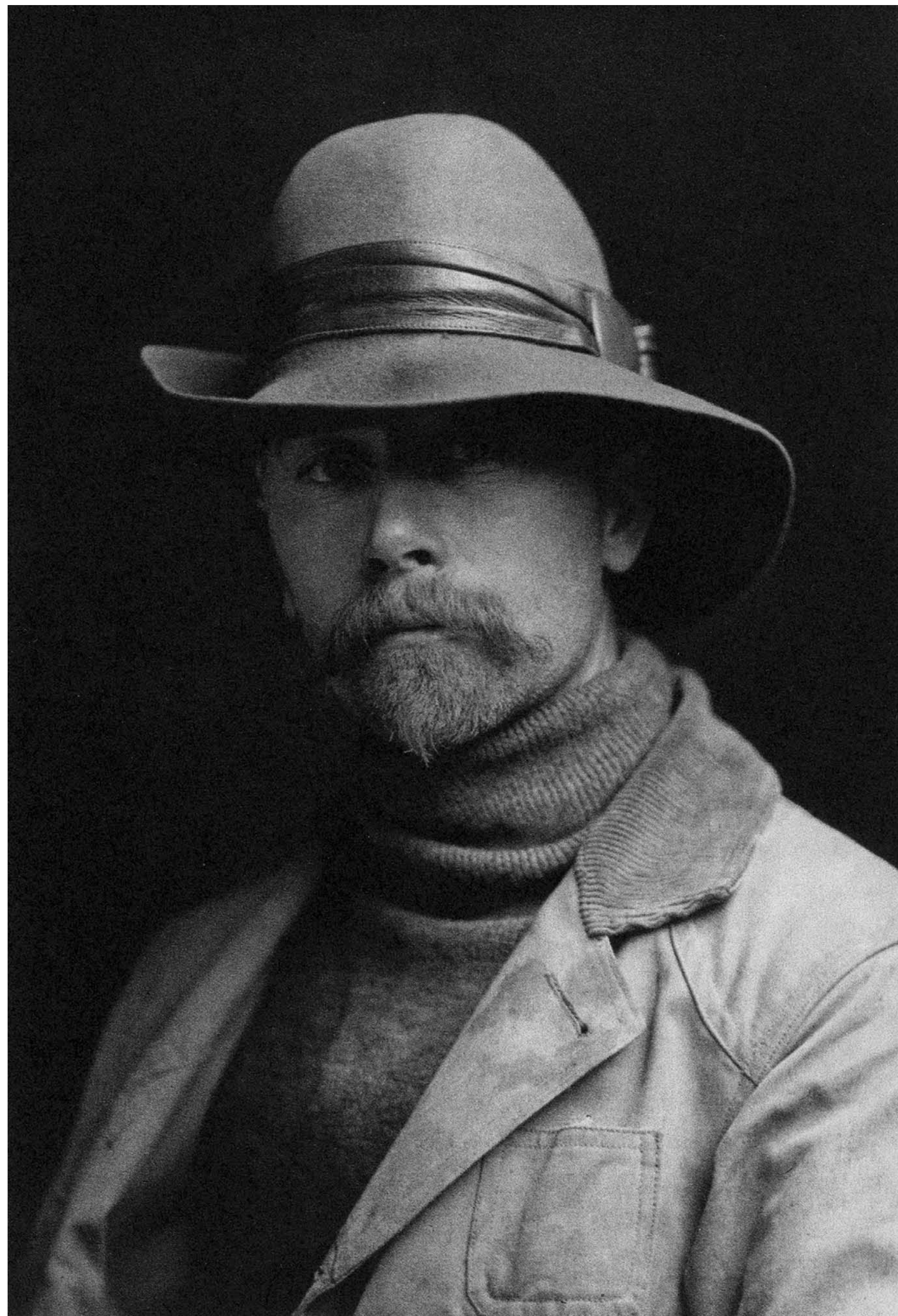


OLD IMAGES / NEW VIEWS

Perspectives on Edward Curtis



Self-Portrait – Edward Curtis

This exhibit features the reflections of twenty artists, scholars, and community leaders in the Pacific Northwest, each asked to select and respond to one Edward Curtis photograph. In the diversity of perspectives, we find nuance regarding Curtis' images and their complex relationship to First Nations cultures.

The exhibit was developed by the Museum of Anthropology and the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia to complement the public presentation of the 1914 Curtis film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters*.

Unless otherwise noted, all images are taken from the Curtis book series, *The North American Indian (NAI)*.



MUSEUM of
Anthropology
at the University of
British Columbia





Gathering Abalones – Nakoaktok

In 1914, Native women were just as interested in modern fashion as anyone

Pam Brown

Heiltsuk Nation

Curator, Pacific Northwest

UBC Museum of Anthropology

This picture evokes bittersweet feelings, as it evokes a time before Aboriginal culture and the resources vital to our existence were impacted by colonization. Abalone in particular were so depleted by over-fishing in the 1970s that now none can be taken, even for a wedding or feast. I say “bittersweet” because this is how a Tsimshian Hereditary Chief described seeing cultural objects in the exhibition *Treasures of the Tsimshian from the Dundas Collection* that had been “collected” by the Rev. Robert J. Dundas in 1863: bitter because they were “taken,” sweet to have a chance to see them.

The picture was taken in 1914, the first year of the Great War in which many First Nations men fought and died. Veterans’ Affairs Canada estimates that one in three able-bodied First Nations men volunteered. This woman, pictured “gathering abalones,” may have been the mother, grandmother, wife, or sister of a man who died far from home. She may have been related to one of those pictured on the walls of the BC Legislature in 1930. She may have been a schoolteacher, or many other things. Like many First Nations women of the time, she is anonymous, and listed simply as “Gathering abalones – Nakoaktok.” One thing is certain: her “normal” life was not lived in a traditional blanket and hat. Traditional clothing was discouraged by missionaries (as was regalia, which was outlawed during the potlatch ban from 1884-1951), and in 1914, Native women were just as interested in modern fashion as anyone. So it’s sweet to think about the fun this woman and her friends may have had when taking part in Curtis’ staged photo shoots – the laughter they probably shared at the idea of dressing up in cedar-bark regalia to gather abalone.

I thank Curtis... for capturing a moment in time in my grandmother's life

Nagedzi - Andy Everson
K'omoks First Nation

Underneath the fur robes and the clip-on nose-ring in this picture, Edward S. Curtis managed to capture something he probably didn't expect. When I gaze at this photograph, I don't see Princess Naida from his film *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. Instead, I see youth and beauty and a long life still to be fulfilled. I look into this profile of my grandmother and see the wrinkles that I knew for most of my life absent. At the same time, I see the waves in her hair that she always carried with pride. I gaze into the photo and see a 17-year-old daughter of a chief whose cultural taboos restricted what she could and couldn't do on film – so much so that Curtis was forced to hire two additional women to also portray the princess in his film. I recognize that although she is wearing a costume, she carries a sense of poise and grace that belies her age. I see in her the eyes of a woman who would live to 99 years of age and who, as a true *princess* amongst our people, would live up to her ancestral name *U'magalis* or “Noblest over All.” I thank Curtis, not for capturing his vision of our people before European contact, but for capturing a moment in time in my grandmother's life.

When the canoe in a scene hit a rock, everyone laughed so much that Curtis pulled the film out of the camera in anger

Jean Barman
Professor Emeritus, UBC

In 1993, I had the honour of being invited to visit with George Hunt's granddaughter Margaret, who played the heroine Naida (along with two others) in Edward Curtis' *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. In very old age, she still took pleasure in sharing stories about Curtis' time at Fort Rupert and, by doing so, turned my understanding of the past on its head. Curtis expected everyone to be serious. In his view as a white man of his time, they were living a life-and-death situation as Indians. He discovered they laughed at Fort Rupert, just as people do everywhere in the world. Once, when the canoe in a scene hit a rock, everyone laughed so much that Curtis pulled the film out of the camera in anger. Ever since then, I have sought to interpret the past from as inclusive a perspective as possible, keeping in mind that, while we are not alike, neither are we so very different from each other.



Naida, the Proud Princess (Margaret Frank, née Wilson), from Edward Curtis' book *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, 1915

This photo shows a connection between my great-grandmother Mary and my great-grandfather Stanley, and the two families that make up who I am

***Waxawidi* – William Wasden Jr.**

'Namgis Tribe

Lilalgamlilas (Stanley Hunt) and the Kwānu'sila Totem Pole: My favourite photo taken by Edward Curtis during the filming of *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, is of Stanley Hunt ("Motana" in the film) standing by one of the Kwānu'sila- ("Thunderbird") over-the-Grizzly Bear-grasping-a-man house posts. The posts for the film were inspired by original totem poles that stood outside the house of head *'Namgis* Chief Tlakwudlas (Ned Harris). These poles were intended to be built into a Big House by Ned's grandfather, who was Chief Tlakwudlas before him. The house was never finished, and the poles were given to Paul Rufus as part of a dowry when he married Ned's oldest daughter *'Wadzidalaga* (Martha). Stanley's father George arranged him in marriage to Ned's second oldest daughter *Gwanti'lakw* (Mary Harris). Stanley received from his *'Namgis* wife the name *Lilalgamlilas*, as well as a traditional dowry from his father-in-law.

This photo shows a connection between my great-grandmother Mary and my great-grandfather Stanley, and the two families that make up who I am today. The picture captures the cultural strength and identity that both the Harris and Hunt families hold and maintain with the guidance and teachings of our ancestors.

These images speak volumes about the subject, but also hint at the man behind the camera

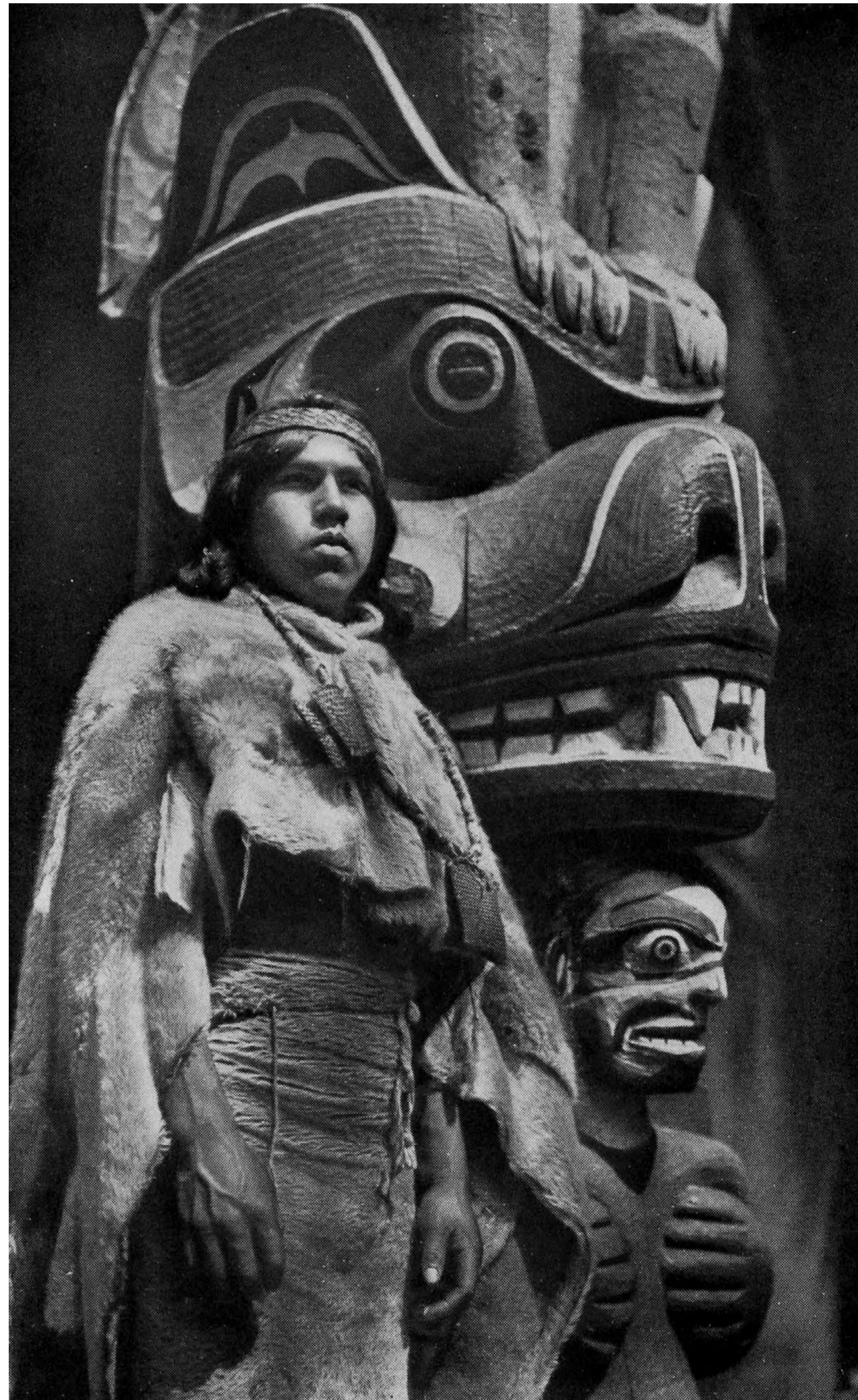
Sharon Eva Grainger
Photographer

Focused on Portraiture: As a portrait photographer, the images of Edward Curtis have caught my eye and captured my curiosity and interest for more than forty years. I saw my first Curtis images as a young girl in Seattle, Washington. My mother, an immigrant to the United States and a photographer, took me to see them and asked me what I saw. My eight-year-old response was, "I see into their eyes, Mommy." As I grew up, these conversations with my mother and other artists developed, shaping my attitude toward my own photographic portraiture, and continuing to draw me into revisiting the photography of Edward Curtis. I find Curtis captured an essence; there is a connection, an understanding of that individual. He often placed the central figure to show the Native person's great affection for the land that was his or her long-time home.

I have begun a project creating my own film images inspired by Curtis photos. I shared his images and asked the First Nations subjects, "If you could decide how you would be portrayed and remembered on film, show me the pose of your choice." In the Big House in Alert Bay, I spent a very rewarding photo session with Stan Hunt (the son of Stanley Hunt, who starred in Curtis' film). The image we created was his pose and my eye. It is a reflection of Stan, and takes the early goal of Edward Curtis, that of preserving a culture, a step further by presenting a pose requested by the subject. I am drawn back again and again to books of Curtis images. They speak volumes about the subject, but also hint at the man behind the camera. Curtis spent a lifetime capturing the faces of the ancestors and relatives of many Native people who today still share parts of North America and continue much of their culturally diverse lives.



Photo of Stan Hunt, by Grainger



Motana (Stanley Hunt), from Edward Curtis' book *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, 1915



The Vanishing Race –Navaho

His images become flawed illustrations of an idealized past that existed only in his mind

David Neel
Kwagiutl Nation

Curtis' photographs are renowned, his conviction to his work legendary; yet his life-long photo essay on the North American Indian will be forever flawed by the basic premise of his work. He believed that the Native people of North America were destined to “vanish” and his mission was to document them. This proved to be a formidable undertaking that would consume his life. Unfortunately he chose to attempt to “document” many of his subjects in the period before he lived, illustrating them in his version of a pre-contact environment. This oversteps the boundaries of a documentary photographer, and his images become flawed illustrations of an idealized past that existed only in his mind.

His methods included supplying props and wigs, and cropping out contemporary items from photographs to achieve an “authentic” past – a tragic misjudgment, as it hugely undermines the value of the images in a social/historical context. Every visual fact and the message contained therein become suspect. If he had chosen to document the Native world as it existed at that time of turmoil and social upheaval, they would be truly great works. Such as the moving and incredible images of photographers like Jacob Riis, W. Eugene Smith, or Sebastiao Salgado. Over time Curtis' images contributed to the popular misunderstanding of Native peoples as vestiges of the past, with little or no place as a part of contemporary world; the precursor to the stoic “Hollywood Indian”. Like a character in a Shakespearean tragedy he was a man of massive talent and passion who gave up much for his work; yet he was unable to fulfill his great potential and created a flawed body of work. This being said, he remains a highly collected and influential artist whose images are as widely published as any photographer.



Chief's Daughter – Nakoaktok

The photo struck me because of the continuation of our culture and my own personal experience

T'lakwagilogwa – Barbara Cranmer
'Namgis First Nation Filmmaker

A woman of great nobility sits showing her wealth and status amongst our Kwakwaka'wakw people. The abalone shell on her hat signifies her status in the social structure of our people. The photo struck me because of the continuation of our culture and my own personal experience when I was in my early teens. At my grandfather Arthur Dick Sr.'s potlatch, I was given my great grandmother Agnes Alfred's Coming of Age ceremony. This ceremony was of great significance in my early life. It shows my family lineage and recognizes my mother's side of the family through my grandfather from the Mamalilikala of Village Island.

I wore a hat covered in abalone shell like the ancestor in the photo. I stood and danced on a wooden box with two family attendants on either side wearing Peace Dance headdresses. I had a dance screen behind me painted with two slaves holding up a copper. The design comes from the Starface House of the Mamalilikala. The story tells of my grandfather's great-grandfather, Maxwayalis, the first man that ever brought our people together after years of war amongst each other. People arrived with guns because they thought he was just trying to trick them. He brought people together in peace and got them to know each other.



Hop Pickers – Puget Sound

Curtis used wigs, costumes, and props to mask evidence of our adaptation

Mique'l Askren

Tsimshian Nation of Metlakatla, Alaska

Doctoral Student, University of British Columbia

While I loathed the thought of mulling over the assortment of romantic images taken by Curtis on the Northwest Coast, I was surprised to find myself filled with emotion when viewing this photograph of a hop-picker in Washington State. It provoked simultaneous feelings of sadness and pride, far from my typical reaction to Curtis' pseudo-documentary photographs. While he was frantically trying to (re)capture the “disappearing Indian” by shooting us with his colonial weapon of choice – the camera – our people's lives were in dramatic upheaval. The Euro-American/Canadian intrusion on our land and waterways caused our way of life to be challenged, demeaned, and eventually outlawed. In an effort to (re)construct “authentic” images of First Nations people, Curtis used wigs, costumes, and props to mask evidence of our adaptation to our Colonial oppressors.

Unlike Curtis' highly constructed images, this photograph is different. More than any other of his Northwest Coast images, it reflects the challenges and hardship First Nations people faced during their transition from a trade-based economy to a cash economy. This shift forced us to accept that our survival no longer depended on our ability to utilize what the land provides, but instead on working for others for an alien currency. Around the turn of the 19th century, hundreds of First Nations people from British Columbia and Alaska began a seasonal migration to Washington State to take advantage of the economic opportunity of hop-picking. Most left their families and communities in the hope of earning enough to return home with money to spare. I've seen images of my own people, Tsimshians from Metlakatla, Alaska, working in these hop fields, and heard stories of hop-picking that are maintained in the oral histories of First Nations people all along the Northwest Coast. Although this image appears serene, it speaks volumes to the sacrifice and resilience of generations of our people.

Curtis' attempt to portray pre-contact Haida with a trunk of costumes was counter to Alfred's principles

Evelyn Vanderhoop
Haida – Eagle Gitans Clan

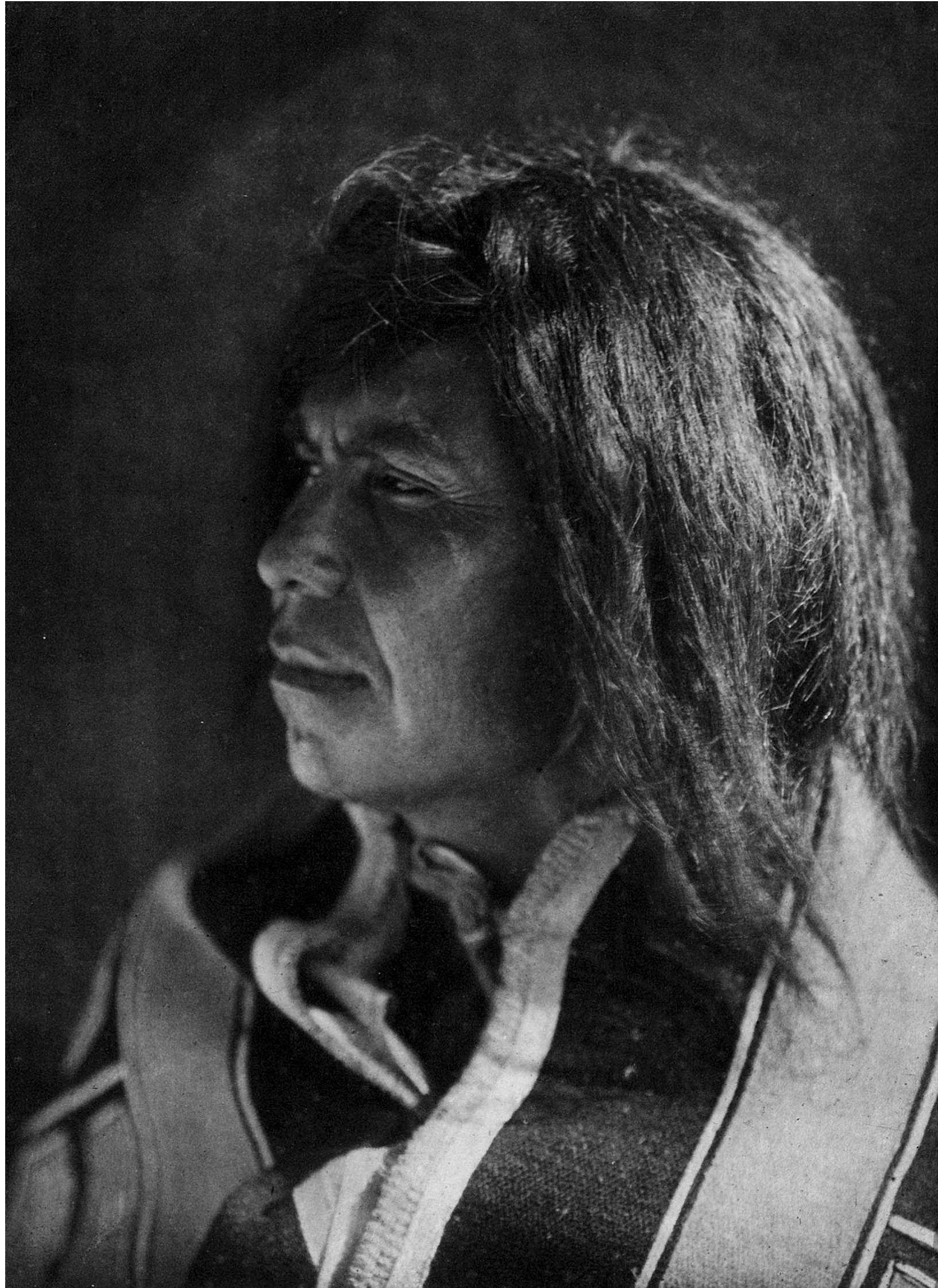
While attending university, my mother gave me a copy of the Edward Curtis photograph, *A Haida of Massett*, a portrait of her father, Alfred Adams. He was a leader in Massett as a teacher, an entrepreneurial store-owner, a music teacher and band organizer, art agent for carvers and weavers, and an Anglican lay minister. He was a driving force for the establishment of the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia. In his role as the first Grand President of that organization, he asserted Native rights for fishing and land title with the Canadian government. When my mother, Delores Adams Churchill, told me stories about her father when I was young, I could hear her affection and pride for him in her voice. He sounded like a stern yet kind man. Alfred Adams passed away when my mother was just fourteen, so I never met my grandfather. He had been such a great inspiration and mentor for so many. I know my mother gave me that Curtis photo to motivate me to do my best in my university studies.

One of the stories my mother told me was about the Curtis portrait. She said that I would never find it in any of his publications. Alfred requested of Curtis that his image not be reproduced beyond the original portfolio. Curtis had talked him into donning a wig and Chief's robe to produce a conspicuous image of bygone days. As Curtis continued to photograph people in Massett, Alfred could see that the "costume" was being used over and over by Curtis' Haida subjects. Cultural authenticity was a concern for Alfred, and Curtis' attempt to portray pre-contact Haida with a trunk of costumes was counter to his principles.

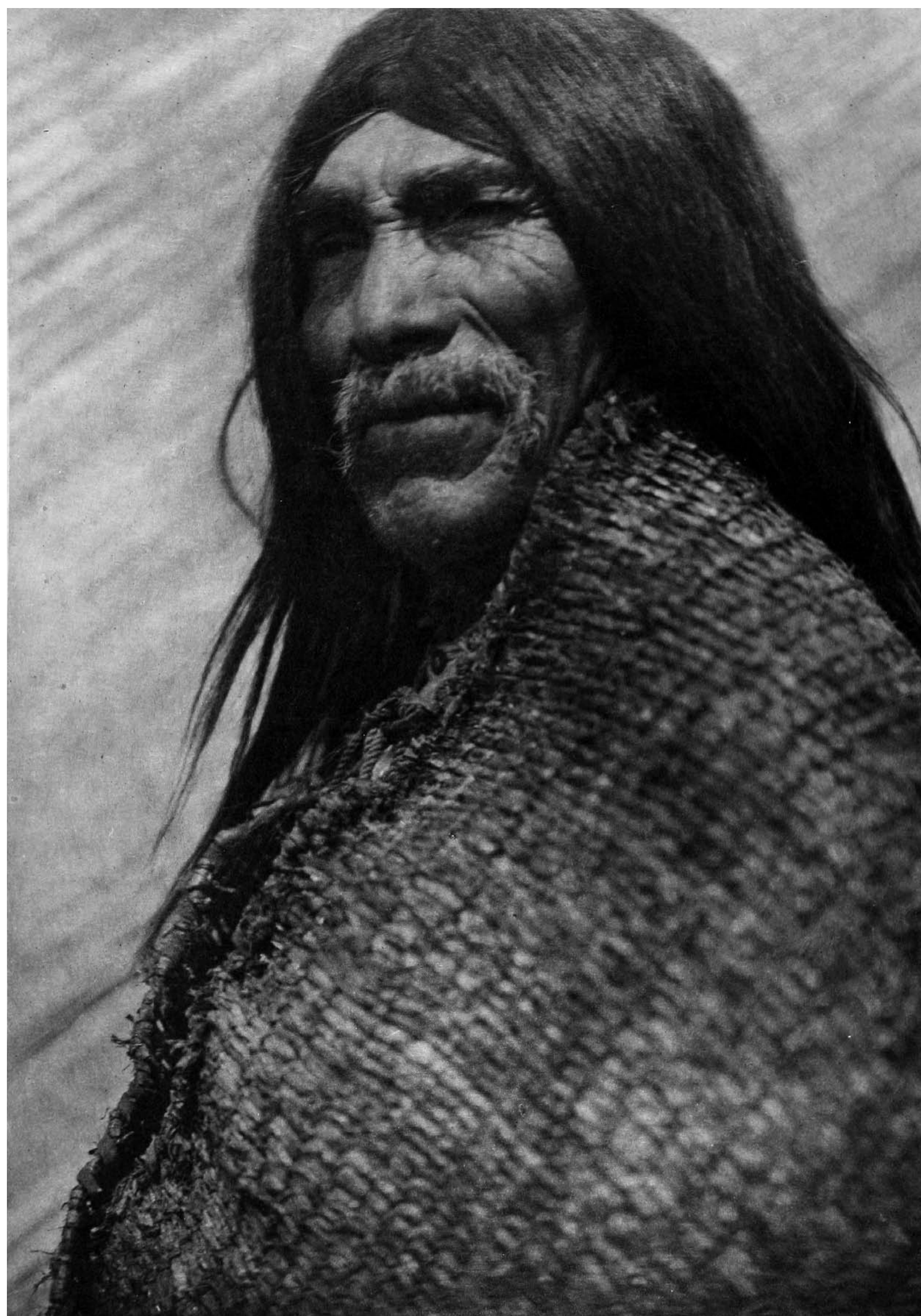
Here is my great grandfather, Alfred Adams, a very well respected Haida man

Carrie Anne Vanderhoop
Masset Haida/Aquinnah Wampanoag

Images distorting perspectives, perpetuating stereotypes, romanticizing peoples from nations that had been battled and diseased to near extinction, immortalizing individuals in the style of "Last of the Mohicans," capturing the Indian before there was no Indian left. Here is my great-grandfather, Alfred Adams, a very well respected Haida man. He accomplished many things in his lifetime and is remembered as a strong leader. He was proud and intelligent. He worked hard to empower his people, restore the spirit of native communities and create a better life for future generations. Future generations. Future generations. Future generations.



A Haida of Massett



Lahkeudup – Skokomish

It is reassuring to understand that romanticism is more complex than a simple meeting of eyes

Marie Clements
Dene/Métis Playwright

I selected this photograph because it represents many of Curtis' deep portraits. "Deep" meaning is when there are layers of textures, both artistically and culturally. Behind the pure beauty of his "subject's" architecture there seems to be more of a story.

A hint of humour in the eye, a slight reflection of anger, a tilt of the head that reveals impatience, or a stance that is long bored. Perhaps this is where his eye is most dynamic – here we can still bear witness to the meeting between humanity and art because it is still breathing, still asking more questions than it is answering.

Having said this, I feel that his portrait subjects are infantilized by his descriptions. He often describes his "subject" in the most generic manner, as if labelling only for his consumption. Content: man; where he took it: place; what his subject is wearing rather than their name. What "type" they are often seems more significant than who they are. Many would say this was a product of the time, but if time can stand still when looking at great art... it can also stand still when it betrays its own good intention. Still, it is reassuring to understand that romanticism is more complex than a simple meeting of eyes.



Bowman

The Indian Act of 1884 that declared aboriginals to be non-persons is one outcome of Enlightenment thinking and the *Bowman* photograph is another

***Umeeek of Ahousaht* – Dr. Richard Atleo**

Nuu-chah-nulth

Associate Adjunct Professor
University of Victoria

For me, the *Bowman* represents a photograph of intense irony. Since a major cultural theme of the Nuu-chah-nulth is the hidden world made manifest in origin stories – such as the story of Son of Raven that unveils the astonishing intimacy between the physical and metaphysical – it is natural for me to view this Curtis photograph from that cultural perspective. On the surface, it is evident that the photograph is meant to illustrate a natural, pristine moment that excited the imagination of Enlightenment authors like Sir Thomas More, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau imagined that the Bowman wandered in the forest, without clothes, without laws, morals, intelligence, society or family and perchance would meet a female, then copulate and continue to wander instinctively, never to know his offspring. The Indian Act of 1884 that declared aboriginals to be non-persons is one outcome of Enlightenment thinking and the *Bowman* photograph is another.

Consequently, as I gaze at this photograph of the Bowman, I am filled with that familiar sense of fear, oppression, helplessness, and powerlessness that I felt as a small child of seven years when I entered residential school. Like the Bowman, frozen in time, captured and imprisoned in western technology, speechless and dumb, the photographer distorts reality so that Renee Dupuis, who served on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, could say: “We should not be surprised to find ourselves, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, confronted with a wall of mutual misunderstanding when it comes to Aboriginal questions.”



Paqsilahl Emerging from the Woods – Qagyuhl

It seems as if he's been “captured” on film as he emerges from the spirit world to hunt for human souls

Colin Browne

Writer and filmmaker

SFU School for the Contemporary Arts

Paqsilahl Emerging from the Woods is a portrait of a dancer embodying the nature of Bak'was, the Wild Man of the Woods. With unkempt hair, sunken eyes, bared teeth, large hands, and with his body pushing through – and screened by – yew branches, it seems as if he's been “captured” on film as he emerges from the spirit world to hunt for human souls. He's a shy ghost, unable to find peace in the world of the dead or the living, and it's not hard to imagine Curtis collaborating with the dancer to create an image that would symbolically represent his restless, divided nature, suspended as he is on the border between life and death.

Photography's appetite for “capturing” what cannot be seen, and Bak'was' appetite for “capturing” human souls, meet on the border that binds the visible to the invisible world. Perhaps the mask produces the border, which is made visible only when Bak'was is approached by his earthly embodiment, the dancer. It is as if each is approaching a mirror. Curtis' photograph offers the viewer a similar encounter. I observe in the image of Bak'was an aspect of myself – and a border that is my self.

The ability to penetrate death has been an enduring aspect of photography from the beginning. Curtis' images of the dancer portraying Bak'was on the eve of World War I (his name is unrecorded) may reflect his own anxieties and uncertainties, as well as his subject's. In this light, the photograph acknowledges and dramatizes a set of complex intercultural encounters between the natural and the supernatural, the wild and the cultivated, the Self and the Other, the photographer and his subject and, most complex of all, colonial exploitation and twentieth-century Kwakwaka'wakw survival. What emerges on the border between these worlds is the fear of dissolution that makes one come alive.



Masked Dancers in Canoes – Qagyuhl

Some perceive Curtis' work among the Kwakwaka'wakw to be contrived and inaccurate

Dan Savard

Senior Collections Manager
Audio Visual, Human History
Royal BC Museum

The authenticity of many Edward Curtis photographs is increasingly questioned by the public. Some perceive his work among the Kwakwaka'wakw to be contrived and inaccurate. This popular opinion is reflected in a comment written by a visitor to the Royal BC Museum after viewing a short film clip from *In the Land of the War Canoes* that is shown in the museum's *First Peoples Gallery*. The footage was shot at the same time as this still photograph and shows dancers performing as Wasp, Thunderbird and Grizzly Bear atop wooden platforms set across or inside the gunwales of three canoes. The comment read: "The documentary film (Dir. [Director?] Curtis) shown in the 'Contact' section of the first peoples exhibits is widely known to be fabricated, he himself dancing in the boat. This should have a disclaimer, something to say that the film is simply his imagination of what is [sic] was like."

Clearly Curtis is not one of these accomplished dancers whose fluid movements communicate the comfort and expertise acquired from years of performing. One account states: "Grizzly Bear is especially expertly portrayed. A number of [Kwakwaka'wakw] people guessed that the dancer was Herbert Martin, a renowned dancer, but he told Bill Holm that he and his older brother Mungo were away at Rivers Inlet during the filming." At least one of Edmund Schwinke's still photographs taken during the making of the film shows the Kwakwaka'wakw man who danced as Wasp with his mask removed. Edward Curtis would have been either setting up the shot for Schwinke, who also operated the motion picture camera, perhaps directing the scene with George Hunt's assistance or possibly operating the motion picture camera himself; but he was not one of the dancers who appeared in the film.