That said, hours were

spent trying to figure out the intricacies of the program and some solutions meant changing the design concept I originally had to better fit with the chosen platform. Regardless of its problems, the DPS program made the most sense for this project because of its versatility and ability to transfer between devices. Working in DPS meant that this project could be opened on a cellphone, a tablet, a computer, and basically any device with the ability to access the internet or download an app. It also allowed for easy sharing on social media platforms. As accessibility was very important to me in choosing a platform, DPS made the most sense for this project.

With regard to effectiveness, this project succeeds in demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of a multimedia journalist digital project. It shows the strength of sharing the stories of a few important members of the Seattle art community through a multi-platform project but also does not provide the depth into one specific person's story that a documentary or individual photo essay would. With more time, I could see this project developing into a larger project that could speak more specifically to individuals in the Salish art community and include more people and more perspectives.

## **Continuing the Conversation**

As the topic of cultural appropriation grows, so does the importance of projects that share different perspectives and ideas about its effects. By creating a space for conversation and sharing, it is possible for our society to become more accepting and understanding of all people. In the relatively short amount of time I spent working to create such a project, I learned about the depth and range of ideologies that exist today regarding the effects of cultural appropriation. All of these realizations began by asking questions. In considering how this project could be continued, I think the best direction would be to develop a way to ask more people about their ideas about cultural appropriation. As the creative project provides a good basis for understanding the background behind cultural appropriation, I think adding a blog or social platform that would allow for people to respond to the work I've done would be very interesting and informative. Similar to what the Portland Art Museum did with their various exhibitions on Native American art, this project could be further developed to pose a question to audience members asking them to share their perspectives. This would allow more people to be involved in the conversation and could even result in some change with regard to the current initiatives of the Seattle Arts Commission.

For their exhibit on Native American artwork, the Burke Museum could also adapt this project into an app that could provide information to museum attendees. Doing this would be a way the Burke Museum could relate the historical artwork seen in their exhibits with modern day issues in the streets of Seattle.

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