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## Review of *The First Americans: Photographs from the Library of Congress* by William H. Goetzmann

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**The First Americans: Photographs from the Library of Congress.** William H. Goetzmann. Washington, DC: Starwood Publishing Company, 1991. Color prints and black and white photographs. 144 pp. \$34.95.

For his *The First Americans*, Goetzmann selected photographs from the Library of Congress collection. Since their prints were offered for sale, turn-of-the-century photographers submitted copies of their work for federal copyrights. The collection does not include anthropological photographs since they were not generally sold to the public. The photos are indicative of

the fascination with Native Americans which existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Goetzmann notes that this fascination centers on the aspect of "lost innocence" from a classical, romantic point of view.

Many of the photographs are posed, stylized portraits. The photographer was so concerned with presenting this image that in some photographs the stage props and even a curtain are visible as if the photographer was more interested in the overall impression rather than realistic detail. Goetzmann makes mention of the message the different artists attempted to portray. Some accentuated white superiority by depicting the "degenerative" lifestyle in photographs revealing squalor or lower standards of living. Some photographs depicted Native Americans outside of their "primitive" homes, while others portrayed the image of the noble savage or the pre-conquest state. Unfortunately, the discovery of paper and film in the 1880s came too late to depict intact, accurate pictures of the true Native American culture as it existed before white conquest. In a way these photographs contributed to the decline of Native Americans as they influenced and effected the commercialization of Native American culture, perhaps hastening their decline.

Goetzmann includes many photographs by Edward Curtis, one of the most prolific photographers of Native Americans. Beginning in 1899, Curtis spent thirty years photographing Native Americans. His works included 40,000 photos and twenty large volumes of text. The author notes that Curtis used a romantic soft-focus sepia for his work that became his trademark. Goetzmann states that Curtis had sympathy for the vanishing culture and wanted to record their images for the future. According to Goetzmann's interpretation, this was not to say Curtis treated his subjects as equals, but even though the subjects may be artificially posed and costumed, their human expression and emotion still comes through to the viewer.

In the beginning of the book Goetzmann includes some color lithographs and engravings which were completed much earlier than the photographs. These precursors may be more accurate representations but Goetzmann points out that they also portray dramatic, sometimes unconvincing imagery.

The most important contribution of this book appears to be Goetzmann's insight that our perceptions and stereotypes of Native Americans continue to persist today. Just as the original photographers and artists posed their subjects to record the classical, romantic images we see in this book, we view these images with the same fascination and colored by our stereotypes. This is not just a collection of photographs, but an attempt by Goetzmann to stimulate us, to make us reflect on our own prejudices. It opens up the reader to think about his personal views of Native Americans. The writer points out

that this classical, romantic view persists today in misinformation and illusions about Native Americans.

The combination of text and photographs in this book make it well worth reading. In addition to a stimulating text, the high quality of photographic reproduction make it a valuable addition to one's library. **Mary Beth Klauer**, *Photographer, San Diego, California*.