



Irene Sieberger An icon of collective experience: Keith Haring's 'Totem'

Keith Haring's works are among the most influential visual expressions of the late twentieth century. Beginning in the early 1980s, Haring developed a distinctive artistic language that became firmly embedded in the collective visual consciousness and remains instantly recognizable to this day. His works combine striking visual immediacy with conceptual depth, moving seamlessly between pop culture, political commentary, and universal symbolism.

For his *Totem* works, created in close collaboration with Jörg Schellmann, Haring drew inspiration from Indigenous art and ancient civilizations. They were conceived during a period marked by profound social and political upheaval as well as personal tragedy, reflecting Haring's belief that art could serve as a powerful medium for communication and social reflection. Schellmann, a pioneer in the field of art editions, played a decisive role in establishing Haring's work in Europe and making it accessible to a broad circle of collectors through high-quality editions.

A totem is a sacred symbol - most often an animal or plant - revered as the mythical ancestor and protective spirit of a clan or community, embodying and defining the group's collective identity. The term originates from the Algonquian languages of North America (Ojibwa: *odoodeman*, meaning "his clan" or "his family") and more broadly refers to the relationship between nature and the social order of a community.

The present vividly colored *Totem* is defined by a vertical sequence of stylized figures that coalesce into a dynamic structure both archaic and reminiscent of a sarcophagus. A procession of figures rendered in Haring's characteristically reduced visual vocabulary appears to support, embrace, and dance with one another, crowned by a radiant sun evocative of the Egyptian god Ra. The integration of cross-like motifs at both the upper and lower edges of the composition brings together diverse cultural reference systems within a richly layered visual form. Haring's fascination with Egyptian iconography and the power of symbolic imagery is especially palpable here.

The form of *Totem* also reflects Haring's recurring engagement with themes of life and death. The sarcophagus-like structure may be understood as a bridge between the world of the living and the afterlife, while simultaneously serving as a vessel of collective memory and enduring identity.

This dimension gains particular poignancy in light of the biographical circumstances surrounding the year of the work's creation. It was during this period that Haring received his AIDS diagnosis, after already losing several close friends - including Andy Warhol - to the disease the previous year. At the same time, the legendary SoHo nightclub "Paradise Garage" closed its doors in 1987. The club had been deeply important to Haring and his own "tribe," inspiring the iconic dancing figures that became central to his visual language. Questions of mortality, spirituality, and collective experience entered his work with existential urgency, transforming *Totem* into both a memorial and a carrier of memory, but also into a powerful symbol of friendship, joy, and life itself.

Keith Haring and Jörg Schellmann, 1987.
With kind permission by Jörg Schellmann and
Schellmann Art, Munich

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Kutztown, Pennsylvania 1958 – 1990 New York

"Totem". 1988

Carved plywood, painted in colour. 184 × 56 × 5 cm
(72 ½ × 22 × 2 in.). Signed and dated on the accompanying metal plaque in black felt-tip pen: K. Haring 88.
One of 35 numbered copies from a total edition of 40. Munich/New York, Edition Schellmann, 1988.
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Provenance

Private Collection, Berlin

EUR 180,000–240,000

USD 212,000–282,000

