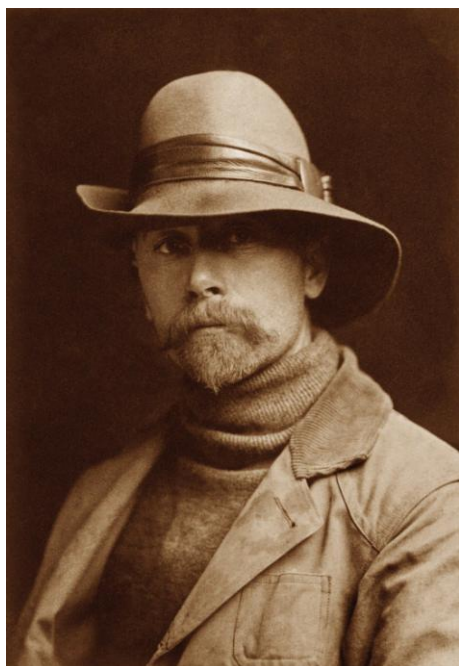


EDWARD SHERIFF CURTIS... HIS ACHIEVEMENTS ARE SO GREAT, SO IMPORTANT IN THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN AMERICA THAT I HARDLY KNOW WHERE TO START OR FINISH, LET ALONE FILL IN MUCH DETAIL, SO PLEASE BEAR WITH ME AS I RECITE THIS INTRODUCTION



He is said to have sacrificed his livelihood, his financial security, his marriage, and, ultimately, his physical and emotional well-being to produce the most beautiful and lavishly produced photographically illustrated set of rare books ever created.

Noted author and critic A. D. Coleman once stated: "*Curtis's work stands as... an absolutely unmatched masterpiece of visual anthropology, and one of the most thorough, extensive, and profound photographic works of all time.*" These Volumes are truly a gift that Edward Curtis left for the world.

With the assistance and patronage of several preeminent individuals, including J. P. Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt, and the kings of both England and Belgium, Curtis succeeded in creating...THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN ... a twenty-volume, twenty-portfolio set of books hand - bound in leather, and with hand-pulled photogravure prints: THE COST, IF DONE TODAY, WOULD BE OVER \$35,000,000.(MILLION)



**A full set of The North American Indian - Less than 300 sets were ever produced by Edward Sheriff Curtis**

Born in 1868, Curtis took to photography at an early age, at 17 he was an apprentice at a studio in Saint Paul, Minnesota, before the Curtis family packed up and eventually settled in the Seattle area. There, he married Clara Phillips, purchased his own camera and a share in a local photography studio.

By 1896, Curtis had built up a widely respected portraiture studio and with his distinctive style and flair, he was soon photographing Seattle's social elite, and this success gave him a level of financial freedom that allowed him to spend time away from the studio to pursue his love of mountaineering and photographing the great outdoors along with some of the local Indians about Puget Sound.

In 1898, he won first prize in a National Photographic Convention for "Homeward," an image of a group of Indians paddling to shore in a canoe at sunset, and the following year he won again with two photographs of Princess Angeline, (the daughter of Chief Sealth) with "The Clam Digger" and "The Mussel Gatherer." An exhibition with these photographs was then sent on a two-year international tour, and Curtis began to gain national recognition.

Various members of his family had roles in the photography business, particularly his younger brother Asahel who was also interested in photography and mountaineering, so with the studio in good hands, Edward he set out with his brother to photograph the Alaskan Gold Rush which had burst upon the region before returning to Seattle with images for newspapers and magazines leaving his brother in the wilds of Alaska for a further 2 years.

His passion for landscape photography coupled with his mountaineering skills found him acting as a guide with the Mazama Mountaineering Club and on one trip to Mount Rainier, he came upon a group of prominent academics who'd become lost. In the group was the anthropologist GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL, an expert on Native American cultures, and Curtis quickly befriended him while guiding the party to safety. Then, on their return to Seattle showed them his landscape and Indian photographs taking about Puget Sound.

Grinnell had studied at Yale, and as an anthropologist he was interested in what he could learn from the Indian tribes of the North West region, and was well known for his ability to get along with the elders of many tribes, and was most impressed with Curtis' photographs (and his outdoor skills) and was to recommend him to Edward Harriman who was planning a major Scientific expedition to Alaska.

Edward Harriman was one of the most powerful men in America, who controlled several railroads and was the President of the Washington Academy of Sciences. However, in 1899, he was exhausted and his doctor told him that he needed a long vacation. So Harriman decided to go to Alaska to hunt Kodiak bears, but rather than going alone, he conceived of the idea of taking with him a large scientific party to explore and document the coast of Alaska.

So the Harriman bear hunt was transformed into a scientific expedition by including many prominent naturalists and scientists. He organized a broad range of arctic experts: botanists, zoologists, geologists, geographers, ornithologists, photographers, artists and writers. Curtis was to be one of two official photographers. For the expedition Harriman refitted the steamship *SS George Elder* into a floating laboratory.

During the expedition regular shipboard demonstrations and lectures gave Curtis a golden opportunity to learn the rudiments of scientific methodology and the fundamentals of ethnographic research. Also, when they encountered Native Peoples, Grinnell mentored Curtis and this in turn fostered Curtis's interest in the plight of the American Indians.

The Harriman Alaskan Expedition, lasted nearly three months and covered thousands of miles between Seattle and the Arctic Circle after which many scientific papers were written and published and Curtis was able to produce photographic albums for sale to the participants. The Expedition was to become the last great adventure of its kind into western North America and was hailed as a great success.

Curtis' new friend Grinnell, had spent twenty seasons in the field with the Blackfoot and Piegan Indians and had established a position of knowledge and trust that would open new doors for Curtis. So when Grinnell asked him to come on a visit to the Piegan Blackfeet in Montana the following year, Curtis did not hesitate and spent the summer of 1900 observing the Sun Dance at an encampment of Blood, Blackfeet, and Algonquin Indians. This was to be a pivotal experience for him, and one which heightened his interest in Native American cultures. He became deeply moved by what he called the "primitive customs and traditions" of the Piegan people, including the "mystifying" Sun Dance he had witnessed. "It was at the start of my concerted effort to learn about the Plains Indians and to photograph their lives," Curtis wrote, "and I was intensely affected."

Curtis began to realize that he might be able to create a record preserving the history of these magnificent people and their extraordinary culture. Later, in a letter to Grinnell he wrote: "But I can start and sell prints of my pictures as I go along. I'm a poor man, but I've got my health, plenty of steam, and something to work for."

Curtis's goal, he imagined, was not just to photograph, but to document as much of the disappearing traditional life of the Native Americans as possible and he held the belief that he would be in a desperate race against time to

document it with film, sound and scholarship. He said that “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.”

Thus, on his return to Seattle from Montana, he stayed only a few weeks before embarking on his first self-financed, self-directed trip into the field: a journey to the Southwest to meet the Hopi, Apache and Navaho peoples of Arizona. Then, on returning to his business in Seattle, he mounted popular exhibitions of his Native American work, published magazine articles and set out on lecturing tours across the country. His photographs became known for their sheer beauty and he relied heavily on the revenue from image sales to continue the Indian work.

**PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIPMENT** [Points to note]: By the 1890's, photography was still in its infancy, although George Eastman (later Kodak org) was starting to market box cameras for amateur use, it was still a very expensive undertaking for any business. For Curtis' Indian work: cameras used were folding Field Cameras of medium to large format. Sensitised materials were Orthochromatic (Blue Green sensitive only) glass plates that could be processed by inspection under Red Safelights. The approximate speed rating (1890's to 1915) was the ISO equivalent 5 to 15 but could by using different developing formulas extend the speed. There was no such thing as a lightmeter. To arrive at an exposure setting, a chart of values was consulted which had latitude, month, time day and various qualities of light to arrive at a ballpark figure which was transferred to a wooden slide rule which had a H&D (ISO) value to set against exposure values – Wow!.. You could then make the shot on an ortho plate and if you had a darkroom (tent) handy with a red safelight available, you could watch the image densities come up in tray of developer, hopefully, giving adequate shadow detail and not burning out the highlights.

Due to the general low sensitivity (slowness) of photographic emulsions, most of Curtis's earlier images (1900 ~ 1920) were of static subjects and have a very shallow depth of field that is most evident in the following image.



**Sioux Chiefs**

Curtis was to take over completely the Seattle studio and eventually buy out another photography business in Seattle as well.

With a trail wagon and assistants travelling ahead to arrange visits, Edward Curtis set out on a journey that would see him photograph the most important Native Americans of the time, including Geronimo, Red Cloud, Medicine Crow and Chief Joseph. Year after year, he packed his camera and supplies - everything he'd need for months in the field - and travelled deep into the Indian territories, all at his own expense.

INDIAN TERRITORY MAP: A snapshot of the pre-European tribal areas, although they were constantly in a state of flux in any case, particularly after horse cultures came along.

MAP 2: Tribal movements in the late 1890's. Indian warfare had ceased and most eastern tribes had relocated onto reservations in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma. Some of the leaders, particularly Geronimo were still prisoners of war and had restricted freedom, although, cynically, they were used politically and some in patronising roles in Buffalo Bill Cody's circus. Curtis thought that the eastern tribes were far too civilised to be of interest as many of their tribal customs, religious/spiritual practices, dress and appearance had been suppressed or outlawed. He would concentrate his studies on the tribes west of the Mississippi.

In 1904, Curtis won a national portrait contest from among eighteen thousand entrants sponsored by a women's magazine. This recognition and his Indian work which he exhibited widely, brought him to the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt and he was invited to Washington to photograph the Roosevelt family, which eventually led to a close friendship between the photographer and the President. Roosevelt was a great lover of the West and was very sympathetic to the plight of the American Indian, and he became an active champion of Curtis' work and encouraged him to proceed with The North American Indian project.

Although Curtis's Indian project was well underway, at great personal expense and largely supported by his Seattle Studio and multiple mortgages, it was not as yet clearly defined and certainly not funded into the future. So feeling the financial stress somewhat, Curtis approached the Smithsonian for funding but was told that there were any number of Indian photographers and would-be anthropologists out there already and turned him down. So he wrote to his friend Teddy Roosevelt for help in finding a patron.

Roosevelt wrote Curtis a glowing letter of recommendation which reads in part: "I regard the work that you have done as one of the most valuable works which any American could now do. The publication of the proposed volumes and folios, dealing with every phase of Indian life among all tribes yet in primitive condition, would be a monument to American constructive scholarship and research of a value quite unparalleled."

Thus armed, in 1906 he approached financier and railroad magnate John Pierpont Morgan, one of the World's richest men, who quickly dismissed him, but Curtis persisted, and Morgan was ultimately awed by the photographer's beautiful work. "Mr. Curtis," Morgan wrote after seeing his images, "I want to see these photographs in books - the most beautiful set of books ever published."

Morgan agreed to sponsor Curtis, paying out \$75,000 over five years in exchange for 25 sets of volumes and 500 original prints. ... Thus the injection of funds from one of the world's richest and most influential persons set a stamp of approval on the project's more ambitious aspects ... Thereafter, arrangements for the management of the Curtis studio in Seattle were formalized, and an office for The North American Indian Corporation was established in Fifth Avenue in New York City with its own manager. Morgan and Curtis also decided upon twenty volumes of illustrated text and twenty portfolios of large-sized photogravure prints for the project.

Morgan's funding was enough for Curtis to acquire the necessary equipment and hire interpreters and researchers, however, this contribution covered only about thirty-five percent of the final cost and this forced Curtis to struggle incessantly to raise funds as he was required to publish the expensively produced volumes out of his own means.

Curtis threw himself into the project, travelling almost constantly while his other assistants operated the Seattle studio. Between trips to Indian reservations, Curtis gave illustrated lectures around the country and worked to publicize the project and sell subscriptions. The first volume appeared in 1907, and by this time Curtis realized the monumental effort would consume far more time and money than originally planned. In addition to the costs of photography and travel, the project required a large amount of field research and written documentation. To accomplish the myriad tasks, Curtis employed as many as seventeen assistants at one time.

In 1909, Morgan pledged an extra \$60,000 to the venture but even this amount could not cover expenses, so Curtis made up the difference with lecture fees, subscriptions, and the sale of individual photographs. Nearly all profit from the successful Seattle studio went to support the project.

STAFFING: *The North American Indian* is often considered the creation of one man, but from the start the project goals required wider efforts. Much of the research and writing was conducted by others, under Curtis's diligent supervision. The Morgan largesse had made it feasible to employ Native American informants and interpreters on a regular basis and, in effect, put a team in the field. The single most important recruit was William Myers, a former Seattle newspaperman who was to become the project's principal ethnologist and, in time, writer.

On wax cylinders, his crew collected more than 10,000 recordings of songs, music and speech in more than 80 tribes, most in their own language. To the amusement of tribal elders, and sometimes for a fee, Curtis was given permission to organize re-enactments of battles and traditional ceremonies among the Indians, and he documented them with his huge 14-inch-by-17-inch view camera, which produced glass-plate negatives that yielded the crisp, detailed and gorgeous gold-tone prints he was noted for. (Revenue raising sale prints)

Curtis's trips however, were not without peril - impassable roads, disease and mechanical failures; Arctic gales and the stifling heat of the Mohave Desert with encounters with suspicious and "unfriendly warriors." But Curtis managed to endear himself to the people with whom he stayed. He was remarkably intuitive and possessing great understanding of the Indian character and was able through his quiet persistence to overcome the apprehension, deep rooted suspicions and fears of the most reticent of chiefs. (It is not hard to imagine the reluctance of the much abused Indians – decimated by Whiteman's diseases, warfare, relocated away from tribal lands, ripped off by dubious agents and restricted to reservations)

Curtis, in pursuit of his dream encountered every imaginable hardship and endured great personal risk. Once, having occurred the suspicions and wrath of a medicine man, he had to pack up and high-tail it out of camp during the night. It is difficult to imagine the enormity of his task, not only was he making tens of thousands of negatives throughout the western United States and Canada, but he also acted as the project's principal ethnographer, fundraiser, publisher and administrator. He wrote most of the initial drafts for the nearly four thousand pages of ethnographic narrative before submitting the text to the project's editor, Frederick Webb Hodge.

In reality, the undertaking was in financial trouble throughout the entire twenty-four-year period between 1906 and 1930, but Curtis constantly strove to keep his project afloat whilst he maintained a gruelling lecture and exhibition schedule, actively sold original photographs, and invested heavily in a feature-length film "The Headhunters" on Vancouver Island in an unrelenting effort to support the disappointing sale of subscriptions for the limited-edition books.

Eventually Curtis would be made to pass over most of his rights in the project in exchange for further funding from J.P. Morgan's holdings. Between 1923 and 1928, in a succession of legal documents, he relinquished copyright in all the pictures already published in *The North American Indian*.

By 1930, Edward Curtis had published the last of his planned 20-volume set of *The North American Indian*, after taking more than 40,000 pictures over 30 years. Yet he was ruined, and he suffered a complete mental and physical breakdown, requiring hospitalization in Colorado.

On recovery he took work in Hollywood, where his friend Cecil B. DeMille hired him for camerawork on films such as *The Ten Commandments* and *The Plainsman*, although he is not credited for his work on these productions. Curtis eventually sold the rights to his own movie *The Headhunters* to the American Museum of Natural History for a mere \$1,500.

Curtis died in Los Angeles in relative obscurity, however, since his death there has been an explosion of renewed interest in his work. Today, he is one of the most widely exhibited, published, and collected photographers in history. His work has been the subject of over 30 monographs and 100 international exhibitions, and can be found in major public and private collections worldwide, including the Getty, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Met.

The *North American Indian* contained more than 2,200 original photographs, printed in photogravure, and nearly 4,000 pages of anthropological text including transcriptions of language and music. Each set included twenty quarto-size volumes containing approximately seventy-five original photogravures and two hundred pages of text. The volumes were supplemented by bound portfolios, each containing approximately thirty-six oversize gravures on eighteen-by-twenty-two-inch etching stock.

Viewed in its entirety, *The North American Indian* presents an historical record of enormous importance. Edward S. Curtis has preserved for future generations an important era in American history and provided an opportunity to understand the American Indian experience. Perhaps the most important legacy of Curtis's monumental accomplishment is the expression of an extraordinary and deeply felt sympathy with the personal and spiritual lives of the American Indians. In this respect, Edward S. Curtis stands alone among the photographers of American Indians.

#### HIGHEST PRICES PAID AT AUCTION TO DATE:

Individual print sold at Sothebys, April 2008, lot no. 9: Chief Joseph 1904, Platinum, 16 x 12in, very rare, signed in ink, mounted on board, condition good. Price realized \$169,000.

A complete set of *The North American Indian* sold at Christie's, April 10, 2012, consisting of twenty volumes and twenty portfolios, condition poor to fair, price realized \$2,882,500

#### After thoughts:

Curtis lived among dozens of native tribes, devoting his life to his calling until he produced a definitive and unparalleled work, *The North American Indian*. *The New York Herald* hailed it as "the most ambitious enterprise in publishing since the production of the King James Bible."

What is all the more remarkable about Curtis's achievement was that it occurred at a point where photography was still in its infancy, when few photographers had ventured beyond the realm of their studios. William Henry Jackson had photographed the American West, and more than a century later Avedon would photograph drifters, ranch-hands and coal miners in a completely different vision called *In the American West*. Yet Curtis stepped off a cliff at the same time he vaulted into the rarefied clouds of ambition, when he set out in 1900 to make the most comprehensive record ever of Native Americans. No one had ever attempted anything like it, nor has anyone since. At the age of 60, fighting to finish his masterwork, Curtis's final struggles to photograph Eskimos far above the Arctic Circle are best understood through his own description: "The wind picked up sections of the sea and threw it in our faces." Then, Curtis dryly adds "One nice thing about such situations is that the suspense is short lived...you either make it or you don't."

... *The North American Indian*, we find, was unashamedly aimed at leading members of the urban, Eastern business community ... [in a 1911 report] ... reminiscent of many self-justifying statements by men like Andrew Carnegie ... Curtis said, "Civilization, with its tremendous force and its insatiable desire to possess all, must necessarily crush the weaker life of primitive man."

William E. Myers (1877-1949), who graduated with a degree in classics from Northwestern University in 1899, eschewed public credit for his work. But Curtis acknowledged his contributions in the preface to the eighteenth volume and elsewhere. In a reminiscence composed two decades after the final volumes were published, Curtis said, "For a ... period of twenty years I had the invaluable services of Mr. W.E. Myers. He was a rapid shorthand writer, a speedy typist ... and had developed an uncanny ear for phonetics."

But why is Curtis so relevant? What really makes this body of work so special? Couldn't anyone make these pictures? ... Um, no. As it turns out Edward Curtis was, regardless of subject matter, an extraordinary photographer in his own right. In the late 1800's and early 1900's no one had seen photographic images of such extraordinary detail, nuance, density and light. In the scheme of things, the medium was still fairly young at the time. Curtis' negatives and prints were sublime – even before Ansel Adams and Fred Archer collaborated to create the Zone System in 1939. Technically, Curtis was virtuosic and his extant body of work is a testament to not only himself, as an artist, but to the development of photography as a viable medium in the burgeoning art world. Easily one might argue that at least part of the relevance of Curtis' work rests in the merit of the photography itself. As well, photogravure – the process Edward Curtis used to reproduce images for *The North American Indian* is also historically significant. The three handmade paper types, Dutch Van Gelder, Japon Vellum & Deluxe Japanese Tissue onto which Curtis' images were printed as photogravures for publication won't ever be produced again. Collectors revere these images for their unique qualities and thus, we have another reason to call the work "relevant."

In the years between 1904 and 1906, Curtis heightened his participation in national exhibits. He knew that he needed to build a wider audience and a solid reputation before approaching anyone as a financial backer for his project, and his own financial situation was becoming dire. He held his first exhibit/lecture at Christensen's Hall in Seattle in December 1904, and attracted an enthusiastic capacity crowd. He took his lecture, which incorporated a slide show and motion pictures, to various venues on the west coast, and eventually to the Washington Club and the prestigious Cosmos Club in Washington D.C., and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. His show garnered positive reviews from the scientific community and the press, and he was able to sell a number of prints, but he also continued to lay out money for work on the first volume of *The North American Indian*, and was in desperate need of a financial backer. In January 1906, he took matters into his own hands and arranged a meeting with J.P. Morgan.

One of his most famous examples of landscape is "Canyon de Chelly," which depicts seven riders on horseback surrounded by dramatic cliff formations. Located in the Northwest corner of Arizona, Canyon de Chelly is considered a very sacred place for the Navaho even to this day. Though many modern photographers have tried to capture it, Curtis's image remains one of the most powerful photographs ever taken of the Canyon. Of course, "he believed that no two people could point a camera at something and come away with the same image," and this photograph is a clear example of that belief. This particular picture seems to make the humans seem insignificant alongside this epic landscape, playing into Curtis's theme of "the dying race."

The complete volumes and portfolios of *The North American Indian* are available online at:

<http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/toc.cgi>

Sources.. far too many to mention

Jeff Cutting  
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