

# The destruction of Washington state history

*[Douglas Granum, a painter and sculptor from Southworth, Washington, <https://douglasgranum.com/>, directed the 1976 restoration of the Tacoma totem pole.]*

**By Douglas Charles Granum**

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Weather, winds, rot, fire, a thousand kinds of moisture, sun — all are the curse of precious objects. However none is so dangerous as thoughtless misguided humans. Precious objects have no defense except what someone gives it, and in the case of this innocent tourist art work, there was no one to protect this classic, old, virgin cedar.

For lack of personal experience, along with profound hate and stupidity, few can imagine today what great significance was bestowed on relics and objects that are now vital voices and connections with the past. In the case of the Fireman's Park Totem, this important past has been needlessly severed.

Often the most crudely carved masks are the most beautiful when danced in the firelight. Our totem was a relic of another time. Danced in firelight, she would be enchanting.

However, let's be clear this tourist piece was never intended to be fronted along with a forest of similar poles gracing some sweeping, proud Northwest coast village. Nor was it carved with all of the care, ritual and excellence possible.

This cross- cultural totem was sold as tourist artwork. It was never intended to stand in front of some great, painted longhouse protecting family while facing the sea. It wasn't created for deep familial ties like other poles.

It was created and sold as tourist art. Its only requirement was to be the tallest totem in the world.

This was not a faux totem. This was a real tourist totem. There are hundreds of real tourist totems everywhere. Should they all be chopped down and cut up?

This tourist work didn't threaten anyone and had no tribal affiliation. The same can mostly be said for hundreds of other tourist poles.

So why so much fear, and by whom, that our Fireman's Park pole was singled out to be destroyed? I always believed that emulation was a high form of flattery.

All artworks are not the same. Does that mean we should vivisection the ones that don't match our biases.

Who gets to decide beauty? Who is the keeper of this the truth?

Who is to say that this same chainsaw group won't shout that other works of art in our community — perhaps the whole forest of tourist totems everywhere — must come down with this same faulty lack of logic.

Who gets to say, "These precious objects have no defense. Let's kill them"? Why? What is the threat from a piece of tourist art? Did someone think that this was supposed to be a "real" totem?

Individuals familiar with coastal art easily see that this was a tourist piece: non-threatening, in fact, endearing.

What is the reason for the savage vivisection of one of Tacoma's ancient classic art works? Left slashed in her own ancient cedar dust, totally destroyed in the most profound way — ancient, really, drawn and quartered.

Is an artwork identified only by culture, or is it really cross-cultural, as in the case of our now horribly altered art work? Cross-cultural abounds in our world. One can't get away from it.

Art is subjective. Work done to be sold almost always lacks the primary care and elegance of a family work made to be revered.

This work was never intended to be "danced." All it had to do was be tall, as it said on its bronze plaque. Is being tall a reason to remove it? Is Fireman's Park now so much improved by this removal of an innocent?

Her heart was the cedar heart of a young spirit. Her heart-wood was sound and solid. They discovered this as they dug their chainsaws deep into her guts.

Was she a totem? Certainly in some cross-cultural way, and yet she was so much more. Because of her great height, she lifted the volume of the entire Fireman's Park square. When you next visit the park, be aware of this. The park has been visually degraded by the removal of this uplifting art piece.

There was really no reason to remove this work. It was solid, extremely well-braced, painted and protected. This was a public work of art that belonged to the public.

For 118 years she stood strong and was protected by whom?

Then one day — like the explosive deaths of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan — some misguided someone approached, ripped and slashed at the old, virgin artwork with chainsaws, saying she must come down because she is causing me pain.

What about the pain of the cedar, the pain of the community that cared for her and loved her all these many years? This fine, old piece of public art, as the song goes, "didn't deserve to die."

There was only a smattering of press and city officials at her demolition and death. How horribly sad.

Creation always survives, even in the face of blind destruction and the degradation of our most cherished historic public treasures.

Really, are we in this together? Look around you. Is anyone really protecting Tacoma's precious public objects, or is it all, not so subtly, being purposely degraded and, in the case of our Fireman's Park Totem, totally destroyed?

*[For more on Douglas Granum, visit <https://douglasgranum.com/>.]*