Edward S. Curtis and the American Indian

Course description: Edward S. Curtis gained recognition for his compelling photographs of North American Indians during the early twentieth century. Between 1907 and 1930, Curtis produced 20 volumes of illustrated text and 20 portfolios of photographs featuring over 80 different tribes. Curtis marketed this project as the record of a “Vanishing Race,” whose traditions were doomed to extinction without Curtis’ visual documentation. His artful images of Indians captured the imagination of Americans who were nostalgic for a simpler, rural past embodied in western landscapes and “primitive” peoples. Indeed, Curtis staged many of the photographs to appear as though North American Indians had no engagement with twentieth-century life. Scholars now ask to what degree did Curtis evoke Indian realities? To explore this question, we will research Native American life on reservations during this period, as well as Curtis’ life history and work. In addition, we will consider the influence of political developments such as the eugenics movement, and artistic trends such as the pictorialist movement in photography. Out of this research, we will write the interpretive texts to accompany an exhibit of Curtis prints at the Brooks Museum of Art, and create a reference catalogue to accompany the Curtis collection housed in Barrett Library.

Required Texts:


Coursepack: A xeroxed collection of journal articles and archival materials, to be handed out in class. Students pay a lab fee for these materials.
Course Requirements:
1) Consistent attendance and participation. Because we meet only once each week, more than one absence will lower your average by a full letter grade.

2) Evidence of thoughtful, serious reading of assigned material, in both discussion and writing. Your course grade will be based 50% on your participation in discussion and 50% on your written work. All readings will be discussed on the day they are listed.

3) Short papers will be assigned every week, culminating in your final drafts of the museum interpretive texts. These short papers will be precise, cogent summaries of readings and class material. The art of summary is difficult; one must avoid meaningless generalities, while limiting descriptive detail. Aim high; you are doing professional work for the Brooks Museum and Barrett Library.

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COURSE OUTLINE

Aug 24  Introduction to the Course

Aug 31  Tradition as Process: Trade, Intermarriage, and Religion


James Ronda, “’We Are Well As We Are’: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth-Century Missions,” pp.66-82.


Writing Exercise: What is the nature of Native American tradition?


Guest Scholar: Ellen Daugherty, Memphis College of Art:
“’Truth’ in Photography and the Pictorialist Tradition.”

Reading: Begin reading Iverson, When Indians Became Cowboys, chaps.1, 2, 3.

Writing Exercise: Describe one Curtis photo in terms of the pictorialist tradition.
Sept. 14 Native American Adaptation and Cultural Persistence

Lecture: The Mythic West


Writing Exercise: *Summarize Iverson’s thesis and findings.*

Sept. 21 Introduction to the Brooks Museum [Class meets in the Brooks Museum lobby].

Marina Pacini, Head Curator, will show us the spaces reserved for the Curtis exhibit, and address the challenges of writing interpretive texts.


Writing Exercise: *Rewrite your Sept. 7 assignment about pictorialism, using what you have learned today from Marina, as well as what you have learned from Gidley’s essay on pictorialist elements in Curtis’ work.*

Sept. 28 Indians, Wild West Shows, and Team Sports: Opportunity and Resistance


Writing Exercise: *Pick a photograph from today’s readings, and write an interpretive text for it. Address Indian mediation of opportunity and exploitation.*
Oct. 5  Popular Discourse About “The Vanishing American,” 1904-1912


E.S. Curtis, “My Work in Indian Photography,” (1907), 195-97.


Writing Exercise: Interpret a Curtis photograph from the Barrett Collection using the Vanishing American thesis.

Oct. 12  Writing Catalogue Copy

Writing Exercise: Pick two Curtis photographs from the Barrett collection, and write catalogue copy for them.

October 15-18  Fall Break

Oct. 19  Curtis’ Work: Art and Enterprise

Reading: Mick Gidley, Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated [read the whole book].

Writing Exercise: Describe Curtis’ work as a capitalist enterprise.

Oct. 26  Richard Throssel: A Crow Photographer

Reading: Peggy Allbright, Crow Indian Photographer: The Work of Richard Throssel [read the whole book].

Writing Exercise: Write an Interpretive text for one of Richard Throssel’s Photographs. Apply something you have learned in one or more units of this course to the Throssel photograph.
Nov. 2 Native American Uses of Photography

Reading: Carol Williams, “Indigenous Uses of Photography,” pp.138-69; endnotes pp.204-09.


Writing Exercise: Pick a photograph from Williams’ text, and write an interpretive text for it. OR, apply Albers and James’ insights to a Curtis photograph.

Nov. 7 Student Presentation of Interpretive Texts for a Farr Photograph


Writing Exercise: Choose a photograph from any non-Curtis source that we have read so far, which visually contradicts Curtis’ images of Indians frozen in pre-contact traditions. Write an interpretive text for it.

Nov. 16 Curtis’ Relationships with Native Americans

Reading: Mick Gidley, Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field [read the whole book].

Writing Exercise: Pick two Curtis photographs, and write the definitive interpretive text for it, using all that you have learned so far. This will be challenging, as you will have to pick and choose what elements to address.

November 23-27 Thanksgiving Break

Nov. 30 Refining of Interpretive Texts for Curtis Exhibit

We will “workshop” texts for selected photographs. Leave your ego at home. Revision is a fact of life for historians. Give yourself a big hand for making it through the course this far!
Dec. 7    Revision of Brochure Essay/Continue Workshop on Interpretive Texts
Drafts due for Catalogue Copy

Dec. 12    Final Drafts Due for Interpretive Texts, Brochure Essay, and Catalogue Copy.

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The Brooks Museum exhibit of Curtis photographs will run from January 15 through April 16, 2006. If any of you would like to volunteer as docents for this exhibit (i.e. you give scheduled tours of the exhibit), let Marina Pacini know. She will be recruiting volunteers. Docent work is good experience for anyone who plans to pursue a professional career in History.

Thank you for your participation in this course, and for your professional work for the Brooks!