Native American Totem Poles

Objective: Students will create a three piece totem pole and learn how to assemble.

Vocabulary: Pinch pots, coil, slabs, score, slip, cone, fire, totem

Materials: clay, color, underglazes

Tools: Needle tool, slip, slats, rolling pin, canvas, paper, pencil, newspaper, toilet paper rolls.
Historic/Cultural Background:

Native Americans who live in the Northwest Pacific Area create totem poles, carvings of Western Red Cedar trees with both cultural and artistic implications. Because of the rapidly decaying nature of these cedar trees, evidence that totem poles existed before 1900 is virtually unfound. However, oral histories of Northwestern Native Americans suggest Totem poles were a part of their culture even before Europeans arrived in America. Granted, they were much smaller then, as the Native Americans had tools that limited the size of the carvings. Men were able to carry them on their backs, and then place them into a room. After the arrival of Europeans, the Totem poles became significantly larger in size, resulting from the advanced woodcarving tools brought by Europeans. These Totem poles were made of a single cedar trunk, reaching a height of nearly forty feet. Even though the Northwestern and

The meanings of the Totem pole designs vary upon the cultures of the different Native American tribes. They tell stories of familiar legends, clan lineages, or notable events. Some are based on culture, while others have a more artistic purpose. Some figures on the totem poles signify reminders of fights, murders, debts, and other unfortunate events. Despite the original inference by early European explorers, totem poles did not serve as objects of worship. Also, the quality, size, and detailed work of the poles in front of a family’s house indicate their amount of success.

The representation of importance is based on the vertical order of the symbols. Many believe the higher figures are considered more important than the lower figures, while others argue that the symbols are organized in a reverse hierarchy style. It depends on the Totem pole, but some have family crests placed on the bottom. Placing the crest on the bottom signifies its importance, as it supports the other figures on top of it.
Instructions:

Day One
1. Cut cardboard tube into three different sizes.
2. Cover cardboard tube with newspaper and secure with tape.
3. 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.) Make a list of possible animals.

Day Two
1. Roll out a slab of clay that will wrap around the tube and score clay to attach. Press and smooth the overlaps. The animal base should be about 3-4” in diameter for balance.
2. Cut off excess clay at the top and bottom of tube allowing for uniform size. Make all other animals and 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.
3. Students can use tools to carve symbols or designs and or can add clay to build up on the surface to create dimension. Encourage the use of both techniques.
4. Make two beads to use as spacers between the animals.
5. Add features such as ears, beaks, and wings etc. to represent animals and carve symbols or designs.