

“Close Up On Art”

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Artwork:

- Numero - Desert Cahuilla
- A Desert Cahuilla Woman
- Marcos - Palm Canon Cahuilla

Artist: Edward S. Curtis, American, 1868-1952

Purchased for Palm Springs Art Museum with funds provided by the William Holden Acquisition Fund

Photography (photogravure on tissue), 1924

Photographer, ethnologist, filmmaker, musicologist—Edward Sheriff Curtis was truly a multi-media man. With a gift for connecting with some of the most influential men of his time -E.H. Harriman, J.P. Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt - Curtis built a fascinating life that began on a hardscrabble Wisconsin farm.

Young Curtis left school in the sixth grade to help with family finances. Using a popular manual, he built his own camera, then apprenticed to a photographer in Minnesota. When the family moved to the Seattle area in the late 1880's, he launched a partnership in a photography studio and became a society photographer.

Some early photographs of Native Americans won prizes, bringing his work to the attention of scientists recruited by the tycoon Edward H. Harriman, who was embarking on the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899. Appointed official photographer of the expedition, he took advantage of his companions' knowledge and gave himself a crash course in scientific enquiry.

These early contacts enabled Curtis to begin planning and searching for funding for his dream project, a complete record of Western Native Americans. His great benefactor was J. P. Morgan, who financed a good portion of the fieldwork for what became a 20-volume set of text and photogravures, “The North American Indian.” The photographs on view at the Palm Springs Art Museum are from Vol. 15, the chapter on the Cahuilla tribe.

Since the Coachella Valley is the ancestral home of the Cahuilla, and some 40 per cent of Palm Springs is built on Indian land, it is appropriate that these photographs are of Cahuilla Indians.

The subjects “Numero” and “Marcos” look directly at the camera. Their faces are wizened and weather-beaten. Curtis's text tells us that the Cahuillas of that time wore little clothing -perhaps a rabbit pelt over their shoulders in cool weather - and the faces of these men reflect a hard life spent outdoors. The photographs bear the date 1924, but unlike many other Curtis photographs, these men look contemporary. Their lives appear hard, but they carry themselves with dignity. One can imagine sadness and loss, along with pride.

In contrast, the photograph of “A Desert Cahuilla Woman” seems romanticized. The young woman gazes into the distance with a pensive expression. She carries none of

the regalia that Curtis's subjects usually wear, just a simple shawl around her shoulders.

Curtis has often been accused of romanticizing his subjects, of creating a myth of a vanishing race. Detractors have written that he often staged photographs, adding or subtracting detail to enhance his vision. Some writers have even suggested that he brought long wigs for men whose haircuts were deemed too modern, or clip-on nose bones to make subjects appear more "indigenous." He was criticized by anthropologists of the time, such as Franz Boas, for staging or re-enacting events to suit his vision. Critics have noted that the same checkered vest appears in portraits he made of Native Americans from several different tribes. (In fact, I own one of those photographs.)

Curtis's wish, he said, was to document as much of Native American traditions as possible before that way of life disappeared. He spoke and wrote of "primitive" people whose traditions represented a fast-disappearing time. Today, his somewhat idealized vision is valued more for its intrinsic beauty than for absolute authenticity.

Curtis is often classified as a Pictorialist, a school of photography in which images were sometimes blurred, often sepia-toned, for added effect.

The 20-volume "The North American Indian" was published piecemeal, between 1907 and 1930, in an expensive limited edition. Each volume was accompanied by a portfolio of some 36 large-format photogravures. Theodore Roosevelt, an admirer of Curtis's work, wrote the foreword. Between publication dates of the volumes, Curtis scrambled for funds to complete his project, selling subscriptions and launching would-be money-making schemes.

One such scheme was a musicale (1911-12), using his photographs in a lantern-slide show, with music taken from some of the thousands of recordings made in the field of Native American language and music.

In 1915, he wrote and directed a full-length silent feature film, "In the Land of the Head Hunters," using Native Americans as his cast. The film was not financially successful.

Curtis moved to Los Angeles and worked as crew for such films as "The Ten Commandments," saving money to move back to the field. By the time the last volume was completed in 1930, the Depression had hit the U.S. and there was little interest in his work.

In later life, Curtis attempted several other ventures, even gold-mining, but ill health brought that to an end. He died in Los Angeles in 1952, with his death marked by a one-paragraph obituary in The New York Times.

In the '70's, interest revived in Curtis's work, sparked by dealers and collectors of vintage photographs as well as by a new counter-culture appreciation of traditional cultures.

SOURCES

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“Numero”



“A Desert Cahuilla Woman”



”Marcos”

