

# 2009 Totems (art + social studies; art + literature)

A totem reads like a story. Tall wood carvings made by North American Indians from Alaska and down through the United States provide records of their lives. Most symbols are in the form of animals, birds, reptiles and occasionally people. Too big to decorate their dwellings, they were placed outside. Burial spots also exhibited totems.

These 2009 Totems can be the result of a student's story or simply a tall, visual collection of animals. Looking at the contemporary totem is a reminder of a German fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm called "Bremen Town Musicians". A donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster stand on each other's backs hoping to get the attention of robbers. They think their singing can be traded for food. This is a delightful story for all students and is worth reading in class to discover the ending.

## Grade Levels 5-8

*Note: instructions and materials based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.*

## Preparation

1. View examples of Native American Totems. Recommended resource:

[Walch Multicultural Art Series: Native Art of North America](#) (71892-1005)

## Process

1. Plan animal selection best for placing on the wooden rod for the totem. The totem's base must be wide and heavy enough to support the post when the animals are attached. Imagine forming the base animal and the others in a way to keep their appendages close to their bodies. Some good base animals might be turtles, frogs or hippos. (The hippo could be placed with stomach on the ground and water around him.) Only four or five animals will fit on the 12" pole. Make a list of possible animals.
2. Each child uses one pound of clay. Separate these and place into zip-close bags to keep them moist. This part of the project using clay could be done in one class. If not, wrap the clay in a wet paper towel and then put into a zip-close bag. Use about a golf ball size of clay for the base

## Materials

[Mini Modeling Tools](#), 10-piece set (30354-1010) share two across class

[Amaco® Stonex White Clay](#), self-hardening, 5-lb box (33247-1005) need 1-lb per student

[Wooden Dowel Rods](#) 1/4" dia x 12" long, package of 12 (60448-1412) need one dowel per student

[Elmer's® Glue All](#), 8-oz (23810-1005), share two bottles across class

[Nylon Clay Cutter](#) (30357-0000) need one

[Round 10-Well Trays](#) (03041-1010) share one between two students

[Golden Nylon Round Brush](#) 72-piece cannister (05134-1072) 1 set

[Stancup® Disposable Containers](#), (04918-0100) share one 100-piece package across class

[Blick®](#)

[Matte Acrylics](#), Basic Set (00727-0079) Neutral Set (00727-1179), share one each set across class

Plastic to cover tables

Box of zip-close bags, sandwich-size, one per student

Plastic straws 1/4" dia (available from a fast food restaurant - shake size), two per student



## Process, continued

animal. Keep a Stancup® handy with a little water if needed to moisten the clay. The animal base should be about 3-4" in diameter for balance. Use the plastic straw to push down through the top of the base animal and all the way to the bottom. Make sure to keep the straw as straight as possible. Gently pull out the straw. Check to make sure the dowel rod fits into the hole. Remove it and set the piece aside.

3. Make all other animals and place a hole through them also. Keep these animals about 1-2" in size. The top animal only needs the hole to be about 3/4 of the way into the animal, leaving the top of the rod covered with clay.
4. Make four or five beads to use as spacers between the animals.
5. Important! As the parts dry, gently push and twist the rods through the holes to keep the holes open. Remove the rods and continue to let them dry. This takes 24 to 36 hours to dry and completely cure.
6. The 2009 animals can be taken off and put back on the totem. If they do not slide easily, gently push the dowel in to smooth the hole. Set aside.
7. Paint the dowel or leave it natural. Paint each animal and set aside to dry. The animals can stay moveable on the totem, or place a little glue in each animal hole as they are stacked for permanent positioning.

## Options

- To make totems more like the Native American ones, use clay rolled into a tube 1-1/2" thick. Cut into pieces about the size of a marshmallow. Carve into the outside edges for designs, use straws, dowels as in this lesson plan.

## National Standards

Content Standard #1— Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

**5-8** Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas

Content Standard #3— Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

**5-8** Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

Content Standard #4— Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

**5-8** Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures

Content Standard #6— Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

**5-8** Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts