

Playing the Indian Card

In June 1900, the tourist journal *The Land of Sunshine* announced a curious new souvenir of Western Americana: a deck of playing cards featuring Native Americans from the pueblo cultures of the Southwest. Described as “fifty-three of the best photographs taken in the last few years by A.C. Vroman of Pasadena,” the deck enacts a revealing merger of ethnographic study and parlor game amusement. For ease of play, each card bears in bold print the symbols of its number and suit. For a different kind of clarity, each is emblazoned with the halftone reproduction of a single photograph by Vroman and a brief caption describing the scene. The ace of clubs shows a horizontal view of a snow-dusted adobe compound labeled “Pueblo of Acoma.” The three of clubs contains a cadre of Native men arrayed in ceremonial formation and describes them as “Carrying the Snakes.” The eight of hearts holds a group of children posed on a stairway, several of whom confront the camera with bold stares. The picture is captioned “Six little Injins.” The queen of diamonds portrays a young Navajo woman sporting long black locks and layered necklaces, and is labeled “An Isleta Belle.” A joker card exhibits a single male figure with white and black painted legs, a loincloth, a foliate-covered torso, and headdress. The caption all too predictably reads, “Coshira (or Clown) at Corn Dance, Pueblo of Santo Domingo.”

Shuffling through Vroman’s deck more than a century later, each turn exposes the problems and possibilities that shaped early photography of Native Americans. In particular, the arrangement of the photographs according to the suited and numerical organization of the cards brings to light a veritable gamblers’ taxonomy of the compositional poses and set pieces used for picturing indigenous cultures. By categorizing these motifs, the deck enables us to deconstruct the images by calling to question their claims of ethnographic altruism and photographic truth. Instead, a different symbolic system, one motivated by aesthetics and ideology, emerges from the cards. It begins with landscape views that connect a timeless and dramatic vision of uncivilized nature with a raw, even primordial fantasy of the indigenous built environment. It continues with pictures of indigenous group activities that focus on traditional practices in order to flesh out a world of rudimentary culture seemingly unscathed by modern civilization. It culminates in carefully posed individual portraits that attempt to crystalize the whole of Native American culture into beautiful and poignant, yet also distant and isolated, subjects. Just as the deck’s system orders the cards, this representational lexicon structures Indian identity in standardized and reductive ways.

Photography of indigenous Americans, especially that produced by Anglo-American cameramen (and a few women) during the sweep of US Westward expansion, was more than anything a projection of order and authority. At the turn of the century, however, many Americans saw it otherwise. While both photography and the philosophy of Manifest Destiny emerged in the 1840s, their development was first seen as merely coincidental; the camera was widely viewed as a benign instrument for documenting the subject matter that appeared before its lens. More recently, however,



we have come to understand how photography did not simply record, but rather constituted the processes of expansion, transformation, and displacement that shaped the American West. Photographs fixed distant and mysterious continental spaces into concrete images that rendered the land known and controlled. The rationalizing capabilities of the plate became the format for conceptualizing and enacting development. In practices ranging from those of the government survey photographers to those of commercial and artistic image makers, the land was first controlled as an image and only subsequently transformed in real time and space—often in ways that were conditioned by the medium. Vast and sublime landscapes, for example, could be broken down and compartmentalized precisely because photography provided a visual template for such actions. People believed natural heterogeneity could be overwritten by uniform systems of organization because photography, by transforming the entire world into ordered monochromes, had in effect already done so.

For Native Americans, who found little purchase in Manifest Destiny, the structuring force of photography proved powerful and perilous. When aimed at indigenous subjects, the camera became an instrument of investigation, categorization, and finally abstraction. Pictures like Vroman’s of the pueblo tribes provided a framework for Anglo-Americans to capture a way of being other than their own. Then, because most viewers possessed neither the option nor inclination to experience these different cultures in their full circumstances, the photographs themselves (like Wild West shows or the World’s Fair exhibitions) became the *de facto* context for understanding Indian life. This substitution of image for actual encounter disempowered Native peoples by separating them from the agency inherent to being in the world. It rendered them disconnected, objectified, and controlled, and served as the mechanism for displacement and dispossession. Pseudo-documentary ethnographic photographs became a means to position Native American life as exemplar of a romantic and essential humanity, yet also as primitive and



without place in the nation’s new industrial paradigm. The photographic Indian became a paradox: a rooted symbol of a timeless American mythology, yet also a nomad drifting out of place and time—a sign of what Edward Sheriff Curtis described as a “vanishing race.”

Vroman’s illustrated deck cautions us that much of what early Native American photography offers as fact is probably better understood as a card sharp’s sleight of hand. Individual plates might beguile viewers with artistry and romance them with Western myth. The more consequential implications of this photography, however, can only be perceived by reading across groups of images, and not by peering into any one of them. Photographers like Vroman and Curtis reported that their Indian subjects mistrusted the camera and sometimes refused to be photographed. Too often this has been dramatized as indigenous mysticism and a fear that the individual plate might capture the soul. Evidence suggests, however, that Native Americans recognized the camera to have a far more extensive and subtle power wherein its systematized program of representation codified entire cultures. Understanding this complex relationship, it must have struck them that the fragmented scenes and postured moments captured in the photographs offered a version of Native life that was at best incomplete, at worst defiled. It must also have occurred to them that the images said more about the culture behind the lens than the one in front of it. The art of Native American photography lay in the deal; there was no magic in the cards.

– Jason Weems

Jason Weems is Associate Professor of the History of Art at UCR. His work focuses on art in the United States and across the broader geography of the Americas. His book *Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest* was published by University of Minnesota Press in 2015. His ongoing research explores the intersection of art and archeological imagery in the Americas, and photography of and by Native Americans during the interwar years. He is currently teaching a seminar called “Native American Art: Synthesis, Sovereignty, and Survivance” at UCR, winter quarter 2016.



Myth and Majesty: Photographs Picturing the American Southwest presents photographs depicting Native Americans in the Southwestern region of the United States dating to the period of the 1870s through the 1930s. Selected from the permanent collection of the California Museum of Photography (CMP), the photographs were made by Adam Clark Vroman, Edward Sheriff Curtis, John Karl Hillers, William Henry Jackson, and others. They depict Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo peoples and cultures from their Western settler points of view. Each photographer brought his own approaches, attitudes, and aims to achieve photographs that remain complex in their aesthetic and sociopolitical resonations, at times fraught with contemporaneous stereotypes about Native Americans.

The first half of the exhibition features 72 prints selected from the CMP's extensive holdings of photographs made by Adam Clark Vroman. Depicting crafts, cultural rituals, and straight-ahead portraits, the selected works picture Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo peoples. The second part of the exhibition features 15 photographs depicting Hopi people and culture, selected from the museum's vast Keystone-Mast Collection, the world's largest collection of original stereoscopic prints and negatives. Additional works by Edward Sheriff Curtis, John Karl Hillers, and William Henry Jackson conclude the exhibition.

Myth and Majesty is organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock and is curated by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, and Kathryn Poindexter, CMP Curatorial Assistant. Special thanks to Jason Weems, Associate Professor of the History of Art at UCR; Leigh Gleason, CMP Curator of Collections; Zaid Yousef, ARTSblock Exhibition Designer; and Aide Jovana Esquivel, CMP Collections Assistant.

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Image credits

Cover: Adam Clark Vroman, *Snake Priest, Walpi*, 1901. Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, The H.C. Setzer-Alexander/ Friends of Photography Collection.

Above: McKern, Underwood & Underwood, *Hopi wearing feather headdress, Arizona*, 1905. Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, The Keystone-Mast Collection.

Interior: McKern, Underwood & Underwood, *Masked Hopi sitting on rocks*, 1905. Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, The Keystone-Mast Collection; Adam Clark Vroman, *Pueblo Basket Maker, Oraibi*, 1900. Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, The H.C. Setzer-Alexander/ Friends of Photography Collection; Selection of playing cards from Adam Clark Vroman's *American Indian Souvenir Playing Cards*, published by Lazarus & Melzer, Los Angeles, 1900. Private collection, Riverside, photo by Nikolay Maslov.

Myth and Majesty

Photographs Picturing the American Southwest

Selections from the Permanent Collection of the California Museum of Photography



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California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock
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