

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2004

Native American Photography at the Smithsonian: The Shindler Catalogue

Elizabeth Edwards
University of Oxford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Edwards, Elizabeth, "Native American Photography at the Smithsonian: The Shindler Catalogue" (2004).
Great Plains Quarterly. 285.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/285>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Native American Photography at the Smithsonian: The Shindler Catalogue. By Paula Richardson Fleming. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003. x + 371 pp. Photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, indexes. \$39.95.

This excellent volume is an illustrated reconstruction of what was probably the first exhibition of photographs at the Smithsonian. The subject matter was not the great politicians or celebrities of the times but Native Americans. Most of the photographs were of delegations that visited Washington—including numerous men from the Plains, especially representatives of the Souian peoples photographed in 1858, 1867, and 1868—and reflected the turbulent inter-cultural politics of the period.

The original exhibition catalogue on which this volume is based was compiled by photog-

rapher and artist A. Zeno Shindler, who undertook work for the Smithsonian. Paula Fleming's effective visual reconstruction of the delegations has enormous historical power. Her concern is not with the content of the photograph beyond the identification of the sitter, or with the details of wider political contexts that made the sitting possible in the first place. Rather it is a piecing together of the history of the image—how and when it was taken, in how many versions it exists, and how it was disseminated. The photographs were listed and re-listed at various times by the Smithsonian, registering shifts in information. All are carefully tracked by Fleming in a *tour de force* of research, registering the nineteenth-century attributions of the photographs and the shifts in transcription that entangle them. Through this detailed study of collecting, reproduction, and presentation, we see some of the mechanisms through which peoples of the Plains became visible and were appropriated into the discourses of science, nationhood, and the popular imagination.

These are not photographs with the glamour and aestheticism of, for instance, Edward S. Curtis or even F. A. Rinehardt. Rather there is often a strong relationship between sitter and photographer. The style as well as the mood of the portraits, especially those by the McClees Studio (1857-8), is honorific, the individuality of the sitters clearly articulated. Yet within a few years these images were circulating within the US and Europe as "native types." Similarly, Whitney's photograph of Medicine Bottle at Fort Snelling (No.179), begun as a topical political photograph—a captured leader of the Minnesota massacre of 1862—is copied by Shindler and absorbed into anthropological science as an example of race. It is the tracking of the shifts in description and consumption that makes this volume important, for it moves beyond mere image content.

My only reservation is the disappointing quality of the image printing. The rather flat middle range greys give little impression of the rich tonal qualities and vibrancy of the

original photographs. Fleming's scholarship, the original photographers, and, indeed, the original sitters deserve better. The cover is beautiful; if only all the photographs had been printed like it.

This volume is an essential reference work. Its careful editing and indexing allow approaches to the material from many different perspectives. It is surely the last word on Shindler and his project and a major contribution to the understanding of the making and use of photographs.

ELIZABETH EDWARDS
Pitt Rivers Museum
University of Oxford