



A M E R I C A N  
I N S T I T U T E F O R  
C O N S E R V A T I O N  
O F H I S T O R I C A N D  
A R T I S T I C W O R K S

---

Article: The treatment of a Haida totem pole: All things considered?

Author(s): Leslie Williamson

Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Six, 1999*

Pages: 2-10

Compilers: Virginia Greene and Emily Kaplan

© 2000 by The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, 1156 15<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20005. (202) 452-9545

[www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org)

Under a licensing agreement, individual authors retain copyright to their work and extend publications rights to the American Institute for Conservation.

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). A membership benefit of the Objects Specialty Group, *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* is mainly comprised of papers presented at OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

Papers presented in *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Six, 1999* have been edited for clarity and content but have not undergone a formal process of peer review. This publication is primarily intended for the members of the Objects Specialty Group of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein rests solely with the authors, whose articles should not be considered official statements of the OSG or the AIC. The OSG is an approved division of the AIC but does not necessarily represent the AIC policy or opinions.

## **THE TREATMENT OF A HAIDA TOTEM POLE: ALL THINGS CONSIDERED?**

Leslie Williamson

The title of this presentation about the treatment of a Haida totem pole at the National Museum of the American Indian poses the question: were all things considered? In this project, as with all oversized artifacts, the process of evolving a treatment plan required much more time, thought, research and advice than is normal for smaller scale projects. The conservation work has been an on-going project, involving numerous conservators, contractors, and interns over a span of almost five years. The nature of the treatment itself involved drawing on the expertise of both object and wooden artifact conservators, curators, engineers, and a traditional native Haida artist. The motivation and goals for this treatment were also multifold, reflecting the necessity to move the pole several hundred miles to a new housing location, the request for exhibit, and the projected expectations of native Haida viewers. With a complicated project of this kind, it is important to continually re-evaluate the decisions as the treatment evolves, and hope that in the end all aspects are fairly considered.

The totem pole was carved about 1875 for Chief Eagle of Old Kasaan Village, Prince of Wales Island, Alaska. Heraldic poles such as this one functioned primarily as reminders of the social standing of the families who paid to raise them. They depict myths or stories that commemorate events of importance to the lineages that claimed them. The village of Old Kasaan was established in the 1700's when the Kaigani subgroup of Haida moved from the Queen Charlotte Islands and took over part of the Prince of Wales Islands from the Tlingit. Many village sites were somewhat unstable, because groups moved with changes in allegiance and changes in resources. Around 1880, Chief Son-I-hat of Old Kasaan built a new clan house at a site near a cannery that would be called New Kasaan, and by 1900 his people had basically deserted the old site. Many of the house fronts and poles of the old village were subsequently given away, sold, or taken.

One of the earliest efforts to salvage poles came from a relationship of the Alaska territorial governor John Brady and the Kaigani Haida. In 1890 a dozen or so poles, including some from Old Kasaan, were given to Brady and eventually became the Sitka National Historic Park. Preservation was attempted in the 1930's, when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had a program to salvage poles, and several were moved from Old to New Kasaan. Along with the removal and relocation of poles by the CCC, attempts were often made to recarve old poles to preserve their forms. These carvings often proved unsatisfactory, leading to heavy repainting with little relation to original color schemes.

When the nephew of the last chief with claim to the pole in this project died without a successor, the pole was sold from the village to provide money for a burial feast for the chief. Unfortunately the feast was never held. The pole was acquired by the Museum of the American Indian (MAI) in the late 1930's. The pole was erected outdoors in front of the MAI on upper Broadway in New

*Williamson*

York City in 1941, and remained there with periodic repair and repainting until worries about the security of exhibiting it outdoors in a changing neighborhood led to the lowering and transfer of the pole to a storage flat on blocks outdoors at the MAI's storage facility in the Bronx in 1982. For a few months in 1984 the pole was exhibited in the atrium of the IBM building in New York, and a small amount of surface restoration occurred at that time. Following this the pole was returned to flat storage in the Bronx.

In 1994, new covers were installed over the museum's four totem poles, and at that time thorough condition examinations were conducted to establish their feasibility for use in exhibits as well as their general needs for shipment and storage at the museum's new storage site in Suitland, MD. James Hay of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) was contracted for this evaluation, utilizing his considerable experience and expertise gained from treatment of his own institution's totem poles. His assessment was that the Haida pole was in relatively good condition when compared to our other poles, but was still in rather poor condition overall.

As is common with most totem poles, it was not carved in the round, but rather hollowed out along the length of the back to reduce weight and splitting. Examination revealed that a modern fir support pole had been affixed to the lower 2/3 of the hollowed back by means of iron bolts and an iron collar, all heavily corroded. The eagle figure, at the very top of the pole, was found to be made of an entirely separate piece of carved cedar, inserted into the curve of the main pole and attached with 3 iron bolts extending through to the front of the potlatch rings and 3 banding straps around the entire assemblage holding it together. The bolts were very corroded, and there was extensive rot around the attachment area. There was also another separately carved piece of a hunter figure that belonged at the bottom between the legs of the lowermost beaver figure but was detached completely. There were significant areas of longitudinal cracking at both the top and bottom of the pole that were quite unstable.

The other concerns for the pole were cosmetic, ranging from numerous small losses filled with modern repair materials like cement, chicken wire, putty, and non-cedar wood affixed with various kinds of hardware, to many, many layers of overpaint. Mr. Hay's experience with removing paint from aged cedar surfaces indicated it would take thousands of hours and still may not have provided an acceptable surface. His final recommendation was that the pole was in good enough condition to be moved horizontally with proper support, but could not be safely erected without repair and additional support, and would need to have either extensive and painstaking paint removal or additional overpainting if the modern color scheme was desired to be corrected.

At this point, the curatorial and exhibits departments decided that they might want the pole to stand in the entry way of the future museum, so plans for treatment of the pole were formalized. During the time of this evaluation and planning the project was being overseen by the head of conservation, Marian Kaminitz, and by former staff conservator John Moses, who directed all the testing, planning and work for the first year of the project before his return to Canada. I inherited the project in 1995. Following the recommendations of Mr. Hay, the treatment was planned to

address the structural needs first, to be followed by the surface needs.

First, a tent-like enclosure was constructed over the pole to provide a sheltered work space, since at 43 feet the pole was too long to fit in available indoor space. To address structural instabilities at the top and bottom of the pole, the fir support pole on the lower two-thirds was removed. Then the attached eagle figure was removed, to allow access to the large, unsupported cracks near the top of the pole. There was extensive loss of wood from rot around the upper crack, probably accelerated by organic matter trapped between the back of the pole and the eagle figure.

The crack was joined with 3 inset butterfly joints adhered with bulked epoxy resin. A large volume of new cedar was carved in layers and adhered in the loss areas around the crack, from the back and then the front, to provide a sound area for attachment of loose surface pieces and the eventual reattachment of the eagle figure. The crack at the bottom was not repaired directly, instead it would be secured with a new custom made support frame we called the "strongback". The strongback design was used at the CMC, having been developed by Mr. Hay with help from engineers and steel fabricators, to provide a framework and lifting point for erecting the pole and to provide a means for securing the pole to the building structure once standing. In our case, it would also be a means for bridging the lower crack, with a curved internal support.

To build the strongback we again contracted with someone with previous experience, Maurice Dulepka, who had provided similar supports for poles at the CMC. Mr. Dulepka came to the Bronx in the Fall of 1996 to assess the pole and make measurements, and proposed using a design with a stainless steel hollow square mast running up the middle of the back of the pole, with extending ladder-like arms to attach to the back edges of the sides of the pole.

We also invited Jim Hart, a prominent Haida carver from Masset, BC, to consult with us on the direction the rest of the project would take. With the issues of basic structural integrity resolved by the strongback, the remaining concerns were more subjective in nature and we wanted input and direction from a knowledgeable native perspective. We asked him to help us determine what a contemporary Haida viewer might expect from seeing this pole on exhibit, with the hopes of incorporating his expectations and requests into any surface work that might be done.

Having Mr. Dulepka and Mr. Hart consulting at the same time had an added benefit in helping resolve some crucial issues. We had planned to bolt the separate eagle figure back in place using pre-existing bolt holes, and to connect it directly to the strongback for security. According to Mr. Dulepka's measurements, however, connection of the eagle to the strongback was going to be awkward because the back of the eagle extended beyond the plane of the hollow steel mast. Mr. Dulepka wanted to remove wood from the back of the eagle's post to make it flush with his steel structure, allowing for a stronger connection.

We were hesitant to remove anything significant from the pole, but Mr. Hart was able to provide some background to justify it, or at least reduce our worries over having some wood removed.

His estimation was that the second piece of wood, attached to the top of the pole, could not be original. He said that if the upper bird figure had deteriorated away while the pole was in the village, the owner would never have had a replacement figure carved and added after the pole had been raised: it just “wasn’t done”. We can see in photos of the pole in situ in 1924 that an eagle figure does exist at the top of the pole, but that it looks fairly degraded, with vegetation growing from it and no beak present. We can also see in photos from just after the time of removal of the pole from the village in the 1930’s that a different eagle figure is present, with a slimmer body and head, and a protruding beak, which is how the pole looked upon acquisition by the museum. Therefore, while the current eagle is original to the time of acquisition, it is actually out of keeping with the traditional lifetime of the pole. We discussed removing the eagle figure completely, or having Mr. Hart recarve a top more in keeping with the quality and style of the original figure, but in the end it was decided to keep the existing addition as important to the history of the pole. Considering Jim Hart’s views, and the necessity of achieving a secure attachment, it was agreed that it was acceptable to remove a few inches from the back of the lower part of the eagle figure, which he did for us with his own carving adze.

After this final step in planning the structural support, Mr. Hart helped devise the surface treatment during discussions with curator Mary Jane Lenz, James Hay, myself and a number of interns and fellows. Again, his opinion was that traditionally, once a pole had deteriorated to a certain point, it wouldn’t have been repaired, it would just have been left to continue to deteriorate and perhaps a new pole would then be erected. Our situation, though, was different from what would happen on site in a native community. We had an historic pole that had been removed from its context, that we wanted to preserve and show as an example of 19th century carving. Mr. Hart felt that just because the maker wouldn’t have thought of preserving the pole didn’t mean we couldn’t or shouldn’t. He didn’t find it objectionable to exhibit the old pole, and even though there has been a resurgence of Haida artists making high quality carving who could carve us a replica or a new pole, he thought the pole could have a place to teach about the history of the Haida.

Mr. Hart did object to showing the pole in its damaged and misinterpreted state. Because the totem pole was a representation of the status of a person or family, a deteriorated pole would be replaced by a new one as a point of pride and to show ongoing prosperity. He thought that for us to show a pole that appeared to be in poor condition would not be well received by Haida viewers. He didn’t want us to make our pole look new again, but just good enough. It needed to have clearly readable forms, because you have to be able to distinguish the characters on the pole in order to “read” the story. Also, the surface coloration had to be accurate. The Haida use a simple and predictable color scheme, which the pole did not resemble. For him, the pole in its current state didn’t look Haida. He asked that we replace poorly made old fills, and insert wood in any rotted or lost areas that interrupted the lines of an important edge or area that defines a form. Especially disturbing was the beak on the eagle, which was obviously an even later addition, and didn’t reflect the correct shape of an eagle’s beak. Mr. Hart provided us with a detailed listing of areas he found in need of work, and also made a sketch of the generally

appropriate color scheme for this kind of Haida pole.

The next spring, the strongback was installed on the pole, with the assistance of Mr. Dulepka and Mr. Hay. Throughout the summer, we proceeded to fill the areas designated by Mr. Hart with carved blocks of cedar. Surfaces were left a little proud, allowing for final surface finishing by him. We asked Mr. Hart to do the final carving, because in many areas the exact shapes were unclear to us, but to him, with a lifetime of studying and carving traditional Haida forms, they were obvious. Equally obvious was the vast difference in carving skill between us and him. We also sampled to try to find original paint colors, and tested methods for removal of the modern paint. Neither proved successful, and we concluded that toning and overpainting the existing paint using an isolating layer of methyl cellulose and gouache would be more time-effective, satisfying, and less damaging to the underlying wood.

When Mr. Hart returned in the Fall of 1997, he provided the eagle with a new beak, and finished carving all our fills, giving them a faceted, shimmering surface we could never have achieved. He also approved a palette of gouache colors including red and black for basic forms on the eyes, brows and lips, and a neutral grey to try to better mimic the color of unpainted aged cedar. To avoid running or fading of the colors, the repainting was not done at the time and will be done once the pole is transported to indoor storage. We hope Mr. Hart will come back to oversee and assist in that work.

Finally, this ongoing project is drawing to an end. The transportation of the pole to the museum's new storage building in Suitland, MD, is planned for late 1999. After all pest management procedures are completed and the pole is loaded on a truck, the direction of future work will fall to the permanent conservation department staff working at the storage facility in Suitland. This juncture in the phases of the treatment of the totem pole provides the opportunity to try to evaluate the entire process, to determine once again if all things were indeed considered. This is a necessary practice since with any project that stretches over a long period it is easy to lose the overall focus of the work while being involved in it.

As a means to this evaluation, I questioned a number of the people involved in the project to see how they now view our overall results. When asked if he would have treated the pole differently if it had been at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, James Hay offered only that they would have worked indoors, which would have allowed for year round work, but also noted that our outdoor tent, with fresh air and picnic tables nearby, was quite pleasant. He did elaborate on his enjoyment of working with Jim Hart, and compared it to his previous experience working with Kwakiutl artists Bruce Alfred and Doug Cranmer as consultants on their treatment of the Wakas pole. He applauded our decision to have someone from the original community as a principle decision-maker in how that material should be displayed, and felt that aside from it being good policy, it will avoid having any questions on authenticity of the treated artifact. John Moses, the original project conservator, similarly supported the process we used, summing it up nicely as: 1. Utilizing available conservation expertise to address structural issues, 2. Utilizing available rigging

*Williamson*

and construction expertise to ensure proper loading and stabilization for transport and reinstallation, and 3. Utilizing native expertise to confirm appropriate design and structural elements, and to work alongside conservators to complete this work.

There were many decisions made throughout this project, and most of them required combining a number of viewpoints to reach a compromise answer. Probably no one thing was absolutely wrong or right, but this is of course often true in conservation. Certainly with an artifact of this size no decision was ever taken lightly. In this project the attempt was to balance the basic needs of conservation of the pole, the institutional needs for display, and the culturally based visual needs of the Haida. We hope a satisfactory balance of them all was reached. Undoubtedly the inclusion of so many skilled and knowledgeable people in the process was invaluable, and ensured that the best of each person's ideas were incorporated. The hard work and good humor of the numerous individuals involved was a great asset and greatly appreciated.

**Author's Address**

Leslie Williamson, National Museum of the American Indian, Research Branch, 3401 Bruckner Blvd., Bronx, NY 10461 (williamson@si.edu).



Figure 1. Pole, showing modern repainting, installed in front of the Museum of the American Indian, 155th Street and Boadway, New York, circa 1963. The repainting subsequently weathered off.

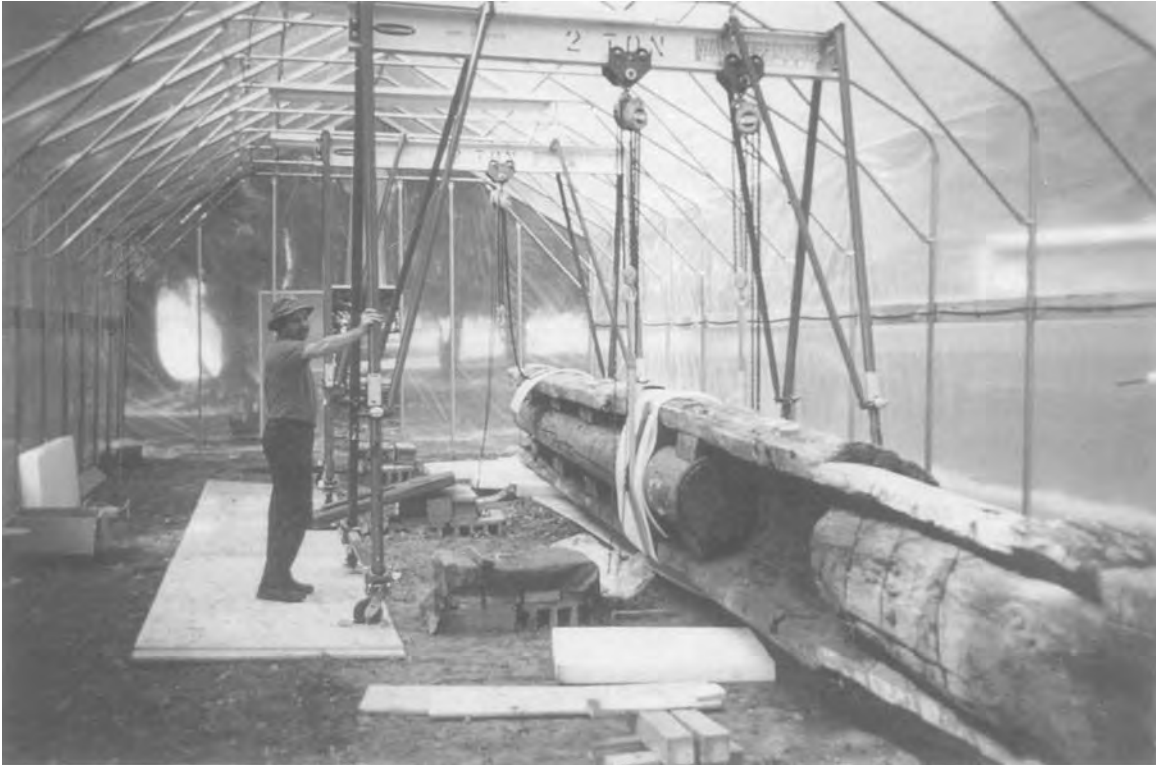


Figure 2. James Hay inspecting the back of the pole, with the old support pole visible at the far end and the eagle figure with old metal banding straps at the near end.



Figure 3. Eagle figure being lowered away from the pole to gain access to cracks and rot.



Figure 5. The pole mounted on the strongback, with all wood fills complete.



Figure 4. The pole and the strongback, prior to attachment.