

Rare totem pole returned to Canada

The National Museum of Man has just repatriated a set of elaborately carved house posts and beams from the Museum of the American Indian in New York City.

The unique forty-two foot long roof beam depicts a Sisiutl (Si-si-ootl) or double headed serpent supported on three upright figures. The Sisiutl which is thought of as having one head in the upper world and the other in the lower world is a cosmological symbol, often represented by a rainbow, among the Kwakiutl Indians of

Vancouver Island.

According to legend, the mythical monster had the power to assume many sizes. To eat, touch or even see the Sisiutl was unlucky and sometimes fatal. But, to those with supernatural power, its blood could turn human skin to stone; its skin used as a belt allowed the wearer to perform wonderful feats; its eyes, when used as sling stones, could kill even whales.

The National Museum of Man's Sisiutl was first erected by the Southern Kwakiutl at the ancient

summer settlement of Tswadi (200 miles northwest of Vancouver). It was collected in 1913 by the Honourable James Donsmuir, and by 1931 was on display in Hatley Park, but was finally acquired by the Heye Foundation for the Museum of the American Indian, Brooklyn.

Its return to Canada was made possible through the Emergency Purchase Fund of the National Museums of Canada.

Photographs are available. For additional information write Francois Gobeil, or call (613) 996-9438.