One Eye on the Market
by Carlo Romero

According to the Library of Congress, "The North American Indian" by Edward S. Curtis is one of the most significant and controversial representations of traditional American Indian culture ever produced." Scholars in the fields of photography, anthropology, and history have divided in this controversy into two primary camps: those who believe Curtis's photographs of American Indians should be considered the work of a Pictorialist artist and nostalgic Indian sympathizer, and those who believe his photography holds value as an authentic ethnographic record of native culture. However, this perennial debate about Curtis's motivation largely overlooks his background as a commercial photographer. Curtis indicates in the prologue to his seminal work The North American Indian that he would like his photographs to be considered both science and art. This ambitious desire, along with other sentiments revealed in his photographs and writings, suggests that Curtis wanted to create an individual style that employed the Pictorialist aesthetic to serve an ulterior motive as well as a documentary purpose. Curtis embarked upon his quest to photograph the unadulterated Native American Indian culture with hopes that his work would have lasting commercial value. The academics may wax esoteric, but ultimately Curtis was a businessman who aimed to create pretty pictures for wealthy patrons.

Curtis was foremost a commercial photographer. Before he snapped his first image of a Native American, he was well known in Seattle for making society portraits of wealthy young women. According to Florence Curtis Graybill and Victor Boesen in their book Visions of a Vanishing Race, "The Curtis Studio in Seattle was where society girls went to have their portraits made in the late 1890's, tradition had it. A portrait by Curtis gave them 'glamour'" (7). Perhaps the most famous debutante photographed by Curtis was the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, Alice Roosevelt, before her wedding to Nicholas Longworth in February 1906. In this image, entitled "Mrs. Nicholas Longworth," Curtis employed elements of composition that indeed glamorized his subject. Mrs. Longworth is captured full-length standing profile before a dark background. Curtis uses a shallow depth of field so that the foreground and the background of the image appear in soft focus. This soft focus in tandem with the direct lighting, which falls only on the subject and her cascading white dress, gives the image a dreamlike quality. Mrs. Longworth holds at her waist a bouquet of flowers, symbolic of the wedding ceremony in which she was poised to take part.

This image displays the same techniques that Curtis used to produce images of Native American Indians. In his photograph "Black Eagle—Assiniboin," Curtis portrays the great "Chief Black Eagle of the Assiniboine, a seamy-faced tribal elder of ninety years," in the same manner he portrays the young daughter of the president of the United States. Though Chief Black Eagle does not stand profile to the camera,

"Mrs. Nicholas Longworth (Alice Roosevelt)."
Graybill and Boesen, 21.
he is captured full length before a dark studio background. Most noticeably, the strong directed lighting creates a glow around the great war chief similar to that which surrounded the stately bride. Black Eagle is draped in a fur that flows downward in much the same manner as Roosevelt’s wedding dress. Curtis uses shallow depth of field to bring only the weathered face of his subject into sharp focus, leaving all else in the frame soft and hazy. Instead of Roosevelt’s bouquet of flowers, Black Eagle holds symbolic feathers at his waist. While the subjects differ significantly in the respective images, the style remains consistent from one to the other. In his portrait of Black Eagle, Curtis has used the techniques of commercial photography to serve a documentary interest. His method of documentation derives from photography-for-profit.

In both images—“Mrs. Nicholas Longworth” and “Black Eagle—Assiniboin”—Curtis practices photographic techniques characteristic of the Pictorialist movement of the early 20th century, a movement in photography led by Alfred Stieglitz that sought to gain respect for the medium among the traditional fine arts. According to photographic historians Vicki Goldberg and Robert Silberman in their book American Photography: A Century of Images:

Since sharp focus suggested the use of photography as a scientific or at least mundane recording device, soft focus became the sign of poetic artistry and the pursuit of beauty... Tonal subtlety was considered a sign of true photographic art, endowing Pictorialist images with a lovely range of carefully modulated grays.

(21-22)

Curtis followed the prescribed methods of Pictorialist photography with a consciousness of their market value. The true Pictorialists saw their medium as a means of artistic expression, while Curtis sought to exploit the interests of his subjects and patrons. He aimed to make his subjects beautiful so that they would have broad commercial appeal.

Curtis chose not only his style but his subjects according to the Pictorialist tradition, as described by Goldberg and Silberman:

Their preferred subjects were portraits, landscapes, and figure studies. There are Pictorialist photographs that look like Renaissance paintings, in which the photograph captures a carefully staged tableau. Even when the subject was contemporary, the pursuit of art meant depicting a world of refinement and elegance... (21)

The body of Curtis’s work exemplifies his great affinity for portraiture. His portrait subjects are typically posed with a dignified gaze and photographed in situations of controlled lighting. When he was not photographing Indian subjects in the manner of portraiture, Curtis often set them in dramatic landscapes to accentuate their continuity with nature. In his image “Cañon de Chelly,” Curtis sets a group of Indians traveling on
horseback in the flat basin of a canyon against a backdrop of rising cliffs that make up the canyon walls. The Indians and their quadruped transports are minute silhouettes when photographed in a wide frame amidst the dramatic landscape. "Their anonymity accentuates their formal relationship with the landscape," observes one critic. The photograph holds little documentary value because the subjects are indistinguishable and the canyon wall is not photographed with a focus that would capture geological detail (Goetzmann 7). Nevertheless, the image beckons the viewer into the scene with the dramatically appealing composition characteristic of Curtis.

Despite exemplifying the stylistic and subjective elements of the Pictorialist style, Curtis rejects the notion that his work may be considered wholly artistic in the introduction to the first edition of his collection *The North American Indian*. He instead suggests that he aims to create simultaneously a documentary record and a work of art, with more emphasis placed on the former ambition:

> It has been the aim to picture all features of the Indian life and environment—types of the young and the old, with their habitats, industries, ceremonies, games, and everyday customs. Rather than being designed for mere embellishment, the photographs are each an illustration of an Indian character or of some vital phase in his existence. (xiii)

According to Graybill and Boesen, Curtis was aware that his supposedly "scientific" approach would distinguish him from the likes of George Catlin, a lawyer and painter from Pennsylvania who began painting Indians in 1832, as well as William Henry Jackson and Adam Clark Vroman, who both photographed Indians during the 19th century prior to Curtis. "Curtis stood alone in that he went about it systematically, and with a comprehensive plan. He had in mind making 'a photographic history of the American Indian,' as he later described it, recording him on film before he gave way too much to the white man's culture" (Graybill and Boesen 12). The timeliness and the comprehensiveness of this plan were its biggest selling points. With entrepreneurial zeal, Curtis capitalized on the opportunity to photograph the endangered Indians before they became fully incorporated into the American mainstream.

Yet Curtis may well have known that the same opportunistic ambition that drove his project would ultimately lead to the questioning of its historical legitimacy. Curtis indicates the urgency of his project in order to amplify its significance, but his statements are misleading. He professes in his introduction to *The North American Indian*:

> "The great changes in practically every phase of the Indian's life that have taken place, especially within recent years, have been such that had the time for collecting much of the material, both descriptive and illustrative, herein recorded, been delayed, it would have been lost forever" (16).

William Goetzmann, Professor of Finance and Management Studies at Yale University, in his article entitled "The Arcadian Landscapes of Edward Curtis," comments:

> By 1905, the vanishing frontier, at least in the Western United States, had already vanished. No one understood this more than Edward Curtis himself. He had spent the last eight years photographing Native American people in the Northwest and Southwest, and had been hard pressed to document any visual evidence of Indians in a "pre-contact" state. (2)

However, the documentary images of American Indians that indicated white influence were of little value in the commercial marketplace; nor were they images that promised to gain Curtis distinction or fame. It was not until Curtis began portraying Indians according to the white stereotype of the "noble savage" that he received awards, recognition, and an increase in the sales of his prints. Curtis gladly perfected his stylistic portrayal of the white stereotype of Indians in order to satisfy his patrons.
Commissioned by the banker J.P. Morgan, Curtis abandoned anthropological ethics and approached his assignment as a business venture. Morgan was the first to propose that Curtis himself write the text that would accompany his collection *The North American Indian*, despite Curtis’s lack of formal education beyond grammar school. Graybill and Boesen recall an interaction between the photographer and the financial mogul:

If there was to be text along with the photographs, telling of the Indian’s customs, ceremonials, beliefs, myths, religion, what he did day to day—Curtis eventually developed twenty-five cardinal points of information to explore—with all of it bound up in books, the question arose as to who should do the writing.

“You are the one to write the text,” Morgan declared at once. “You know the Indians and how they live and what they are thinking.” (20)

Morgan, occupied with the persistent demands of Wall Street, knew little about the academic study of American Indians. However, as project patron and cocksure New York millionaire, he issued directives to Curtis that the photographer was obliged to follow. Not only did he direct Curtis to author the text for *The North American Indian*, but he also made Curtis responsible for marketing the work. For his part, Curtis did not first seek a grant from a museum or an academic institution: he sought the sponsorship of a wealthy banker, and he was only able to proceed with his project when the banker felt his project would be marketable. Morgan definitively commercialized Curtis’s work on North American Indians by determining that the photographs and accompanying writing were to be sold by subscription (Graybill and Boesen 20). At Morgan’s behest, Curtis became more than simply a photographer: he became a promoter and a salesman as well. When Morgan set the price of subscription to Curtis’s publication and the salary that Curtis would receive, “The arrangements called for Curtis to give time to promotion and sales of the work, besides his researches in the field” (Graybill and Boesen 20). If Curtis originally intended to take photographs as an artist, his self-expression must have been inhibited by his consciousness of the market’s interests. If Curtis intended to approach his subject of American Indians scientifically, his objectivity must have been clouded by his economic motive. It is idealistic at best to subscribe to the notion that Curtis’s work could be purely artistic or purely scientific or some combination of the two, despite his reliance on the patronage of J.P. Morgan.

Morgan’s endorsement meant that Curtis commercialized the Indians with whom he claimed to sympathize. He created images of Indians according to the narrow-minded stereotype held by the purchasing public. Curtis accentuated the archetypal elements of his native subjects and eliminated evidence of white influence in his images by resorting to cropping, set backgrounds, and staged tableaus. In his effort to pose Indians dressed in traditional clothes, performing ceremonial rituals, and preparing for battle, Curtis found himself fabricating garments, bribing tribes to reenact particular dances, and being occasionally deceived by Indians unwilling to reveal their most sacred beliefs. In the image “Yebechai Prayer—Navajo,” as noted by anthropologist Christopher Lyman in his book *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: The Photographs of Edward Curtis*, “Curtis posed this enactment of the Yebechai ceremony. Probably without Curtis’s knowledge, the dancers performed the dance backward in order to secularize it” (69). In his zeal to capture “the Indian” according to his own socially conditioned notions, Curtis was duped by his hired models. According to Lyman, as quoted by Gerald Vizenor, Professor of American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, in his 2000 article entitled “Edward Curtis: Pictorialist and Ethnographic Adventurist,” “Curtis was selling images to a popular audience whose perception of ‘Indianness’ was based on stereotypes” (31).
Curtis evaluated the success of his project according to the success of this sale. He states in his introduction to *The North American Indian*: "I hope that while our extended observation among these brown people have given me no shallow insight into their life and thought, neither the pictures nor the descriptive matter will be found lacking in popular interest" (15). Throughout his endeavor Curtin was motivated by the thought that his photographs of American Indians would bring him lasting fame and substantial profit. Curtis's values were those of a free market capitalist. He expressed occasional concern about the skepticism of academia toward his work, but only because of the possibility that scholarly dissent would compromise his commercial sales. Said Curtis about the resistance of universities to his project: "The work can be sold out completely without these large institutions becoming subscribers, but it can be sold faster if they will give us their endorsements, and there is, as you know, a little satisfaction in feeling that these men are with us" (Graybill and Boesen 36). For Curtis, academic endorsement was simply a means to the higher end of public acclaim.

Curtis's photographs constitute the farewell performance of the noble savage as ordered by and captured through the eyes of a white man from metropolitan society. Curtis, like many turn-of-the-century Americans (including his friend Theodore Roosevelt), was drawn to the myth that in nature lay the path to salvation. Vizenor sums up his enterprise: "He posed as an ethnographer out to capture the last images of a vanishing race. To do this, of course, he paid for native poses, staged, altered, and manipulated his pictures to create an ethnographic simulation as a pictorialist" (28). Despite his detractors, and perhaps very much because of them, Curtis's photographs are considered some of the most valuable in the history of the United States. "A single set of *The North American Indian* is now worth roughly the entire investment made by the Morgan family in its production" (Goetzmann 9). In his bold attempt to satisfy one of the wealthiest bankers in the country, to unlock religious secrets kept from white men for hundreds of years, and to earn himself lasting celebrity, Curtis succeeded in creating a photographic style all his own.

**Works Cited**


