

## **Star House Pole: Early Images of the Haida Totem Pole in the Pitt Rivers Museum**

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

9 June – 28 September 2014

This exhibition presents a selection of historic images – including photographs, drawings and published material – which relate to the Haida totem pole now in the Pitt Rivers Museum's collections, plus several original documents concerning its acquisition and installation in the Museum in 1901. The totem pole, or frontal post, itself comes from the Haida village of Masset, on Haida Gwaii (formerly Queen Charlotte Islands), in British Columbia, Canada. Early photographs of Masset show the pole situated in front of Chief Anetlas' Star House, where it had been raised at a potlatch to celebrate the adoption of a daughter; the carved motifs, such as the striking raven's head, denote ancestral beings and stories related to the chief's lineage or, more especially, that of his wife, a member of the Haida's Raven moiety. The totem pole, which can today be seen in the Court of the Museum, was purchased for the University of Oxford by Edward Burnett Tylor, Keeper of the University Museum and the first Professor of Anthropology. Tylor drew on his



1998.473.1

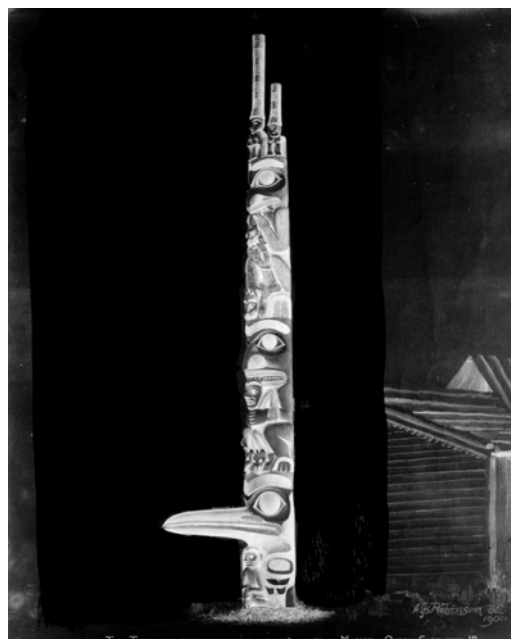
View of houses and totem poles at Masset (formerly Massett) village, with the frontal post of Star House (with the raven's beak) clearly visible in the foreground, now located in the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. *Photograph by Bertram Buxton. Masset, Haida Gwaii, Canada. 1882.*



2004.144.1

'The Totem-pole standing before the chief's house in Masset, Queen Charlotte I<sup>d</sup>.'

*Watercolour by Alfred Robinson. 1901.*



PRM77536

Glass negative of Robinson's painting (left), reworked as one of several stages in the process leading to its publication.

*Photograph by Alfred Robinson. 1901.*



Balfour Library, Per.2

Robinson's painting (top) reproduced in E. B. Tylor's 1902 article in *Man*, 'Note on the Haida Totem-Post lately erected in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford'.



Private collection

'Totem Poles', an imaginary view of a Haida village, featuring Star House Pole copied from the published image (left).

*Illustration by Fairfax Muckley. Circa 1909.*



1998.267.269.10



1998.267.269.8

Two photographs showing the Haida totem pole shortly after its installation in the Court of the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1901. Robert Hanley Hall, who had arranged for its purchase through the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote to Prof. E. B. Tylor the following February: 'I am much pleased to receive the two handsome photographs of the Totem Pole as it now stands in the Museum, and I will prize them very much.'

*Photographs by Alfred Robinson. Oxford, England. 1901.*

extensive network of correspondents to secure his goal, which took several years to achieve. Letters from an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, Robert Hanley Hall, attest to his negotiating a final price of \$36 for the cedar pole, which was taken down and shipped to England on completion of the sale.

At the centre of the display is a sequence of images whose relationship has only recently been understood, and which is shown here for the first time. Following the installation of the forty-foot pole in the autumn of 1901, Tylor published a short article on the subject in the scholarly journal *Man*, titled 'Note on the Haida Totem-Post lately erected in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford'. Wishing for a colour plate to accompany his words, Tylor engaged his assistant Alfred Robinson, a skilled draughtsman and photographer, to make an illustration of the pole for publication. A close examination of Robinson's original painting, which for many years was on display in the Museum, reveals that he based his depiction on a photograph, being a view of Masset taken two decades earlier by Bertram Buxton, with colour added from life after the pole's arrival in Oxford. After several times photographing and reworking his glass plates for publication, Robinson's illustration was reproduced at the front of Tylor's article, and printed opposite Buxton's original image, thereby reflecting the pole in its current state and as it would have once been seen. Less than a decade later, however, Robinson's depiction had itself been copied – and its context entirely altered – by the illustrator Louis Fairfax Muckley, whose work would be reproduced several times over in popular encyclopedias of the day. From photograph of the totem pole *in situ* to an imagined view of a Haida village, this sequence of images is a good example of how knowledge was constructed – and also how it could be changed – in the early part of the last century.