



Dalton's

AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS



THE CRAFTSMAN

"The lyf so short
the craft so
long to
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The Craftsman was printed from October 1901 to December 1916 and was devoted to the American Arts and Crafts Movement. [Reprint archives.](#)

Telling History By Photographs. Records Of Our North American Indians Being Preserved By Pictures

We are just waking up here in America to appreciating the big interests of our own country and to a sense of cherishing our original greatness. We are painting our plains, protecting our forests, creating game preserves, and at last—not saving the existence of the North American Indian, the most picturesque roving people on earth, but making and preserving records of them from an historical, scientific and artistic point of view. We as a nation are not doing this. Just one man, an American, an explorer, an artist with the camera, has conceived and is carrying into execution the gigantic idea of making complete photographic and text records of the North American Indians so far as they exist in a primitive condition today. Mr. Edward S. Curtis has been already working for six years on this project. The Smithsonian Institution at Washington has known about his purpose, President Roosevelt has kept in close touch with his work, ethnologists and photographers have followed his progress with interest; but until the recent exhibitions of Indian photographs and the stereopticon lectures at the Waldorf, New York, the general public has had very little idea of the scope and beauty of Mr. Curtis' intention and achievement. It has already been said in print of this work that "if Mr. Curtis lives and keeps his health for ten years he will have accumulated material for the greatest artistic and historical work in American ethnology that has ever been conceived of." Toward this end, Mr. Curtis has already fifteen hundred characteristic Indian photographs. In the recent exhibit in New York, about two hundred prints of the thousand already made, were on the walls. But something of the purpose in making the collection is quickly felt even in this limited display. Each primitive tribe—as far as captured by Mr. Curtis' camera—is presented in its own group, with every variation of type, young and old, with home structures, environment, handicrafts, games and ceremonies presented intimately and sympathetically. These pictures tell the history, the legends, the myths, the manners and customs of a vanishing tribe as no printed page, however vivid, could set forth. And the photographs



themselves, quite apart from their historic and scientific value, show a fresh, far step in the progress of photography into the realm of fine arts. Mr. Curtis has so far improved on old methods of printing and finishing as to have practically invented processes in photographic presentation. His tones, his rough surfaced papers, his color combinations are a new art, or a new science, as one classes camera work. And to those who know nothing of methods and improvements these photographs of picturesque people, employed in primitive ways, their homes and their country, are beautiful pictures, as paintings are beautiful, because of the marvelous way in which nature is reproduced. There are most luminous atmospheric effects, a glimmer of sunlight, a deep still night, desolate plains seen through dust clouds and astonishing contrasts of light and shade as sunbeams gleam down gorges through narrow crevices. There is apparently nothing in the way of difficulties that he cannot overcome, from the shyness of the Indian nature to illusive quality of air and sunlight. And all by tenacious labor, following insight. For a picture of three Sioux Chiefs he visited Montana three times, and cultivated his

models at intervals for three years. Mr. Curtis is first of all a craftsman, and after that equally a historian, a scientist, an artist and an understanding human being; if he collects facts, they are accurate; if he traces the civilization of Indian tribes, he is consistent; if he makes a picture, it is with the latest improvement in methods; if he wants the confidence of a tribe of people, he visits them and wins their liking and trust—so that each phase of his endeavor can stand alone; his pictures by themselves are perfect, his ethnological

- Inventory
- Tudor Rose
- Books
- Buying
- Location
- Events
- Arts & Crafts
- Shows / News
- Guestbook
- Links
- Contact Us
- Home

researches are of themselves also complete. When his records are finished Mr. Curtis expects to have from fifteen to twenty volumes, illustrated with from one thousand to fifteen hundred of his own photographs, the text to be gathered by himself, accurate and interesting, and subject to final editing by ethnological authorities. President Roosevelt, in a letter regarding Mr. Curtis' project wrote, "I esteem it a matter of great moment that for our good fortune Mr. Curtis should have had the will and the power to preserve as he has in his pictures this strange and beautiful, and now vanishing life.

