

## Ray Losey and the Power of Observation

Ray Losey stands before me, a painter's brush in one hand, a quart of black Rustoleum paint in the other. He is midway between applying another stroke of paint to the totem next to him and answering another of my questions—more like, sharing a little of his family history but more so discussing his art and the evolution of totem carving.

“This was supposed to be a ‘teaching pole,’” says Ray. “I was going to give carving lessons to a small group of young people but it got complicated.” By his estimate, the pole will stand over seventeen feet high although this is difficult to judge since the pole is lying on its back. Ray has already primed the pole to prevent splitting and is about to apply the black paint to strategic locations. He started carving the pole two years ago but had to give it a rest last November when the weather turned cold, recommencing work this past April. The pole is made of red cedar, but not the eight hundred year-old cedar that Ray purchased to carve several spectacular whale masks. According to Ray, and as is probably known to anyone interested in Pacific Northwest environmental issues, most if not all of the old-growth timber has been logged.

Ray laments this not just as a carver but also as a custodian of the natural world. The house that he has shared for eighteen years with his wife Marilynne, an accomplished artist in her own right, backs up to Portland's third largest park, Marquam Park. The 4T trail is interrupted briefly by the road in front of Ray and Marilynne's house, continuing up the hill to Council Crest. While Ray delves into the topics of the moment, a band of teenagers passes by his workshop a scant twenty or so yards away. One, maybe two of the youngsters glance our way, but the rest forge ahead, laughing and shouting (I should have mentioned that Ray carves and paints his totems under the first story overhang of the back of his house facing the woods).

“If they were Native American children, they might have been more observant,” Ray notes cautiously. This leads to a discussion of the power of observation, the very thing that has led me to Ray's back yard.

My wife and I moved to Portland and into our house just before Thanksgiving last year. After broiling for more than twenty years in the Phoenix desert, where the heat ratchets up a few more degrees each summer, we needed reassurance that rain still fell somewhere, that watered coursed in rivers in other parts of the country—such as the Pacific Northwest. The first thing I noticed when walking our dogs down the street that fronts Ray's house was the large totem, almost seventeen feet tall I later learned, a beacon at the side of his house that faces the Marquam trail.

“People think we bought it!” Ray chuckles at the fact that few believed the owner's occupant may have carved the totem. I'll admit I thought the same thing until I noticed—observed from a distance—the large unfinished totem lying on its back on a series of saw horses below the overhang at the back of his house, the place where we are now conversing.

The totem towering in his yard, Ray tells me, was intended to be a community art piece for the neighborhood and for those who hike the Marquam Park trail to enjoy, the subject of which was chronicled in a January 2011 article in *The Oregonian*.

I told myself from the get-go that I had to meet the person behind the pole. Such a thing as a totem in a residential yard was alien to me. Growing up in the Midwest, I was used to cast-iron jockeys, blue spherical balls on pedestals, and pink flamingos in people's yards, but not large and colorful totem poles. I wanted to learn more about this vestige of one of the last wilderness holdouts that this country knew, the land of the Nez Perce and Lewis and Clark. I got lucky one day while passing his house and found him working under the hood of his truck. We chatted for a few minutes and he agreed to a longer conversation that weekend.

When we began talking a few days later, Ray appeared more comfortable discussing the changes in totem carving than discussing his own. I prompted how his father, who didn't force his son to carve, but Rex would give his son a design to work on, but Ray found himself more interested in painting, at least early on. "Carving explained, "more like this early reaction may of the son to take a father's can cause tension in any Native Americans pass on his skills to a uncle who would in turn avoiding any conflict Being of Native American and his explanation rang



over the past two centuries past. He did explain when Rex Losey, was a carver practice his trade. Rather, "design" to work on, but interested in painting, at was kinda like work," Ray dabbling." One reason for have been the reluctance advice, a relationship that culture. According to Ray, frequently saw the father relative such as an aunt or train the nephew, thus between father and son. and European descent, Ray true.

The history of totem carving has already been amply described by ethnographers, anthropologists, and art historians in a trove of books. At the risk of over-generalizing a highly complex topic, totem carving grew out of a tradition of shorter mortuary poles used to hold the ashes of the deceased. Beginning in the early 1800s, however, the incursion of the "white man" and the burgeoning fur trade transformed a modest and highly personal relic into objects of desire by the wealthy art patrons of the east—and beyond. Once Native Americans obtained steel knives from the traders, French, Russian, and American, they no longer had to carve with

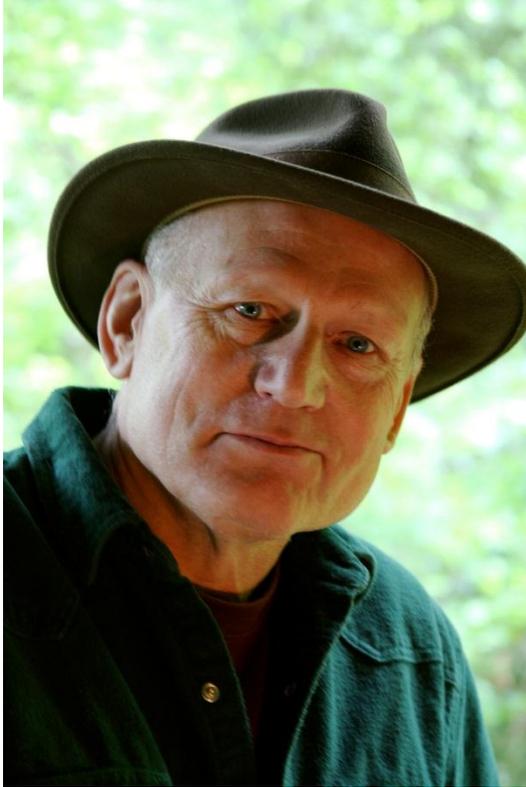
stone or beaver teeth. Poles consequently grew taller as the Native Americans used the principles of mast-rigging to erect taller poles. And the images themselves, traditional images of whale, beaver, and eagle were modified to meet the changing tastes of the buyers. The Native American, well aware of market pressures, realized he was onto something and began to adapt his approach and style to totem carving while still honoring his traditional past.

Ray refers to this change in attitude the result of a “collective intelligence” that influences the art world. He has experienced this first hand. Early in his career, Ray took up welding and made garden art, using “found objects” to adorn the gardens of his patrons. But suddenly totems came back in vogue and so Ray returned to totem carving, something he finds more satisfying. And he now stands in front of me with not one, but two totems at his side, the other a finished piece, shorter than the totem in progress, painted using vibrant hues of yellow and other colors I thought unlike those I had seen on totems in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. (This piece, it turns out, was purchased as a retirement gift for a Texas woman who didn’t want a Rolex; she had “made it” as an oil commodities trader in a largely man’s world and asked for a totem instead.)

I asked Ray about his color palette and his answer was unapologetic. Whereas the traditional colors of a Native American totem are black, brownish-red, and turquoise in tertiary cuts around the eye sockets, he adds color for interest, in part an acknowledgement of changing tastes and a demand for brighter colors. This is not a new phenomenon, Ray explains. Once the Native Americans interacted with the Chinese who influenced them long before the arrival of the fur traders and discovered vermilion red, they quickly abandoned using salmon berries as a natural source of color. As Ray describes his art, he is taking totem carving “into the twenty-first century,” continuing a trend of adaptation that has historical precedent.



Ray told me at the beginning of our conversation that he had never pictured himself a totem carver when he was younger but here he is, a “master carver” as his partner of nineteen years Marilynne describes him, not an official designation but nonetheless an honorarium she uses with all seriousness, one conferred on practitioners of the art who demonstrate expert



skill and a prolific love of the art. As with all trades that cannot be automated, mechanized, or otherwise relegated to the assembly-line, the concern is, who will take the tradition of totem carving into the twenty-second century and beyond? Ray has been approached by a number of older artisans who want to be tutored by this master carver, but Ray forthrightly admits he wishes he could train a younger Native American who would use his teachings to continue the tradition while making the art form his own.

Ray adds more black paint to the totem, turns towards me, and concludes, “We covered a lot of ground today, haven’t we?”

Ray Losey recently began showing some of his work at the Art Elements Gallery in Newberg.

However, residents of the southwest hills of Portland need only travel a short distance to see the totem in his yard that took me by surprise, aroused my curiosity, and most importantly, made me observe.