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Primitive art conjures up familiar faces

The art of monumental wood carving reached its pinnacle among the native inhabitants of North America with the so-called totem pole.

Odd-sounding tribes such as the Tlingit, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola and Nootka in the American Northwest depended on salmon fishing for their livelihood. They also developed a facility for wood-working in cedar, earning the tribes the name "salmon and cedar people."

In 1778, Capt. James Cook, an explorer, recorded seeing scores of massive totems. And soon after, the introduction of European steel tools such as knives, adzes, axes and chisels came to replace the Indian craftsmen's jade and stone implements.

By the 19th century, totems ceased to be used as funerary markers and took on a more heraldic function. Even ship's paint from whaling vessels was used to decorate totems. Frogs became green, crows black and human faces red.

All this is to say that totems — at least the pole-shaped ones — have been around for a long time. But how regrettable that widespread carving by Indian artisans came to an abrupt halt by the turn of this century.

Yet, a faction of totem art lives and thrives. It also remains on display through July 14 at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

"Totem," featuring works by seven artists from as close as Miami and as far as Barcelona, Spain, is not necessarily about carved images of the vertical variety. The Boca artworks share a formal homogeneity by way of distinctive primitivism and a raw energy that exudes an often powerful and even magical imagery. In this display, totems are introduced through pigments on surfaces, as well as by sculptures and even photographic images.

A sense of repetitive imagery, as seen in the nimble stick figures of Roshan Houshmand's paintings and the photographs and cutouts by Elaine Reichek, for instance, conjure up pithy notions of the totem, too.

The wall sculptures of New York-based artist Macyn Bolt are replete with contradictions. His plastic-foam shapes are coated in modeling paste, thus imparting a heavy appearance to otherwise feather-light forms. Bolt's *Untitled #42* (1988) comes across as a mimimalistic bit of tribal art, with a slash for a brow and a thin cone perhaps reflecting a nose. "I tried to make something that is unfamiliar, yet strangely recognizable," Bolt explains.

Plaster, raw hemp and tar are the ingredients in the modeled heads by Iranian-born Shahreyar Ataie, who works in Coral Gables. Mounted on coarse wooden plinths, Ataie's rather savage "portrait busts" appear more vegetable-like than a true reflection of flesh and blood. It is the nonspecific elements of these sculptures that makes them totems.

Bruno La Verdier is from Maine. He seems to have gathered much from his French-Canadian blacksmith grandfather. The massive clay and steel work *Shrine B III* (1989) appears as an enormous sword hilt, complete with an aperture to accommodate a blade.

Elemental forces are at work in the art of La Verdier. Call his pieces tombstones or steles. A vigorous architectural quality prevails, but abstraction still governs notions of the totem.

Spain's Houshmand is the sole painter in the "Totem" show. Her oils on canvas deal with primal rites, dances and obscure ceremonies. In *El Valle* (1991), triangles, concentric circles and a brigade of dancing figures celebrate a rev-

erence for tribal hieroglyphics. One is reminded of the early work of Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb.

But the spiky elements of limbs and tepees, here so unabashedly laid in with dark pigments in a linear treatment, are soothed by an orchestration of greens and blues. The hues make compositions less threatening than initially felt.

Elaine Reichek from New York works with photographs and elements of collage. The pair of figures in *Blue Men* (1986) appear to pounce out of a black and white exposure: "We are looking at them, they are looking at us," the artist says.

Reichek's pieces cut across cultures to juxtapose an ancestral message with modern society. This duality is consistent in her work — and to the idea of totems as venerable boundaries between the *then* and *now*.

The wooden masklike endeavors of Miami's Ward Shelley and New York's Linda Stein invite joint discussion.

Shelley has long delighted audiences with his brusque pieces constructed of wood, tar and enamel that often harbor a hidden electrical beep or inlay of blinking lights. Like battery-powered African masks, Shelley's fetish images are oh-so earthy. A totemic evocativeness always remains the nuts and bolts of his creative point of view.

By comparison, Stein's primitive objects are more refined, a little flashier and surely more delicate. Leather, beads, rope and even a sliver of bone often dangle from these works of potent formal magic. Pity the unbeliever who swipes this precious accoutrement from a jealous shaman!

Totems all — these artworks reveal just how wonderfully eclectic originality can be.

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