

Encore!

# Curtis' exhibit tells a noble history

Photographic study shows a compelling cultural portrait of Native American past

By Julie Decker  
Encore Contributor

A lesson in history is seldom as compelling as the visual essay "Images of and Idyllic Past: The photographs of Edward S. Curtis."

The exhibition, on loan from the Custer County Art Center in Miles City, Montana, and currently on display at the University's Museum of Natural History features 60 sepia-toned photogravures from Curtis' epic study of early 20th century American life, "The North American Indian."

Although the exhibition serves as a lesson in history, it is not a lecture. The photographs portray scenes from the everyday lives of the Native Americans, including Curtis' own views of tribal stereotypes in choosing scenes he saw as typical and manipulating his subjects to convey a sense of personality and a greater sense of culture.

Native American chiefs are adorned with elaborate headdresses, children emerge from tepees, and totem poles loom in the background, staring out at the viewer, telling their folktales and allowing for the rediscovery of the North American past.

Clearly within each photograph is the ability of the Native Americans to live off the land, to work with and become part of nature — a reciprocal relationship of trust and respect rather than one of selfish motives and destruction.

There is a sense of romanticism in Curtis' work, in the

way he portrays the Native Americans as innately noble, living in a world uninterrupted by the 19th century.

The photographs do not represent cultural change, but instead serve as more of a cultural portrait that visually tell of a mode of life which has progressively disappeared but that is so much a part of American history. It becomes surprising that in such a small format, Curtis was able to offer such extensive portrayal, using his camera to bring the past into focus.

Curtis began his study in 1898 when he set out to obtain, in his words, "a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions."

The project had financial backing from J.P. Morgan and support from Pres. Theodore Roosevelt who wrote, "In Mr. Curtis we have both an artist and a trained observer, whose pictures are pictures, not merely photographs; whose work has far more than accuracy, because it is truthful."

The project ended up taking over 30 years and resulted in more than 40,000 photographs of more than 80 North American tribes.

The photographs in the exhibition cover every aspect of Curtis' work, from straightfor-



Courtesy Photo

The Cowichan mask is an example of Curtis works.

ward documentation of baskets, artifacts, physiognomy and dwellings to posed compositions and technically manipulated portraits.

The images were produced through a photogravure process which involves inking by hand and meticulously reproducing an image on a flatbed, hand-operated press, providing the viewer with photographic history and documentation as well.

Although the photographs are not without blemishes, the warm brown sepia tones glow, lending to the mood of the image and a feeling for the time, the season, the surroundings, which bring the still photographs to life.

The exhibit will be on display at the University's Museum of Natural History, 1608 E. 15th Ave., until Dec. 19.

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