



the lost treasure

A priceless cache of signed platinum prints by American master Edward S. Curtis is found in a small New England museum. Nearly a century after their last appearance, these long-forgotten photographs are going on view once again. **By Russell Hart**

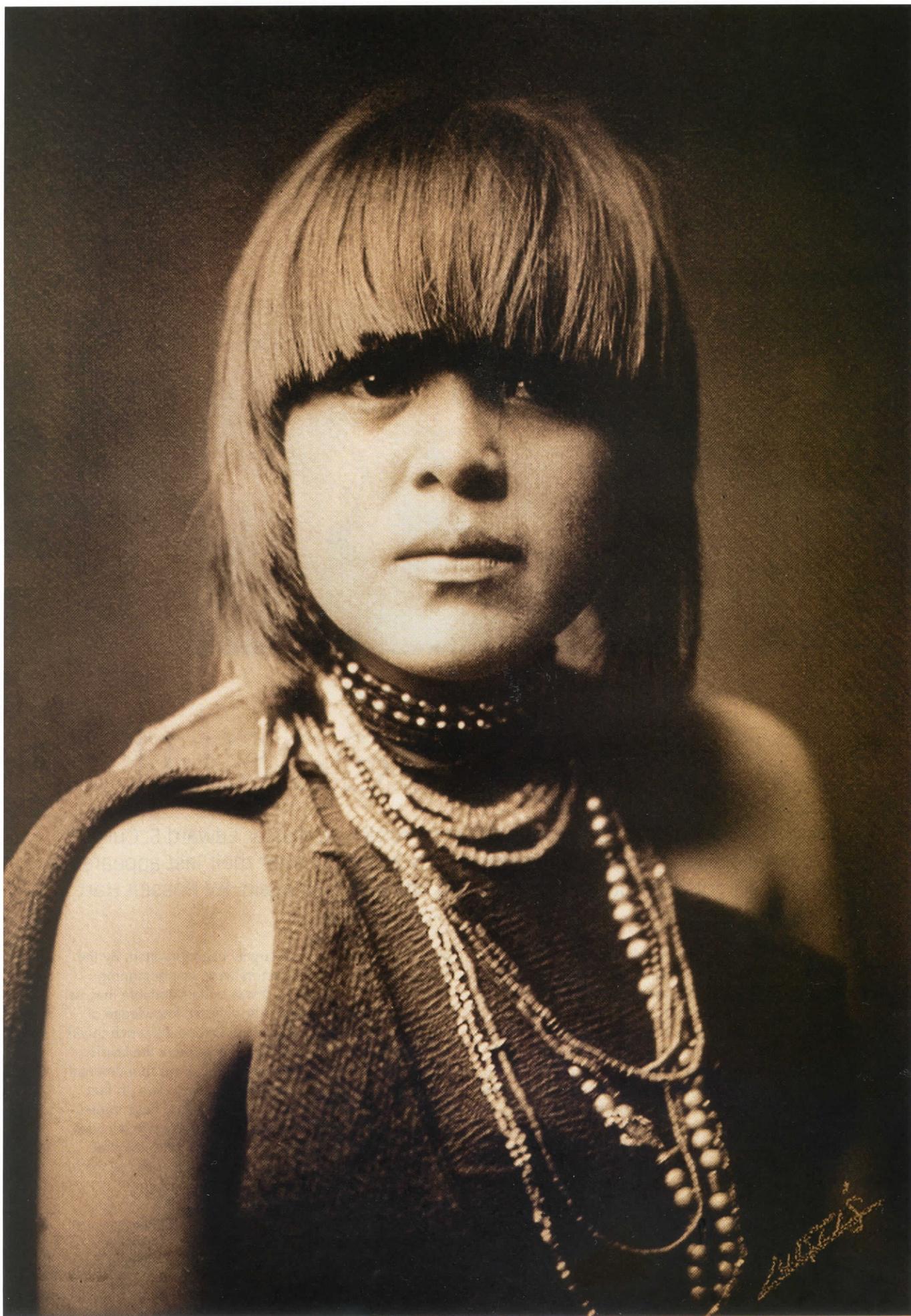
Twenty-five years ago, the director of the small Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, was sifting through a storage area when he found a collection of photographic prints that had obviously been languishing for many years. The subjects of the photographs were American Indians. Though the director didn't know where the prints had come from, he was struck by their quality, and soon thereafter he invited Boston curator Clark Worswick to have a look. "The director stopped at a large print case," Worswick recalls. "He pointed wordlessly at the drawers, and I remember him reaching up to the highest drawer and pulling out one and then another of Edward S. Curtis's masterworks."

Undertaken in the early years of the 20th century as Native American culture was dying, Curtis's landmark survey of Indian life, landscape, and customs—images that include some of the most evocative photographic

portraits ever made—had largely been forgotten. By the 1970s, curators and collectors were just beginning to rediscover the work, so it was understandable that, at the time, the Peabody's director had no knowledge of the photographs. But he wondered aloud if the rich-toned prints he found were made by photogravure, the lavish reproduction process used by Curtis for his monumental 20-volume study, *The North American Indian*. In fact, most of the thousands of Curtis prints that have traded so briskly in the art market during the past two decades are actually photogravures from the portfolios that accompanied each volume of the series. They are made with ink, not precious metals, and are unsigned.

As he studied the Peabody's Curtis prints, though, Clark Worswick realized that they were not photogravures. They were, in fact, original platinum prints made by Curtis himself—mainly from his original 14x17-inch

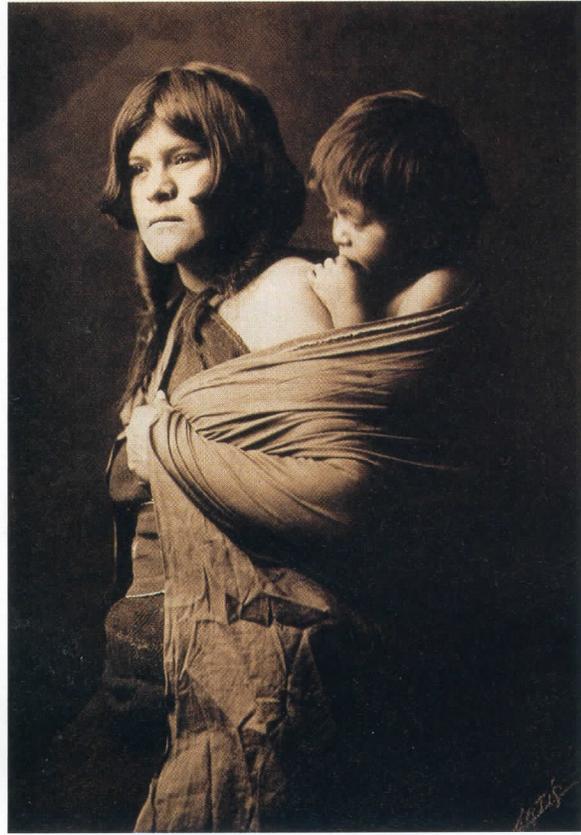
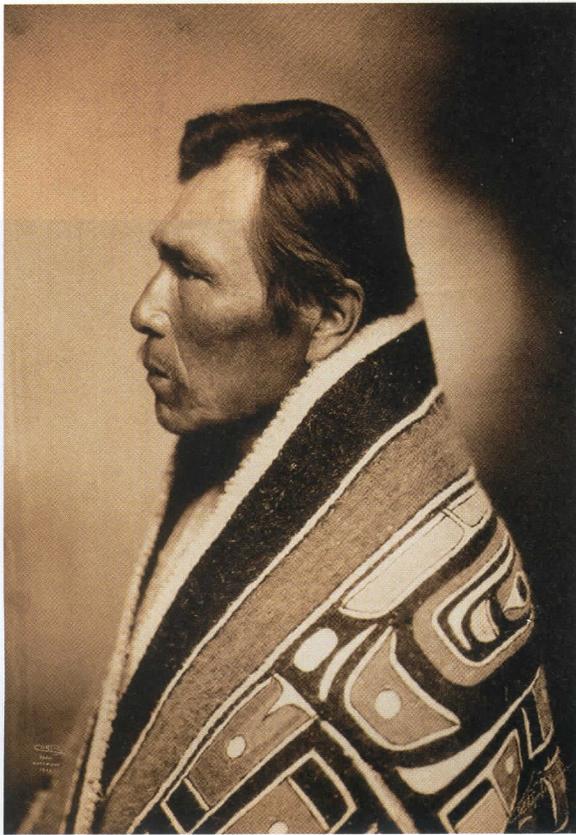
Opposite:
"Taos Water
Carriers,
1905." Above:
"An Oasis in
the Badlands,
1905."



Unique find: Most of the fine platinum prints found at the Peabody Essex Museum are of images that were not included in Curtis's landmark publication, *The North American Indian*, which contained more than 1,400 gravure reproductions. At left: "Pobe Tommo (Flower Son), 1905."



© 2001 ARNOLD EDITONS, FROM EDWARD CURTIS THE MASTER PRINTS, PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDWARD CURTIS (5)



“ I simply don’t have a clue how we got these pictures,” said the museum director.

glass negatives, not the copper gravure plates used to print the pictures in *The North American Indian*. “Each of these is a signed Curtis exhibition print,” a stunned Worswick told the museum’s director. “I don’t think there is anything like these prints around.” The director was puzzled: “I simply don’t have a clue how we got these pictures,” he said.

Worswick went on to discover that the 109 Peabody photographs originated from a traveling exhibition that Curtis had mounted in 1906 to promote and raise funds for his *North American Indian* project, which he spent the next 25 years producing. The show’s penultimate venue was the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, where philanthropist and financier J.P. Morgan saw Curtis’s work for the first time. Morgan was so impressed that he decided to underwrite Curtis’s ongoing project. The show then moved, in a scaled-down version, to Boston’s tony St. Botolph Club. There, one of the Peabody Museum’s benefactors saw the work and purchased it outright from Curtis—immediately donating it to the museum, which is known today as the Peabody Essex Museum.

“Dealers here and there, along with a few collectors, have perhaps a score of Curtis exhibition prints,” writes Worswick, now curator of photography at the Peabody Essex, in the new book *Edward Curtis: The Master Prints* (Arena Editions, \$60). “No one has one hundred and nine Curtis prints like the Peabody Essex Museum.”

The collection is unique because it is the largest single group of original Curtis prints outside the Library of Congress. By representing the entire 1906 Boston exhibition, it offers a special insight into what Curtis considered his best work at the time. “To get at the rarity of these prints, one should perhaps pose an abstract question that concerns the work of Curtis’s contemporaries,” writes Worswick, whose curatorial expertise ranges from 19th-century Asian photography to Walker Evans. “Does an Alfred Steiglitz, an Edward Steichen, a Frederick Holland Day, or a Frederick Evans exhibition survive intact from the first years of the twentieth century that allows the public to see the total oeuvre of the artist as it was intended to be seen?” The St. Botolph show was, in fact, Curtis’s last major exhibition, since he devoted the rest of his career to the published work.

Most of the Peabody Essex’s Curtis prints are of images not included in *The North American Indian*, which contained more than 1,400 gravure reproductions. All are collected in the Arena book, reproduced in the four-color process to capture the range of image tone in the originals. More than 60 of the prints, both unseen and familiar, will be on display at the Peabody Essex from November 2 through March 17, 2002. It’s the first time in almost 100 years that the public will be able to see these master prints. Says Worswick, “It was a kind of discovery that one only makes once in a lifetime.” ■

Above left: “Snoqualmie Jim, 1901.”
Right: “A Hopi Mother and Child, 1900.”