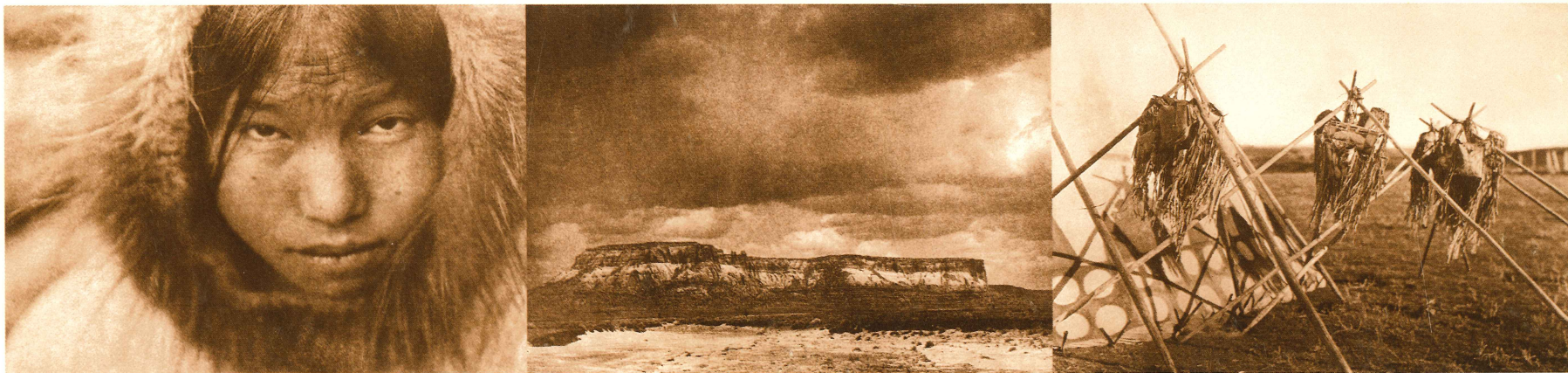


Ghost Dance: Exhibiting Paradox

Edward S. Curtis Photogravures
Selections from the Grinnell College Art Collection

January 28 – March 17, 2000
Print and Drawing Study Room
Burling Library, Grinnell College



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Selections from the Grinnell College Art Collection

Gift of John W. Rosenbloom '71
and Maureen E. Gustafson

Exhibition in the Print and Drawing Study Room,
Burling Library, Grinnell College
January 28 – March 17, 2000

*Organized by the Exhibition Seminar,
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Introduction

Meredith Ibey '00
and Jennifer Stob '00

*Whatever it
grants to vision
and whatever
its manner,
a photograph is
always invisible:
it is not it
that we see.*

– Roland Barthes

Photography is, and has been since its inception, the definitive art form to struggle with the old maxim, “seeing is believing.” The photogravures of Edward S. Curtis are a testimony to this struggle – a veritable Pandora’s box of signifier, signified, and referent (see Jones). Curtis photographed American Indians just after the official close of the western frontier in 1890. His subjects, decimated in population and land holdings, found themselves confined to reservation life and reliant on government subsidies. As a unifying concept for Curtis’s images and the history behind them, we present the title *Ghost Dance: Exhibiting Paradox*. The title refers to the Ghost Dance of 1889-1890, a religious movement that promised to be the last hope of paradise for American Indians and that precipitated, tragically, the murder of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre (see Garland). Paradoxically, the Ghost Dance religion, rooted in a combination of missionary preaching and traditional spirituality, evoked a pristine world not dissimilar to the paradise-in-limbo that Curtis tried to fabricate. There is an important distinction between these two paradises, however: one was created by the inhabitants themselves, while the other was framed by the very type of outsider American Indians sought to exclude. The title conveys some of the difficulties both audience and curatorial team are urged to confront in the complicated links between history, aesthetics, and fallacy in Curtis’s images.

Curtis’s oeuvre begs an examination of several issues concerning not only photography as an art form, but the subject matter he portrayed and the methodology involved. From 1895-1928, Curtis set out to document what he considered to be the last remaining traditions of the American Indian in his lifework, *The North American Indian*. Because of the rapid changes native cultures experienced at this time, he practiced salvage ethnography, the documentation and purported re-creation of endangered native traditions (see Anderson). Curtis envisioned American Indians as “already shorn of their tribal strength and...passing into the darkness of an unknown future,” as he wrote in the caption for the photogravure chosen to begin his first volume: *The Vanishing Race*. The print depicts a procession of Navaho on horseback, riding away from the camera and into the blurred, dusty half-light of a Southwestern canyon. One individual turns, his profile hidden in shadow, for a backward glance at the photographer. It is this backward glance that serves as the focal point of the photogravure and of Curtis’s supposition that American Indians, along with their primitive traditions, were silently fading out of modern society.

Throughout this project, Curtis was not attempting to photograph American Indians in their current condition on reservations, but rather to situate them in a re-created past. He dressed many in costumes from his collection and posed them in what he considered to be traditional settings. As art historian Mick Gidley emphasizes, Curtis created an illusion, both “optical and conceptual,” of an unchanging American Indian “removed from time and its passage altogether” (43). His photographs perpetuate the stereotype of the noble savage, one possessing a primitive wisdom and a mystical connection to nature (see Gingerich). This stereotype ignores not only the persecution of American Indians prior to and contempo-

rary with Curtis's project, but also their resistance or adaptation to non-native society.

Although many artists photographed American Indians, Curtis did not strictly follow the documentary style of representation employed by many of his contemporaries, such as Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine. He was instead aligned with the pictorialist tradition, an alternative movement in photography organized in the United States by Alfred Stieglitz. Pictorialism tried to reproduce in photography the formal, compositional, and aesthetic principles found in painting (see Stamey). Although Curtis's photogravures include all subject genres, his portraits are of special interest, as several of them contain terms such as "type" or "profile" in their titles. Such terms allude to phrenology and physiognomy, disciplines still considered valid in the early twentieth century, yet discredited by the scientific community in ensuing decades. His volumes represent a visual archive of American Indian cultures – their physical characteristics, their ceremonies and habitations, and their material objects, all organized by tribe (see Anderson).

Curtis's chosen medium for *The North American Indian* was that of photogravure, a particularly expensive, meticulous, and time-consuming artistic process. This combination of photography and printmaking resulted in beautifully textured sepia prints (see Ventis). To cover the expense of this process and his extensive travel, Curtis sought additional financing. In 1906, J. P. Morgan began to support Curtis financially with the expectation that the project would result in "the most beautiful set of books ever published" (Morgan, qtd. in Curtis 15). Even with Morgan's support Curtis constantly needed more funding. Over the course of the project, he explored many fundraising possibilities, producing, among other promotional entertainment, a feature film about the Kwakiutl of British Columbia then titled *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (see Price). Despite financial setbacks, Curtis published a collection totaling twenty bound volumes and twenty accompanying portfolios, drawing upon eighty different native cultures throughout the western United States and Canada.

The following collection of essays examines these diverse yet interwoven themes of photographer and photographed within *The North American Indian*. In Curtis's photographs, the "Indian" becomes an object, as American Indians themselves did over the course of the conquest of the United States. The exceptional beauty of these prints conflicts with and yet potentially embraces and accentuates this haunting history of genocide. We assert that the history of non-native treatment of American Indians, the horrific tragedies such as the Wounded Knee Massacre, and Curtis's photogravures are different, separate – and yet connected. We invite our audience, both reader and viewer, to enjoy, defy, and question his prints, keeping at hand the tension between reality and contrivance and the ties between past and present.