

Reviews and Discussion

Christopher M. Lyman. *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians* by Edward S. Curtis. New York: Pantheon (in association with the Smithsonian Institution Press), 1982. 159 pp., 129 black-and-white ills. \$14.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Joanna Cohan Scherer
Smithsonian Institution

This book was published in association with a traveling exhibition of photographs entitled "The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: A New Look at the Work of Edward Curtis," circulated under the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Institution from March 1982 through April 1984. Edward Curtis was an early-twentieth-century photographer, author, and ethnographer of American Indians. His magnum opus, *The North American Indian* (1907–1930), comprised twenty volumes of text, profusely illustrated with his own photographs in addition to twenty oversized photographic portfolios.

Lyman's main thesis is that Curtis failed to accomplish his stated goal, to create a photographic record of Indian images as ethnographically accurate documents. Curtis, in the name of "science," went about to create "a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes . . . that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions" (p. 51). To accomplish this, Curtis planned to photograph Indians "directly from Nature," that is, to photograph them where they lived and not in a studio setting. This was to be a photographic preservation of Indian life (re-creating a visual image before contact with non-Indians), vital because Curtis presumed Indians to be a Vanishing Race. Rather than producing accurate ethnographic documents, Lyman contends that Curtis depicted his subjects in racial stereotypes, colored by racial prejudices and the ethnocentrism of his time. According to Lyman, these photographs were "artistic renditions of popular imagery" (p. 55). He presents examples in which Curtis seems to have dressed up the Indians (possibly with props, but this is conjecture, for the subjects may also have willingly borrowed items from one another for the picture), posed them, reconstructed scenes, and manipulated the images after they were taken: cropping the image, darkening areas of the print, and removing evidences of Euro-American artifacts (Figures 1 and 2). Because of these manipulations Lyman argues that Curtis never was an ethnographic documentarist, as he wished, but instead was a romantic pictorialist photographer, emphasizing drama and romance rather than ethnographic "truth."

Lyman's main thesis, however, is not well substantiated. I believe Curtis did faithfully carry out his stated purpose of creating a photographic record of Indians as ethnographically accurate documents. He carried it out, however, in the framework of what was then generally accepted as ethnographic documentation. Curtis wrote to Charles D. Walcott, secretary of the Smithsonian, on December 7, 1908:

I have succeeded in what I attempted to do as to the nature of the work; that is—to retain in both pictures and text the spirit, atmosphere and mystery of the primitive life, and yet make the work answer the requirements of the ethnologist and archaeologist. My feeling has been from the beginning that the bare skeleton of the subject would not give to the people as a whole, the satisfying view of the Indian; neither do I want to make the life seem so beautiful that it will be misleading in that respect.

The idea of removing all non-Indian elements from Curtis visuals to produce ethnographic documents was not only Curtis's idea (Holm and Quimby 1980: 32–33) but was supported by the men of learning with whom Curtis was in active communication. In discussing the possibility of developing a series of documentary motion pictures Curtis wished to produce in conjunction with his still-picture project, Curtis wrote to Walcott on May 2, 1912:

As I see it, it is most important that great effort be made to have all costumes absolutely correct. To do this requires a great deal of preliminary work where a picture is to be made, and at times a heavy expense. Some of those in consultation have felt that it would be better to do more work and use such costumes as occur, rather than to be so exact in costuming and consequently cover less ground. It would seem to be much better to do a few things particularly well than to cover a lot of territory in an indifferent fashion, and I believe you will quite agree with me in this. A word from you on this point would strengthen my argument very much.

Walcott responded on May 4, 1912:

I am particularly interested in your plan, as the Bureau of American Ethnology of this Institution has felt the need of initiating a work of this kind while valuable results are still obtainable, but lack of the necessary means has prevented definite steps toward the development of the project. Your plan to make a permanent motion-picture record of the existing primitive life of our Indians while the opportunity still lasts, and to restore scientifically, so far as may be practicable, that part of their life that has passed, is so important to education that I am very much pleased to know that there is a prospect of this work being done. It is almost needless for me to say that unless the pictures are made in a scientific manner—that is, unless *all intrusive elements are eliminated* so far as practicable and *the illustrations made to show the Indians*



Figures 1, 2 Yellow Kidney and Little Plume (Fig. 1, on right) inside a Blackfoot tipi. Titled by Curtis "The Piegan Lodge." In Figure 2, the retouched gravure shows the removal of a small square case, possibly a clock or a case with a peace medal. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1909. Copyright 1910. Retouched gravure from Curtis original publication, Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution. S.I. neg. 75-11978.



and their activities as they were before white men came among them—the plan would scarcely be worth the time and expense. I am therefore gratified to know that you fully appreciate this need, and trust that your plans may bear fruit. (emphasis supplied)

When the term “ethnographic present” is applied to a verbal approach to the Indian past, it lacks the negative connotation that “reconstruction” has when it is applied to photographic documentation. Curtis’s deep involvement in reconstruction to create an ethnographic present was then accepted practice among anthropologists. It is pointless for us in the 1980s to impose on Curtis’s work our concept of “the ideal of cooperation between photographer and subject which we think of in contemporary documentary photography” (p. 137). For Curtis, reconstruction of the cultures of the North American Indians was fully within the accepted practices of his time. That there is obviously some truth to Lyman’s specific contentions is acknowledged, but such minor tampering with the photographic images hardly offsets the magnitude of Curtis’s ethnographic accomplishments.

Another of Lyman’s hypotheses is that Curtis’s work and his views of Indians, racism, and the importance of the ethnographic present underwent a change during the 1920s. Lyman believes that Curtis came to accept more that “‘the Indian’ whom he had tried to present did not exist” (p. 138). According to Lyman, Curtis grew to accept the influence of white culture on Indians and minimized his attempts to manipulate the images. I think this hypothesis is pure fantasy. There are too many demonstrable contradictions. Curtis’ picture entitled “Hopi Farmers, Yesterday and Today,” taken before 1906, challenges this hypothesis. In referring to Volume 20 and Curtis’s work among the Alaskan Eskimo, Lyman says, “. . . but many of his photographs of houses, water craft, and other material possessions from Alaska are unpretentious documents. . . . these photographs allow the subjects a decent chance to express themselves as they chose” (p. 137). For his hypothesis to hold up one should find the Eskimo in Volume 20 dressed as Curtis found them on those summer days in 1927 when he photographed them. But this is not the case.

Henry B. Collins, now archaeologist emeritus at the Smithsonian, was on Nunivak Island in the summer of 1927 (Collins 1928:149–156) when Edward Curtis visited the island to take photographs for his last volume on Alaskan Eskimo. According to Collins, Curtis was in Nash Harbor on Nunivak Island from July 20 to July 22, 1927. Leaving Nash Harbor, Collins and an associate, T. Dale Stewart (now physical anthropologist emeritus at the Smithsonian), caught a ride with Curtis’s party and traveled with them to a summer camp of Paul Ivanoff, a native trader. On July 26, weather permitted them to continue on to Cape Etolin, where Ivanoff’s permanent village was located. Curtis



Figure 3 Eskimo women, Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island, wearing gutskin parkas. Titled by Curtis “Waterproof parkas, Nunivak.” These may have been some of the St. Lawrence Island garments Curtis had with him, according to Henry Collins. It should be noted, however, that Nunivak Islanders did make and wear waterproof gutskin clothing of their own (Lantis 1984:216). There is also no direct evidence that Curtis ever visited St. Lawrence Island (Curtis 1930). Thus, whether these items were introduced props is, I feel, not conclusive. However, even if not props, it is obvious from the picture context that the Nunivak women whom Curtis photographed that July 1927 were dressed in costuming not used during that time of year or for the activity pictured. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1927. Copyright 1928. Gravure from Curtis original publication, Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution. S.I. neg. 82-4762.



Figure 4 Boys from Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island, in winter parkas and wearing fancy hat/caps used for special occasions. Smaller boy is identified as Jackie by Henry Collins (personal communication, 1984). Titled by Curtis "Duck-skin parkas, Nunivak." In his introduction to volume 20 Curtis states: "the descriptive text and the illustrations in this volume depict only the summer life of the Eskimo . . ." (Curtis 1930:xvi). Clearly, the individuals are dressed in their winter clothes. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1927. Copyright 1928. Gravure from Curtis original publication, Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution. S.I. neg. 82-4759.



Figure 5 Woman from Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island, in winter parka, hanging herring to dry. Titled by Curtis "Herring racks, Nunivak." Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1927. Copyright, 1928. Gravure from Curtis original publication, Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution. S.I. neg. 82-4761.



Figure 6 Four women from Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island, wearing their customary cloth summer dresses. Photograph by Henry B. Collins, summer 1927. Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives, Collins collection.

had been at Cape Etolin previously, working on Eskimo mythology (Collins 1927:26), and in his diary entry for July 26 Collins notes, "Was rather afraid that the Curtis party had been here long enough to crimp our activities, buying up ethnological material and paying 50¢ tin of talcum powder, according to sex" (ibid.:30). Curtis left Cape Etolin soon after for St. Michael. One of the last entries in the Collins diary regarding Curtis, dated August 28, states:

Mr. Ivanoff said that no word had been received at St. Michael of the Curtis boat, which should have reached there long ago. We are afraid they are lost. They stayed at Hooper Bay two days, leaving there the 28 or 29 of July. The day following their departure there was a rather bad blow but Mr. Ivanoff thought it was hardly strong enough to wreck them. If anything is wrong, it is more likely that they are stranded on the mud flats around the mouth of the Yukon. Glad we gave them some of our supplies. [ibid.:47]

Curtis (and party) were scheduled to go from St. Michael to Nome and then back to the states. Thus, Curtis was actively taking photographs in Alaska only for several weeks.

On the field trip to Alaska, Edward Curtis was accompanied by his daughter, Beth Curtis, and assistant, Stewart C. Eastwood. Curtis personally took all the pictures (Figures 3, 4, and 5). When Collins asked his advice on light-setting for his own camera work, Curtis told Collins that he never paid any attention to the settings. Collins thought the photographer might be trying to hide some trade secret, but this attitude is consistent with a speech given by Curtis in which he commented that, when asked, he could not even remember what type of camera or lens he used (Gidley 1978:349). According to Collins (personal communication, 1982), Curtis told the Nunivak Islanders where and how to pose. He also asked them to dress in St. Lawrence Island gutskin waterproof garments which Collins said Curtis had brought with him. The

Nunivak Island Eskimo also posed in their winter parkas, not worn in summer (Figure 6), and hats or caps for men and boys, which were not worn everyday (see Figure 4). So much for Curtis's so-called enlightenment during his last field trip.

A great weakness of Lyman's work is his over-analyzing of individual photographs and his attempt to read Curtis's motives into the image. An example of this is his analysis of an Apache picture, titled by Curtis "Typical Apache." According to Lyman, "the cropping makes this image seem menacing and creates an allusion to stereotypes of the Apache as bloodthirsty" (pp. 66-67). I see no bloodthirsty hostile Indian in either the cropped or uncropped version (Figures 7 and 8). The cropped photograph results from exercising practical good sense on a full-length portrait of an old man standing in front of a cloth-draped background.

Curtis did not think of himself as an artist and denied any reference to his work as Art (Haynes 1979:5). Calling photography "art-science," Curtis refused to be limited by either definition (p. 17), Lyman, however, prefers to see Curtis in the role of an art photographer and accepts his contribution to the field of art photography as considerable. I find it strange that that which Curtis denied (that his work was art) is that in which Lyman feels his work excels, and that which Curtis professed to do (create a body of ethnological documents) is that which Lyman denies it was possible for him to achieve because of his ethnocentrism and racial prejudices. Lyman, without verbal corroboration (to my knowledge), tries to read into Curtis "racist" preconceptions (e.g., the Apache man interpretation). It seems to me that this book presents not Curtis's illusions, but Lyman's.

It is important to mention that the photoreproductions in this publication are of marginal quality and do not do justice to Curtis's work. Such poor reproductions are inexcusable. Those of us who deal with visuals must make publishers aware that the extra cost of producing good visuals for a book is a necessity, not a luxury.

Most anthropologists already know of Curtis's penchant, and that of other early photographers, for manipulating their subjects and prints (e.g., Scherer 1975). For the nonspecialist, this book may be an eye-opener, especially if the reader is unaware of the techniques of early photographers. The publication will provide no surprises, however, to those who have been doing serious critical research on native American photographs. For those ultimately interested in Curtis as an art photographer, the book will seem to be nothing but intellectual nitpicking.

References

- Collins, Henry B.
1927 Diaries, manuscript notes, photographs relating to Alaskan fieldwork. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1928 Explorations and Field-work of the Smithsonian Institution in 1927. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Curtis, Edward S.
1907-1930 The North American Indians; being a series of volumes picturing and describing the Indians of the United States, and Alaska, written, illustrated, and published by Edward S. Curtis; edited by Frederick Webb Hodge; foreword, Theodore Roosevelt; field research conducted under the patronage of J. Pierpont Morgan (Seattle, Wash.) E. S. Curtis (Cambridge, U.S.A., The University Press). 20 vols., containing frontispieces (vol. 20, colored frontis.), plates. 20 portfolios of numbered plates, 60 x 50 cm. (Nos. 1-722).
- Gidley, Mark
1978 Edward S. Curtis Speaks. . . . History of Photography 2(4):October.
- Haynes, Ric
1979 Edward Sheriff Curtis: 1868-1952. The Shadow Catcher. Expedition 22(1):Fall.
- Holm, Bill, and George Quimby
1980 Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes: A Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Lantis, Margaret
1984 Nunivak Eskimo. In Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 5: Arctic. David Damas, volume ed.; William Sturtevant, general ed. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Scherer, Joanna Cohan
1975 You Can't Believe Your Eyes: Inaccuracies in Photographs of North American Indians. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication 2(2):67-79.

Figures 7, 8 Apache man. Titled by Curtis "Typical Apache." Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1906. Copyright 1906. Gravure from Curtis original publication, Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution. (Fig. 7) S.I. neg. 85-3793; (Fig. 8) S.I. neg. 75-11107.

