

Edward S. Curtis

Photogravures of American Indians

Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery

Performing Arts Center

Bennington College

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Edward S. Curtis
1868-1952

In Seattle, as he grew up, Curtis first encountered American Indians and perceived how rapidly an ancient way of life was passing. Then he began photographing Indians and selling prints.

A chance meeting on Mt. Rainier, where he rescued three lost and freezing members of a government exploring team, led to his first major opportunity: to join, as photographer, the 1899 scientific expedition organized and backed by E. H. Harriman, the railroad magnate, to explore the coast and arctic waterways of Alaska. During this single summer Curtis took over 5000 photographs. More important to him, however, were the discussions with brilliant scientists from many disciplines, in particular the anthropologist, George Bird Grinnell, whose long work among the plains Indians helped shape Curtis' ethnographic approach.

The visits to Indian settlements, which were to occupy him for twenty-seven years, began in 1900. Spurred by an ever-widening circle of admirers, he was able to win the support of T. R. Roosevelt, and then of J. P. Morgan, who granted funds to begin the colossal record of native American culture with camera and notebook. Before disappearing, the last vestiges would be encyclopaedically documented for the generations to come. Curtis took more than 40,000 photographs, made one movie, and carried out intensive studies in tribe after tribe of social customs, ceremony, technology, and history. The first of his labors began to emerge in 1907 with the publication of the first volume of *The Indians of North America*. Accompanying this volume with its glazed paper, photographic illustrations and quarter leather binding was a matching folio of 35 photogravures. The final volume and folio appeared in 1928.

Having completed his life work, Curtis retired at 60 to pursue a long-cherished interest in motion pictures until his death.



The present exhibit draws from the 20 folios of photogravures that accompanied the 20 volumes describing each of the tribes. Hall Park McCullough of North Bennington was one of the original subscribers, and this was his set.

The exhibit has been jointly mounted by the Art Division of Bennington College and the Bennington American Indian Heritage Committee under the chairmanship of Jane R. Hanks. For the first time the entire collection of 732 photogravures can be seen at one time. On the wall are displayed 179, the remainder being available for perusal in the Gallery with the assistance of an attendant.