Exhibition Reviews

Aboriginal Portraits from the National Archives of Canada. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA. Ottawa. 15 May - 29 September 1996.

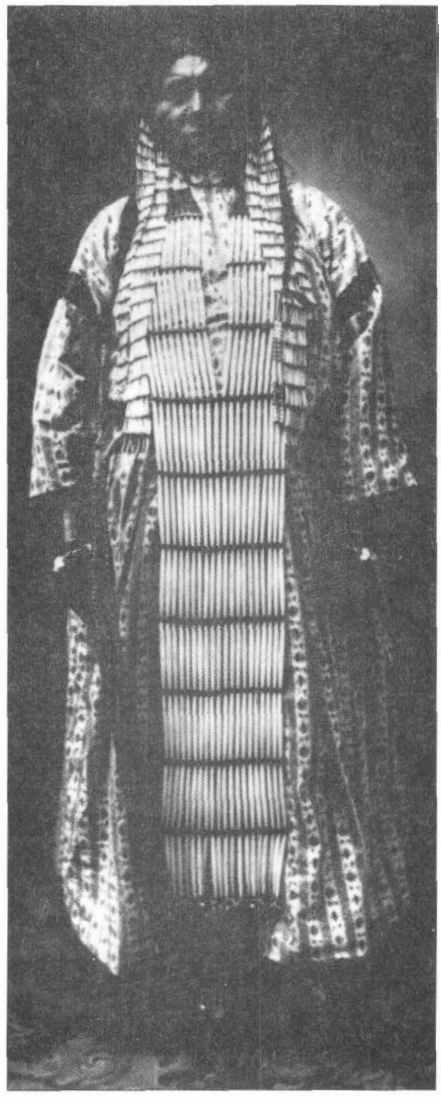
An almost life-size photograph greeted the viewer upon entering the main gallery of the exhibition *Aboriginal Portraits from the National Archives of Canada.* It was an enlargement of someone "having her picture taken" and depicted a middle-aged woman, standing alone in a long floral dress, with magnificent jewellery. She appeared composed and dignified with her hands at her sides, confidently returning the viewer's gaze. It was not an unusual image until the viewer realized that she is Aboriginal. Despited a respected status in their own culture, Aboriginal women are usually depicted in photographs in a more marginal and passive role and identified as the "squaw or wife of" a more dominant male figure. The original caption of the portrait labelled her "A Sioux Squaw" and completely reduced her individuality to a stereotype/commodity. However, one of the aims of this exhibition was to re-examine those labels and attempt to return some of the individuality of each subject. Thus the new caption read: "*A Studio portrait of a Dakota (Sioux) woman, Manitoba, 1909, Photo: Winnipeg Photo Company.*" The addition of these secondary captions was significant in providing more context for the portraits.

There are other areas of representation that the exhibition also sought to re-dress. Curators Edward Tompkins and Jeffrey Thomas, an Onondaga-Iroquois, considered a number of issues related to the depiction of Aboriginal people and their culture, such as the dignity of the sitter, the problems of assimilation, and relationships with the natural environment. Thomas' perspective from inside the Aboriginal community was evident in the selection of photographs, which reflect the humanity of the subjects portrayed rather than merely document the myth of the "Imaginary Indian."

Aboriginal Portraits was drawn from the National Archives' holdings of photographic documentation of Canada's Indigenous Peoples. It was composed of 140 photographs and spanned the history of the medium from a daguerreotype of one of the first Aboriginals to be photographed, Maun-gua-daus (George Henry), Chief of the Ojibwa Nation, ca. 1846-48, to modern silver-gelatin prints by Aboriginal photographers such as David Neel and Shelly Niro.

The exhibition was installed in three areas of the National Archives. In the main foyer, a wall of huge modern prints made from the negatives of Edward Curtis, the turn-of-the-century pictorialist, confronted the visitor. Curtis' photographs,

exemplifying the myth of the "Noble Savage," attempted to capture the "vanishing race" of the North American Indian. He idealized and fictionalized many of his images by adding unauthentic clothing, wigs, and make-up in order to enhance his romanticized version of the "Indian." Curtis's romantic view of Native people was popular among his fellow "shadowcatchers," a name given to photographers by some of the Native people who felt that the transfer of their images meant that some part of their life-force was diminished; the shadow refers to death or to the death of the soul.



Studio portrait of a Dakota (Sioux) woman, Manitoba, 1909. Photo: Winnipeg Photo Company. National Archives of Canada, Canada Patent and Copyright Office Collection, negative number PA-29555.

Curtis's imagery also had some posthumous success in the 1970s. However, recent analysis by postcolonial writers has subjected his work to re-evaluation and their inclusion, enlarged to a monumental scale and installed in a privileged place, challenged the viewer to consider their continued impact on perceptions of Indigenous people.

The main body of the exhibition, in the exhibition hall, was installed chronologically and allowed for a study of significant events in Canadian history involving Native peoples. It also demonstrated the richness of the holdings of the National Archives.

Two portraits of Mistahi maskwa (Big Bear), a Plains Cree Chief, both by Otto Buell, summarized the dichotomy captured in this exhibition. In a portrait dated 1884 taken at Fort Pitt, NWT, Mistahi maskwa is empowered by his position in the centre of the image, carries ceremonial feathers, and confronts the camera directly. In the second photo, taken one year later, he is a prisoner in chains, arrested because he attempted, in his position as Chief, to obtain improved living conditions for his people during the 1885 North West Rebellion. Here, he averts his gaze from the camera in an act of silent resistance. This tension, of posing for a photograph or being "captured unwillingly" by the camera, is strongly expressed throughout the exhibition.

The third section of the exhibition, also in the entrance, consisted of documentary images from everyday life such as women farm labourers, residential schools, hunting and fishing scenes, and even a wedding. These were not picturesque images constructed upon the expectations of the photographer, such as the ones done by Curtis. The people depicted here have a sense of self-identity shown by their confrontation of the camera: they return the gaze.

I have only two suggestions for future exhibitions of this type. It would be useful to provide information on the captions about the fonds/collections from which such images are taken. This would have emphasized the "archival" nature of these images which have not been collected for their single inherent interest but are from larger collections of similar material. Secondly, a complete list of all the images exhibited should have been published in the brochure accompanying the show. This would have produced a lasting record of this provocative exhibition. As it is, there is no record of it. That said, the National Archives is still to be congratulated for taking the lead towards re-thinking the stereotypes of Native peoples. Another version of the exhibition, *Pride and Dignity, Aboriginal Portraits*, curated by Jeffrey Thomas has been installed in the National Archives gallery on St. Patrick Street, Ottawa. It should not be missed.

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