



Edward S. Curtis, *The Vanishing Race—Navajo*, 1904
(published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 1, 1907).
Photogravure, 14 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Dibner Library of
the History of Science and Technology, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

“Yet in a Primitive Condition”

Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian

Shannon Egan

From 1907 to 1930, Edward S. Curtis created *The North American Indian*, a forty-volume edition of photographs and writings that he hoped would cover “every phase of Indian life of all tribes yet in a primitive condition.” All evidence indicates that he set out to make a singular and unified work of art. However, a comparative analysis of photographs made at different moments in this ambitious project reveals that *The North American Indian* ultimately is characterized not by stylistic and thematic unity but by significant shifts in aesthetic and political orientation.¹

Curtis selected *The Vanishing Race—Navajo* (frontispiece) as the opening photograph for the first volume of his series to establish his goals for the project. “The thought which this picture is meant to convey is that the Indians as a race, already shorn in their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future,” his caption states. “Feeling that the picture expresses so much of the thought that inspired the entire work, the author has chosen it as the first of the series.” At the turn of the century, Curtis, in consonance with ideas presented in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “frontier thesis,” James Earle Fraser’s sculpture *The End of the*

Trail (fig. 1), and Henry Farny’s painting *Morning of a New Day* (fig. 2), assumed that the Indians and the frontier—the western regions that had remained unclaimed by white settlers through the nineteenth century—were vanishing.² Curtis’s photograph illustrates this moment of the Indians’ disappearance and presents a small group of Indians on horseback receding diagonally into the hazy distance. Through his use of a blurred focus, details of costume and setting are obliterated and the figures become anonymous silhouettes of generic Indians, conveying the impression of an entire race passively fading away.

In contrast to the opening plate, *A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter* (fig. 3), taken ten years later and published in volume ten, presents a different view of Native Americans as well as an awareness of a modernist aesthetic in photography. *The Vanishing Race* conforms to the pictorialist photographic style, which is characterized by a softened focus and often pastoral subject matter and which was promulgated most famously by galleryist and photographer Alfred Stieglitz around the turn of the century. To date, scholars have classified the entirety of Curtis’s project as pictorialist, but these studies fail to recognize fully the wider stylistic scope of his compositions and



artistic goals. In *A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter*, for example, the two abstracted Native American sculptures are more than simply the posts on which the platform bisecting the image rests. Curtis draws particular attention to the similarities between the Indian woman and the sculptures. The woman's bent right arm mirrors the left statue's left arm. The lines of the statues' eyes, cheeks, and mouths exaggeratedly echo the features of her

face. At the same time, the woman's blanket and wide-brimmed hat mask her shape to make it more like the figures below. The background is unornamented and Curtis's caption for this photograph provides minimal information about its subject, as if to underscore the picture's formal rather than anthropological qualities.³ In foregrounding the aesthetic of the statues, Curtis presents Indian sculpture as an accessible model for achieving a new kind of abstraction in Euro-American art.

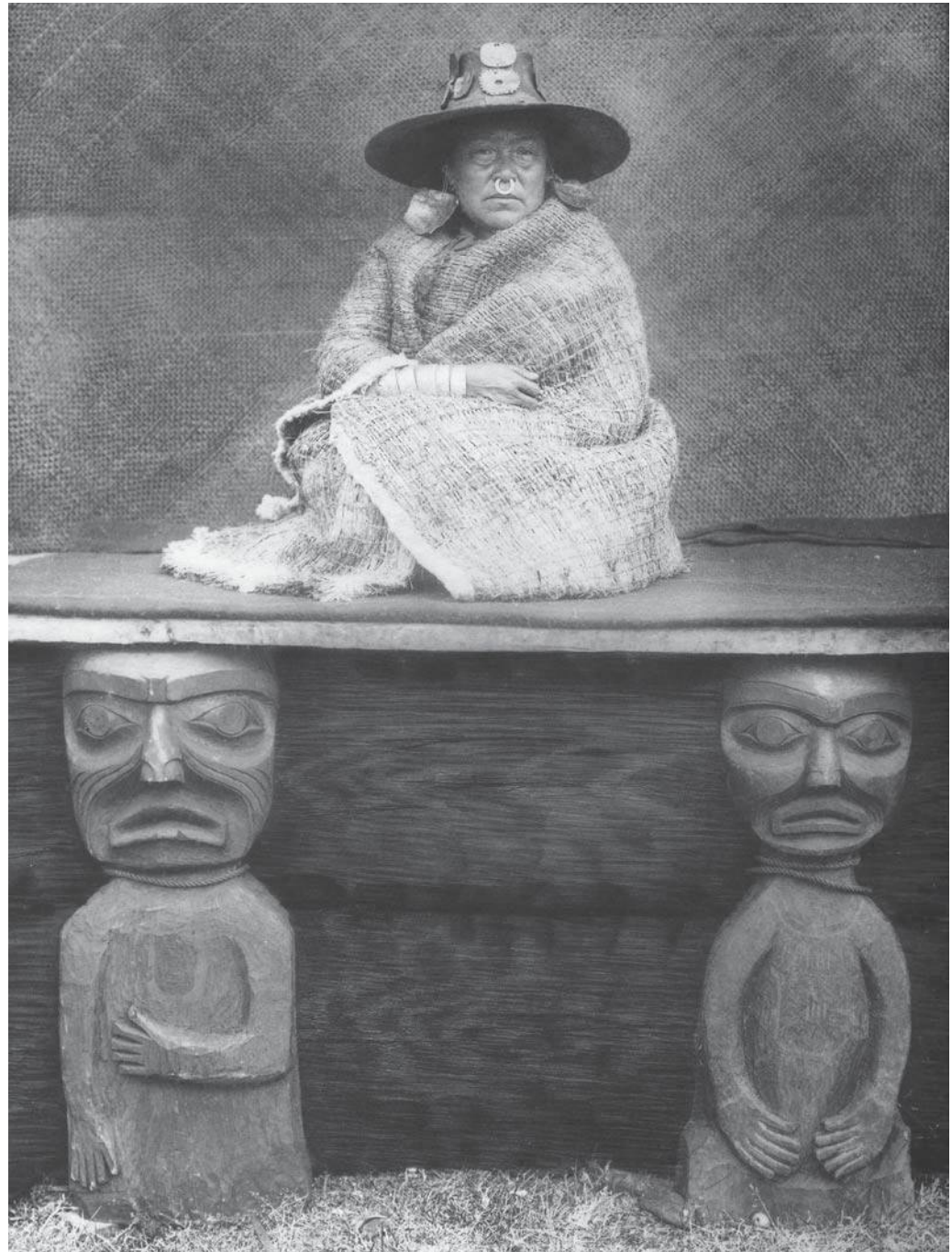
Curtis presents the woman as analogous to a work of abstracted sculpture, but the horizontal axis that perfectly divides the picture in half also invites a systematic comparison of differences and similarities between the two registers. The wooden statues are pressed against the wooden boards behind them and thus function not as sculptures-in-the-round but as reliefs, materially connected to their background. The texture of the woman's coarsely woven robe likewise matches that of the straw wall behind her and finds another textural equivalent in the narrow strip of grass at the bottom



1 James Earle Fraser, *The End of the Trail*, ca. 1894. Bronze, 44 in. high. Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa

2 Henry Farny, *Morning of a New Day*, 1907. Oil, 22 x 32 in. National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City

- 3 Edward S. Curtis, *A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter*, 1914 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 10, 1915). Photogravure, 17 3/8 x 13 in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



of the photograph. Although this strip of grass provides the composition with a limited sense of depth, the photograph conveys a sense of compressed flatness within an apparently three-dimensional space. While the sculptures' rigid frontality establishes the support and architecture of the photograph, the hunch and

subtle twist of the woman's body endow her with a roundedness and sense of movement lacking in the figures beneath her. Her status as an art object, akin to the sculptures, is amplified in her reappearance as a work of photographic art.

As this look at photographs made in 1904 and 1914 suggests, Curtis's

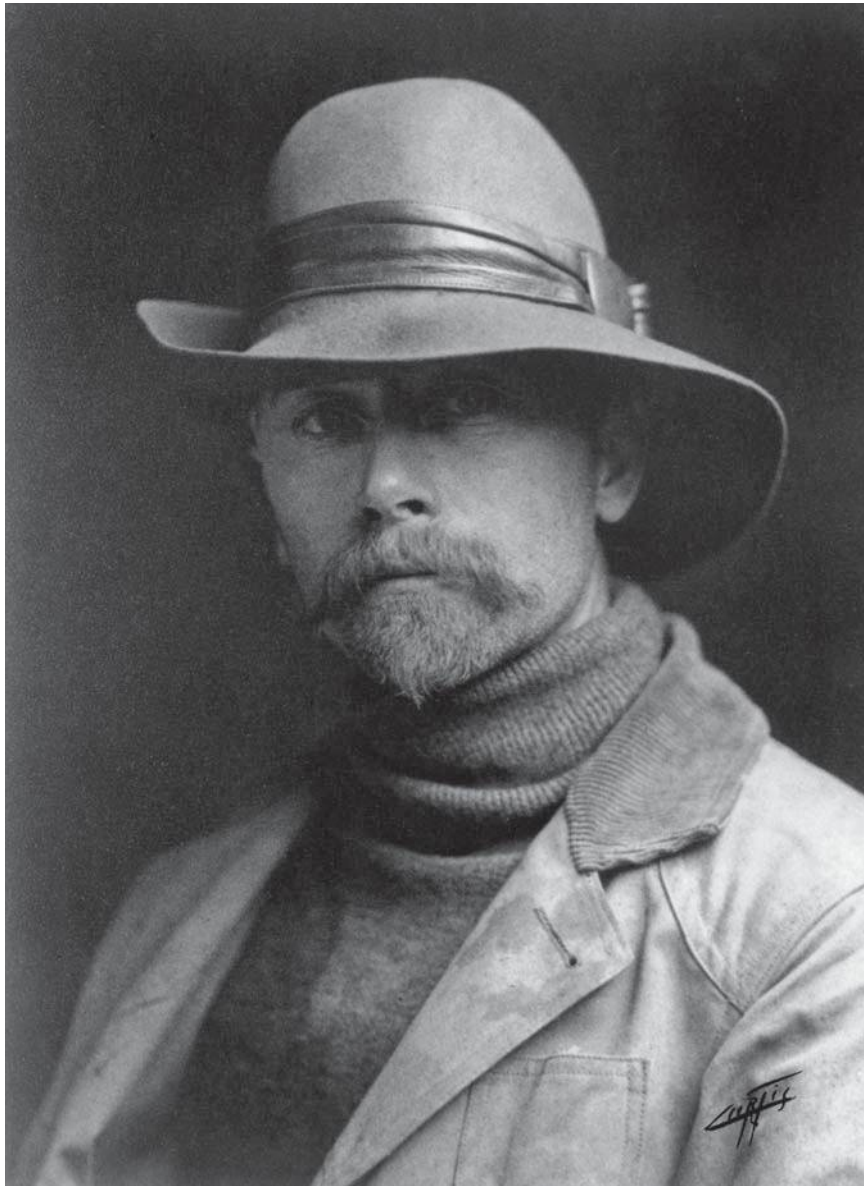
“vanishing race” thesis changed over the course of his project. His photographs must be read in the context of his evolving understanding and a shifting reception of his works. Curtis’s early photographs, those taken between about 1900 and 1913, correspond to the tenets of progressivism. I use the term “progressivism” as it relates to the political and social agenda of integrating both Native Americans and foreigners into U.S. society during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, along with banking magnate John Pierpont Morgan, actively encouraged and supported the publication and marketing of Curtis’s work. Curtis’s photographs from the second half of *The North American Indian* (taken between 1914 and 1930), by contrast, engage with the nativist interest in creating a specifically American art and culture that would take as its subject not only the Indian but also the notion of an Indian aesthetic. The nativist movement, which arose in the years following World War I, was based on the idea that America possessed characteristics exclusively its own and ought to resist any aspect of foreignness in its imagined identity as a cohesive nation. In contrast to the progressive-era goal of assimilating immigrants, nativism emphasized Americanness as a quality that is inherited rather than achieved through naturalization.⁴ Thus activists, including prominent artists and intellectuals, began to seek more rights for Indians and less governmental interference in their activities in this period, and artists searched for specifically “indigenous” qualities to incorporate into their own productions.

Although I establish two fulcra—exemplified by *The Vanishing Race—Navajo* and *A Nakoaktok Chief’s Daughter*—for locating and understanding the variations of style and subject of Curtis’s photographs, his move from progressivism to nativism was neither neat nor abrupt. In the later volumes, for instance, he published photographs from

his first trips in the field alongside works taken years afterward. Curtis’s sometimes ambiguous statements and actions have prevented scholars from confronting his political views; the literature on Curtis also has not addressed his relationship to the larger milieu of nativist artists and writers in the 1920s and the effects of these associations on his photographic style.⁵ Yet *The North American Indian* is best understood in relation to the significant changes, including shifting perceptions and representations of Native Americans and their art, that took place over the three decades in which it was produced. This essay investigates what was at stake, politically and aesthetically, in Curtis’s commitment to continuing this massive and financially debilitating project.

The First Decade, 1900–1910

Edward Curtis (1868–1952) established a profitable photography studio in Seattle after receiving limited training as a photographer’s apprentice in the Midwest. He developed a reputation as the city’s leading society photographer, and by the end of the 1890s bought his partner’s share in the studio. Curtis (fig. 4) quickly outgrew the artistic restraints of conventional portraiture, however, and regularly ventured outside the studio to Mount Rainier and nearby Indian reservations to find more “picturesque” photographic subjects. He was an avid hiker and skilled outdoorsman, and on an 1898 excursion Curtis rescued a “lost party of scientificos” and guided them back to safety. To his good fortune, the “scientificos” included George Bird Grinnell, ethnologist and friend of Theodore Roosevelt; Gifford Pinchot, chief of the U.S. Forest Service; and C. Hart Merriam, head of the Biological Survey of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Interactions with these men and invitations to join them on western expeditions broadened Curtis’s interests in what were presumed to be disappearing



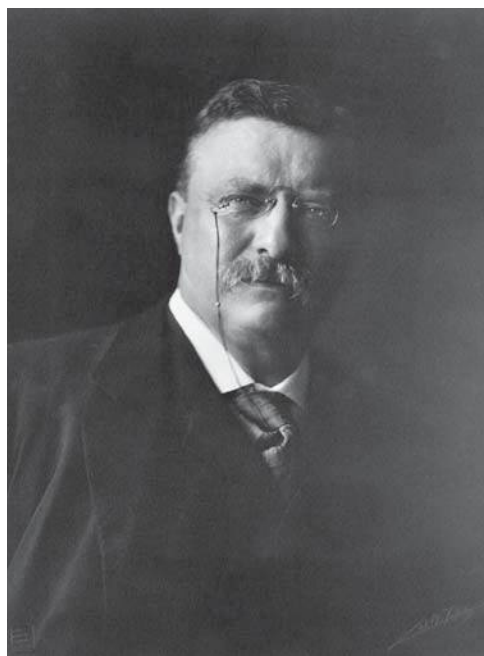
4 Edward S. Curtis, *Self-Portrait*, 1899. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 7 1/16 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Purchase from Robert Schoelkopf Gallery

subjects and scenery. Each of these men later lent financial support and political clout to *The North American Indian*, but none was as important as Roosevelt (fig. 5) to the inception and success of the project. Roosevelt first noticed Curtis's photography in 1904 when one of his pictures appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. The president commissioned Curtis to take portraits of his family in New York, where the two discussed the photographer's ambitious plan. Roosevelt encouraged Curtis to seek private financial support and wrote a letter of introduction to potential

patrons in addition to contributing a fulsome foreword to *The North American Indian*. The resulting set of twenty large picture portfolios, each with approximately thirty-nine photogravures intended for framing, and twenty accompanying text volumes was printed in a leather-bound edition and made available by subscription for three thousand dollars. While Morgan supplied the initial funds for *The North American Indian* (fifteen thousand dollars a year for five years), Curtis relied on subscription sales to museums, libraries, and prosperous individuals to continue his work. He hoped to sell five hundred sets. To attract subscribers, Roosevelt autographed copies of the albums, and his foreword was reproduced frequently on promotional broadsheets and in pamphlets distributed to potential patrons.⁶

President Roosevelt reinforced the political, and even patriotic, nature of Curtis's endeavor and cast it as a national treasure. In his foreword, the president praised *The North American Indian* as a "good thing for the whole American people." He continued, "The Indian as he has hitherto been is on the point of passing away. His life has been lived under conditions thru which our own race past [*sic*] so many ages ago that not a vestige of their memory remains." The foreword, with its emphasis on passing and the past, suggested a similarity and potential kinship between the Indians and "our own race"—implying the inevitability of the Indians' assimilation into contemporary American society. Moreover, Roosevelt underlined Curtis's position as an artist whose pictures implicitly link present-day, vanishing Indians with Anglo-Americans' earliest ancestors—"our own race . . . so many ages ago." In the photographs and in *The Vanishing Race—Navajo* specifically, the characteristics of different tribal cultures blur and fade into the background as a more homogenous and unified idea of America is constructed. The implied social hierarchy of Roosevelt's foreword was not lost on

- 5 Edward S. Curtis, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 1904. Platinum print, 15 3/4 x 11 7/8 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Purchase from Sotheby Parke-Bernet



Curtis, whose introduction continued the president's patronizing tone:

The value of such a work, in great measure, will lie in the breadth of its treatment, in its wealth of illustration, and in the fact that it represents the result of personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of their aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the superior race.⁷

In addition to defining the Indian in relation to the "superior race," both Roosevelt and Curtis defined *The North American Indian* in artistic terms, based on its "wealth of illustration" and the anachronistic opportunity it afforded to capture visually the "picturesque" antiquity of Indian life.

In his photographs Curtis rendered moot the "Indian problem"—Anglo-American anxiety about Native Americans' place in contemporary society—and made the phenomenon of a "vanishing race" more palatable to his audience by casting the Indians as ancient relics fixed in a permanent, ahistorical past. The comparison of

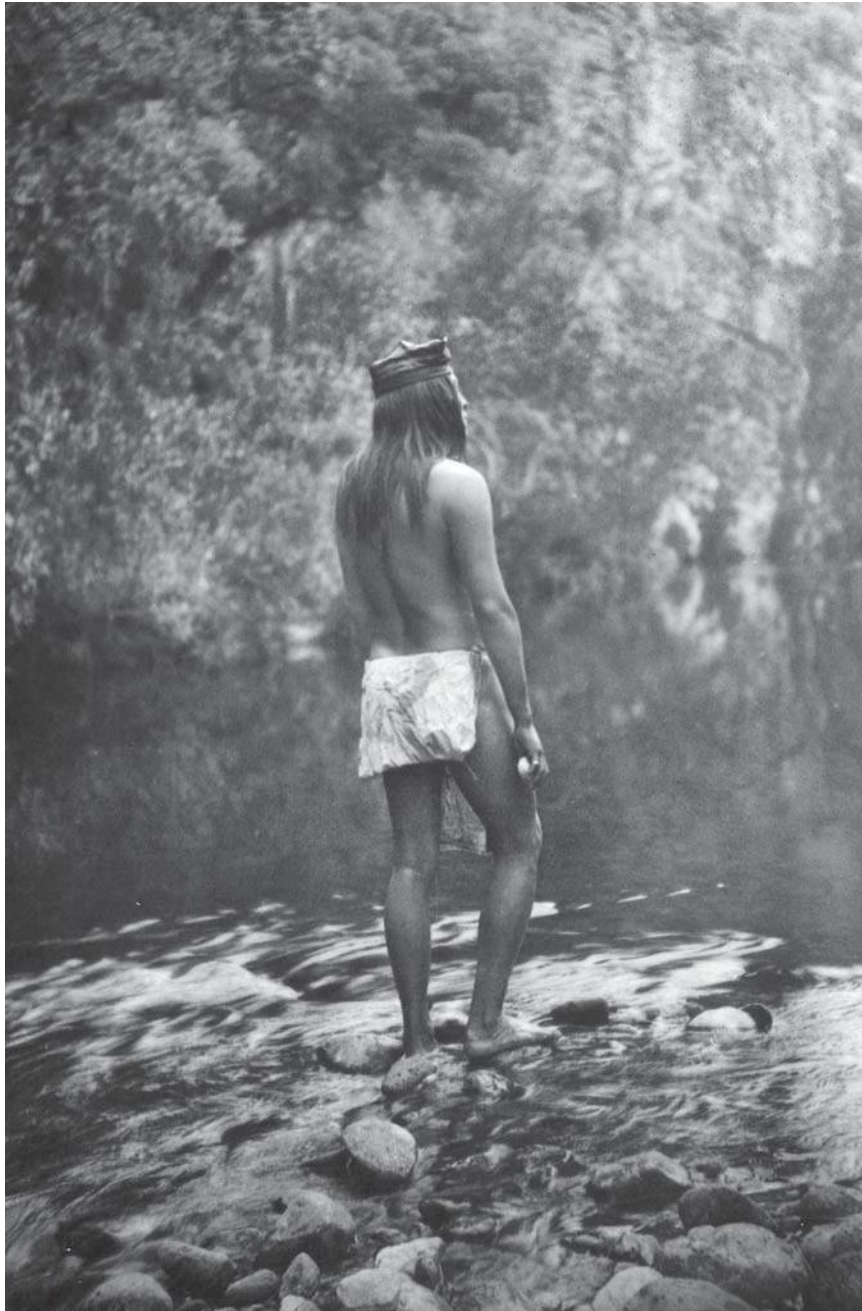
Indians' imagined "archaic" existence "so many years ago" to Stone Age or classical imagery can be understood as serving assimilationist policy despite—and possibly because of—its temporal discrepancy. On the one hand, the "vanished" Indians already are absorbed into the national past and, therefore, do not present a problem for continued American expansion. On the other hand, describing the Indians in terms of the antique—claiming them as the Greeks of North American history—had the effect of "civilizing" them through their insertion into a European-American cultural context. Attempts to modify the appearance, role, and perception of Indians converted them into figures of a new, emphatically American antiquity.

By asserting that the Indians were "thousands of years behind us in civilization," Curtis affirmed the belief popular among Americans at the time that the New World possessed a rich history different from, but equal to, that of Europeans. In a 1909 article Curtis voiced this competitive attitude: "You, who say there is nothing old in our country, turn your eyes for one year from Europe and go to the land of an ancient yet primitive civilization." In 1905 Roosevelt drew a similar conclusion in a letter to Curtis, declaring, "You are doing a service which is much as if you were able suddenly to reproduce in their minute details the lives of the men who lived in Europe in the unpolished stone period." Although Curtis asked his viewer to "turn your eyes . . . from Europe," he, like Roosevelt, intimated the resemblance between the two cultures and proposed that Indians were America's quasi-European ancestors. A number of artworks around the turn of the century also expressed these ideas by combining Indian and classical imagery. At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, for example, sculptures of Indian nudes were exhibited in conventional academic and equestrian poses derived from the art of Greco-Roman antiquity, with only the slightest suggestion of Indian

- 6 Edward S. Curtis, *The Apache*, 1906 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 1, 1907). Photogravure, 18 1/8 x 13 in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 7 F. Holland Day, *The Marble Faun*, 1896 or 1897. Platinum print. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

identity or costume. In 1905 Roosevelt suggested that the Phrygian cap on the ten-dollar gold piece's allegorical figure of Liberty be replaced with an Indian head-dress, saying, "American Liberty should have something distinctly American about her!" The new Liberty, markedly classical in appearance aside from her headgear, conflated allusions to antique coinage with Indian symbols.⁸

Curtis's early Indians follow this confluence of Indian and Arcadian subjects. Their stances and gestures resemble those of subjects by photographers Clarence White and F. Holland Day as well as Thomas Eakins, all of whom costumed and posed their models as antique figures. Curtis's *Apache* (fig. 6), for example, recalls Day's hazy *Marble Faun* (fig. 7) in its idealized and youthful nudity, academic pose, and pastoral setting. In *The Apache* Curtis explicitly asked the viewer to imagine the subject as belonging to a prehistoric moment. His caption reads, "This picture might be titled 'Life Primeval.' It is the Apache as we would mentally picture him in the time of the Stone Age." Curtis photographed the model not simply as a primeval relic; in addition, the figure's pose, the emphasis on his musculature, and his youthful near nudity present him as a classical sculpture. Balanced on a river rock with his back toward the viewer, the figure stands in contrapposto, a hallmark of classical Greek sculpture, and wears only a rectangular loincloth. He appears





to be in a meditative state, and because the man's sight line parallels the implied direction of movement in *The Vanishing Race—Navajo*, the photograph reinforces Curtis's stated intention to offer a picture of a race in the act of vanishing. Again, the blurred background avoids any reference to modern development, and the setting reads as a place not yet touched by "civilization."⁹

Curtis not only sought to resurrect the moment before Indians came into contact with white settlers but also tried to enact an idealized state in which Indians live in harmony with contemporary federal governmental policies. Governmental goals centered on dismantling tribal lands, encouraging farming by individuals rather than collectives, and teaching Anglo-American domestic, carpentry, economic, and language skills in government-sponsored schools. Roosevelt and the Indian commissioners serving in the progressive period wanted to produce fully Americanized laborers and farmers from young, "still measurably plastic" Indians. Federal efforts were met with resistance, however, by Indians unwilling to abandon native customs, and government agents became frustrated with their wards and various bureaucratic struggles. Photographs such as *The Apache*, featuring solitary Indians in idyllic landscapes, appear to gloss over contemporary conflicts regarding reservation mismanagement, misguided reform efforts, and other larger battles, such as the 1890 Sioux uprising at Wounded Knee.¹⁰

Curtis's writings clearly address the reality of the government's complicated relationship with its Indian "wards." In an article entitled "Vanishing Indian Types" published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1906, he commented, "As soon as you can make a study of one of the educated boys or men after their return to the reservation, you see that education is not civilization, and are convinced that while you can educate an Indian in one generation, you cannot civilize him in so brief a period." Despite this apparently pessimistic assessment of Indian schools, Curtis argued for government management of Indian "advancement" and praised Indian Commissioner Francis E. Leupp's administration: "It is certain wherever you see an agent of that kind you see advancement. It may not be considered advancement by the people in the neighborhood of the reservation, but their point of view



- 8 Edward S. Curtis, *The Apache Reaper*, 1906 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 1, 1907). Photogravure, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 9 Edward S. Curtis, *The Mussel Gatherer*, 1900 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 9, 1913). Photogravure, 14 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 10 Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Oil, 33 x 44 in. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France/Art Resource, New York
- 11 Alfred Stieglitz, *The Net Mender*, 1894. Photogravure, 4 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, Museum Purchase © 2006 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

from self-interest is not broad enough to be considered.”¹¹ Curtis offered the subjects of his photographs his own kind of advancement: by imagining the Indians as an American version of the classical Greeks, he made these not yet “civilized” subjects the forerunners of a model civilization.

In addition to envisioning the Indians as ancient subjects or half-fading apparitions, several of Curtis's photographs from this period are modeled on another established indicator of advanced culture, nineteenth-century European painting. For example, the compositions of *The Apache Reaper* (fig. 8) and *The Mussel Gatherer* (fig. 9) mimic pastoral genre scenes by such French artists as Jean-François Millet. Similar to Millet's *Gleaners* (fig. 10), the figure's face in *The Apache Reaper* is obscured. She is hunched over her sickle, absorbed in the repetitive activity of harvesting wheat.¹² Little about the subject's physical presence and occupation marks her as particularly “Indian.” She belongs more clearly to a Western tradition of representations of peasant farmers than to a specific nation of Native Americans.

I am not suggesting that Curtis undertook a deliberate, close study of Millet's works, but an awareness of art-historical tradition clearly pervades his photographs. In a series of articles written in 1900,

Curtis insisted on photography's allegiance to the discipline of fine art:

*I know of no greater need [for photography] than the need of better art education. . . . When I say that we should study for a greater art education I do not mean that we should try to make our work like a brush or pencil artist. Photography is one of the greatest art sciences and is able to stand for itself. Let us study light and shade, composition and perspective, both as it is seen in nature and in the work of the masters, not to copy but to learn. Once we know the true rules of art it will soon be shown in our work.*¹³

Curtis's images, therefore, illustrate the tenets of pictorialism through careful study of “the work of the masters” and the conventions of painting.

Photographs by Curtis that appropriate Millet's trope of the monumental peasant worker in a landscape also bear a striking resemblance to contemporary pictorialist photographs such as Stieglitz's *Net Mender* (fig. 11). In addition to following Stieglitz's suggestions for making “artistic” pictures, Curtis exhibited works alongside those by Stieglitz and other prominent Photo-Secessionists, including Gertrude Käsebier, Edward Steichen, and Clarence White. Curtis's photographs, however, refer not only to his artistic aspirations

but also to the government's social aims for the education of Indians. Progressive schools, such as Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, emphasized domestic, agricultural, and manual labor, activities that he routinely photographed. In a 1906 address to a graduating class of African American and Indian students at Hampton Institute, Roosevelt asserted, "No race, no nationality ever really raises itself by the exhibition of genius in a few. What counts is the character of the average man and average woman." Curtis's *Mussel Gatherer* and *Apache Reaper*, in line with the interests of Roosevelt and the Office of Indian Affairs, depict Indians as average laborers, a potentially valuable workforce. The photographer hides their faces and does not exhibit them as distinct individuals, but instead as a class of industrious workers. By comparing Indians to European peasants in appearance and gesture, Curtis proposed that the Native Americans were capable of achieving the government's education reforms and also of belonging, in this picturesque sense, to Western culture.¹⁴

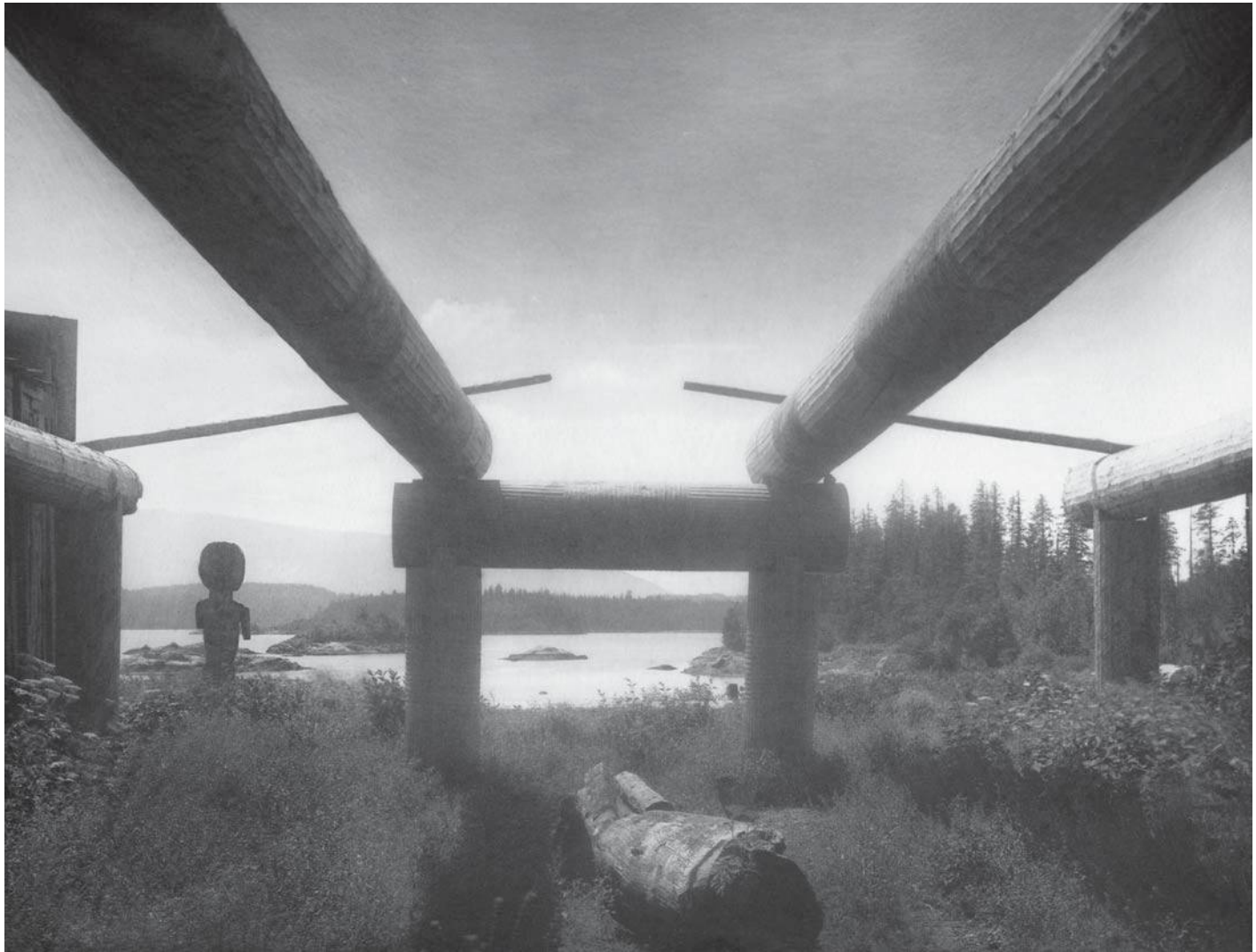
The Second Decade, 1910–20

In the early 1910s Curtis witnessed a flagging of both the government's optimism for the potential of Indian reform and financial support for *The North American Indian*. Publication of his portfolios slowed in this decade and stopped entirely during World War I. Yet certain photographs from the period, including *A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter* (see fig. 3), can be seen as watershed works that deviate from his pictorialist style and respond to the introduction of modern European art in America as well as contemporary political change.

Most of the literature on Curtis does not take into account his proximity to or interest in art exhibitions in New York. Many of his photographs from

1910 through the 1920s were made following his exposure to this changing artistic climate. Between 1906 and 1920 Manhattan was Curtis's primary place of residence, and he spent only part of the year, mostly the summers, in the field. His participation in the National Arts Club, business activities, and exhibition and lecture schedule in New York familiarized him with trends and developments among exhibiting photographers and painters. Modernist paintings and sculptures by Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso were first seen by American audiences in 1908, 1910, and 1911, respectively, at Stieglitz's 291 gallery, at the Armory Show in 1913, and at Marius de Zayas's Modern Gallery in 1915. Curtis maintained an office and studio at 437 Fifth Avenue, only a few blocks south of de Zayas's gallery at 500 Fifth Avenue and a short walk north from Stieglitz's galleries at 291 and later 293 Fifth Avenue. Although he attempted to play up his persona as a western adventurer to subscribers and stockholders of the corporation he formed to finance his project, his geographic proximity to exhibitions of avant-garde work placed him and his photographs in the middle of, rather than at a practical and aesthetic remove from, the modernist milieu that emerged in New York in the 1910s.¹⁵

Curtis's *Kwakiutl House Frame* (fig. 12) suggests a striking awareness of the art exhibited in these nearby New York galleries. The picture depicts a rectilinear house frame laid squarely onto a lush, grassy foreground bordered by a still lake with mountains in the distance. The principal lines of the frame converge at and draw attention to the vanishing point in the center of the photograph, an arrangement that creates the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane. By frontally orienting his camera to this view, Curtis lets the exaggerated geometry of the structure overpower the landscape. He does not abandon entirely his earlier pictorialist tendency to depict



12 Edward S. Curtis, *Kwakiutl House Frame*, 1914 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 10, 1915). Photogravure, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

a bucolic scene but noticeably uses the frame to call attention to the rectilinear properties of the photographic plane and the almost mechanical construction of foreground, middle, and background space. The house's beams function as a perspectival diagram within the photograph and as a surrogate picture frame. By emphasizing the orthogonal lines of a picture's convincing recession into space, Curtis used the Renaissance ideal of picture making to turn his photograph into a network of geometric relationships. His photograph maps the path between the conventional application of linear perspective and the construction of increasingly abstract, cubist space.¹⁶

The intersection of modernist art and ethnography was not lost on contemporary New York critics, who frequently mentioned how artists such as Picasso made works that belonged to both disciplines. Beginning about 1911 columnists in New York newspapers criticized cubist work for using motifs that were too reminiscent of those found in "Alaskan totem poles" and "Aztec symbolism." These same writers, though, praised Curtis's project for successfully presenting an ethnographic study as a work of fine art. For a present and conscious model, Curtis could look to Stieglitz and de Zayas, who displayed ethnographic artifacts with cubist pieces at their galleries, just

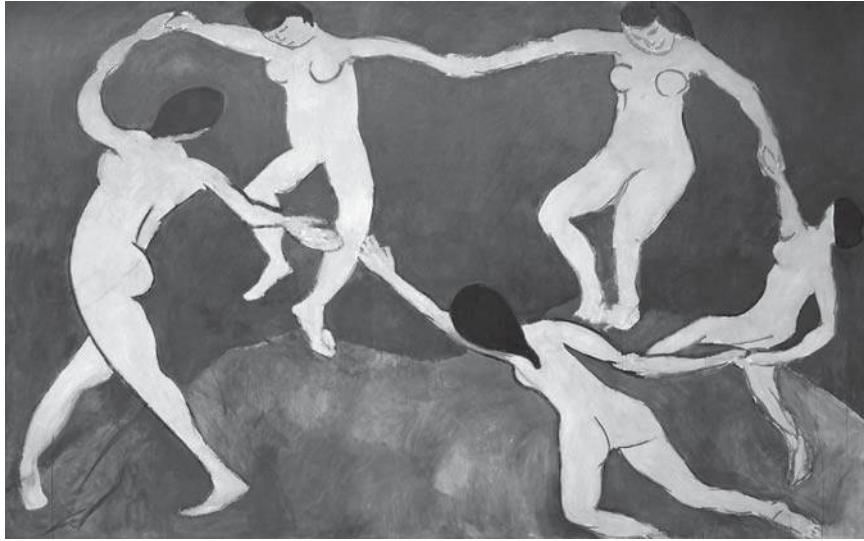


13 Edward S. Curtis, *Dancing to Restore an Eclipsed Moon*, 1914 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 10, 1915). Photo-gravure, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

as Curtis exhibited his own collections of Indian objects alongside his photographs in his New York studio. Stieglitz, for example, exhibited de Zayas's collection of archaic Mexican pottery and stone carvings at the same time that he showed works by Picasso and Braque at 291 in 1914–15. Curtis may well have noticed this display of Native North American ethnographic artifacts with an exhibition of cubist art, as he was in New York at the time. It would have been of special interest to him, since he had hoped to include in his portfolios material from all of North America—including Mexico. These objects offered a new style for art making, and the Native American works

provided a specifically “native” American model.¹⁷

Artists saw in both Indian and African art the successful deployment of abstraction and subversion of Western pictorial conventions. A formal analogy can be drawn between Stieglitz's exhibition space and Curtis's photographs as sites that compare the cubist aesthetic with Native American objects. The archaic Mexican pottery Stieglitz exhibited alongside the cubist works served as a counterpart to the African art that interested Picasso and Braque. Nonetheless, Picasso and Braque's incorporation of African masks cannot be understood as identical to Curtis's use of Native American subjects



14 Henri Matisse, *Dance (first version)*, 1909. Oil, 102 ¼ x 153 ⅝ in. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller in honor of Alfred H. Barr Jr. © Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

in his modernist and ambivalently ethnological art. Native American, ancient Mexican, and African art all served as visual models for American artists and critics in making and understanding modernist art, but Indian art alone supplied a “one-hundred-percent American” subject.¹⁸ By using an Indian aesthetic as a model, American artists, including Curtis, could claim a freedom from long-standing European conventions of picture making at the same time that their choice of abstract, flat, and geometric Indian objects suggested formal similarities to the stylistic experiments of European modernists. Curtis emphasized Indian design in his photographs most frequently when it was distilled by and overlapped with modernist aesthetic principles.

Along with artists and urban art critics, major anthropological figures began to promote southwestern Indian art and its influence on American art. Edgar Lee Hewett, a champion of Indian art who helped establish many artistic and ethnological institutions in Santa Fe in the 1910s and 1920s, also admired Indian art that most closely approximated the work of European modernists. In an article entitled “Native American Artists,” he praised the design of Indian paintings,

pottery, and textiles by describing their “flat, decorative character, absence of backgrounds and foregrounds, freedom from our system of perspective, unerring color sense and strangely impersonal character.” In particular, he valued this art because it was “freed from white influence” and differed from “our system of perspective.” His theories marked a radical change from progressive-era attempts to assimilate the Indians and subject them to “white influence.”¹⁹

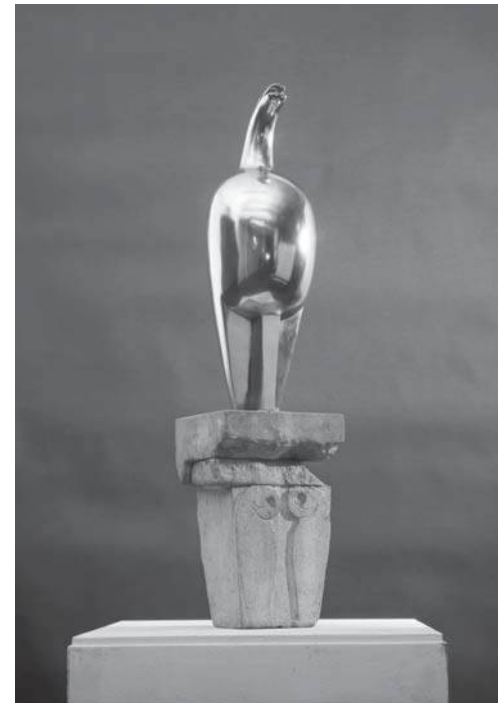
While Hewett favored the study of southwestern tribes, it is Curtis’s photographs of northwestern natives and their artifacts that most readily encourage associations between Indian culture and modernist art. For example, *Dancing to Restore an Eclipsed Moon* (fig. 13), a companion to *A Nakoaktok Chief’s Daughter* and *Kwakiutl House Frame* in volume ten, responds to Matisse’s graphic reduction of figure-ground relationships. In this work, as in *Chief’s Daughter*, a prominent horizontal line bisects the composition and emphasizes the circular movement of the figures. A plume of smoke appears to fuel the dance, while the darkened shadows flatten the Indians’ bodies into abstracted silhouettes. The figures seem to mimic the circle of dancers in Matisse’s *Joy of Life* as well as in his later painting *Dance* (fig. 14). Like Matisse, Curtis abandoned anatomical detail in favor of creating a circulating and cadenced effect. Praised at the time for being “vigorous and rhythmic,” Matisse’s drawings shown at 291 were considered a model of “primitive art” and a major influence for American artists. The 291 gallery also offered Curtis the chance to encounter a photograph of Matisse’s *Joy of Life* in early 1910 and to see Brancusi’s sculptures (exhibited in 1914). At first glance, *Haida Slate Carvings* (fig. 15) appears to be an anomaly in Curtis’s oeuvre; the entire composition consists of a front and side view of what Curtis called “miniature totem poles.” In his caption for the image, Curtis praised the skill and artistry that

- 15 Edward S. Curtis, *Haida Slate Carvings*, 1915 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 11, 1916). Photogravure, 17 3/4 x 13 3/8 in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 16 Constantin Brancusi, *Maiastra*, 1911. Polished bronze, 22 x 7 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. Tate Gallery, London © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

produced the Haida objects and drew attention to the formal balance between the pattern of geometric and highly stylized figuration of the carvings with the sharp linearity of the forms. New York critics drew similar analogies to foreign and ancient cultures in their reviews of Brancusi's sculptures, such as *Maiastra* (fig. 16). Removed from its tribal context, the totem pole becomes a sculpture that might be compared to, and even rival,

contemporary modern works. The sheen of the material and reduction of the forms to animal and birdlike faces call to mind Brancusi's work. In connecting Indian art to modern art, Curtis made an unfamiliar object more accessible, and potentially more attractive, to his audience, a class of patrons and critics with interests in both Curtis's and Stieglitz's undertakings. Moreover, by evenly spacing the statues in a white, groundless space, Curtis emphasized the abstracted rhythm of the stacked totems and of his photographic composition. The clarity of the picture helps the carvings to be seen, but the rigidity, balance, and reduction of pictorial space expose it as a "straight" artistic photograph, an art object in its own right.²⁰

"Primitivism" in the mid- to late 1910s was not defined solely by a surging interest in non-Western artifacts on the part of artists, collectors, and anthropologists. Rather, a shift in racial politics encouraged the simultaneous fascination with and derision of non-European cultures. Regardless of when the term is used, the designation "primitive" inarguably implies an attitude of superiority on the



part of the “nonprimitive” culture. In the 1910s the delineation of race and culture and the progressive faith in the process of “Americanization” came under increased scrutiny. New theories of eugenics replaced earlier notions of the melting pot and a belief in the ability of the environment to shape cultural identity. Curtis’s commitments to illustrating the “vanishing race” appealed to contemporary eugenicists as reassurance that the disappearance of one of the “lower races” would not affect the “good race strain” of “native American aristocracy.” Beginning in 1909 Curtis’s relationship with Henry Fairfield Osborn, director of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, put him in close contact with proponents of eugenics. In a letter of that year to his editor, Frederick Webb Hodge, Curtis revealed that he was eager to entice Osborn into his circle of patrons, writing, “I had a splendid chat with Professor Osborn yesterday and am to write him giving a review of my past season’s work and plans for next year. . . . He is now enthusiastic, but I want to increase his enthusiasm if possible.” Curtis was successful in this endeavor. In a 1913 letter to Hodge, he wrote, “I had a long talk with Professor Osborn. He is more than with us in our work.” As a possible response to this new relationship and in an attempt to underscore the necessity of keeping Indians out of the Anglo-American gene pool, Curtis in 1911 published an older photograph, *The Three Chiefs—Piegan* from 1900 (fig. 17), with the description, “A glimpse of the life and conditions which are on the verge of extinction.” The composition, which simply depicts three figures on horseback on an expansive prairie punctuated by a small stream in the foreground and foreboding clouds above, reads as a kind of rough draft of *The Vanishing Race—Navajo* from 1904 (see frontispiece), which he made four years later. *The Three Chiefs—Piegan* was Curtis’s first attempt to portray his subjects moving away from what he called the “advance-

ment of civilization.” The chiefs all face left and appear to be stopped momentarily on a journey westward, thus abandoning the acres of space visible within the frame. Curtis’s early meditations on Indian extinction would have been reaffirmed when he read Osborn’s 1916 preface to Madison Grant’s book *The Passing of the Great Race*. Osborn recast Americans’ power to set the stage for Indians’ extinction in a newly nativist voice, declaring that “the best spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical forces of heredity” must be preserved to protect the nation’s institutions:

[C]onservation of that race which has given us the true spirit of Americanism is not a matter of either racial pride or racial prejudice; it is a matter of love of country. . . . If I were asked: What is the greatest danger which threatens the American republic today? I would certainly reply: The gradual dying out among our people of those hereditary traits through which the principles of our religious, political and social foundations were laid down and their insidious replacements by traits of less noble character.²¹

The race to which Osborn refers and which “has given us the true spirit of Americanism” is not the Indian race, yet he refers to the “gradual dying out . . . of those hereditary traits.” By applying the “vanishing race” language to Anglo-America, Osborn conflates white anxiety regarding immigration with the Indians’ plight. Indians occupy a diminished place in Osborn’s racial spectrum, because they are not responsible for providing America’s “religious, political and social foundations”; they threaten to “endanger” the country with their “traits of less noble character.” Taken against this rhetoric, Curtis’s Indians inspire in their viewers both condescension for not being white and a kind of sympathetic identification as members of an already “vanishing race.”

When America entered World War I in 1917, the military adopted a similar strategy of using presumptions about



17 Edward S. Curtis, *The Three Chiefs—Piegan*, ca. 1900 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 6, 1911). Photogravure, 14 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Indians' experiences to white Americans' advantage. The government repeatedly emphasized the stereotype of Indians as "natural fighters" to justify the drafting of Native Americans, to secure their acceptance among white soldiers, and, more broadly, to mark the U.S. Army as decidedly American, far removed from the European enemy, through its Indianness. Indians were praised for teaching the American troops "old Indian tactics," and, according to one report, an Indian soldier "admitted rather dolefully that there was no time to lift any Germans' hair." The government commended the Indians for their "warlike nature" and, perhaps more

importantly, sought to align these images of Indian stoicism with the overall character of the American army.²²

While Curtis's photographs downplay Native Americans' perceived militant strain, particularly in comparison with earlier paintings of Indians in battle by Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, he actively sought to participate in the war effort. He wanted to "edge in on this war situation," and while explicit details of his wartime ambition are not documented, he did give a lecture and screen his narrative film *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* to raise funds for the "benefit of war sufferers." Although the film's story, influenced

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, was told as an eighteenth-century Kwakiutl Indian romance "in the days of Vancouver," with emphasis on elaborate wedding feasts and ceremonies, the title contributed to the perception of Indians' savage "headhunting."²³ Curtis's Indian work contributed to the general belief that the Indians were an effective component of America's military strength, a national treasure. His photographs took on an increasingly patriotic and nationalistic cast in the light of America's undisputed approval of its Indian "warriors."

The Final Decade, 1920–30

At the close of the war, Curtis and his contemporaries turned away from stereotypes of the Plains Indians' warlike raids and northwest Indians' quasi-modernist objects to embrace southwestern tribes as quintessentially "Indian." Curtis's post-World War I photographic compositions conformed to the ideals of a larger project of identifying the indigenous characteristics of an American art and "An American Place." The Southwest became the locus for nativist writers who asserted that Indian artifacts could be classified as a form of modern art and as a prototype for a specifically American aesthetic. This group included writers D. H. Lawrence, Oliver LaFarge, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Mary Austin, author of *The American Rhythm* (1923), and painters John Sloan and Marsden Hartley, among others. They considered the Santa Fe area, rich in Native American history and architecture, an ideal site for finding Indian models and creating American rather than New York-centered or imitatively European art. In the early 1920s Curtis also left New York, living primarily in Los Angeles but traveling frequently to New Mexico. Like the other artists who relocated to the Southwest in search of new subject matter, he became increasingly concerned with

a new assimilationist dilemma. He and his fellow artists depended for motifs and inspiration on the persistence of Indian culture despite progressive attempts to restrict ceremonial practices and craft production. "While the majority of the [Indian] groups have changed materially through contact with the white race and mixed bloods predominate, there is still fine picture material," Curtis commented in a 1922 letter.²⁴ He was always interested in photographic subjects that captured the "authentic" Indian, but the pictures he made of Indians in the 1920s moved away from his previous progressivist affiliations and aligned him with other artists newly involved with Indian activism.

These artists-*cum*-activists focused on the beauty and intelligence of Indian art in their calls for its preservation. Sloan and LaFarge, like Curtis, stressed the importance of Indian art and of finding "fine picture material among the Indians" and argued, "The Indian artist deserves to be classed as a Modernist. He does not confine his art to mere photographic impression, nor does he resort to meaningless geometric design." Hartley modeled his own painting on Indian art and said, "We have the excellent encouragement of redman esthetics to establish ourselves firmly with an esthetic consciousness of our own. . . . The redman proves to us what native soil will do." Curtis may have been familiar with Hartley's essays, which were published in various national journals and proclaimed the significance of Indian art, and his *Amerika* paintings, made in Berlin in 1914 and 1915 and exhibited at Stieglitz's 291 gallery in 1916. Although Hartley made these paintings in Europe, the Native American artifacts he studied at the ethnographic museum in Berlin seem analogous to the Indians Curtis studied on reservations. Hartley's easel paintings and Curtis's carefully crafted photogravures distance themselves materially from the works created by Native American artists, employing

Native American culture not as a subject to imitate or document but rather as an aesthetic ideal. By appropriating the subject and form of Indian art, Curtis and others sought to capture the “authenticity” supposedly inherent in Indian art through unmistakably Western media.²⁵

Curtis was aware of the presence of the important writers and artists in New Mexico. He photographed Luhan’s Native American husband, Tony Luhan, in 1905, corresponded with Austin, and praised her work on Indian verse and poetry. In 1924, the year after nativist books such as Austin’s *American Rhythm* and Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* were published, Curtis gave a lecture at the new anthropology museum in Santa Fe. The speech, a response to the increasing Anglo-American interest in southwestern Native American culture, took ambiguous and contradictory positions. At points Curtis criticized writers including Lawrence and Austin for their exploitation of Indians. He called the activists who were appealing for Indian citizenship, freedom of religion, and land rights “amateur and professional mussers,” and accused them of “assisting Indians for selfish purposes only,” because they were “writers going upon reservations . . . in search of original material . . . something sensational.” Curtis’s own photography, of course, can be subjected to similar criticism, because *The North American Indian* stands as a work of original photographic art created for wealthy and visually educated Anglo-American subscribers, particularly J. Pierpont Morgan. Instead of being anthropological evidence for an audience of ethnographic scholars, Curtis’s project can be understood as an attempt to create a uniquely American art in response to what Hartley called “the esthetic of the redman.”²⁶

Curtis not only searched for “original material” on reservations but also participated in Indian politics as a “musser.” In 1922 he helped organize the Indian Welfare League, one of many Anglo-

American organizations in the 1920s that fought for passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, increased land and water rights, and Indians’ freedom from government interference. Cultural historians see the virtually simultaneous ratification in 1924 of the Indian Citizenship Act and the Johnson Immigration Act as the clearest indication of national endorsement of nativist and anti-assimilationist beliefs. The Citizenship Act stated that Indians were already citizens through birthright, whereas the Immigration Act ratified a quota system for incoming foreigners. Native Americans were no longer seen as a problem for American expansion or identity, and the art and rhetoric of the period countered the perceived threats of immigration by privileging America’s “native” characteristics. In these years following World War I, “Indianness” served as the model for “native” American culture. By focusing on Indians’ contemporary artisanal production, Curtis and others moved away from a picturesque comparison of Indian culture to that of Greco-Roman antiquity. Throughout the periods of nativism and progressivism defined here, artists employed Indian subjects to make the nation’s art and history seem more American.

The first major impetus for Curtis’s new Indian activism and formation of the Indian Welfare League was the 1922 Bursum Bill, which was intended to help white New Mexicans acquire Pueblo lands. Prominent Indian advocates, including Austin, Luhan, and future Indian Commissioner John Collier, strenuously opposed it and the bill was defeated. The League, which Curtis chaired, underscored opposition to the bill in the condemnatory language of its 1922 mission statement, declaring that “we, the white people and our fathers before us” had robbed Native Americans of their heritage. Restrictions on Indians’ freedom of religion were the next issue to occupy the southwestern artistic and political community. Government officials sought to restrict Indians’ religious freedoms because of

the supposedly pornographic, dangerous, and immoral nature of ceremonies (it was suggested that Indian priests took sexual advantage of young girls at some events). But the government's policies were opposed by artists and tourists drawn to the picturesque exoticism of Indian dances and ceremonies.²⁷

In the spring of 1923 Indian Commissioner Charles Burke sent a letter "To all Indians" in which he declared, "I could issue an order against these useless and harmful performances, but I would much rather have you give them up of your own free will and, therefore, I ask you now in this letter to do so." In a 1924 article entitled "The Indian and His Religious Freedom," Curtis responded to Burke's letter as well as other activists' analyses of the ceremonies. Although Curtis would continue to actively participate on the executive committee of the Indian Welfare League and supported its mission to encourage "religious liberties for all Indians," to place "greater limits on the discretionary powers of Indian agents and superintendents," and to fight for "full citizenship rights," he never completely abandoned

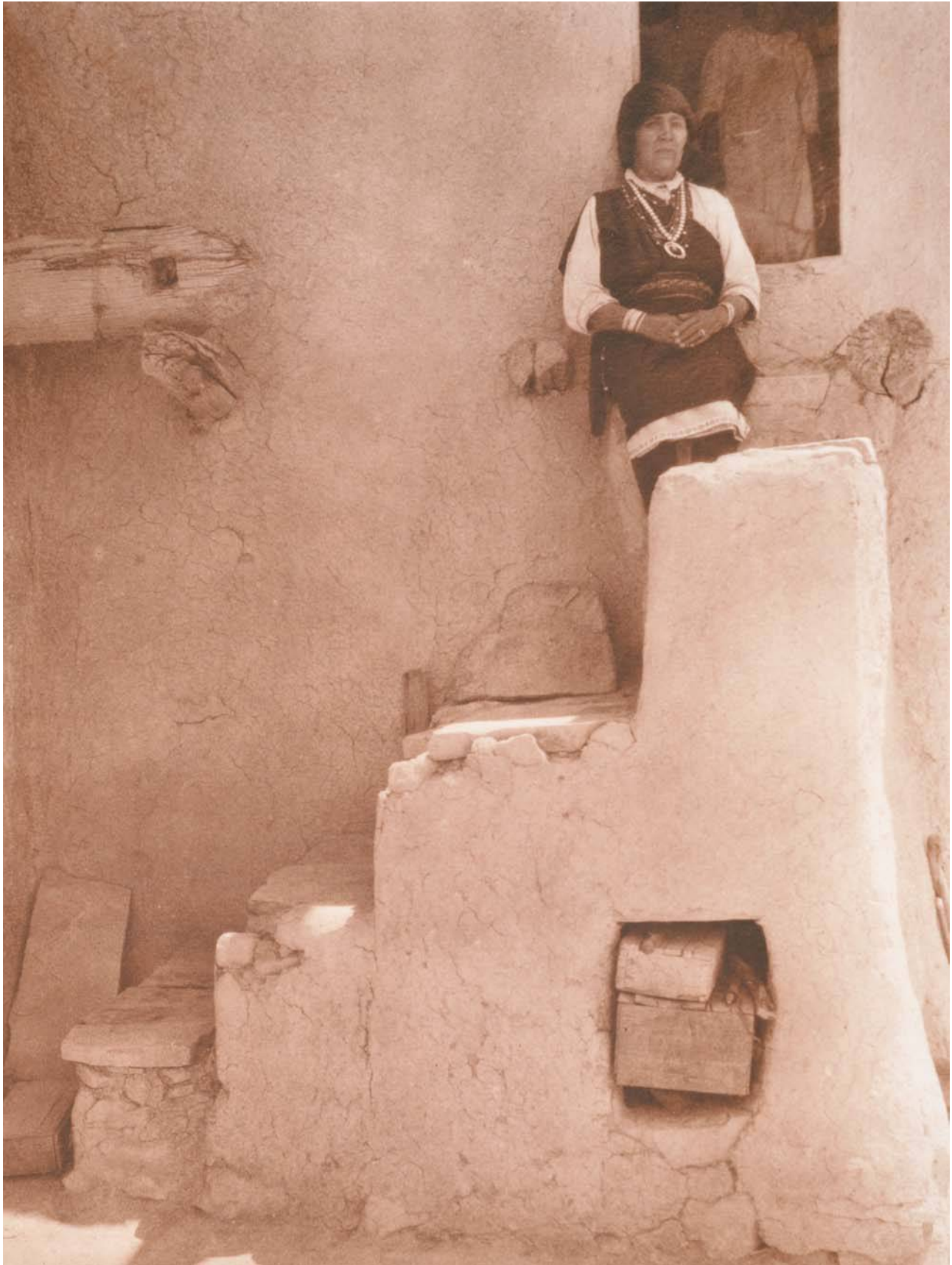
certain progressivist beliefs about Indian assimilation.²⁸ He said Indians should have the choice not to participate in "lewd and obscene" dances. In the 1924 article he favored progressive, or what he called "educated," Indians and dispelled the myth that Indians were homogenous in religious practices and beliefs. He critiqued both the "professional mussers" and federal agents employed by the Department of the Interior, as well as orthodox Indians who practiced "religious tyranny." Curtis wrote:

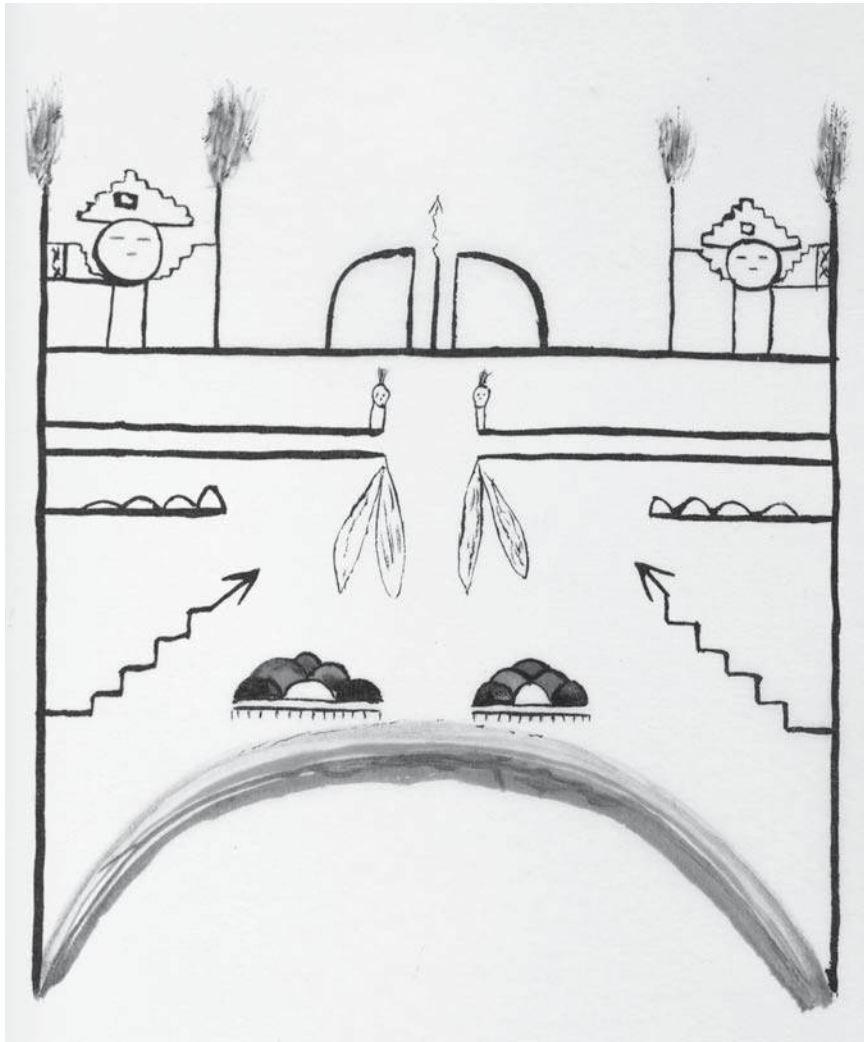
The present storm of protest against government interference with the Indian religion is grounded largely on an unfortunate, ill-advised, and ambiguously worded letter emanating from the Indian Department. . . . In this controversy, the white friends—the agitators—and the orthodox Indians are not asking for religious freedom, but for religious tyranny, and had the government been one thousandth part as aggressive in checking misdemeanors perpetrated by the Indians in the name of "religion" as the Indians themselves have been in coercing the progressive and educated Indians into the old time practices, the whole civilized world would have voiced a just protest. . . . In passing it should be mentioned that the koshares are the dance leaders—the clowns, or fun makers—are responsible for the greater part of the lewd and obscene phases of these dances.

Possibly in response to the perceived "obscenity" of the dances, Curtis published relatively few photographs of Indian ceremonies in the late volumes of *The North American Indian*. Those that do appear were created in the 1910s and, therefore, do not respond specifically to the questions that engaged Curtis in the 1920s. In comparison with Curtis's intentionally outdated photographs of these performances, artist John Sloan's prints and paintings commented on the nature of Indian dances in the 1920s, specifically the Anglo-American tourists' "grotesque" interest in the ceremonies (fig. 18).²⁹

18 John Sloan, *Indian Detour*, 1927. Etching, 6 x 7 ¼ in. Estate of John Sloan, Courtesy of Kraushaar Galleries, New York







19 Edward S. Curtis, *A Paguat Entrance*, 1925 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 16, 1926). Photogravure, 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 13 in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

20 Edward S. Curtis, *Wall Painting for the Summer Shiwanna Ceremony, Santo Domingo*, n.d. (published in *The North American Indian*, text vol. 16, 1926). Photogravure, 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Dibner Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The increasingly fraught political and artistic scene in the Southwest inevitably had an impact on Curtis's seemingly ambivalent involvement in Indian activism and influenced the way he made his pictures. The 1920s photographs, like those from the mid-1910s, reveal Curtis's continued modernist interest in the rigid geometry of Indian art and architecture. Unlike the earlier pictures, however, the photographs must be read in terms of Curtis's greater awareness of the social complexity of the region and his deeper absorption of Native American aesthetics. In *A Paguat Entrance* (fig. 19), for example, Curtis did not simply create a portrait of a seated woman but emphasized the geographic—and therefore

political—specificity of the work by shifting the compositional focus onto distinctively southwestern adobe steps. Following modernist inclinations now, Curtis allowed the shape of the steps and surrounding architecture to dictate the construction of the pictorial space. The photograph resembles, in fact, an abstract pattern from a Native American painting that Curtis reproduced as a photogravure in the portfolio's accompanying text volume (fig. 20). In both works, steps lead the viewer's eye to two figural forms in the upper register. *Wall Painting for the Summer Shiwanna Ceremony, Santo Domingo*, a work formally comparable to Hartley's Indian pictures, presents a severely restricted geometric design, organized symmetrically around a central axis, with a limited number of curved and slightly overlapping forms. Curtis's photograph is in dialogue with this painting's flat, stylized pattern and its careful study of recessions and projections of the various rectilinear forms within a shallow plane. The woman in the photograph, who seems about to vanish into a niche, rests on the same axis as the snug-fitting wooden beams in another rectangular indentation at the bottom. Unlike the beams, she does not fill her hollow alcove. This photograph does more than illustrate the appearance of Native American architecture: it concerns itself with the construction of many different forms of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, specifically as that space exists in relation to the parallel planes of the depicted facade and the picture itself. The photograph establishes a pattern of rectangular forms and figures, and, as in *A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter* (see fig. 3), the rhythmic geometry appears to derive from the already available Indian composition of the steps leading to the Paguat entrance. By modeling his composition on a "real" Indian painting and foregrounding the cubist blockiness of the architecture in

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63, 64, © Smithsonian Institution, courtesy National Portrait Gallery; 67 (left), Photo by Erich Lessing; 71, Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY; 72 (right), Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY

his photograph, Curtis presents a modernist interest in the Indian subject and illustrates his broader attempt to create a specifically American aesthetic. Several other photographs from the second half of his project also depict abstract designs in Native American architecture, weaving, basketry, and pottery.

In October 1925, the year *A Paguat* *Entrance* was made, the *American Magazine of Art* published a review by Jessie Selkinghaus of Curtis's photographs. The author, who located Curtis within a nativist circle, also characterized the photographs as explicitly not pictorialist. Selkinghaus described Curtis as belonging to "a small but earnest company of people—artists, writers, students of research—who have honestly tried to understand and appreciate the Indian for what he is in contrast to the sentimentalists who have endowed him with picturesque qualities . . . and laid over him a poetic sentiment." In opposition to the other writers' early and frequent descriptions of Curtis's photographs as "picturesque," she did not see that term as a viable description for his contemporary Indian pictures. Selkinghaus even reversed the common characterization of the albums as a "record" of a vanishing race, writing that Curtis "saw in the Indian not a vanishing race but a new element in our American citizenship riding courageously into an unknown future."³⁰ Curtis's postwar photographs and his late political activism must be read as critically and stylistically distinct from the work published in the first volumes of *The North American Indian*. In *A Paguat Entrance*, the pairing of the shadowy, diminished figure with her solid, more tangible double asserts a kind of pictorial revision of Curtis's early

"vanishing race" thesis. The photograph does not imagine its subject as advancing toward (and vanishing within) an exemplary notion of American civilization, but instead typifies the Indian as a static, productive model for American culture.

Curtis's unique undertaking, with its promulgation of both political and artistic agendas, has yet to receive the recognition it deserves in American art-historical scholarship. Beyond Curtis's active political involvement with commissioners of Indian affairs and the Indian Welfare League as well as his intersections with prominent artists, writers, and intellectuals, the transformation of the subject matter and style of his photographs demonstrates his changing perceptions of American identity and culture. Although Curtis's ambivalent political positions complicate any single reading of his project, the first volumes of *The North American Indian*, in imagining the Indian as an ancient ancestor in the process of vanishing, clearly echo national assimilation policies by embedding the Indian in the Western artistic and historical canon. In the late photographs, by contrast, Curtis constructs a reconfigured Indian subject and proposes a new, nativist American art. Despite Curtis's activism on behalf of the southwestern Indians' political situation, he suppressed the plight of the "real" Indians and replaced it with a narrative of Indianness that served the artistic and political needs of an Anglo-American culture. The entirety of *The North American Indian*, therefore, confronts the contemporaneous "Indian problem"—with idealized versions of an American past and with a revised definition of "native" American citizenship for the nation's future.

Notes

I am grateful for the insightful comments of Brigid Doherty, Michael Fried, and William Truettner as well as the anonymous reviewers for *American Art*. Research support was provided by a Sara Roby Predoctoral Fellowship at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and a Terra Foundation for the Arts/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art. The argument sketched here appears in expanded form in my dissertation, "An American Art: Edward S. Curtis and *The North American Indian*, 1907–30" (Johns Hopkins University, 2006).

- 1 In his 1906 "Outline of the North American Indian Project," Edward S. Curtis writes, "The plan in mind is to make a complete publication, showing pictures and including text of every phase of Indian life of all tribes yet in a primitive condition"; Edward S. Curtis File, J. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (hereafter Curtis File, Morgan Library).
- 2 For the captions, see Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian, Being a Series of Volumes Picturing and Describing the Indians of the United States and Alaska*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press; Norwood, Mass.: Plimpton Press, 1907–30), unpaginated. I continue to use the word "Indian" to emphasize that its place in Curtis's original title represents a historically specific use of an ethnographic descriptor with implications for the project's western-centric stance. Curtis authored two articles on "Vanishing Indian Types"—of the Southwest and of the Northwest Plains—in *Scribner's* 39 (May 1906): 513–29 and (June 1906): 657–71. For analyses of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century perceptions of "the vanishing race," see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1982); and William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C., 1894), 199.
- 3 For the studies that characterize Curtis's photographs as consistently pictorialist, see Beth Barclay DeWall, "The Artistic Achievement of Edward Sheriff Curtis" (MA thesis, Univ. of Cincinnati, 1980); A. D. Coleman, "Edward S. Curtis: The Photographer as Ethnologist," in *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1998), 133–58; and Mick Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements in Edward S. Curtis's Representation of American Indians," in *Re-discoveries of America: The Meeting of Cultures*, ed. Johan Callens (Brussels: VUB Press, 1993), 62–85.
- 4 The term "nativism" was in circulation by the mid-nineteenth century among Americans with antiforeign sentiment. See John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (1955; repr., New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988). See also Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995) on nativism's role in the development of American modernism in the literary arts.
- 5 For the most comprehensive and rigorously researched study of Curtis to date, see Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).
- 6 Curtis uses the term "picturesque" in his "Vanishing Indian Types: The Tribes of the Northwest Plains," *Scribner's Magazine* 39 (June 1906): 667. He describes his encounter with the "scientificos" in an April 10, 1951, letter to librarian Harriet Leitch; Edward S. Curtis Letters, Seattle Public Library. For his early interaction with Roosevelt, see Florence Curtis Graybill and Victor Boesen, *Edward Sheriff Curtis: Visions of a Vanishing Race* (New York: American Legacy Press, 1976), 12. Roosevelt's correspondence with Curtis can be found in the Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. On the financial arrangements between Curtis and Morgan, see Curtis File, Morgan Library. The payments from Morgan barely covered the costs accrued during Curtis's fieldwork, and Curtis was responsible for the costs of printing and publishing the series. Only 272 of the intended 500 sets were sold; it is not known how many were actually printed.
- 7 Theodore Roosevelt, foreword to *The North American Indian*, n.p. For Curtis's quote, see his "General Introduction," *The North American Indian*, vol. 1 (1907), xiii.
- 8 For the first quote, see Curtis, "Vanishing Indian Types: Tribes of the Northwest Plains," 659. For the second quote, see Curtis, "Indians of the Stone Houses," *Scribner's* 45 (February 1909): 175. For Roosevelt's comment to the artist, see Roosevelt to Curtis, December 18, 1905, Curtis File, University of Washington Libraries, Division of Manuscripts and Special Collections, Seattle. On the Columbian Exposition, see Carolyn Kinder Carr et al., *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, National Portrait Gallery, 1993). See Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 91–92, for the "American Liberty" quote.
- 9 Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 1 (1907), n.p. See also William N. Goetzmann, "The Arcadian Landscapes of Edward S. Curtis," in *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 83–91.
- 10 The Dawes Act, passed in 1887, and the Curtis Act (no relation to Edward S. Curtis) of 1898 were the two main pieces of legislation that tried to solve the "Indian problem" in the progressivist period. The Dawes Act, also called the General Allotment Act, allotted lands to individuals rather than to the Native American tribes that occupied the regions; "leftover" property then was made available to white settlers. The Curtis Act allowed the government to further liquidate Indian Territory and dismantle tribal governments. See Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Documents of United States Indian Policy* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2000), 170–73, 195–96. The quotation is from Indian Commissioner Francis Leupp, September 30, 1905, as cited in Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola, eds., *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824–1977* (Lincoln: Univ.

- of Nebraska Press, 1979), 223–24. The politics on the Indian reservations ca. 1905 were recounted by Curtis's son, Harold P. Curtis, in his essay "Entering Apache Lands"; see Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2003), 30–35.
- 11 Curtis, "Vanishing Indian Types: Tribes of the Northwest Plains," 671.
 - 12 The caption for *The Apache Reaper* reads: "Here the Apache woman is seen in her small wheatfield harvesting the grain with a hand sickle, the method now common to all Indians of the Southwest"; Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 1 (1907), n.p. Curtis thus indicates that the subject of this photograph is an already assimilated Indian, a model of the government's insistence that Indians adopt new farming practices. *Course of Study for the Indian Schools of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 7–40.
 - 13 Photographer P. H. Emerson undertook a careful study of Millet in the development of his writings on naturalistic photography, the major influence for the U.S. pictorialist movement; see Emerson's *Naturalistic Photography* (New York: Scovill and Adams Company, 1899). For the quotation, see Curtis, "Photography," *Western Trail* 1 (January 1900): 187, one of four essays Curtis published in 1900 in the *Western Trail* that assess the issue of photography as an art and offer advice on the making of artistic photos.
 - 14 See "Pictorial Photography at the Lewis and Clark Exposition," *Camera Work* 11 (July 1905): 57. For Roosevelt's quote, see his "Speech at Hampton Institute," May 30, 1906, Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress.
 - 15 Curtis was an active member of the National Arts Club from 1903 to 1922; National Arts Club Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. He lectured and held exhibitions at the Astor Gallery in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York Public Library, Lotos Club, and Plaza Hotel in New York; and at the Cosmos Club and Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C.; see Curtis File, University of Washington Libraries. Curtis was not a member of Stieglitz's circle, but his work was shown and discussed alongside that of photographers associated with Stieglitz at the Louis and Clark Exposition of 1905 and the Canadian Pictorialist Exposition of 1907; pictorialist exhibitions were held at the National Arts Club as well. Curtis received positive reviews from two noted photographic critics as well as a mention in *Camera Work*; see Arnold Genthe, "A Critical View of the Salon Pictures with a Few Words upon the Tendency of the Photographers," *Camera Craft* 2 (February 1901): 310; and Sidney Allan [Sadakichi Hartmann], "E. S. Curtis, Photo Historian," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* 44 (August 1907): 361–63. On the corporation that Curtis formed in 1910 after his stipend from Morgan expired, see Curtis Papers, Morgan Library, and Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*, 112.
 - 16 For an overview of Stieglitz's circles and exhibitions, see Sarah Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2000). Yve-Alain Bois discusses cubist works by Picasso and Georges Braque in relation to the grid and its relationship to the shape of the canvas in "The Semiology of Cubism," in *Picasso and Braque, A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 169–221.
 - 17 For the reprint of the newspaper columns, see *Camera Work* 36 (October 1911): 31–68, esp. "Mr. Tyrell in the *N.Y. Evening World*," 49, and "Mr. J. Edgar Chamberlain in the *Evening Mail*," 32. Reviews of Curtis's work were reprinted in a promotional broadsheet, *The North American Indian, Extracts from Reviews of the Book, and Comments on the Work of Its Author, Edward S. Curtis*; Curtis File, Getty Research Institute Research Library, Special Collections and Visual Resources, Los Angeles. According to notices in the *New York Times* and correspondence in the Morgan Library, Curtis was in New York on February 19, 1913, two days after the Armory Show opened. He spent the winter of 1913–14 in New York and would have seen an exhibition of contemporary art at the National Arts Club as well as a Constantin Brancusi sculpture exhibit at 291. Curtis was also in New York during the exhibition of Picasso's and Braque's works and of de Zayas's collection of archaic Mexican pottery and carvings in stone at 291.
 - 18 According to Higham, the phrase "one-hundred percent American" became prevalent in the years following World War I; Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 213.
 - 19 See Edgar L. Hewett, "Native American Artists," *Art and Archaeology* 8 (March 1922): 106–7.
 - 20 On Matisse, see Charles H. Caffin, "Henri Matisse and Isadora Duncan," *Camera Work* 25 (June 1909): 18; and John Cauman, "Henri Matisse, 1908, 1910, and 1912, New Evidence of Life," in Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America*, 83–95. On Brancusi, see *Camera Work* 45 (January 1914); and Ann Temkin, "Constantin Brancusi, 1914: Startling Lucidity," in Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America*, 158. In a 1978 interview, son-in-law Manfred E. Magnuson discussed how Curtis saw himself as a straight photographer in the 1920s; typed transcript of interview, Curtis Manuscripts, Getty Research Library.
 - 21 See Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 4–12. Letter to Frederick Webb Hodge, November 2, 1909, Edward S. Curtis Manuscripts, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. For "advancement of civilization," see Curtis, "Vanishing Indian Types: Tribes of the Southwest," *Scribner's Magazine* 39 (May 1906): 518. For the block quote see Osborn, preface to Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, viii–ix.
 - 22 On Native Americans' participation in World War I, see Jennifer Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001); Thomas Anthony Britten, "American Indians in World War I: Military Service as a Catalyst for Reform" (PhD diss., Texas Tech Univ., 1994); and Russell Lawrence Bush, "American Indians in the Great War," *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 3 (1991): 276–303. For the quotations, see "Frontier Tactics Practiced on Germans, Sport for Redskins," *American Indian Magazine* 7 (Summer 1919): 103–4; "Lo, the Rich Indian Is Eager to Fight the Savage Hun," *Literary Digest* 57 (June 1, 1918): 56–62; and Charles W. Duke, "Whoop-e-e! Mr. Kaiser, Look Out for

- the American Indian!" *Washington Post*, May 13, 1917, 5.
- 23 "Coming to Theaters" and "City News in Brief," *Washington Post*, February 26, 1915, 9; "Brilliant Audience Attends Concert of Philadelphians," *Washington Post*, February 24, 1915, 7; and "Written on the Screen," *New York Times*, January 31, 1915. Curtis also donated two photographs for the Army Relief; "For the Army Relief Garden Party," *New York Times*, May 17, 1913, 11. Curtis published a supplementary book also entitled *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (Yonkers, N.Y.: World Book Company, 1915). In 1916 he screened a film entitled *How Britain Prepared* and argued in an accompanying lecture that the United States should prepare for war; "How Britain Prepared," *New York Times*, May 30, 1916, 3.
- 24 Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 3–40 and 239–91, discusses the formation of the idea of "An American Place," among the Stieglitz circle and provides a good overview of the Santa Fe colony surrounding Mabel Dodge Luhan. For the quote, see Curtis to Edmond S. Meany, 1922, Curtis File, Univ. of Washington Libraries.
- 25 Oliver LaFarge and John Sloan, *Introduction to American Indian Art* (New York: Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, 1931), 15. Marsden Hartley, "Red Man Ceremonials: An American Plea for American Esthetics," *Art and Archaeology* 19 (January 1920): 14. Hartley's models for these paintings were Native American artifacts from Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde as well as the Trocadéro in Paris; see Bruce Robertson, "Marsden Hartley, 1916: Letters to the Dead," in Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America*, 230. On Hartley, see also Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 175–76.
- 26 Curtis's photograph of Tony Luhan, entitled *Iahla* ("Willow")—*Taos*, was published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 16 (1926). For Curtis's correspondence with Austin, see Mary Austin Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923); D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature* (New York: T. Seltzer, 1923). See Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*, 39–40, on the content of this unpublished lecture. On the "esthetic of the redman," see Marsden Hartley, "The Scientific Esthetic of the Redman: The Great Corn Ceremony at Santo Domingo," *Art and Archaeology* 13 (March 1922): 113–19; and "The Scientific Esthetic of the Redman: The Fiesta of San Geronimo at Taos," *Art and Archaeology* 14 (September 1922): 137–40.
- 27 "First Americans," Indian Welfare League pamphlet, Curtis Papers, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Prucha, *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, 216–18. See also Harry C. James, *Pages from Hopi History* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1974), 186, 188.
- 28 Charles Burke's letter is reprinted in James, *Pages from Hopi History*, 187–88. That same spring Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work, who agreed with Burke's views, gathered an advisory council of one hundred educators, politicians, and Indian "experts" to address the "Indian problem." Curtis's Indian Welfare League, his editor Frederick Webb Hodge, and other prominent friends were members of this council. See "Work Calls Council on Indian Problems," *New York Times*, May 12, 1923, 18. As one scholar has pointed out, this essay intentionally imitated the title of Collier's contentious article "The Indian and His Religious Freedom"; see Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*, 260. It is not known where or if this article was published, but a typescript version is housed in the Getty Research Library.
- 29 Curtis, "The Indian and His Religious Freedom," Curtis File, University of Washington Libraries. Curtis explained the dating of his photographs in the introduction to vol. 12 (1922), xi: "Many of the photographs here presented could not have been made in more recent years." For John Sloan's Santa Fe work, see Sloan, *Gist of Art* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939), 270.
- 30 Jessie Selkinghaus, "Curtis's Indian Pictures," *American Magazine of Art* 16, no. 10 (October 1925): 536–42.