

# Tacoma Totem Pole

## Deaccession Review and Recommendation

Dear Arts Commission:

This is a synopsis of the Deaccession panel's recommendations. Also included is the packet of background information that was provided to the panel for your review. On Monday, March 8, we will present the recommendations of the panel and background for your consideration. Please review this information in advance of the meeting on Monday.

Thank you,  
Amy McBride, Tacoma Arts Administrator

**Title:** Tacoma Totem Pole

**TACMAC #:** 19820058

**Artist:** Unknown

**Medium:** Red cedar

**Dimensions:** 72.5'h (above grade) x 34"w x 34"d

**Year Created:** 1903

**Location:** Fireman's Park, 801 A St, Tacoma, WA 98402

### Tacoma Totem Pole Timeline

- September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Tacoma Arts Commission voted to assemble a panel to consider the Tacoma Totem Pole for De-accession from the Municipal Art Collection.
- February 25, 2021: Deaccession Panel unanimously recommends the de-accession.
- March 8, 2021: Tacoma Arts Commission reviews Deaccession panel recommendation and votes.
- April, 2021: Presentation to Landmarks Preservation Commission to consider removing the Tacoma Totem Pole as an historic landmark (date to be determined)
- Ongoing: Researching options for removal

### De-accession from the Municipal Art Collection

De-accessioning removes an artwork from the Municipal Art Collection. The De-accession of the Tacoma Totem Pole is being considered due to the following conditions:

- Inauthentic
- Aesthetic Value

The Tacoma Totem Pole is believed to be fraudulent in origin and misrepresents Native American peoples and artforms. The original artists are unknown. While some historical records claim they were

Tlingit, representatives from the Tlingit and Haida Tribe do not believe the pole has any authentic ceremonial or clan origins, and thereby claim no association with it. The style, method of carving, and secrecy surrounding the creation of the pole indicate it is just as likely by non-Natives poorly appropriating a Native aesthetic. This theory has been backed up by tribal consultants as well as the deaccession panelists. The faux Northern style of the carving also contributes to misinformation about the art forms of the Coast Salish peoples of this region. The pole's continued presence in Tacoma is harmful, and its removal has been requested by members of the Puyallup Tribe, and the Tlingit and Haida Tribe.

The De-accession panel was assembled with the intention of centering indigenous voice and perspective to bring information and concerns to the forefront that have not been shared in an official public forum to date.

**Deaccession Panel Voting Members:**

Andrew Strobel (Haida, Puyallup Tribe Planning Director), Catherine Edwards (Central Council Tlingit and Haida Tribal Councilmember), Clinton McCloud (Puyallup), Kevin Bartoy (Landmarks Preservation Commission), Jeanette Sanchez (Arts Commission)

**Deaccession Panel Recommendations:**

On February 25, 2021, the deaccession panel met and voted unanimously for the removal of the Tacoma Totem Pole from the Municipal Art Collection.

Panel recommendations beyond de-accessioning:

While the future of the object will be determined through separate processes, panelists recommended that the pole be destroyed or otherwise permanently removed from public view.

- In the panel discussion, the pole was described as an “inauthentic trinket” that represents colonialism, whiteness, and patriarchy.
- Continuing to romanticize the object by allowing it to move into a historical collection prevents real social progress and movement forward.
- Panelists also noted that Chester Thorne, one of the businessmen who originally commissioned the pole, started the Port of Tacoma and stole land from the Puyallup people.
- The pole was created in an attempt to compete with Seattle during the boosterism era, exploiting Native culture to serve capitalist and colonial motives.

The panel also expressed a desire to see more Puyallup and Coast Salish art in Tacoma, as well as more public art in general, including replacing the Tacoma Totem Pole with something “proper and honorable”.



Images Courtesy Grit City Magazine