The Story of the Totempole. National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, the Netherlands. October 6, 2012—April 1, 2013.*

Reviewed by Mariangela Provezi

On April 2013 a new item came to enrich the garden of the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde in the Netherlands. Eight meters long, weighing one and a half tons, and made out of red cedar decorated with vivid colors, a totem pole was placed just a few meters outside the museum's entrance. Most totem poles serve as memorials of significant events; likewise, this one will now remain as a commemoration of the cultural event that took place not long ago in Leiden, Netherlands. From October 6, 2012 until April 1, 2013, the National Museum of Ethnology hosted an exhibition on the Northwest Coast Indians, named *Het Verhaal van de Totempaal* or *The Story of The Totempole*. The exhibition was nominated for the prestigious Society of British and International Design Awards (SBID) on October 2013 and on November 29, 2013, the Story of the Totempole succeeded in winning the Public Space International Design Award (British Interior Designers 2014). The SBID award is definitely a success for the exhibition, the museum, and also for the company that took on the task of designing the exhibition, Kossman DeJong. It is a recognition addressing the aesthetics, or to be more precise, the artistic part of an ethnographic display. This observation brings forth the discussion in contemporary museology about modes of display in museums in general and consequently ethnographic museums (Bouquet 2012; Shelton 2011). The question of how much art can be incorporated into an ethnographic display comes to mind. In this discussion I pose the question, where does the Story of the Totempole stand?

Figure 1. Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde. Photo by the author.

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The exhibition apparently created quite an impression on both design experts and the Dutch audience, with the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde estimating that attendance reached 70 thousand visitors. An effortless assumption could attribute the project's popularity to the exhibition's subject. American Indian culture has been widely projected in novels, movies, comic books, and children's games and toys. However, the popularity of a theme does not equate success. It is essential to know how to make an appealing presentation to the visitors and Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde knew how to do just that.

The Story of the Totempole is the materialization of an idea that came in February 2011, when the Canadian ambassador to the Netherlands visited the National Museum of Ethnology with a proposition for a project on the Northwest Coast Indians. This proposal coincided with the museum's intention to produce a temporary exhibition that would inaugurate one of its newly renovated spaces. For the purposes of the exhibition, a special centerpiece was created. Rande Cook, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist, was the master carver of the exhibition's totem pole (Provezi 2012). The manufacture of the centerpiece began in Canada in the spring of 2012, and later in August of that year it was transported in the Netherlands where it would be completed. From August 22, 2012 the totem pole was located in the museum's garden; there the master carver Rande Cook and his team added the finishing touches to the piece. For almost ten days people could actually observe the process of creating a totem pole and converse with its creators. With this event the museum triggered the imagination of its possible visitors managed to raise interest and expectations before the actual advertising of the exhibition even began. Later the exhibition poster illustrated an image of the totem pole and the title of the exhibit. Unpretentious and enigmatic, it added to the unique atmosphere that was already created from the people's contact with the totem pole carvers and urged visitors to see the exhibition and experience the story.

Figure 2. Photo by the author.

As the exhibition doors opened, big and small human-like figures welcomed the visitor. In the background two large video walls projected images from the Northwest Coast culture, but what really drew the attention of the visitors was a peculiar manmade tree. Thousands drawings of salmon were hanging down from the ceiling almost like leaves surrounding a pillar. Half of these drawings were colored by children of the Northwest Coast in Canada and the other half were done by children in the Netherlands, a symbol of unity and co-operation.

Walking towards the second showroom, the protagonist of the exhibition appeared. Absolutely riveting, this wonderful totem pole dominated the space. It stood in the middle of the room for visitors to observe and admire its craftsmanship. The design of the space around the main exhibit was cleverly filled with totem poles. Even the walls of the room were transformed in alternative showcases, displaying a range of totem poles from the Tlingit, the Tsimshian, the Haida, and the Kwakwaka'wakw.

Figure 3. Exhibiting totem poles on the wall. Photo by the author.

The exhibition carried on with references to the Northwest Coast people's everyday life and contemporary art. The design for these two exhibits appeared less imaginative than the other showrooms, creating a more classical presentation of the artefacts. The display of the objects revealed that their number was perhaps lacking compared to the other subjects presented. Their placement was also a bit confusing for the visitors to understand and did not draw their attention to the information given.

Figure 4. Every Day Life exhibition room. Photo by the author.

Figure 5. Art exhibition room. Photo by the author.

Next was the room of the Past and Present. In this showroom, everything participated in the presentation. Archival photographs documented the area's first contact with Europeans and the history of the relationship between the Northwest Coast and Western culture. Many subjects were addressed through text, short movies, and documentaries, such as celebration ceremonies, education, and tourism. The center of the room was filled with stringed screens. Each screen projected an interview with the indigenous people where comments on issues that concern the contemporary society of the Northwest Coast through the scope of history and tradition were made. All things aligned in order to bring out matters that were and still are influencing the Northwest Coast Native Americans.

Figure 6. Past and Present exhibit. Photo by author.

Figure 7. Past and Present exhibit. Photo by author.

Figure 8. Winter Ceremonies exhibit. Photo by the author.

Leaving the Past and Present showroom, the visitor entered a different zone of the Northwest Coast culture. The entirely altered set of lighting and the sound coming from the following displays foreshadowed that something different was happening in the exhibition from there on. The visitor entered a dark space, where the sounds of drums and voices filled the room; this was the Winter Ceremonies. Masks hanging on a black wall were bathed in dim lighting and appeared almost as if they were floating around the room. Dark and mystical, this exhibit evoked feelings of spirituality. Winter Ceremonies indeed had a strong visual impact that almost drew all attention from the fact that the masks had been placed randomly in the room without following any specific ethnographic taxonomy.

Before leaving the exhibition, the visitor had the opportunity to see the potlatch—one of the most famous ceremonies of the Northwest Coast Native Americans—being recreated. Upon entering the room, three wide video walls demonstrated a modern-day potlatch. Beneath the video walls were items from the contemporary market and the room was filled with the objects that were given in such ceremonies in the past. This inventive placement of objects embedded a contrast between the past and the present underlying the idea that the potlatch ceremony is timeless. The visitor became a spectator of what an actual potlatch felt like.

In *The Story of the Totem Pole* exhibition the design was skilfully used to attribute most of the sacred or mystical qualities certain objects had according to the Northwest Coast tradition. It was evident, but at the same time it was also rather discrete. It did not overwhelm the visitor but allowed the required space to imagine, contemplate, and be critical of what was presented. A video demonstrating the chronicle of the totem pole's creation serves as a perfect example of

Figure 9. Potlatch exhibit. Photo by the author.

Figure 10. Potlatch exhibit. Photo by the author.

how the exhibition managed to provide “food for thought.” Complementing the presentation of the exhibition’s centerpiece, a video conveyed all kinds of different information for all kinds of different visitors to ponder. Apart from the translation of the item’s significance, other parameters were also given. One of them was the relationship between the museum and the Kwakwaka’wakw community that emphasized the importance of co-operating with indigenous communities for the National Museum of Ethnology. A further “concealed” message was transmitted while master carver Rande Cook analyzed the importance of this totem pole. “It is not just an item,” he said “this is my story; this is me at the heart” while wearing a t-shirt that read “souvenir.” Thoughts of how tourism plays a very important role in the history of the Northwest Coast come to mind. This image could serve as an historic comment for the totem poles that were manufactured as souvenirs for tourists and that were later acquired by museums. In a different context it could also reference the commercial aspect of the relationship and co-operation between the museum and source communities. Many thoughts and assumptions could be made for this video; its importance lies not in the different messages it transmitted but in the stimulation that it offered to the mind of each visitor and the space it created for such thoughts to develop.

Judging from the objects presented throughout the exhibition, however, this could also lead to some misleading conclusions. Most of the artifacts exhibited in *The Story of the Totempole* came from the Kwakwaka’wakw culture group, thus creating an unbalanced presentation of the Northwest Coast Indian culture groups presented. This display could easily lead to the deceptive assumption that the Kwakwaka’wakw are culturally more important than others like the Haida or the Tlingit.

Although for the most part of the exhibition the design complemented *The Story of the Totempole*, there were some parts where the content was overlooked. The most palpable example of that was found in the Winter Ceremonies showroom. Although the aesthetics of the exhibit managed to convey the necessary mysticism of the subject, the ethnographic taxonomy was inadequate. Perhaps for an art exhibition the ethnographic background or even its absence would not have that much impact on the desired outcome, but the *Story of the Totempole* was an ethnographic exhibition. This observation brings us back to the initial question. The SBID design

award was undeniably a prestigious recognition for both the museum and the exhibition designer company; however, it is a design award. As a design award it refers to the aesthetic part of the exhibition and not to the project as a whole. Presenting a subject with inventive aesthetics is creative and impressive but presenting it in its accurate context is essential, otherwise an exhibition could easily become a meaningless fanfare or even a distorted reality (Smith 2011). Ethnographic museums should incorporate art in the manner of display to the point that this does not intervene with the historical and cultural significance of the object. After all, one of the responsibilities of the museums is to preserve not only the object exhibited but also its historical and cultural significance, the intangible. *The Story of the Totempole* managed for the most part to present a holistic and up to date view of its subjects. Apart from its wonderful presentation and the variety of the subjects it offered, it did have some weaknesses. These weaknesses were found only in some of the exhibit rooms and not the whole of the exhibition due to the fact that the subjects introduced were indeed too many for all to be presented properly. Consequently, the exhibition would have been more complete in context if it had hosted fewer topics.

In exploring the exhibition, one could see that the museum managed to tell *The Story of the Totempole* in an enchanting way. Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde charmed its audience once more with *The Story of the Totempole* exhibition “narrating” not just one but many stories about the past and present Northwest culture and it was extremely close in achieving a constructive balance between its theme and its design. The SIBD award came as recognition of a work that carried visitors through a journey to the Northwest Coast of Canada, evoking numerous emotions and thoughts.

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