

Totems Truer Than Theory

[SEEMS THEY DIDN'T START FOR YOU AND ME]



For years scholars of such things have almost universally assumed that totem poles of the Northwest Indians were born purely out of the tourist trade and the introduction of European iron tools.

That, it appears, is giving a bit too much credit to the march of progress, for it now looks like carvers of the Northwest were carving their histories and jokes when ancient Greek sculptors were sculpting Venus of Melos and her sisters — maybe before.

This scholastic breakthrough, sure to cause tempest in archeological circles, comes from Dr. George MacDonald, chief of the archeology division for the National Museums of Canada and an internationally recognized authority on the Haida Indians British of Columbia. He has evidence that indicates the stylized designs go back at least to 500 B.C.

Dr. MacDonald's most important research has been at Prince Rupert Harbor, B.C., where he and a hundred students have been digging for six years. They have found amulets and combs of bone, carved with mythological crests that "go back to the foundations," and which are the same dazzling art work that is cut into the huge red cedar totems.

"The crests were the same as today," said the elated Dr. MacDonald. "They are zoomorphic, based on animal mythology."

He believes that the Indians' art was entirely geometric and nonrepresentational until 500 B.C., when the coastal population began to increase rapidly and the people split into independent village societies and developed a new form of social organization — a family rank system — for which crests were necessary.

The crests then, as today, not only spelled out the family lineage — with two "phratries" or families among the Haidas, for instance, and four among the Tsimshians — but were also used to proclaim the property rights of the owner.

Scientists have found similar carvings by the Makah Indians just over the Canadian border in the state of Washington, which were covered by mud slides over five hundred years ago.

"I can guarantee you this," said Dr. MacDonald

emphatically, "the carving of crest animals was going on a large scale for thousands of years."

Bjorn Simonson, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia and field director of the province's Archeological Advisory Board, has discovered a plank house at Higgins Pass, B.C., preserved by being charred by fire and by a ten-foot cover of refuse. It has been radio carbon dated at 500 B.C.

Another student completely excavated a very large plank house at Prince Rupert built in 1780 — before the Haidas had extensive contact with Europeans — and abandoned in 1830. The timbers were preserved and they will be displayed in the museum in Ottawa.

The plank houses prove that Indians did not need European tools to carve the wood, Dr. MacDonald said, and stone axes and adzes made of jadeite were found at these archeological sites.

No totem pole has been found anywhere that predates the arrival of the first explorers in 1787, but Dr. MacDonald contends that that doesn't mean there were none. The Indians made no attempt to preserve the poles and all eventually yield to dry rot, unless the site is submerged.

His contention is that the Northwest Indians have been sculpturing in wood on a monumental scale for several thousand years.

"The scale was probably different, perhaps shorter, flatter," Dr. MacDonald said, "and on the Haida mainland I believe there were mostly painted housefronts instead." The contention is in direct opposition to the belief of such recognized experts as the late Marius Barbeau.

Until recently when Indians realized the importance of their past and revived the old customs, no new totem had been carved in over sixty years and very few in the decades before that. Haida population dwindled disastrously through European and Asian-borne epidemics, and the number of Haidas on Queen Charlotte Island alone had dropped from eight thousand to six hundred.

The sculpturing of totems also was damaged badly by overzealous missionaries who misunderstood their nature and accused the Indians of worshipping false gods.

One missionary identified only as the Rev.