The True Legacy of Edward S. Curtis
by Cory Miller

"Painted Tipi—Assiniboin" is one of over forty thousand images of Native Americans that Seattle-based photographer Edward S. Curtis created between 1904 and 1930. He assembled these photographs along with ethnographies of many tribes into the twenty volumes of The North American Indian. In this particular portrait, paintings of two buffalo skulls decorate the south side of a tipi and horizontal borders span its crown. Just outside the door, positioned behind the tipi, a woman stands dressed in a dark cloth dress adorned with rows of beads, metal sequins, coins, and elk teeth. A boy and his horse are most forward in the frame. He is young, yet he is extravagantly dressed like a mature warrior, wearing a heavily beaded vest, buffalo hide leggings, a cotton shirt, and a porcupine hair roach that dangles from the back of his neck. His horse dwarfs him, but he appears resolute and confident.

Curtis's caption to this plate helps direct the viewer's response: "A tipi painted with figures commemoratve of a dream experienced by its owner is a venerated object" (qtd. in Graybill & Boesen, plate 84). Since the boy probably lives here, these are the dreams of his father. The mother seems to be torn between having to let her son live as a man in her tribe's warrior society and still caring for him as a young child. She is proud, not sad. The boy and the tipi paintings are symbolically related, it seems—perhaps because the father once dreamt with anticipation of how his son would grow to be a strong horseman and hunter. As the mother looks on with optimistic nostalgia and the boy is so confidently fixed on his horse, Curtis shows that this dream has new life in the son. "A Painted Tipi—Assiniboin" is a prime example of how Curtis not only shows the culture and condition of the Indians, but also captures them in a way that artfully expresses what otherwise may not be shown in a simple photograph.

Not everyone sees it this way. Christopher Lyman is one critic who accuses Curtis of expressing a personal and subjective view of the Indian in his photographs rather than recording the true state of these people. In his book The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis, Lyman writes:

His conception of primitiveness, although never clearly defined, appears to have been based on the popular illusion that change depleted Indianness—that true Indianness was that which was unaffected by White culture. Curtis seems therefore to have believed that by removing evidence of the influence of White culture from his photographs, he was being more truthful in his depiction of Indians. (62-63)

Here Lyman refers to Curtis's tendency to change the natural setting of his photographs by posing subjects with a collection of their material possessions and then retouching other evidence of Euro-American influence out of his negatives. Lyman argues that Curtis had his own image of how Indians were before being changed by whites and that he fashioned his work to convey that image instead of the Indians' normal, unaffected, candid lives. He stresses that Curtis's efforts to show the true lives of Indians ultimately created a false, romanticized stereotype.

In regarding Curtis's photographs as less than candid, Lyman does not simply find fault with the way the photographer allowed his subjects to be aware of his presence. His definition of candidness does not require Curtis to have hidden from the Indians and spied into their camps through his lens. Lyman instead criticizes Curtis for composing his scenes with the motive of hiding modernity. He suggests that Curtis intended to create a pictorial history of the Indians using the present tribes as actors and his own imagination as the script. Thus Lyman argues that Curtis was dishonest in his efforts to hastily record as much of the lingering Native American cultures as he could.

Despite the success of The North American Indian in bringing the most realistic view of Native American cultures available at the time
"A Painted Tipi—Assiniboin." Graybill and Boesen, plate 84.

to whites back home, Lyman points out specific photographs in the collection that are inherently dishonest because of the changes Curtis made. Concerning "On the Little Bighorn," Lyman writes: "In this romantically composed pictorial a wagon has been removed by retouching. The scratchy marks of the retouching stylus are visible just to the left of the center of the frame" (71). He also points out that in a photograph made at Acoma ("Fiesta of San Estevan"); "Pueblo hats and suspenders were retouched away" (71). He observes that in another view of this festival, Curtis removed two white onlookers from just above center frame (72), and that lodges shown in "Assiniboin Camp on Bow River" "were made from machine-woven fabric, possibly feed sacks. Close inspection shows retouching marks, where product labels were removed" (72). These frames were altered by retouching negatives, but little evidence is usually left when frames are cropped to exclude unwanted objects in the perimeter. "A Painted Tipi—Assiniboin" may well be another example of Curtis's choosing to crop out evidence of modernity. It is reported that, in the original negative, an automobile sat just a few feet to the left of the tipi. Even though Lyman does not cite this specific cropping, the possibility of such a deletion brings his argument into sharp focus: changes in the composition of these scenes, whether slight or substantial, can change how viewers perceive the reality of the Indians' condition at that time.

Because of Curtis's methods for erasing modernity from his frames, Lyman suggests that Curtis strove to shoot photographs of the past, not of the present in which they were made. Lyman seems to imply that the only true Indian was one who exuded savagery and primitiveness,
and that these qualities were only to be found in some irrecoverable past:

It was the "untutored savage" which Curtis intended to present. "Savages" and "primitiveness" were, and had always been, imaginary constructs which could be presented in photographs only through imaginative use of the medium. (62) According to Lyman, photographs themselves could be said to show only the present—i.e., whatever was before the lens when the film was exposed. However, through creative staging of his scenes, Curtis forced through the lens his idea of true Indians from a time before any European influence had taken place. Lyman claims that Curtis relied on his understanding of Native American cultures to construct a portrait of Indian life that was realistic yet not real.

Curtis often made photographs of real people wearing or operating material objects which they owned and had used at one point in their own lives. Yet Lyman does not believe that Curtis's photographs are honest. So what would it take to satisfy such a critic? Is Lyman actually condemning Curtis and his work because Curtis himself was not an Indian? Perhaps Lyman would need to know that the photographer was a member of the tribe he was photographing in order to trust that he had the background knowledge required to justify any manipulations of his photographs.

When Lyman accuses Curtis of trying to photograph the Indian before European influence, he does not consider how long ago this theoretical time would have been. The simple presence of beadwork shows a drastic shift in material culture due to trade goods. If Curtis did in fact remove an automobile from "A Painted Tipi—Assiniboin," the apparent date of the scene is only twenty or thirty years before when the picture was taken. To reach a true pre-contact state, however, Curtis would have had to change much more than he possibly could have. Both Curtis and his subjects were aware that they could never accomplish this, and his methods sought simply to remove what was superfluous from his photographs in order to emphasize the people and artifacts of surviving Native American cultures. In "Assiniboin Camp on Bow River," Curtis removed corporate labels from the front tipi, and to the not-so-critical viewer, what's left appears to be leaf shadows. Had Curtis not omitted this evidence of modernity, the labels would have been so dominant in the frame as to suggest that Curtis was highlighting the Indians' use of feed sacks for tipi liners instead of paying homage to the surviving culture of the Plains.

Lyman criticizes Curtis for not being candid in his ethnographic photography, but modern audiences must consider, "How much does this really matter?" Even though Curtis did create settings for his posed shots and inevitably affected the activity of his subjects, there are benefits to his approach. The quality of his photographs was superior to other ethnographic photographers of the time, many of whom focused their shots from a distance. Clarity and the amount of detail in each frame could not have been better had Curtis tried to hide himself in order to boast that

"Assiniboin Camp on Bow River." Lyman, 72.
his shots were completely natural. Since the subjects knew he was there and what he was doing, they were probably much more cooperative and comfortable than they would have been otherwise. And as he collaborated on his scenes with the Indians, Curtis also gained a much better understanding of exactly what he was photographing.

One such photograph that could not have been taken candidly is “The Piki Maker.” Inside a pueblo, a young married woman kneels before a hearth over which is placed a flat skillet. She spreads paste from a pottery bowl, which sits beside her, over the cooking surface to make very thin sheets of piki from blue corn meal. She has a collection of this traditional bread stacked on a woven mat, also beside her. The woman’s hair is worn in two loose curls, in contrast to the example of an unmarried maiden’s hair in “Hopi Girl.” Curtis may have asked her to dress in her best clothes and perform this task, but the photograph still shows a common scene in Hopi life.

In “Incense Over a Medicine Bundle—Hidatsa,” Curtis shows objects and actions representative of a Hidatsa ritual. A man with flowing long hair and face paint sits beside a medicine bundle. He is shirtless and holding a bowl full of smoldering incense over the bundle, which also has a pipe resting on top of it. What is actually in the bundle cannot be seen because it is wrapped in an animal hide. The background and lighting suggest that the scene is within a walled structure. The intricacies or even importance of this ceremony cannot be determined from the photograph, and it is likely that the man is performing the ritual simply because Curtis asked him to. But Curtis was inspired by the living ceremonies of these people and by what he gathered from discussing their culture with them. Even though the photograph was most likely not made during an actual ceremony, this in itself does not mean that the scene is dishonest about Indian life.

Though historians, anthropologists, and art critics may argue endlessly about the worth of Curtis’s photographs, the true answers should come from inside Native American cultures. In 2000 Anne Makepeace produced a documentary film, Coming to Light, in which she shows many present-day Native Americans the almost
see what tradition was back then. When I was growing up, you know, we already had regular clothing. Tradition wasn’t really that big. And now it’s going back towards being more traditional, and now we have these pictures to show us how they really were back then. (Makepeace 2000)

She knew that Hopi women usually wore plain cotton dresses by the time Curtis made this photograph and that he had probably asked them to dress up just for this occasion. But she thinks it was a special occasion, and her words do not criticize Curtis for staging it. George Horse Capture, an A’animin Gros Ventre man also shown in Coming to Light, agrees: “He did a monumental job, and if he didn’t come along and do this, the loss would be tremendous... When people start criticizing stereotypes, I look at my great grandfather. He’s not a stereotype.” The Indians who view these photographs know the real people behind them. The memories evoked of these ancestors grant credibility to Curtis’s work.

Works Cited

