



Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian Photographic Images. Library of Congress.

Reviewed by E. A. Schwartz

Published on H-Survey (December, 2001)

Picturing the American Indian

Northwestern University's Edward S. Curtis exhibit under the auspices of the Library of Congress, supported by the Ameritech National Digital Library Competition, appears to be almost everything one could want in a web presentation of a complex subject. It is a mostly well-designed, valuable resource for any teacher of American history whose students can navigate the internet, even those whose students are not ready to appreciate the valuable interpretive essays. <p> The importance of Curtis and the meaning of his work are still open to question more than seventy years after the publication in 1930 of the last volume of his photographs. Curtis began publication of twenty volumes and more than 2,200 photographs of American Indian people and artifacts in 1907. He hoped the project would be self-supporting, but the expensive volumes sold slowly and he never covered his costs. His work was, significantly, praised by Theodore Roosevelt, who recommended it to financier J.P. Morgan, whose philanthropic support helped Curtis continue his work. Curtis was never accepted, however, either by the prominent aesthetic photographers whose work paralleled his own, or by the anthropologists whose discipline was rising during the period when Curtis was at work. <p> Curtis set out to record native cultures which were generally thought to be in the process of vanishing. When he encountered non-native artifacts, he tended to retouch them out of his finished work. Perhaps the best-known example was the disappearance of a clock from his picture of two Piegan men, which is discussed in this exhibit. Other examples (drawn from Christopher Lyman's <cite>The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs by Edward S. Curtis</cite> [New York: Pantheon Books, 1982]) include erasing advertis-

ing from the bag fabric used to make a tipi and providing "indigenous" garb for some subjects, which becomes obvious when one sees pictures of different persons from different groups wearing the same outfit. (Lyman's book, now unfortunately out of print, informs this review and casts a shadow over the presentation which will be obvious to readers familiar with the book, notwithstanding the relatively few mentions it receives.) <p> Curtis's work was little known by the time he was done, and all but forgotten within a few more years. But popular culture rediscovered the picturesque possibilities of Indians in the 1960s and publishers of posters and calendars turned Curtis photographs into icons. Rare is the American who has not been exposed, probably unknowingly, to the works of Edward S. Curtis. <p> Among the virtues of this presentation is its comprehensiveness, including, according to the explanatory notes, "all of the published photogravure images including over 1500 illustrations bound in the text volumes, along with over 700 portfolio plates." Captions are provided in text which can be copied, and large-format versions of the photographs can be downloaded. <p> The presentation also includes a timeline and a map showing locations of the groups photographed by Curtis. The accompanying essays were written by Mick Gidley of the University of Leeds, England; David R.M. Beck of the University of Montana, and Gerald Vizenor of the University of California, Berkeley. The link that leads to the essays might be given more prominence, given that they provide the context that makes the presentation the intellectual opportunity it is. <p> Gidley's contribution is a straightforward description of Curtis's life which includes consideration of several specific photographs, but is less concerned with

controversy and deep interpretation than the other essays. Gidely concludes that, "The North American Indian' is a monument in words and pictures to a range of cultures which most white men could not or would not see." Beck's essay, "The Myth of the Vanishing Race," considers Curtis in the context of American Indian history and the development of anthropology. Beck provides essential background. His essay is the intellectual pivot of the presentation.

Vizenor's essay, "Edward Curtis: Pictorialist and Ethnographic Adventurist," is a deep interpretation integrating the aesthetics of Curtis and his subjects with a consideration of the ethnographic meaning or lack of meaning of the photographs. Vizenor notes, "Three generations later the native heirs choose his photographic images for reasons other than the politics of the social sciences. Perhaps natives praise the visual analogy. Curtis pictures may, in fact, be the choice of more natives than any other photographer. This association, in my view, is aesthetic, not ethnographic.... Why would natives pose to create a portrait simulation, a pictorialist image not their own, for photographic adventurers who later nominate their pictures as the real, and the ethnographic documents of a vanishing race?"

Among them, the essayists have covered every aspect of Curtis except, perhaps, one. The presentation gives us Curtis as Curtis presumably chose to have his work represented, in sepia. While the tone may give some viewers a more organic and timeless feeling than the blunt black-and-white of a news picture, it also obscures details by reducing contrast. Curtis frequently made his subjects somewhat fuzzy or obscure. While we can assume Cur-

tis sometimes had the technical difficulties most photographers experience, this approach was an exploitation of technique, not a failure of technique. Curtis did not, as one critic has suggested, have to make images with short depths of focus because of long exposure times, and his tendency to leave some subjects in shadow is not due to any uncertain concept of lighting. He was making visual arguments, and the sepia tone was another tool he used to make them. One can get a sense of the significance of the sepia tone by comparing pictures in this presentation with their reprinted black-and-white counterparts in Christopher Lyman's book, mentioned above. A comparison of one example from this collection with a modified version may be found at <http://www.csusm.edu/schwartz/curtisb.htm>. [1]

Although, as Gerald Vizenour points out, native people have found a aesthetic resonance in these pictures, those who would use this presentation or the photographs alone as teaching tools have a problem. With the help of the essayists, they will have to decide how to approach the meanings Curtis has invested in his images through his techniques and his tendency to make subjects more indigenous-seeming through costuming and retouching.

Note:

[1]. I chose to attempt to subvert Curtis by removing the sepia tone and cropping the images. In other words, I chose content over the image as such, but as a consequence I implicitly accepted the content left after my editing as valid. The results are among the images in a collection for a California history course which may be found at <http://courses.csusm.edu/hist347as/vc/curtisfr.htm>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey>

Citation: E. A. Schwartz. Review of , *Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian Photographic Images*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14978>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.