

The Pole — a very unique commission

By ERIC SAPERSTEIN

Artisans of the Valley, Pennington, N.J., completed this reproduction Alaskan Totem pole at the end of May 2002. It is a fully artistic project, which is our favorite type of work. Artistic commissions require special attention and either consistent client input, or full artistic freedom. In this case, the client provided a sample

totem, and requested that we create a unique pole "bigger and better" than a model piece.

Having never designed a totem, my father, Stanley Saperstein, began the project by researching Alaskan and other tribal totems to gain a full background of the characters and techniques. A few weeks later he had his template designed and work began. This was my first opportunity to create a large-scale sculpture, gaining my experience doing the roughout and heavy work for the pole, with Dad quickly regaining artistic control for all the detail.

Standing just shy of six-feet tall, this portal pole accents the open area of the atrium in our client's Frank Lloyd Wright-style home. The color scheme was designed to match the existing decor both inside and outside of the glass room, following the rules of the home's architect.

Carving totems is a diverse tradition spanning early civilizations between North and South America, Australia, Africa, and Europe. Common in stone or wood, artistic representation of supernatural beings is an interregal part of tradition and superstition for tribes throughout the world, serving in some cases as a spiritual "coat of arms" displaying power and prominence or commemoration within the tribal community.

This particular pole has Alaskan roots. Each character is a combination of animal and human characteristics, holding specific meaning to tribes. Totems tell a story, and should represent their craftsman and owners. Each pole is unique, and may tell a traditional or hidden story expressing both truth and humor, in many cases poking fun at both parties.

The Characters

The Thunderbird atop the pole resides on the poles of chiefs. Grand lord of the Sky Realm, this great bird frightens humans who disturb him, needs homage, and is busy with his own wars carried out beyond human perception. This bird eats whales, and enjoys visiting human dance ceremonies.

The Beaver, expressing a slightly twisted grimace, follows native traditions to incorporate humorous expressions. This vengeful creature occasionally murders humans. If provoked, the Beaver digs underground tunnels that cause earthquakes and

landslides; he is also known to construct fine arrows.

The Raven, creator of light, formed the universe starting with a shiny object that turned into the sun. A powerful, ever-transforming trickster, he is always hungry, ever curious, deviant, compulsive, crooked, corrupt and deceptive, but somehow remains likeable. In modern terms: ever politically incorrect.

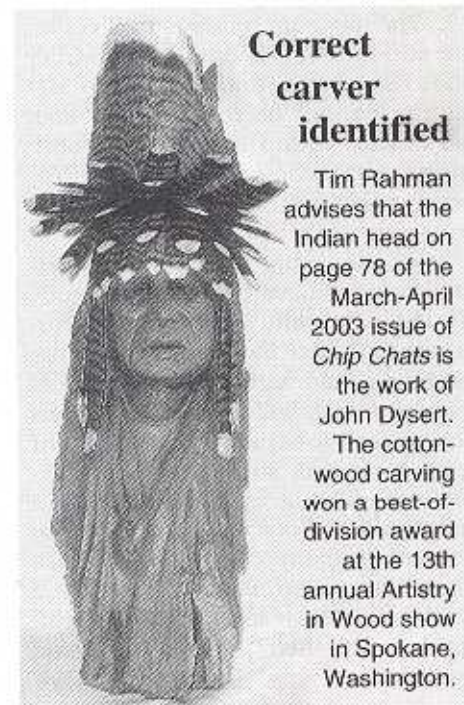
The Bear is an early "transformer" who can easily switch a human and animal form. A Bear must never be insulted or cursed. This lumbering, caring figure yearns to marry a good-looking human princesses and has the ability to make fires with wet sticks known as "bear wood."

Our research led us to a much greater understanding of traditional use of totems, and a history of the techniques and skills employed by Native carvers. We look forward to any future opportunity to provide larger scale sculptural pieces such as this one. ■

Contact Artisans of the Valley, 103 Corrine Dr., Pennington, NJ 08534; (609) 637-0450; <www.artisansofthevalley.com>.



Totem pole stands nearly six feet tall; wood is poplar.



Correct carver identified

Tim Rahman advises that the Indian head on page 78 of the March-April 2003 issue of *Chip Chats* is the work of John Dysert. The cottonwood carving won a best-of-division award at the 13th annual Artistry in Wood show in Spokane, Washington.

Tom Singleton carvings sought

Debra Gallup, 15088 State Hwy M-28, Newberry, MI 49868, is looking to purchase any woodcarvings by the late Tom Singleton of Newberry, Mich. E-mail <dgallup@portup.com>.