

## Edward Curtis

### *Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar Bark Blanket, 1915*

photogravure on paper  
34.0 cm x 42.0 cm

Collection of the Vancouver Art  
Gallery, Gift of Mary and Mike Mason  
VAG 2005.8.1



# Edward Curtis

*Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar Bark Blanket, 1915*

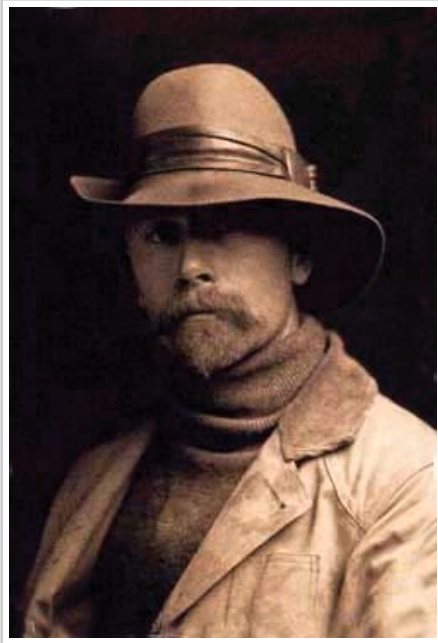


Image source: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

## Artist's Biography

Nationality: American

Born: 1868-02, White Water, Wisconsin

Died: 1954-10-21

Edward Sheriff Curtis was born in 1868 near Whitewater, Wisconsin to Johnson Asahel Curtis (1840-1887), a reverend; and Ellen Sheriff (1844-1912). In 1885 at the age of seventeen Edward became an apprentice photographer in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1887 the family moved to Seattle, Washington, where Edward purchased a new camera and became partners in an existing photographic studio with Rasmus Rothi. Edward paid \$150 for his fifty percent share in the studio. After about six months, Curtis left Rothi as a partner, and formed a new partnership with Thomas Guptill. The new studio was called, "Curtis and Guptill, Photographers and Photoengravers".

In 1906 J.P. Morgan offered Curtis \$75,000 to produce a series on the North American Indian, in 20 volumes with 1,500 photographs. Morgan was to receive 25 sets and 500 original prints as his method of repayment. Curtis' goal was not just to photograph, but to document as much Native American traditional life as possible before that lifestyle disappeared. He wrote in the introduction to his first volume in 1907: "The information that is to be gathered...respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost." He made over 10,000 wax cylinder recordings of Indian language and music. He took over 40,000 photographic images from over eighty tribes. He recorded tribal lore and history, and he described traditional foods, housing, garments, recreation, ceremonies, and funeral customs. He wrote biographical sketches of tribal leaders and this material, in most cases, is the only recorded history.

Around 1922 Curtis moved to Los Angeles with his daughter Beth, and opened a new photo studio. To earn money he worked as an assistant cameraman for Cecil B. DeMille and was an uncredited assistant cameraman in the 1923 filming of *The Ten Commandments*. On October 16, 1924 Curtis sold the rights to his ethnographic motion picture *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* to the American Museum of Natural History. He was paid \$1,500 for the master print and the original camera negative. It had cost him over \$20,000 to film.

In 1927 after returning from Alaska to Seattle with his daughter Beth, he was arrested for failure to pay alimony over the preceding seven years. The total owed was \$4,500, but the charges were dropped. For Christmas of 1927, the family was reunited at daughter Florence's home in Medford, Oregon. This was the first time since the divorce that Curtis was with all of his children at the same time, and it had been thirteen years since he had seen Katherine. In 1928, desperate for cash, Edward sold the rights to his project to J.P Morgan's son. In 1930 he published the concluding volume of *The North American Indian*. It was the Great Depression, so only about 280 sets were ever sold of his now completed opus magnus. In 1930 his ex-wife, Clara, was still living in Seattle operating the photo studio with their daughter Katherine. His other daughter, Florence Curtis, was still living in Medford, Oregon with her husband Henry Graybill. In 1932 Clara drowned while rowing in Puget Sound, and his daughter, Katherine moved to California to be closer to her father and her sister Beth.

On October 21, 1952 at the age of 84, Curtis died of a heart attack in Los Angeles, California in the home of his daughter Beth. He was buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Hollywood Hills, California.

Source: "Edward S. Curtis," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. February 16, 2006. <http://www.wikipedia.org>.

# Edward Curtis

*Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar Bark Blanket, 1915*

## Artistic Context

Nationality: American

Group: photography; 19th century; 20th century

Provenance: donated by Mary and Mike Mason in 2005

Subject: American West; Native Americans; portraits

## Other Works in the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

Edward Curtis  
*Cowichan Housefront, 1912*  
photogravure on tissue  
Gift of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft  
VAG 2004.37.56

Edward Curtis  
*Crests of a Nimpkish Family, 1914*  
photogravure on tissue  
Gift of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft  
VAG 2004.37.57

Edward Curtis  
*Setting the Net - Quinault, 1912*  
photogravure on tissue  
Gift of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft  
VAG 2004.37.58

Edward Curtis  
*Shores of Shoalwater Bay, 1912*  
photogravure on tissue  
Gift of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft  
VAG 2004.37.59

Edward Curtis  
*Tenakak House, Harbledowns, 1914*  
photogravure on tissue  
Gift of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft  
VAG 2004.37.60

Edward Curtis  
*Clayoquot Type, 1915*  
photogravure on paper  
Gift of Mary and Mike Mason  
VAG 2005.8.2

Edward Curtis  
*The North American Indian, Volume 9: Salishan Tribes of the Coast, 1913*  
photogravure on paper  
Gift of Bill Jeffries  
VAG 2005.23.1

# Edward Curtis

Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar Bark Blanket, 1915

## Further Reading

Adam, Hans Christian. *Edward Sheriff Curtis, 1868-1952*. Köln: New York, 1999.

Cadozo, Christopher ed. *Sacred Legacy: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Gidley, Mick ed. *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian project in the field*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Holm, Bill. *Edward S. Curtis in the land of the War Canoes: a Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980.

Lyman, Christopher. *Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*. New York: Pantheon Books in association with the Smithsonian Institution, 1982.

## Exhibition History

### Exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery

*75 Years of Collecting: First Nations: Myths and Realities*. May 6, 2006 - August 27, 2006.

## Archival History

### Acquisitions Justification

Acquisition Record

[transcription]

**Curtis, Edward  
b. 1868, White Water, Wisconsin  
d.1952**

### **A Clayoquot Type, 1915**

photogravure  
21.6 x 17.6 cm (22.7 x 18.9 cm framed)

### **Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar-Bark Blanket, 1915**

photogravure  
17.7 x 21.8 cm (19 x 22.9 cm framed)

**Donor:** Mike Mason  
**Appraised By:** Beth Noble  
**Provenance:**  
**Exhibited:**



# Edward Curtis

## *Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar Bark Blanket, 1915*

### **Artist Biography**

Curtis was born in White Water and his family moved shortly thereafter to Minnesota where he grew up near the Chipewa, Menomini and Winnebago Indian nations. In his teens, Curtis built his own crude cameras and taught himself photography from self-help guides. In 1891, Curtis purchased a share in a photographic studio that became known as Rothi and Curtis. The following year, Curtis formed a partnership with Thomas Guptill as photographers and photo-engravers. From 1896 to 1930, Curtis focused on his monumental project *The North American Indian*, for which he is best known. Curtis photographed every major Native American nation west of the Mississippi, taking over 40,000 negatives of eighty different nations. Curtis generally tried to remove any indication of the postcontact era, and often replaced contemporary aspects of his sitters' dress with what he saw as more traditional items. In 1905 Curtis exhibited portions of his work at the Washington Club, the Cosmos Club and several other galleries. The following year, Curtis exhibited 1,000 of his photographs in the Seattle area. In 1907, the first volume of *The North American Indian* was completed. In 1930 volumes 19 and 20 of *The North American Indian* were published, completing Curtis' project.

### **Artist in Context**

Curtis was influenced by Pictorialism, and his work is indicative of the Pictorialist effort to produce a soft, atmospheric effect in emulation of the appearance of 18th and 19th century European academic painting and print-making. Pictorialists were also known for giving priority to the personal expression of the photographer over a realistic portrayal of the subject matter. While Curtis was influenced by this tradition, he attempted to combine its emphasis on effect with a concern for the accurate portrayal of ethnographic details. Curtis paid his sitters to pose, selected their ornaments and clothing and played with the light and tone thereby incurring some controversy about the accuracy of his portrayals.

### **Work Under Consideration**

*Nootka Woman Wearing Cedar-Bark Blanket* is a close-up frontal portrait of a Nootka woman with her head swathed in her blanket. Similarly, in *A Clayoquot Type*, Curtis presents a closely shot portrait of a Clayoquot man, his shoulders covered in a blanket made of bark. Both works are characteristic of Curtis' photographic approach in *The North American Indian* project, which represented Native American cultures to a primarily white American audience, through photographs, interviews, oral histories, language data and transcriptions of music.

### **Justification**

In 2004 the Gallery acquired a collection of 463 historical, modern and contemporary photographs,

including 5 works by Curtis. The Gallery's collection is now one of the most important public collections of photography in Canada. This acquisition will enhance the Gallery's holdings of work by an important figure from the history of photography. These two photographs are strong examples of Curtis' work and have a special relevance to this area, as both of the individuals portrayed are from First Nations whose traditional territories are within British Columbia. The works are in good condition.

Recommend acceptance.

Grant Arnold  
Audain Curator of British Columbia Art

Research: Emmy Lee  
Assistant Curator

