



Native American
Photography
by Zig Jackson



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Photographing Native America, featuring works by Zig Jackson

July 17, 2018–December 16, 2018

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Who informs your understanding of cultures that are different from your own? What images of Native Americans are you used to seeing and who creates them?

Photographer Zig Jackson (b. 1957) grew up on an Indian reservation in North Dakota. It was there that he cultivated his love for art and where images of his people, their history, and the realities of their present lives went on to influence his work. His photographs show an acute awareness of the ways in which his culture has had to adapt to the world of its oppressors, yet the stories we tell about his culture have not changed since first contact.

These photographs speak volumes about how non-Native audiences and artists see, and in turn represent, Native American cultures in media narratives. Beginning with the works of Edward Curtis (1868–1952), a prolific photographer famous for his photographs focusing on various Native American tribes and continuing with images by modern photographers, Native Americans have been largely portrayed as stoic, disappearing nations of people. While this work often came from a place of profound respect, artists failed to impart an equally deep understanding of the people they were photographing. Native Americans, their heritage, and their traditional clothing and rituals were commodified and depersonalized. They were not depicted as individuals but instead as anonymous photographic subjects, whose consent has been assumed and whose visages are snapped by tourists or framed in playing cards.

By capturing the clash of cultures and the smiles of respected tribal members, Jackson challenges deeply ingrained popular American concepts of Native Americans. He encourages us to embrace the narratives that people tell us about themselves.

– Mac Chambers '19



Zig Jackson (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara; American b. 1957)
Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian, #1 of 4, Taos, New Mexico,
1992 negative/2018 print
Gelatin silver print photograph
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
2018.8.2



Zig Jackson (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara; American b. 1957)
Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian,
Crow Agency, Montana, 1991 negative/2018 print
Gelatin silver print photograph
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
2018.8.3

The series "Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian" shows how Native Americans navigate the boundaries of tribal life with the outside world. While many tourists treat traditional occasions such as tribal dances as spectator events, the ceremonies are sites of tribal community and times of celebration and honor. Because the expectations of the spectators occur simultaneously with the experiences of the tribal communities, Native participants and guests often endure objectification and intrusion when they attend events. Jackson confronts these conflicting intentions by turning his camera on the tourists, saying that there is "a little humor when you're looking at Indian photographing tourist photographing Indian... [with] a little bit of sadness underneath."



Zig Jackson (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara; American b. 1957)
Two Moons Stoic/Two Moons Smiling, Busby, Montana,
1991 negative/2007 print

Gelatin silver print photograph

Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
2018.8.1

Edward S. Curtis was a prolific photographer famous for his work focusing on various Native American tribes. Curtis's work was inducted into the Library of Congress on an ongoing basis for thirty years starting in 1900. Zig Jackson's work was acquired by the Library of Congress in 2005. He was the first Native American photographer to be included in the collection.

Jackson says of Curtis's work "He would photograph the Native American but he would always make them look stoic. Don't laugh, don't do anything...In ways that would stereotype us and Hollywood would pick it up." By contrasting the stereotypical image of a stern tribal leader with the same subject grinning into the camera, Jackson reminds us of the joy and agency that Native Americans are rarely shown possessing in American visual culture. While discussing Two Moons Stoic/Two Moons Smiling, Jackson said of his work "Tribal peoples love to joke and laugh—Two Moons has a beautiful smile."



Edward Sheriff Curtis (American, 1868–1952)
Sioux sub chief Red Hawk - Oasis in the Badlands,
South Dakota, 1904
Sepia-toned silver gelatin print
Bonnie Barrett Stretch (Class of 1961) Photography
Collection, Purchase with the Susan and Bernard Schilling
Fund (Susan Eisenhart, Class of 1932)
2016.7.8



Edward Sheriff Curtis (American, 1868–1952)
Arapaho Water Girl, 1910
Photogravure on paper
Gift of Ann Zelle (Class of 1965)
2015.30.2



Photographer: Adam Clark Vroman (American, 1856–1914);

Publisher: Lazarus & Melzer

The American Indian Souvenir Playing Cards, ca. 1900

Photoengraving on heavy coated paper

Gift of Lewis A. Shepard

2006.10.1-4

The individuals photographed here are part of a deck called "The American Indian Souvenir Playing Cards." While we know the history of the photographer and his motivations for capturing images of Native people living in New Mexico, we know almost nothing about the people featured in his photos.

Although Vroman's work came from a place of appreciation, he effectively silenced his subjects by taking their photos and disseminating them without identifying the people featured. Their placement on souvenir playing cards without any accompanying information relegates them to decorative elements, making them appear as iconic representatives of an entire people, rather than as individuals.



Mac Chambers '19 (top) and Zig Jackson (bottom) standing in front of Collection Spotlight "Photographing Native America."