

Educational Resources

The life and work of Edward Curtis offers a wealth of fascinating topics well suited for the classroom. The following lesson plan has been developed to give educators a jumping off point to a variety of activities focused on Curtis and his work.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Curtis (1868-1952) was a complicated, passionate, self-educated pioneer and visionary artist who rose from poverty and obscurity to become the most famous photographer of his time. Between 1900 and 1930 he traveled from Mexico to the Arctic, from the Rockies to the Pacific, photographing and recording more than eighty different tribes. He became friends with Teddy Roosevelt, got funding from J. P. Morgan, and set out in 1900 to photograph traditional Indian ways that he thought were vanishing. Curtis abandoned his career as a successful portrait photographer, and sacrificed his health, his marriage, and all of his assets to create an astonishing body of work that included 10,000 recordings, 40,000 photographs, and twenty volumes of text.

In this lesson, students will be introduced to Curtis and the Native Americans he documented, understand some of the complex issues that go along with doing ethnographic work, and discover what it can be like doing ethnographic work themselves.

GRADE LEVEL

7-12

SUBJECT AREAS

The Arts, History, Social Science, Geography

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson students will:

- develop an appreciation for photography as both an artform and as historical document
- understand the achievement represented in Curtis's work
- understand the vast diversity of Native American peoples
- examine the controversies surrounding the work
- create their own set of 'personal historical documents'

MATERIALS

For activity 1:

- Pen, pencil, map of North America
- A computer with web access or print-outs of equivalent pages.

For activity 2:

- A computer with web access or books of Curtis's photographs

For activity 3:

- Students may provide recording devices ranging from pen and paper and disposable cameras to hand-held video cameras.

BOOKS

Curtis, Edward S.; [The North American Indian, the Complete Portfolios](#). Taschen, 1997. ISBN 3-8228-8183-X

Curtis, Edward S.; [Native Nations](#). Bulfinch Press, 1993. ISBN 0-8212-2052-7

WEBSITES

For a general introduction to Curtis:

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/curtis_e.html

For a timeline of his life (Flash4 plugin required):

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/curtis_e_timeline.html

The Edward Curtis: Dialog site:

<http://www.thirteen.org/americanmasters/curtis/index.html>

Three Galleries with many Curtis images:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/curthome.html>

<http://www.edwardcurtis.com/gallery1x.htm>

<http://www.edwardscurtis.com/gallery.html>

(notice the subtle difference in URLs of the last two-- they are different sites.)

The Curtis Collection is an excellent resource for all things Curtis:

<http://www.curtis-collection.com>

Edward S. Curtis: Frontier Photographer (Smithsonian Institution)

<http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Curtis/curtis-navigation.htm>

BACKGROUND ACTIVITIES

Have students watch the film "Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians" AND/OR spend some time on the web sites listed above.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Mapping the Curtis Odyssey/Discovering the Diversity of Native American Tribes

Edward Curtis spent 30 years attempting to document every Native American tribe. This would be no easy task at any point in history, but Curtis did it before planes, cars, and polaroids! In this activity, students will use the web and a map of North America to track some of the places Curtis visited on his travels and find out about the tribes that lived there.

Duration: The length of this activity can be scaled up or down by adding or reducing the number of tribes to include on the map as well as how many details about those tribes are required.

Preparation: Xerox a map of North America for each student.

1. Distribute copies of the map
2. Go to the web site at <http://www.curtis-collection.com/tribalindex.html>
3. The web page lists the tribes visited in each of the 20 volumes of Curtis' work. Select one or two tribes from each volume and mark where that tribe lived on the map with a number.
4. On a separate page list two or three unique facts about each tribe (the web site has sections for Dress, Dwellings, Religion and Ceremonies, etc.)
5. Once the map is dotted with numbers, connect the dots to show the extent of Curtis's travels and the wide range of Indian people in North America.

Activity 2: The Photograph as Art, The Photograph as History

Curtis has been accused of dressing up Indian people in regalia and outfits they no longer wore, presenting false and stereotyped images of a vanishing race. Why did he choose to photograph only traditional Indian life, and how much did American Indians participate in the way they were represented in his pictures? In this activity, students will examine several Curtis photographs, learn about the issues involved, view video clips from Native Americans and Curtis experts, then discuss the issues as a group and on messageboards on the web.

The Edward Curtis: Dialogue site address is <http://www.thirteen.org/americanmasters/curtis/index.html>

Activity 3: Creating Your Own Ethnographic Study

Duration: Most of this activity happens outside of class. Classroom time could be limited to an initial discussion regarding ethnography, and later a presentation of the student's projects.

Preparation: You may want to begin the lesson with a brief introduction to anthropology. An excellent place to start online is <http://www.sil.si.edu/SILPublications/Anthropology-K12/anth-k12.htm>

"Ethnographic" sounds like a very complicated word, but if you break it down into parts, it can suddenly make sense. "Ethno-" comes from the Greek word "ethnos", which means "people". "-graphic" comes from the Greek word "grafiko" which means "to write". So you might imagine that "Ethnographic" means "to write about people", which is pretty close to the dictionary definition: "a scientific description of specific human cultures".

In this activity, students are assigned the task of creating an "ethnographic study" of some culture around them. This "culture" could be the neighborhood barber shop, a library, a soccer team, or simply one's home and family-- anything that includes people involved in a task at a particular location. Encourage students to pretend they are anthropologists that know little or nothing about the "culture" they are about to explore. Using any variety of methods including interviews, sketches, photography, video, and home made maps, have students attempt to assemble a representation of that culture that they can present to the class.

Other students can critique the presentations using questions gathered from the Edward Curtis: Dialogue site, such as "Does this show the culture in only a positive light? Does it glorify the culture while glossing over certain important issues?" etc.
