



**Poles, Posts and Canoes: The Preservation, Conservation  
and Continuation of Native American Monumental Wood  
Carving | 2014-09**  
Tulalip Tribes Hibulb Cultural Center



National Park Service  
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**NCPTT 2012 Grants  
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**“Poles, Posts and Canoes: The Preservation, Conservation and Continuation  
of Native American Monumental Wood Carving”**

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**Final Report**

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## Executive Summary

This project was to examine and discuss the challenges of preserving and exhibiting monumental wood carvings from both a Native and Non-native point of view. The symposium was a collaborative effort that attempted to unite those who care for and/or create Native American carvings which may include conservators, Native American carvers and Native and non-Native museum professionals.

The goal during the symposium was to promote an informal discussion between these professional groups in the hope that the resulting dialogue will help support and preserve the continued development of this traditional form. In addition, the aim is to assist in better understanding the best methods to conserve, preserve and present both historic and contemporary Native American wooden carvings.

A 2-day symposium was held and we organized a call-for-papers. Presentations were given on conservation and care practices from diverse points of view; Native and non-Native. The presentation topics guided the conservation throughout the conference. The topics of discussion were:

- Large carvings and current conservation practices in native and non-Natives museums.
- The meaning of these carvings for contemporary carvers and how carvers might participate in their conservation and curation.
- Looking forward to the future-finding balance between technical and non-technical approaches to the use and care of monumental Native American wooden carvings.
- How can museums and conservation help nurture contemporary carving activities?
- How can we define “best practices” in Native American museum collections?

## Introduction

The primary products facilitated by the NCPTT grant were two related events; the first a two day symposium and the second a practical workshop.

The two day symposium, entitled "*Poles, Posts and Canoes: the Preservation, Conservation and Continuation of native American Monumental Wood Carving*" gathered non-Native museum professionals, tribal members, and contemporary Native carvers to discuss the challenges of preserving and exhibiting historic monumental wood carvings from both a Native and Non-Native view point. It served to connect Native carvers and the museum community in the hope that the resulting dialogue will help support the continued development of this traditional art form, as well as an understanding of the challenges faced by museums charged with caring for this material, both old and new. The format of the event was aimed at encouraging discussion, so presentations were relaxed and brief, and an equal amount of time was given for open discussion of the topics addressed. The structure of the symposium generally followed that outlined in our original grant application. This included the development of an online presence (currently a blog site) that we hope will eventually become a full blown website.

Shortly after the initial announcement of the symposium we were contacted by conservator Michael Harrington and his colleagues who have in the past held three very popular and successful practical workshops on the maintenance of totem poles. They offered to hold a similar event in association with the symposium, and being familiar with their work and the popularity of the previous versions of the workshop, it was clear that this was a perfect optional extension to the original gathering. Part of the NCPTT grant was used to directly support this event, in particular travel and honoraria for the instructors. While the workshop was not included in our original proposal for the symposium, when the opportunity was offered to us to host it as part of the gathering, it was obvious that this was an invaluable and perfect addition to the planned event and one that would have been foolish to turn down.

## Methods and Materials

There are no methods or materials to report since the symposium was dialogued based.

## Results and Discussions

The symposium and the workshop were attended by people from all of the targeted communities – conservators, museum professionals (native and non-native) and contemporary carvers and artists – all individuals working in one way or another in the field of historic preservation and perpetuation of historic art forms.

From observations made during the week, comments on the evaluation forms completed by participants at the end of the symposium and workshop, and from correspondence with participants since the events, both the symposium and the workshop had significant positive impacts on those that attended. Most commonly noted were the following:

- How valuable it was to have long, scheduled periods of discussion which led to more open and relaxed talk about the various topics. It was noted that this was of particular value when it came to addressing culturally sensitive topics, such as the intangible values and importance of native carving. These are areas that are often avoided or simply overlooked during typical question and answer sessions as they require time for participants to feel comfortable talking freely and openly. The extended discussion periods allowed the appropriate atmosphere to develop.
- The content of the presentations provided new and valuable information and/or perspectives of use to participants in the future.
- Many participants acknowledged having left with a better understanding of native perspectives regarding the creation and care of monumental native wood carvings.
- And related to the last point, many non-native participants said that they now have a better understanding of how to approach discussing what may be sensitive topics with First Peoples.
- First People participants commented that both events left them with a better understanding of the challenges faced by museum-based approaches to caring for these materials.
- The opportunity to network on an international level with other individuals who share their interest in the preservation of this material will have a lasting impact on their work.

The workshop provided 28 people from a wide geographic range (in fact international) with advanced guidance in the care of totem poles. Many of the participants are also responsible for historic wooden structures (in particular long houses), and so the knowledge gained will have an impact beyond just the care of carved poles.

Other indications that the week of activities has had an impact is the enthusiasm shown by participants to perpetuate the contacts they made either by personal communications or by meeting again in the future – the question “When can we do this again?” was uttered many times.

The idea of a website that would serve as an online meeting place for folks to keep in contact and continue discussions was enthusiastically endorsed and we are in the process of developing ideas for this through the existing blog.

With the attendees coming from at least seven countries, the symposium and workshop can claim to have advanced the field of historic preservation at an international level.

## Conclusions

## Acknowledgments

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[http://www.tulalipcares.org/Applications/Charitable Contributions Grant Application](http://www.tulalipcares.org/Applications/Charitable_Contributions_Grant_Application)  
Provided funding for the conference

## References

There are no references to report.