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Review of *The Plains Indian Photographs of Edward S. Curtis* By Edward S. Curtis

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The Plains Indian Photographs of Edward S. Curtis. By Edward S. Curtis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Photographs, commentary. vii + 186 pp. \$50.00.

This selection of Edward Curtis photographs is accompanied by three scholarly discussions of various aspects of his work. Martha Sandweiss places him in a historical context by considering both the development of his photographic techniques and the work of other photographers of his time (early twentieth century). Curtis was the most prominent of a group of individuals who made photography a popular and commercial medium. Mick Gidley emphasizes the fact that Curtis did not work alone; he employed both photographic and ethnographic assistants in relatively large numbers. Financed largely by J. Pierpont Morgan, Curtis and his assistants traveled extensively, but Gidley, using unpublished accounts of some of those travels, also comments on the reality behind the images—accounts of starvation among the Cheyenne and the staging of war scenes by men confined to reservations and restrained by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Duane Niatum asserts that Curtis's strong aesthetic sense makes his photographs works of art rather than ethnographic records. He suggests that one source of Curtis's aesthetic can be traced to the French artist Jean-François Millet, and that the pictorialist style of photography (using framing devices such as trees,

massing light and shadow, manipulating focus) drew on canons of art established in the Renaissance and in the work of seventeenth-century Dutch painters.

As all three writers note, Curtis's motivation for his work was to preserve images and knowledge of the "vanishing Indian." Curtis subscribed fully to the idea that Indian cultures were dying out, and his images romanticize the past, to the extent that he air brushed a clock out of a picture taken in a Piegan lodge (the faint blur of the clock is still discernible). He gave a timeless quality to his photos, and in his many portraits of Indians sought to convey a sense of dignity and nobility.

The photographs in the book are reproduced in black and white and do not do justice to the sepia-toned originals. They lack the contrast, the sense of light, and the clarity that Curtis captured by coating his photographic plates with a thin layer of gold. They do not demonstrate the nuances of light and shadow or the sharpness of detail that make the original portfolios so striking and that the authors of the three essays discuss. In this respect the volume is a disappointment, though the quality of the essays compensates the reader with significant insights into the significance of Curtis's work.

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