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Pitt Rivers MUSEUM
Anthropology and World Archaeology

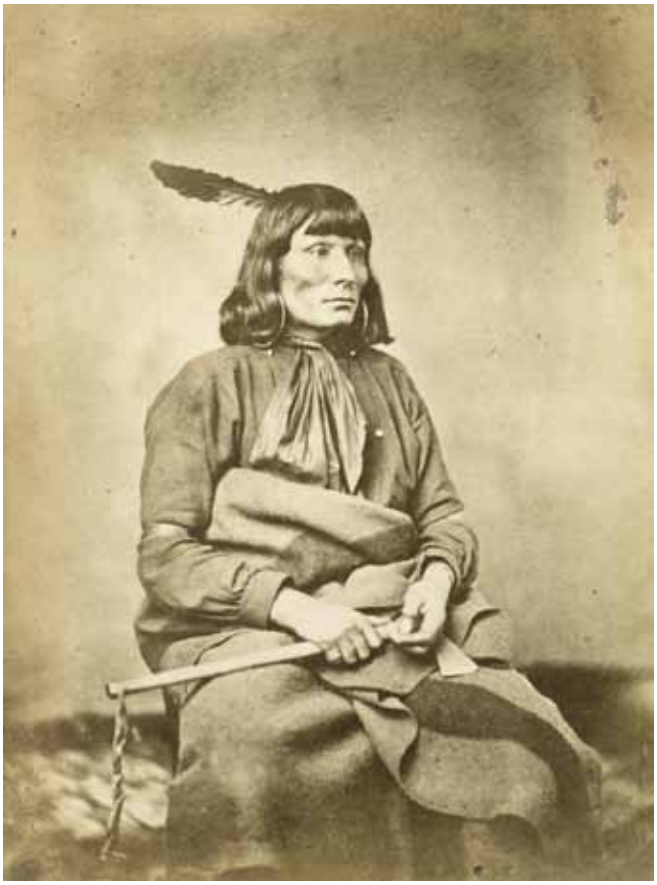
THE COLLECTION OF NATIVE AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS

Some Themes

Since the earliest days of photography images have been made of Native American peoples. Although many different styles of photography developed, the vast majority of photographs were taken to serve the interests of the white American population. They reflected ideas of the Native American as perhaps a “noble red man” from a “disappearing race” in the face of settlement and modernisation, or as the “barbarous savage” of adventure stories (and later films) in need of “civilisation”. Native Americans seldom had any control over these representations or their interpretation.

The Delegations

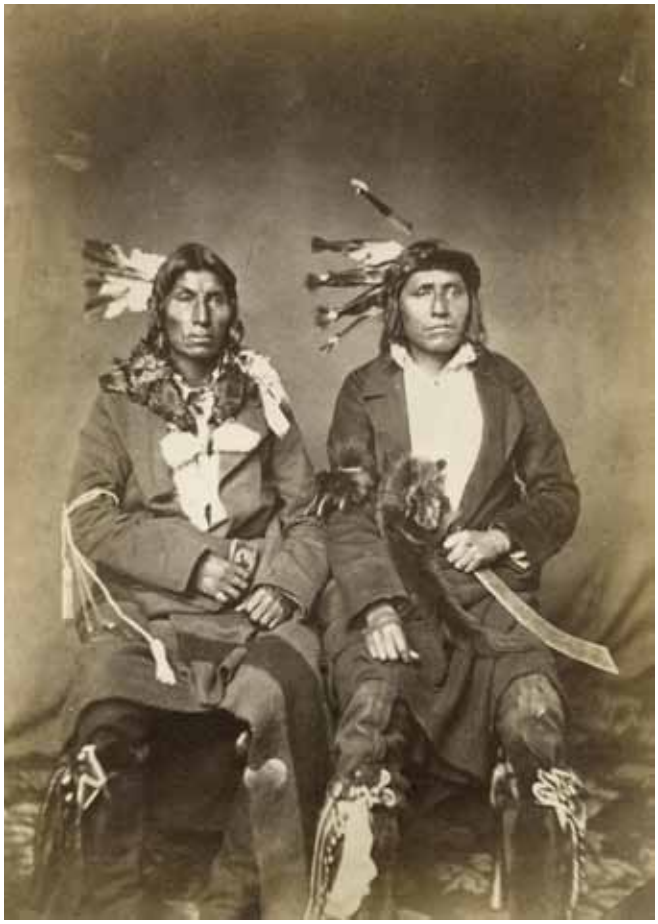
By the mid-nineteenth century, the date of the first photographs here (illustrations right and overleaf), white settlement of America’s west was pushing the Native American population from their traditional lands. This was a source of great tension which often erupted into violence. The U.S. government invited delegations of Native American leaders to Washington DC to impress them with the power of progress and to negotiate treaties over land rights peacefully. Many of these Native American visitors were recorded by leading photographers of the day. These two photographs (one overleaf) were taken in 1858 by the McClees and Vannerson Studio.



▲ **Studio portrait of He’kha’ka Nang’-zhe (Standing Elk); 1998.128.3**

They are interesting because they present the Native American leaders in the same style as other important people of the day, such as President Abraham Lincoln or General Lee. They are fine portraits that let us see the individuality of the sitters, and they are captioned with their names.

Studio Portrait of Tshe-tan' Wa-ku'wa Ma'ni (Little Crow) and Wa-kin'-yan Ta'-Wa (His Own Thunder); 1998.128.12 ▶



"The Science of Man"

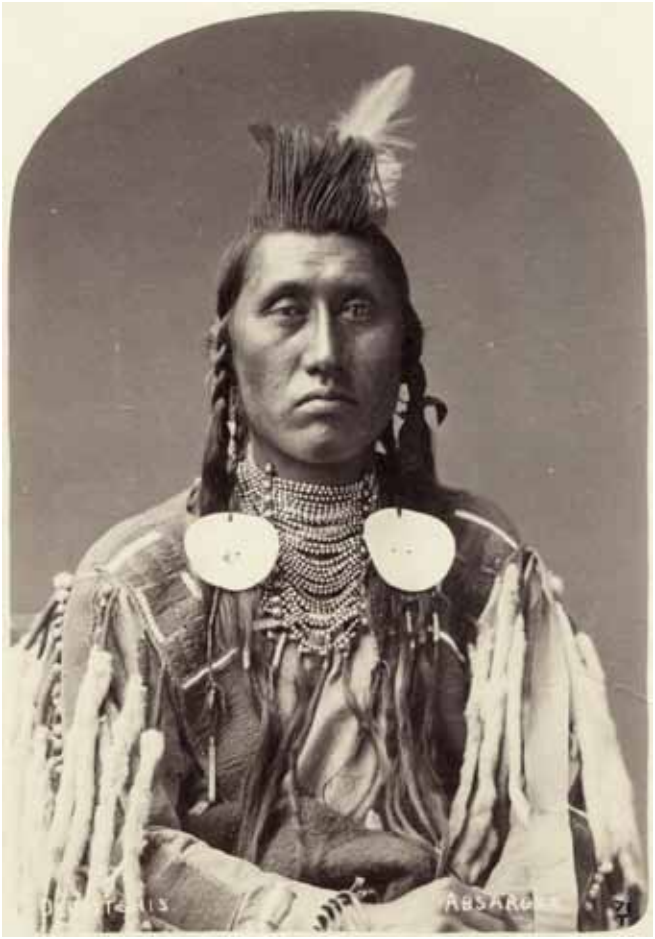
At the same time such photographs came to have other meanings. What viewers "see" in a photograph is largely dependent on the contexts in which the images are presented, combined with what the viewer already knows or believes. The second half of the 19th century saw the rapid development of anthropology or ethnology – the scientific study of peoples and cultures. Photographs like these were also seen as general representations of different tribes. Very soon after these two photographs were made, they were being offered for sale as examples of, to quote McClees's advertisement leaflet, the "race of red men, now rapidly fading away".

The organisation of scientific anthropology came under the control of a U.S. Government department, the Bureau of Ethnology (later Bureau of American Ethnology), established in 1879. Its function was to describe and record Native American peoples and cultures. This record was also available to be used by the Government in its "assimilation" policy – the attempt to absorb Native Americans into white culture and its ideas of progress and civilisation.

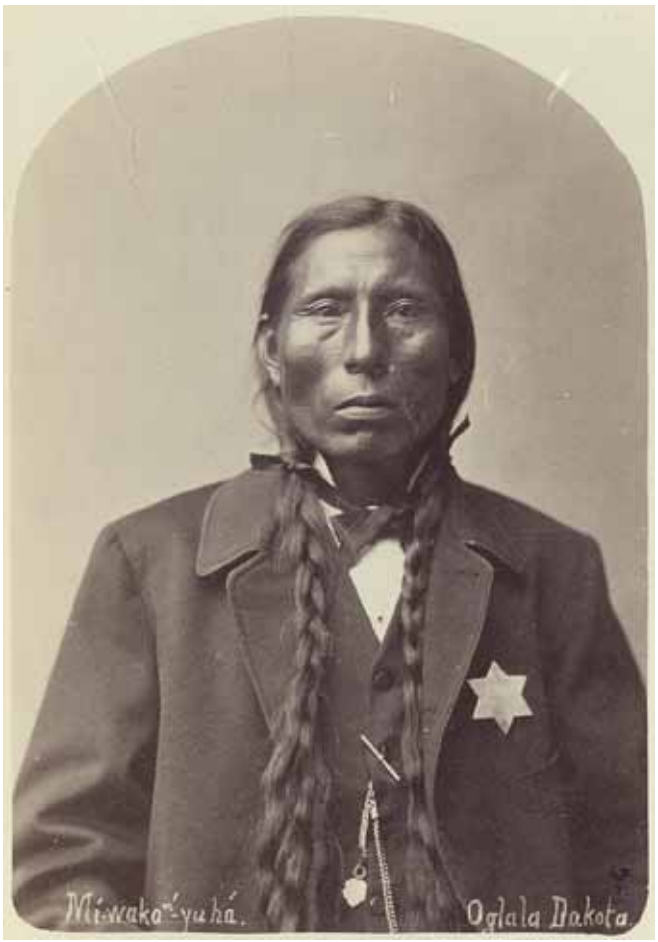
The whole period saw a hardening of attitudes towards Native American peoples. Their legal status changed in 1871, giving them fewer land and

negotiation rights. Yet the delegations to Washington continued and the 1880s saw some of the most concentrated photographic work.

The photographs of Charles Milton Bell here are good examples of this period. Bell was taking these photographs for the Bureau of Ethnology and its influence can be seen clearly. Although they are strong portraits on one level, they do not have the lively individuality of the McClees and Vannerson images. Despite the rich detail, such as Pretty Eagle's abalone shell pendants, porcupine quill embroidery and hair dressed with buffalo grease (illustrated below left), there is a severe, still, almost lifeless quality to the photographs, especially when one looks at a number of them together. While Pretty Eagle's features and clothing appealed both to scientific and popular ideas of "real" Native Americans, other photographs, like that of Mi-Wa-Kan Yu-Ha-La photographed by Hillers (illustrated below right), have details such as European clothing, medals, or short hair, which suggest the rapid changes overtaking Native American peoples.



▲ **Portrait of Dee-Kit-Shis (Pretty Eagle); 1998.254.6.5**



▲ **Portrait of of Oglala man, Mi-Wa-Kan Yu-Ha-La (Sword), Captain of Native Police and Judge of Native Court 1875; 1998.254.6.1**

Photography in the Field

Making a photographic record of Native American culture first hand in the "field" was another major concern. The examples here (illustration below and two overleaf) of Hopi people were taken in 1879 on a Bureau of Ethnology expedition to the Southwest. The photographer was John Hillers, who had worked on a number of expeditions and who later worked for the U.S. Geological Survey. The intention of these photographs, like Bell's, was to document cultures which were believed to be rapidly changing or even dying out in the face of white settlement, technological change and central government policy towards Native American people. Thus we see groups posed carefully to show traditional pottery making, or clothing or domestic scenes such as dressing hair. All the photographs were described in detail for anthropologists who might use the images. For instance, the original 1885 caption for the illustration right is "A group of [Hopi] girls, showing their characteristic head-dress and apparel. The hair is worn in this way so long as they remain unmarried, after which it is worn down."

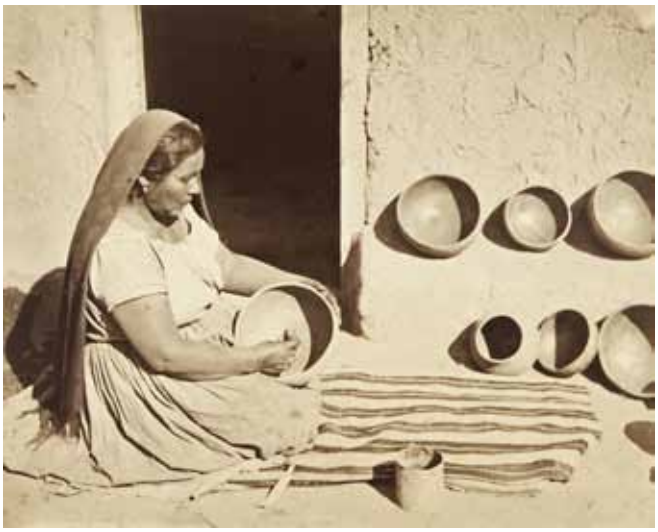
However, Hillers's photographs, like all the photographs here, are much more than simple documents. Although the realism of photography suggests that "this is how it was" it should be remembered that it was presumably the photographers who decided how to photograph whatever they thought was interesting about their subjects. So it is their vision of the subject that survives for us to use as an historical source. Hillers's photographs are a good example. Although photographing "real" people, doing "real things", there is a strong artistic element in the photographs' composition which suggests a more romantic Western way of thinking about the subjects. This can be seen in the careful positioning of the figures within the frame of the photograph,

Group portrait of three Hopi girls, sitting on rocks, with a blanket hanging on a wall behind them; 1998.273.19 ▶

similar to portrait painting, or in the sweeping skies and wide landscapes which suggest nineteenth century European ideas about wilderness and purity of spirit. So we see that these photographs are more complicated than simply a record of activities and clothing.

◀ **View of a Hopi man, sitting on the ground in front of a vertical loom, weaving a sacred blanket; 1998.170.4**

▼ **Portrait of a woman, kneeling on a blanket on the ground, polishing the inside of a large clay pot with a smooth pebble; 1998.169.29**



Contemporary Uses

In recent years Native American peoples have been using photographs such as these to re-engage with their history on their own terms within their communities. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which houses many anthropological archives, has for many years run an outreach programme for Native American communities and provided training for Native American historians and curators. This has raised many issues which challenge conventional Western ideas of “historical truth”.

Working with similar ideas a number of Native American artists such as Carm Little Turtle, Jimmy Durham and Hulleah Tsinhnajinnie have used historical photographs of Native peoples in their contemporary art work. Through this work they have drawn attention to many of the complex issues of modern Native identity, such as ownership of the land and legal rights, as part of the growing political voice of Native American peoples in the late twentieth century.

Photographs, and what we believe they show us, form part of these complex issues.

Further Information

Other Native American Introductory Guides:
http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/totem.html
http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/native.html

Photograph Collections:
http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/photocollection.html
http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/pdf/Among_The_Pueblos.pdf. (pdf download)

Further Reading

Christian Feest, *Native Arts of North America*, London: Thames & Hudson (1980).

Paula Fleming & Judith Luskey, *The North American Indian in Early Photographs*, Oxford: Phaidon (1988).

Paula Fleming & Judith Luskey, *Shadow Catchers,* London: Calman & King (1993).

Lucy Lippiard (ed.), *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans*, New York: New Press (1992).

Terence Winch (ed.), *All Roads are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institute (1994).

David Murdoch, *Eyewitness Guides: North American Indian*, London: Dorling Kindersley (1995).

Unfortunately none of these photographs are on permanent display.

The original text for this Introductory Guide was taken from a leaflet by Elizabeth Edwards, former Head of Photograph and Manuscript Collections. This leaflet is now out-of-print but a copy is held within the Manuscript Collections see:
http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/manuscripts/pittriversmuseumpapers.html

Revised by
Photograph and Manuscript Collections, 2011

Supported by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND