



EDWARD S. CURTIS

ONE HUNDRED MASTERWORKS

Edward S. Curtis

ONE HUNDRED MASTERWORKS

CHRISTOPHER CARDOZO

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

A. D. COLEMAN, LOUISE ERDRICH, ERIC J. JOLLY,
AND MICHAEL CHARLES TOBIAS

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page 2: Edward S. Curtis, *Untitled (Two Hopi Girls in Window)*, 1900/ca. 1900. Platinum print, 15½ x 11¾ inches

page 4: Edward S. Curtis, *The Rush Gatherer—Kutenai*, 1910. Photogravure, 12 x 16 inches

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FOREWORD

Edward S. Curtis: One Hundred Masterworks presents a carefully considered selection of this famous photographer's magnificent photographs of Native Americans and Native American life. Moreover, it approaches the subject from a novel angle. Whereas a good number of Curtis' images have become familiar to the general public via posters, postcards, and books (and some have achieved iconic status), what is much rarer are encounters with Curtis' *prints*, the objects themselves. It is the finest of these prints that are the primary focus and great strength of *Edward S. Curtis: One Hundred Masterworks*.

Over a thirty-year period, Curtis devoted his talents to documenting Native Americans and their lifeways. Curtis was much more than a photographer, superb portraitist, and gifted printmaker; he was also an acute observer of human beings and cultures. His efforts culminated in a mammoth, twenty-volume set of books on the American Indian that is today celebrated as an invaluable record of a rich way of life. *One Hundred Masterworks* explores these varied aspects of Curtis' seminal oeuvre.

In 1996, I had the good fortune to have been introduced to Curtis' art through a serendipitous encounter with Christopher Cardozo, who was in the process of assembling what is now widely considered the greatest collection of Curtis photographs in existence. The prints were breathtaking. Cardozo's keen eye for image quality and print condition, his appreciation of rarity and photographic processes, his deep understanding of the subject—in short, his unparalleled connoisseurship was evident from our first encounter.

FEP has had the great privilege of presenting exhibitions from the Cardozo collection in the past and we are delighted to now be bringing a serious selection of Curtis' work, with a special focus on the master prints, to a broad audience. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christopher Cardozo for the generous loans from his collection, his ongoing partnership, and his profound commitment to Curtis' legacy, and to our colleagues at DelMonico Books • Prestel for their dedication to this project.

TODD BRANDOW

Executive Director, Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography

INTRODUCTION

THE ARTISTRY OF EDWARD S. CURTIS

CHRISTOPHER CARDOZO

Part of the fascination that photography holds is its ability to unlock secrets kept even from ourselves.

Like dreams, the photograph can uncork a beady bouquet of recognition which can escape into the cognitive world.

—JACK WELPOTT, *Women & Other Visions*, 1975

THE AESTHETIC, EMOTIONAL, AND SPIRITUAL QUALITIES found in Curtis' most realized images are the cornerstone of his accomplishment as a photographic artist. It is not unprecedented, whether in this country or internationally, to see people at exhibitions moved to tears while looking at his photographs. This is especially true when they are viewing his vintage photographs, particularly master prints of the quality highlighted in this volume. By "master prints," I mean those prints made in the darkroom for exhibition and/or sale (platinum, silver, goldtones, etc.), as distinct from the photogravure prints that almost without exception were created exclusively for Curtis' magnum opus *The North American Indian*. A photogravure has the potential to be extraordinary in its own right, but as a single-color, ink-transfer process, it lacks the complexity and depth of Curtis' most highly realized master prints. It is for this reason that *One Hundred Masterworks* gives precedence to the extremely small body of work that Curtis created in non-photogravure processes, the prints for which he won awards and which he actively exhibited and sold to collectors.

Many of these master prints have a potent "object presence" that transforms the image into something visceral, emotional, and simply "more alive." And it is this presence that elevates certain of his photographs into works of art. A. D. Coleman, when viewing the Curtis platinum print *Tápa* (pl. 40) for the first time, paused momentarily, absorbed the experience, and then declared with a note of reverence: "That is one of the most beautiful works on paper I have ever seen." An exceptional statement, particularly from someone who has looked at hundreds of thousands of photographs during his fifty years as a critic and historian of photography.

In Curtis' finest photographs, the object and image become a seamless and self-reinforcing whole, creating the potential for the viewer of a powerful, deeply felt experience. There is ample evidence that Curtis was a gifted maker of compelling and enduring images. In the past fifteen years alone, his photographs have been exhibited in more than forty countries and on every continent but Antarctica. His work has been shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Getty Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Morgan Library and Museum. More than 250 institutions across the United States and Europe hold his work in their permanent collections. Clearly the value and importance of his photographs are widely recognized.

Less often acknowledged are his gifts as a craftsman and as an aesthetic and technical innovator. It is evident from even a cursory viewing of plates in this volume that Curtis created prints in an exceptional variety and range of photographic mediums, and his extant, exhibition-quality vintage works exist in at least five different mediums (other of his photographs in at least four other mediums).

Curtis is sometimes viewed simply as an ethnographic photographer, overlooking his gifts as a practitioner of fine-art photography. While his extensive text, sound recordings, and early film footage are ethnographic in intent and scope, Curtis himself viewed his finest photographs as works of art. Many of his images are indeed primarily ethnographic in nature, but those for which he is best known were created first and foremost as works of art. The fact that Curtis produced a major body of work that spans the entire spectrum from purely ethnographic and documentary to purely aesthetic has escaped the attention of many observers. Yet it is essential to truly understanding and appreciating what he achieved.

Conveying the beauty and power, the “object presence,” of his most realized photographic prints is at the heart of this publication and its illustrations. A principal goal of this book is to give the viewer an appreciation of Curtis’ genius not only as a maker of enduring images but also as a maker of beautiful, compelling objects, and to do so in a manner that has never before been possible outside of a few exhibitions of Curtis’ master prints and vintage photogravures. While the printed page cannot replace the experience of looking at the actual object, certain books can bring the viewer close to that experience and that is one of the central aims of this book: to give the reader a sense of being in the presence of a fully realized, vintage Curtis photograph. Through careful juxtapositions and sequencing of images, and highly faithful reproductions, it is hoped the essence of Curtis’ gifts as a maker of both images and objects will be more fully revealed.

A NOTE TO THE READER

The dates of the photographs as given here refer first to the date the image was made — the negative date — and second, the print date, for example, 1905/1908. If the negative and print dates are coterminous, only one date is given. Figure illustrations are numbered consecutively from beginning to end of the volume.



Edward S. Curtis, [Self-portrait], 1899/ca. 1899

GELATIN SILVER PRINT, 8⁷/₁₆ X 6¹/₄ INCHES



FIG. 1 Edward S. Curtis, *Untitled (Indian Brave Profile)*—Tribe Unknown, 1905/ca. 1905
PLATINUM PRINT, 16 X 11 INCHES

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

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 one of our most widely collected and exhibited fine-art photographers, 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 groundbreaking filmmaker. 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. 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 how indigenous peoples lived before their 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.

While primarily a photographer, I do not see or think photographically, hence the story of Indian life will not be told in microscopic detail but rather will be presented as a broad and luminous picture.

— EDWARD S. CURTIS

A fundamental tenet of this book is that 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 (figs. 2, 3). Shamoan 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 purposeful engagement in the transmission of information, culture, and self by his Native collaborators. The openness and intimacy that are essential components of his most realized photographs could only have been achieved through close collaboration and deep trust on the part of the Native participants. One need only look at the thousands of images by other photographers of the American Indian to see what a rare occurrence this was. Today, for many Native people and their tribes, this collaboratively created body of work is a wellspring of cultural and linguistic revivification and the imagery a source of pride, dignity, and a deepened sense of identity.

While it is well documented that innumerable Native people, from school children to elders, have been touched by 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* (pl. 57): “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 . . .* [emphasis added].”

This essential quality, the universality of many Curtis images, is a key element in understanding why they have endured for over a century and affected people throughout the world. Impassioned by the wisdom and richness of American Indian life and culture, Curtis was also deeply moved by the individuals who shared so much with him. He realized that he could not only preserve a record of the history, culture, and profound humanity of Native peoples but felt absolutely compelled to do so before they vanished forever. That Native Americans themselves (not just their culture) might actually “vanish” was a real possibility at that time.