EDWARD CURTIS: SHADOW CATCHER

SEPTEMBER 4–OCTOBER 31, 2015

1 INTRODUCTION
DAWN BOONE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, A6

4 FROM THE COLLECTOR
SANDRA MILLER

5 EXHIBIT LIST

6 CURTIS IN CONTEXT
LORNA CAHALL, ART HISTORIAN

9 A PATH OF BEAUTY, HEART, AND SPIRIT
CHRISTOPHER CARDozo, CARDozo FINE ART

13 THE ART OF THE SHADOW CATCHER
DAWN BOONE AND LORNA CAHALL

28 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ON THE COVER:
KLAMATH WOMAN
Volume 13, Plate 436
A Golden Opportunity

The seed for this exhibit started with a generous offer from local collectors and retired gallery owners Steve and Sandra Miller. Over the course of several decades, the Millers had amassed a sizeable collection of Curtis prints recovered from broken volumes 7, 10, and 18 of Curtis’ *The North American Indian*. These volumes focus on Oregon and Washington tribes: the Yakima, the Klickatat, the Kutenai, Salishan tribes of the interior, the Kwakiutl, the Chipewyan, the Western Woods Cree, and the Sarsi. The Millers were keen on sharing their collection with the community, and A6 began working in earnest on developing the exhibit.

A6 was then given the special opportunity to purchase a complete portfolio of large-format prints—Portfolio 13 of The *North American Indian*—from the Praeger collection. This portfolio contains images of Oregon and northern California tribes: the Klamath, the Hupa, the Yurok, the Karok, the Wiyot, the Tolowa and Tututni, the Shasta, and the Achomawi. In the end, A6 had 106 original Curtis prints at our disposal; roughly half were selected for the “Edward Curtis: Shadow Catcher” exhibit.

Exhibit Focus

Many historical societies and Native American museums have prints of Edward Curtis in their collections. These holdings are often paired with other Native American displays and serve to educate visitors about various tribes and tribal life. Curtis’ prints are also used for cultural reclamation; tribes use his photographs to identify family members or recreate tribal regalia, tools and structures.

A6’s interest in Curtis takes a different bent. Our gallery and studio promote arts education and art appreciation of two lesser-known forms of artistic expression: printmaking and book arts. Curtis used a process called *photogravure*, which entailed transferring and etching photographic images into copper plates. These plates were inked and printed by hand—a rare, early intersection of photography and printmaking.

Curtis’ opus, *The North American Indian*, from whence these prints came, is a work of art in its own right. Curtis printed fewer than 300 editions. Each edition included 20 volumes, filled with hand-tipped original prints. A portfolio of several dozen large-format prints accompanied each volume. Curtis was involved in every aspect of production, making it a true artist’s book.

In presenting this exhibit, A6 shifts the focus to Curtis himself—using his work to examine his artistic choices in creating this cultural legacy.

A6 is grateful for the involvement and support of Christopher Cardozo, the world’s leading collector and expert on Curtis. Cardozo will visit Bend to discuss Curtis’ art and legacy in a special presentation the opening weekend of A6’s exhibit. Cardozo’s essay (page 11) speaks to the breadth of Curtis’ artistic output. A6 is also grateful for the contributions of art historian Lorna Cahall and local collector Sandra Miller to this catalog. Both provide special insight into Curtis and the power of his art.

Beyond the Exhibit

Curtis’ work offers a rich departure point for studying the American West, photography, and Native American culture. Recognizing this potential, A6 enlisted several cultural partners to expand the conversation and build on Curtis. BendFilm, Deschutes Public Library, and The High Desert Museum answered the call and planned a variety of programs to run in tandem with A6’s exhibit. These programs delve into Curtis’ other artistic endeavors (such as his little-known silent film), his Native American subjects and their descendants, and current tribal attitudes towards Curtis.

A6 is pleased to see our exhibit spur the development of a larger cultural series. These collaborations have resulted in something truly special for our region—and at the core is art, revealing its power to educate and illuminate.
As a past art teacher and gallery owner I have had some wonderful chance experiences that have changed my life.

When Sunbird Gallery was in its infancy in the early 1980s, I was approached by a recession-hit man who was desperate to sell a few pieces of art. I was totally unfamiliar with but intrigued by the beauty and quality of the prints he offered. One thing led to another, and within a week I was speaking to the collector and dealer Christopher Cardozo in Minneapolis who enthusiastically confirmed my instincts.

I was the proud owner of original vintage photogravures by the famous and brilliant Pacific Northwest photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis. The hunt was on.

I read everything I could find about this amazing adventurer/artist, and when a photographer/collector from New York purchased the prints, I was hooked. These historic images were teaching me so much about my adopted home and country, and I wanted more of them in my gallery.

Christopher continued my education in the finer details and supplied me with volumes and portfolios which I shared by having many wonderful shows in the gallery. Gallery visitors began to take note of Curtis and his work and many old orotones, photographs and gravures were dusted off and brought to the gallery for authentication and preservation.

Curtis’ work stoked my interest in contemporary Native American artists.

That early encounter and fascination with Curtis’ work and life proved to be pivotal in my personal growth and in the flourishing of the gallery. It is impossible to live with his art and not experience an exciting shift.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOLUME OR PORTFOLIO</th>
<th>FACING PAGE OR PLATE #</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>VOLUME OR PORTFOLIO</th>
<th>FACING PAGE OR PLATE #</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>FP</td>
<td>Camp in the Forest–Kutenai</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>A Blackfoot Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mat Lodge–Yakima</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Blackfoot Cookery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>A Holiday Lodge–Yakima</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Kaistosinikyi (“Kill-for-nothing”)–Blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>An Old Man of Waiyam</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>A Cree Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Camp of the Root Diggers–Yakima</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>A Cree Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Skuthun–Klickitat</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Napeu (Man)–Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Mitsa–Klickitat</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>A Medicine Bag–Blackfoot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Flathead Young Woman</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Itsipstsinikyi (“Kills-Inside”)–Piegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Not Indian–Flathead</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>Piksohkomik (“Calling-Bird”)–Piegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Red Owl–Flathead</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>Assiniboin Bowman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Ahlahlemila–Flathead</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>Assiniboin Camp on Bow River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Jerking Meat–Flathead</td>
<td>Volume 18</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>A Piegan Tipi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Drying Meat–Flathead</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>Klamath Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>The Peace Officer–Kalispel</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>Karok Baskets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>Chief of the Land–Kalispel</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>Hupa Trout Trap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>The Chief’s Wife–Kalispel</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>Old Klamath Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Kalispel Maiden</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>A Klamath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Young Kalispel Girl</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>Hupa Jumping Dance Costume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>Kalispel Youth</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>Quiet Waters–Yurok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>Skirt–Kalispel</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>Wife of Modoc Henry–Klamath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>Spokan Woman</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>A Klamath Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Not Grizzly Bear–Kutenai</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>Fishing from Canoe–Hupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>A Kutenai Man</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>In the Forest–Klamath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>Kutenai Girls at the Lake Shore</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>Klamath Warrior’s Head-Dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Spokan Matron</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>Hupa Mother and Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Joseph–Nez Perce</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>Hupa Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>Hamatsa–Quagyuhl</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>The Salmon Stream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>Tsunukwalahl–Quagyuhl</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>Hupa Fisherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 7</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>Komuciq–Quagyuhl</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>Spearing Salmon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A Chipewyan Tipi</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>Klamath Lake Marshes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Camp Among the Aspens–Chipewyan</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>Woman’s Primitive Dress–Tolowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>A Cree</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>Crater Lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cree Fishing Camp</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>Achomawi Basket-Maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Picking Blueberries–Cree</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>Fishing Platform on Trinity River–Hupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Niukskai–Stamik (&quot;Three Bulls&quot;)–Blood</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>Principal Female Shaman of the Hupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>A Typical Blackfoot</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>The Chief–Klamath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Blackfoot Finery</td>
<td>Portfolio 13</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>A Smoky Day at the Sugar Bowl–Hupa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1868 Edward Curtis was born in Whitewater, Wisconsin, a town developed by New Englanders. The townsfolk and Curtis’ parents carried the Yankee values of individual conscience, hard work and a belief that divinity was within each one of us. Like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, these northern folk believed in the sacredness of nature and our unity with it. Each individual—including the slaves of the South—was perceived as a spiritual being. These views fed the Abolitionist Movement of the 19th Century that brought on the Civil War.

Lincoln was killed in 1865, three years before Curtis was born. The “golden spike” that connected San Francisco to the East Coast by rail was driven in that same year. Curtis’ father came home from the Civil War broken and sickly; he gradually led his family into dire poverty. Curtis left school at the age of twelve and struggled to raise food and provide necessities for the family.

The last quarter of the 19th century was an era of vast national expansion. The American Dream wasn’t just being imagined, it was being lived on every side, with breakthroughs in science, engineering, and experimentation. By the early 20th century, cars replaced horses, cities were being lighted by electricity, and photography was a recognized art form.

As the country moved West, tragic and innumerable Indian wars ensued, such as Custer’s massacre of the Cheyenne at The Battle of Washita River in 1868 and Custer’s ruin at the Little Big Horn 1876 under the generalship of Red Cloud. Mutual fear and mistrust was the
rule. Overall, indigenous populations were being scattered or completely wiped out as settlers migrated into their tribal lands.

The Curtis family moved to Puget Sound and Curtis finally fought his way to success, bringing a vast change in his life. In 1891, at the age of 23, he and Thomas Guptill started a photography studio in Seattle. His talent, great technical expertise and handsome charm brought him commissions and even national fame.

Photography continued to leap forward with several modern innovations. There could be no doubt that the ever-improving camera was here to stay. Curtis, however, was successful with earlier photogravure techniques and the style of the “art” photograph. This choice was perfect for his future work.

He made a slow but steady turn away from successful society photographer to traveling ethnographer. His early portraits of Northwest Indians began to sell at higher prices than his studio work. Collectors could see the beauty, technical perfection and passion that filled them. Curtis’ initial fascination had evolved into an urgent mission:

“The passing of every old man or woman means the passing of some tradition, some knowledge of sacred rites possessed by no other...consequently the information that is to be gathered, for the benefit of future generations, respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost for all time.”

He did just that, dedicating thirty years of his life in service to his “Big Idea”—a series of volumes and portfolios on 80 tribes, which became *The North American Indian*. Curtis’ prints reflect the Yankee values instilled from his Wisconsin upbringing. Looking into the eyes of Curtis’ subjects, we see them as Curtis saw them—their deep human value shining through. His images show a unity of mankind with nature. His portraits of elders show a beauty and dignity of old age. Curtis’ landscapes hint at the spiritual depth of place. There are no victims, no caricatures, nor are they sentimental. Curtis’ message to us is clear—look hard at this power, this beauty and grace. Look into their eyes and see their wisdom.
Edward S. Curtis was a true renaissance man and an extraordinary, although often unrecognized, American hero. He achieved what many thought impossible, and the images, scholarly text, film footage, and sound recordings he created during his thirty-five-year odyssey have touched viewers and readers throughout the world. Curtis created one of the most enduring and iconic visual records in the history of the photographic medium, a record that has helped inform our vision of who we are for over a century. Today, he is perhaps our most widely collected and exhibited fine-art photographer, and more than one thousand books, reviews, and articles have been written about him and/or illustrated by his photographs. Above all, he was a man of great passions, resilience, and heart who dedicated his adult life to educating and inspiring an entire nation about the heart and soul of its indigenous peoples.

Curtis’ work changed the way our nation viewed Native Americans and generated a broad-ranging dialogue for greater compassion, understanding, and inclusion. For more than a century, his images have moved and inspired diverse audiences, transcending economic, cultural, social, educational, and national boundaries. He accomplished this at a time when Native Americans were commonly viewed with disdain or hatred and some individuals were still actively advocating for the extinction of all Native peoples on the North American continent.

Curtis was a visionary, an award-winning artist, a consummate craftsman, an intrepid entrepreneur, a technical innovator, a respected ethnographer, a superbly accomplished publisher, and a ground-breaking film-maker. He was a witness, a multiculturalist, an adventurer, a gifted communicator, a mountaineer and outdoorsman, a multimedia artist, a skilled leader, and an early environmentalist. Yet most people only know Curtis as a photographer, and then, only from a relatively small number of images that are commonly reproduced in books or magazines. Few people outside of academia are aware that he wrote thousands of pages of scholarly, ethnographic text; produced extensive film footage; and made approximately 10,000 wax cylinder recordings of Native language and music. Thus, when viewing Curtis’ compelling images of Native Americans, it is important to keep them in context: they comprise only one component of a much larger whole. Equally important is the fact that the vast majority of his most enduring photographs were created with a profoundly different intention and frame of reference than the scholarly text and the ethnographic film and sound recordings.

Edward Curtis: Shadow Catcher

THE MIND WORKS WITH WORDS, THE BODY WORKS WITH MUSCLES, THE SOUL WORKS WITH IMAGES.

—THOMAS MOORE

THE MIND WORKS WITH WORDS, THE BODY WORKS WITH MUSCLES, THE SOUL WORKS WITH IMAGES.

—THOMAS MOORE

THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO ENLIGHTENMENT, BE SURE TO CHOOSE ONE WITH HEART.

—LAO TSU

A PATH OF BEAUTY, HEART, AND SPIRIT

CHRISTOPHER CARDOZO

The Mind Works with Words, the Body Works with Muscles, the Soul Works with Images.

—Thomas Moore

There are many paths to enlightenment, be sure to choose one with heart.

—Lao Tsu

A Path of Beauty, Heart, and Spirit

Christopher Cardozo
Many of the photographs that are typically reproduced, by contrast, were made not as visual ethnography but as art, with a primary aim of revealing the spiritual lives of Native Americans and their culture, and how indigenous peoples had lived before that culture was so profoundly altered by Euro-Americans. Although his “art” photographs often contain documentary and ethnographic information, Curtis’ stated intent was to create an accurate narrative of his subjects’ enduring humanity and their spirituality, rather than a record of their lives as it existed at the time.

Curtis’ most iconic photographs are best viewed as consciously created works of art, not merely as ethnographic documentation. That said, it should be noted that many of his approximately 5,000 extant photographs are highly or purely documentary in nature. His magnum opus, *The North American Indian*, contains many images that are not particularly artistic and show Native Americans and their objects, structures, and/or clothing in literal and descriptive ways. Shamoon Zamir, in his recent book *The Gift of Face*, found over 600 examples in *The North American Indian* of photographs with evidence of Euro-American material culture. Thus, Curtis often had to compromise or modify his visual intent, because so much had irrevocably changed.

An absolutely critical but little understood fact is that his unparalleled artistic, ethnographic, and historical record was created with the active involvement of as many as 10,000 native people in what may have been the largest participatory project in history. The sense of reciprocity evident in many aspects of his work testifies to the
Curtis’ photographs, texts, films, and sound recordings, this fact is often overlooked by those who may dismiss his photographs as romanticized evocations of noble primitives. Pulitzer Prize–winning Native American author N. Scott Momaday, for one, challenged this reductive perspective when writing about his first viewing of the Curtis photograph entitled *Travaux—Piegan*: “It struck me with such force that tears came to my eyes. I felt that I was looking at a memory in my blood. . . . Curtis’ photographs comprehend indispensable images of every human being at every time in every place . . .”

This essay reprinted courtesy of DelMonico Books–Prestel, from Edward S. Curtis: One Hundred Masterworks, DelMonico Books–Prestel.
In his efforts to record everything he could of our continent’s native peoples, Curtis approached The North American Indian as a combination of pictures and text. The man with an eighth grade education employed writers, editors and field agents. He took copious notes, made thousands of recordings, and labored over the writing and rewriting of each of the twenty volumes. Curtis became a more effective and accurate ethnologist on Native Americans than anyone yet employed by the Smithsonian.

And yet, his photographs take a different bent. They are not dry subjects of scientific record, nor do they fall into the category of photo journalism—often defined as “telling a story with a photograph.”

Curtis’ images read more as frozen moments in time. In his compositions, he does not slavishly attempt to show all he can; rather, he focuses on the essentials, building a connection with his subject, exploring overarching themes of man’s place in nature, and nature’s place in man.

One can sense the patience Curtis exercised while waiting for that elusive flash of a person’s essence.

By considering his photographer’s tricks and his photographic process, it becomes clear: there is an artist at work here.
In the 1820s, thirty years before Curtis was born, printmakers and photographers experimented with ways to make light-sensitive plates. Several photographic processes evolved out of these experiments: daguerrotypes, cyanotypes, platinum prints, and wet-plate photography.

By 1878, photogravure became the most highly precise and subtle kind of photographic printing. Gelatin-coated, light-sensitive tissue transferred images from glass plate negatives to copper plates, which were then etched with acid. Similar to fine aquatint etchings, photogravure plates were inked by hand and printed with an etching press.

Serious art photographers such as Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz strove to elevate the public’s perception of photography as an art form, not merely a mechanical process. Strand and Stieglitz favored the soft, grainy appearance of photogravure, which imbued landscapes with a wonderful atmospheric quality. Photogravure was also unsurpassed for its ability to capture subtle variations of tone, resulting in a rich beauty.

Photography took a great leap forward in 1888 with the development of film. Yet Curtis remained enchanted with photogravure. Curtis experimented with a few other photographic methods, but the bulk of his images were produced using the more challenging, more costly—but artistically rewarding—photogravure process.
PIKSOHKOMI ("CALLING-BIRD")—PIEGAN
Volume 18, Facing Page 162
Curtis refined his approach to portraiture in his early years at his Seattle portrait studio. Curtis won admiration for his portrait of Theodore Roosevelt. Said a close friend of the president, “It is more than a picture. It is the man himself.”

Such visual revelations did not come by chance. Curtis asserted, “Good pictures are the result of long study rather than chance.” Curtis ranked with history’s great portraitists in his ability to set forth the image of a person’s soul. The Greeks called it kairos, the magic instant when the artist sees and captures the precise gesture, movement or expression that holds the essence of the individual.

Curtis pursued this Classical ideal, giving his images of Native Americans greater depth than straight photo documentary.
Curtis brought a special sensitivity to his images of tribal elders. In images such as *Old Klamath Woman* (center right), he adjusted his lens to create a shallow depth of field. Only the most forward areas of the face retain clarity, rapidly softening to the blurred middle and background. Curtis used this technique as a compositional ploy to simplify what might otherwise be a busy background—and to keep the viewer’s attention on the individual’s expression. In *Skuthun–Klickatat*, the image is almost entirely out of focus, as if the subject is already on the brink of crossing over.

As he turned his camera on the wizened members of these tribes, Curtis strove to convey a gentle acceptance of death, a softening of spirit, and a deep knowing.

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**TOP ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT):**

TYPICAL FEMALE PHYSIOGNOMY–Sarsi
Volume 18, Facing Page 94

OLD KLAMATH WOMAN
Portfolio 15, Plate 440

MITS–KLICKATAT
Volume 7, Facing Page 38

**BOTTOM ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT):**

SKUTHUN–KLIKITAT
Volume 7, Facing Page 34

CHIEF OF THE LAND–KALISPEL
Volume 7, Facing Page 96
Curtis’ subjects met the camera as they were—open, honest, unvarnished. They lock eyes with the camera—and us.

For the majority of these natives, Curtis’ camera was the first they had encountered. Unfamiliar with the technology, it is reasonable to assume they also had little idea or experience as to the final photographic outcome. Viewed with modern eyes, there is a refreshing lack of artifice—a far cry from contemporary portraits, or the current selfie phenomenon, where individuals adopt personas or feign happiness for the camera.

An Absence of Smiles

There are three reasons for a scarcity of smiles in Curtis’ images. First, his photographic process involved a long exposure time, during which the subject had to hold very still for a long period. Such sustained sitting was more easily accomplished with a neutral face. Second, smiling was not culturally ingrained for many of these tribes; they were more likely to express delight through hand or body gestures. Third, Curtis approached this project in a very serious and professional manner, for he viewed the plight of the tribes—and their potential loss of culture—as also very serious. A smiling Indian would not generate the desired effect.

As we encounter image after image of these close-mouthed natives, they seem to reflect another truth. Private, protective, and reticent to share their most deeply-held beliefs, these individuals possessed a deep, mysterious knowledge that they could not (or would not) share.
LEFT: NASURETHUR-CHIPEWYAN
Volume 7, Facing Page 6

TOP RIGHT: SPOKAN MATRON
Volume 7, Facing Page 158
Curtis used a low camera angle for many of his portraits—including *Hupa Woman* (center) and *Niukskai-Stamik (“Three Bulls”)–Blood (top left)*. In a low-angle shot, the camera lens is positioned below the axis of the subject’s eyes. The effect is subtle—we seem to be looking up at these men and women. This was a deliberate choice by the artist—Curtis wanted us to feel their stature and authority. The camera conveys their spiritual power.

In other instances, his camera looks downward, empathetically connecting with his subjects. The high camera angle lets us look down at the swaddled baby in *Hupa Mother and Child (top right)*, joining the mother in her fond contemplation. The high camera angle in *Spearing Salmon (bottom right)* creates a similar connection to the subject. Our view follows the downward focus of the fisherman studying the water.
Curtis began his epic project as an artist, but evolved into an ethnographer. In the text of *The North American Indian*, he painstakingly described the customs, social structure, and life of each tribe.

He did not adopt this same approach with the camera. While his images do capture a good deal of ethnographic detail, they read first and foremost as works of art.

Curtis viewed these photographs as “illustrations.” Tellingly, his texts in each volume do not reference the accompanying photographs, nor does Curtis identify most of his subjects by name.

These images sought to convey the spirituality and humanity of indigenous peoples—and spark the imagination.
Curtis observed how tribes were tied to the land in both a practical and spiritual fashion. Emersonian ideals—of the healing power of nature and the divinity within each individual—echo through Curtis’ work.

In Quiet Waters–Yurok, the figure of the fisherman appears interlocked with the rocks behind him, his dark braids mimicking the dark shadowed crevices. The marvelous, ethereal mist of forest in the background, and the clarity of the water speak to nature’s power. As our eyes follow the fisherman’s gaze along the line of the spear, we move into the reflections, where the figure of the man is no longer discernible from his rocky surroundings, at one with nature.

In Crater Lake (page 27), the chieftain appears similarly locked with the land, his figure and feather headdress echoing the craggy shapes on the far rim of the volcano.

In Hupa Mother and Child (page 8) the tree and woman are connected. The tree becomes a symbol of the mother’s strength and protection.

His camera picks up every beautiful detail of the lush foliage backdrop in Spearing Salmon (page 12). This shady enclave is welcoming and protective. Man is at home in his surroundings.

There are instances when Curtis’ subjects feel unprotected, as in A Typical Blackfoot (page 3). Against an empty landscape, the native faces an open and indeterminate future.

In other iconic Curtis images (not represented in this exhibit), a lone horseman or small group of figures ride out into similarly empty vistas. Their backs to the viewer, they look as if they are about to vanish out of sight—along with the rest of their people.

And yet the images remain—living, breathing, immortal.
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EDWARD CURTIS: SHADOW CATCHER

A6 explores the influences, motivations, and artistic choices of Edward S. Curtis in this exhibit of original vintage photogravure prints featuring tribes from Oregon, Washington and Northern California.

ABOVE: CRATER LAKE, Portfolio 13, Plate 463