

Edward S. Curtis,
Self Portrait

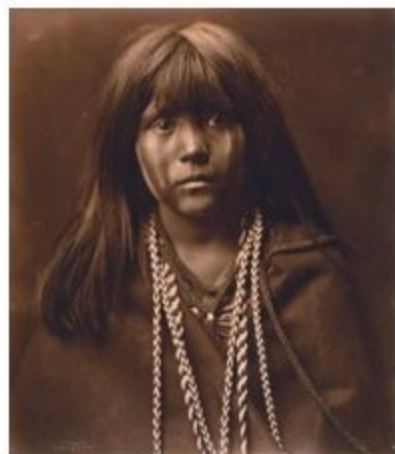
Light and Legacy:
The ART and TECHNIQUES of
EDWARD S. CURTIS



Edward S. Curtis,
Piegan, c. 1910,
cyanotype on paper;
Peterson Family Collection

AT WESTERN SPIRIT:
SCOTTSDALE'S MUSEUM OF THE WEST
BY JAMES D. BALESTRIERI

At the end of the 19th century, many Indigenous peoples in North America continued to follow traditional ways of life despite the tremendous pressures of Westward expansion. Seattle photographer Edward Curtis saw the importance of honoring these people on film and devoted his life to this endeavor. Opening at Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West in October 2021, and running through late spring 2023, *Light and Legacy: The Art and Techniques of Edward S. Curtis* will be celebrating the life and works of this seminal American artist.



Edward S. Curtis, *Mosa-Mohave*, 1908, photogravure; Peterson Family Collection

From 1900 to 1930, Curtis spent countless hours on the road and in the field, traveling from Arizona to Alaska and from the Mississippi River to the California coast, creating thousands of images, audio recordings, and the earliest motion pictures of Native Americans, all while making tremendous contributions to the art and science of photography. The result, the 20 volumes and portfolios of *The North American Indian*, remains an artistic and ethnographic triumph. Curtis chose, and led, a dramatic, even cinematic life — yet it all but consumed him. His passion would take his

health and marriage and he would eventually lose control of and rights to his images. His life's work would nearly vanish into history. But in the 1970s, in a Boston bookstore basement, his art once again came to light.

Dr. Tricia Loscher, Assistant Director for Collections, Exhibitions and Research at Western Spirit, describes the exhibition, stating, "Based upon years of collecting Curtis's artwork, Tim Peterson, Scottsdale's Museum of the West's Trustee and Western art collector, has used his discerning eye in helping to curate this exhibition. On display will be photogravures; original copper plates; orotones; platinum prints; silver bromides; silver gelatins; cyanotypes; glass plate negatives; and recordings of Native music." Peterson adds, "The exhibition lays out in two parts. In the first, at least four portraits, one dwelling, and four to six cultural images from each of the first 20 volumes of *The North American Indian* will be featured. The second half of the exhibition honors Curtis's artistry in the darkroom. Bottles of the minerals he used to develop his prints, as well as a camera of the kind he traveled with will be on display." For perhaps the first time, visitors will have a chance to compare the same image in different versions and learn how these



Edward S. Curtis, *An Oasis in the Badlands*, 1905, silver bromide border photograph; Peterson Family Collection



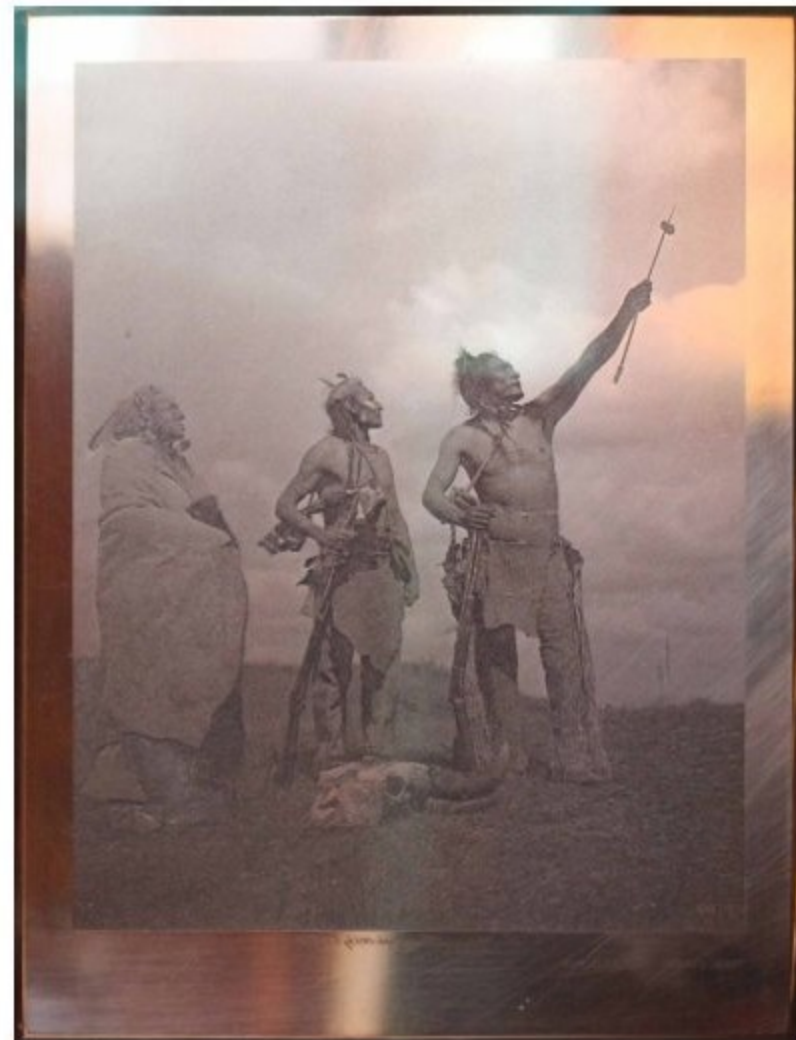
Edward S. Curtis, *Son of the Desert*, 1904, silver photograph;
Peterson Family Collection

various versions were created in the darkroom.

Born into abject poverty, Edward Curtis's father, a sickly Union Army vet, had little more to give his son than the camera lens he had somehow acquired during the war. Not a camera, a lens. Young Edward was fascinated and constructed his first camera out of wood. When the family moved to Seattle, Edward found work in a photography studio and soon made a success on his own.

A chance meeting on the slopes of Mt. Rainer with a lost party of "scientificos," as Curtis called them, changed his course forever. Among them was George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Field and Stream* magazine and author of numerous works on the Plains Indians. Grinnell invited Curtis to accompany the group on an expedition to Alaska and to visit the Blackfoot in Montana after that. In Montana, Curtis imbibed the "Vanishing Race" myth that envisioned an inevitable, tragic end to America's Indigenous Peoples and began to imagine *The North American Indian*. With the eventual blessing of President Theodore Roosevelt and the financial backing of J. Pierpont Morgan, publication began, but the work, sold by subscription, was expensive for the time — \$3000 — and individuals and institutions were often reluctant to commit to something that, it seemed, might never be finished.

Curtis, however, had grit to spare, relentless ambition, and a restless, creative mind. In addition to his photographs, Curtis and his various teams made over 10,000 wax cylinder

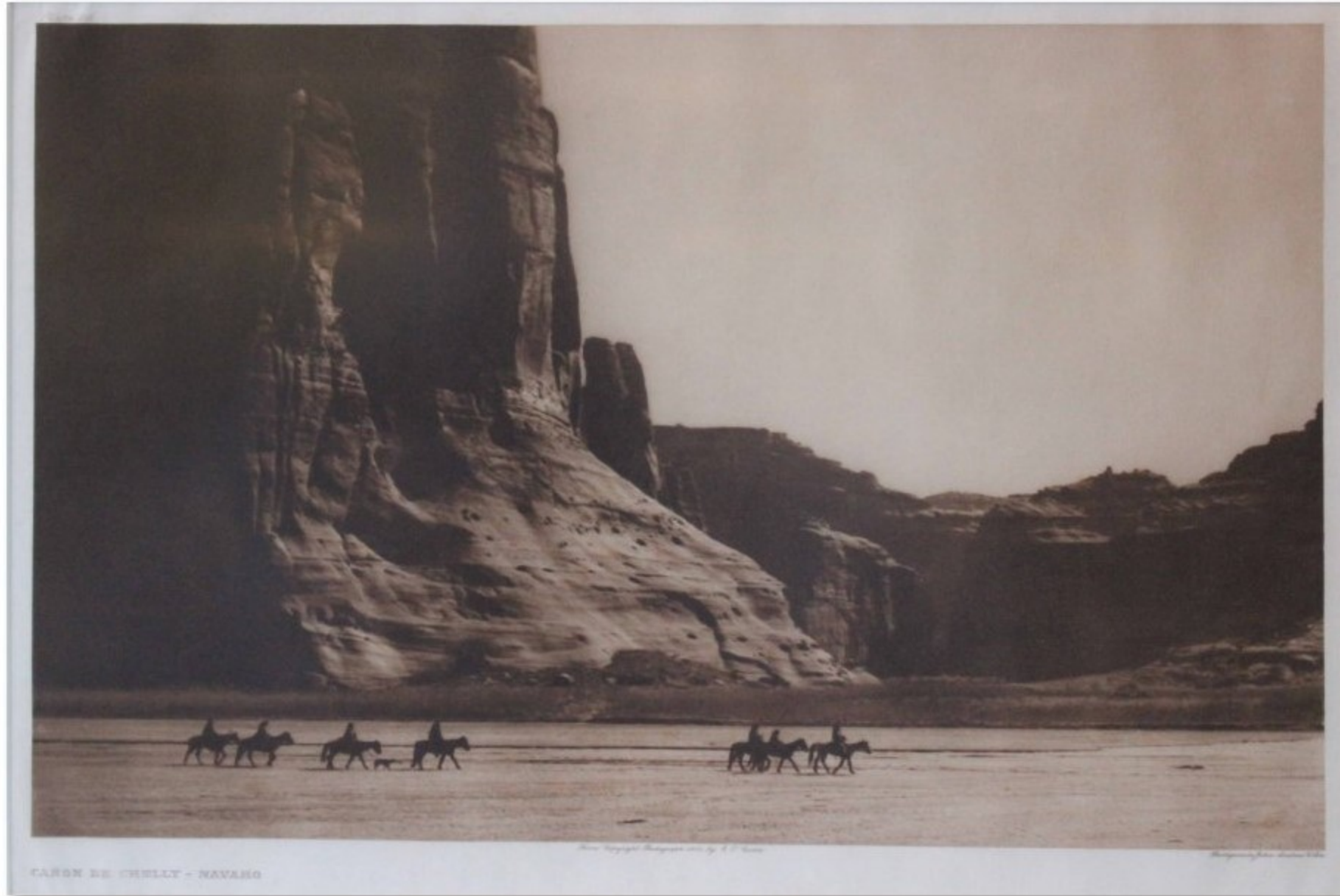


Edward S. Curtis, *The Oath*, 1909, copperplate;
Peterson Family Collection

recordings of Native American languages, songs and music, a bounty that continues to produce dividends today, and made the first all-Native film in British Columbia with Kwakiutl actors reenacting their stories and legends. Even with the absurd title given it by its producers and promoters, *Land*

of the Head Hunters, and even with Curtis himself leading the charge, the film was a critical darling and commercial flop that left him deeper in debt. Adding injury to insult, while in British Columbia a boat Curtis was filming from was upended and his hip smashed by an indifferent whale.

Edward S. Curtis,
Canyon de Chelly,
1904, photogravure;
Peterson Family Collection



Edward S. Curtis,
Medicine Crow,
1909, goldtone;
Peterson Family Collection



No stranger to controversy in his lifetime, Curtis to this day inspires fierce debate. As an example, Curtis's time among the Crow, listening to the story of the Battle of the Little Big Horn — Custer's Last Stand — from some of the scouts who had been there caused him to rewrite the hagiographic account of "Yellowhair" in a less than flattering way. Historians blustered at Curtis's revisionism, but the account he set down has come to be seen as historically accurate. Today, on the other hand, many Native artists and scholars see Curtis's undeniably beautiful portraits as romanticized, unduly stoic and resigned images that contribute to inaccurate views of Indigenous Peoples. Yet we also know that of all the white artists who

Edward S. Curtis, *The Three Chiefs*,
albumen photograph; Peterson Family Collection



chose Native Americans as their subjects, none visited as many different tribes and spent as much time among them, and none were invited to see, photograph, and sometimes take part in ceremonies as Curtis was. *Light and Legacy: The*

Art & Techniques of Edward S. Curtis explores and embraces the complexities of these points of view – and of the man himself – in the most comprehensive exhibition of this artist's work undertaken to date.

Edward S. Curtis, *The Potter – Nampeyo*,
platinum photograph; Peterson Family Collection



WESTERN SPIRIT: SCOTTSDALE'S MUSEUM OF THE WEST

Open in 2015, Scottsdale's Museum of the West features regularly changing and permanent exhibitions of Western and Native American art and cultural artifacts, as well as entertaining and informative events and programs that bring the West's heritage and culture to life. Current exhibitions include: *Canvas of Clay: Hopi Pottery Masterworks from The Allan and Judith Cooke Collection*; *Courage and Crossroads: A Visual Journey Through the American West*; *Dr. Rennard Strickland's Profound Legacy*:



The Golden West on the Silver Screen; Collecting Stories: John Coleman Bronzes from the Alper Collection; The A.P. Hays Spirit of the West Collection of Western Artifacts; Photographs by Barry M. Goldwater: Selections from the Arizona Highway Collection; From the Mountains to the Moon: the Art of Paul Calle; Beaded Gauntlets from the William P. Healey Collection.

All are housed in an award-winning building designed by Phoenix-based architectural firm Studio Ma. Scottsdale's Museum of the West also features the Christine and Ted Mollring Sculpture Courtyard, the 135-seat Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust Theater and Auditorium, and the Sue and Robert Karatz Museum Store. Indoor and outdoor spaces are certified as LEED® Gold. SMOw is owned by the City of Scottsdale and the museum is managed by Scottsdale Museum of the West, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and is a Smithsonian Affiliate. 🌵

WESTERN SPIRIT: SCOTTSDALE'S MUSEUM OF THE WEST

3830 N. Marshall Way, Scottsdale, AZ 85251

480-686-9539

www.scottsdalemuseumwest.org

Hours:

Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30 – 5:00 PM.

Sunday, 11:00 – 5:00 PM.

