

# First Americans

## Prehistory - 1600



by Joe Burton





“To the Indian, the material world is sentient and intelligent... mysterious and implacable power resides in inanimate objects.”

- Francis Parkman  
*The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century.*

by Joe Burton





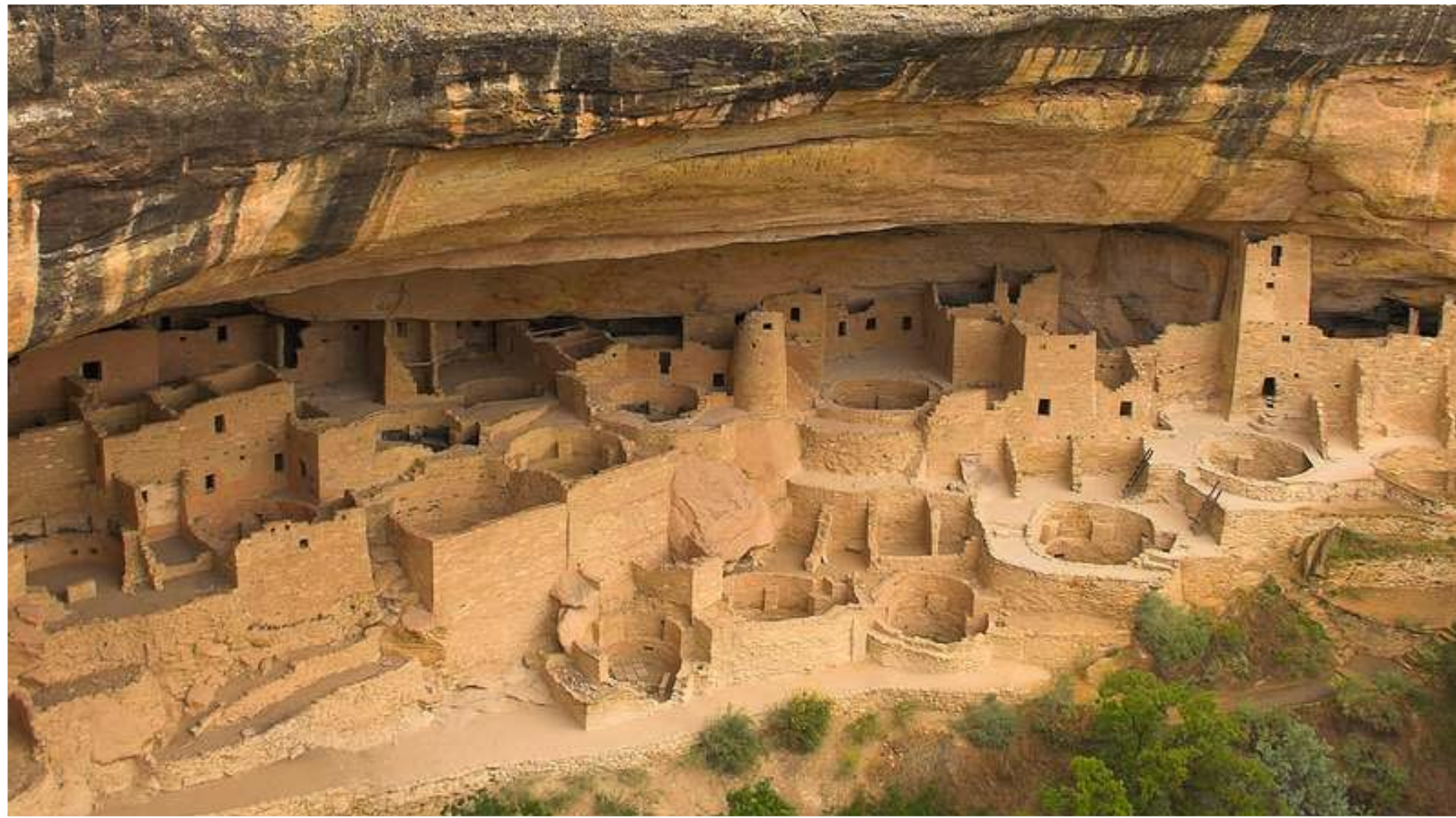
***Platform Effigy Pipe*** (Hopewell Culture)

300 BC-500 AD

*Werner Forman Archive,  
Ohio State Museum,  
Columbus, Ohio.*

The Hopewell Culture of the Ohio Valley, which flourished from roughly 200 BC to 500 AD, was responsible for an extensive array of earthwork walls and mounds built in geometric shapes. This pipe, with a bowl in the shape of a toad, recalls the ceremonial use of tobacco by many native American cultures.





***Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde, Colorado*** (Pueblo Culture)

1100-1200 AD

*Werner Forman Archive,  
Ohio State Museum,  
Columbus, Ohio.*

The Most elaborate dwelling arrangements of all pre-European native American societies were those of the Pueblo Culture of the Southwest. Once the hub of a prominent chiefdom, this cliffside complex housed more than 400 people. Among its more than 200 rooms were 23 of the ceremonial chambers called *Kivas*, distinguished by their circular shape.





***Head Effigy Vessel*** (Mississippian Culture)

1300-1500 AD

Buffware With Red Slip Pigment, 6 3/8 x 7 x 7 1/4

*Founders Society Purchase With Funds From Mary G. and Robert H. Flint Foundation, 1986.*

*Detroit Institute of The Arts.*

Flourishing from ca. 900 AD to the threshold of the era of Spanish exploration, the Mississippian Culture was an agricultural society center in the lower Midwest and Mississippi Valley. This effigy of a departed ancestor is representative of the tribes' complex understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead.



“The territory that would one day make up the United States was never even visited by Christopher Columbus on any of his four voyages of discovery.”





**John White** (fl. 1585-93)  
*Algonquin Village of Pomeiock,  
Near Gibbs Creek, North Carolina  
16th Century - Pen and Ink Drawing  
British Museum, London*

This sketch made by John White, leader of a British expedition to the coastal Carolinas in 1585, shows the grouping of bark-covered huts and longhouses within a defensive palisade that was a common living arrangement of Woodland Indians in the Northeast and Middle Atlantic regions of the future United States. Multiple-family dwellings were the norm.





***Helmet*** (Tlingit)

Carved Wood, Probably Cedar

*American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York*

Renowned for their towering totems, which often recounted clan histories in a stylized visual fashion, tribes of the Pacific Northwest such as the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian also carved elaborate masks for ritual ceremonies. This helmet is likely a portrait of its owner, who would have been prominent in his community.



***Owl Ornament for The Prow  
of A Canoe*** (Tlingit)

Wood, abalone shell, bear fur,  
height 47 in.

*Werner Forman Archive,  
Field Museum of Natural History,  
Chicago*



This carving of an owl with outstretched wings is typical of the prow ornaments mounted on Tlingit war canoes. The motif was one of the crests used by the Raven division at Klukwan, largest of the Chilkat Tlingit villages.



**George Catlin (1796-1872)**

*Medicine Man Performing  
His Mysteries Over a Dying Man.*

1832

*Smithsonian American Art Museum,  
Washington, DC*



The medicine man of the Blackfoot and other Plains Indians was regarded as a especially empowered link between the material and spiritual worlds, and not simply as a healer, as the Anglicized team implies. Catlin, who possessed great respect for native cultures, once proposed that the Indians and their natural environment be preserved in a “Nation’s Park.”





***Basket*** (Pomo).

Ca. 1890-1910

Clamshell Disks, Red Woodpecker Feathers, Quail Topknots, and Tree Materials.

Diameter: 7 in.

*Collection of the Newark Museum,*

*Newark, New Jersey*

The Pomo people of California comprised some 70 individual tribes, inhabiting what are now Mendocino, Sonoma, and Lake Counties, and the region around the Russian River valley. Vessels such as the one shown here - demonstrate their great skill at basket-weaving, and their utilization of natural materials to adorn utilitarian objects.





**George Catlin** (1796-1872).

Ojibwa Village. 1854

Oil on Canvas, 19 x 26 1/2 in.

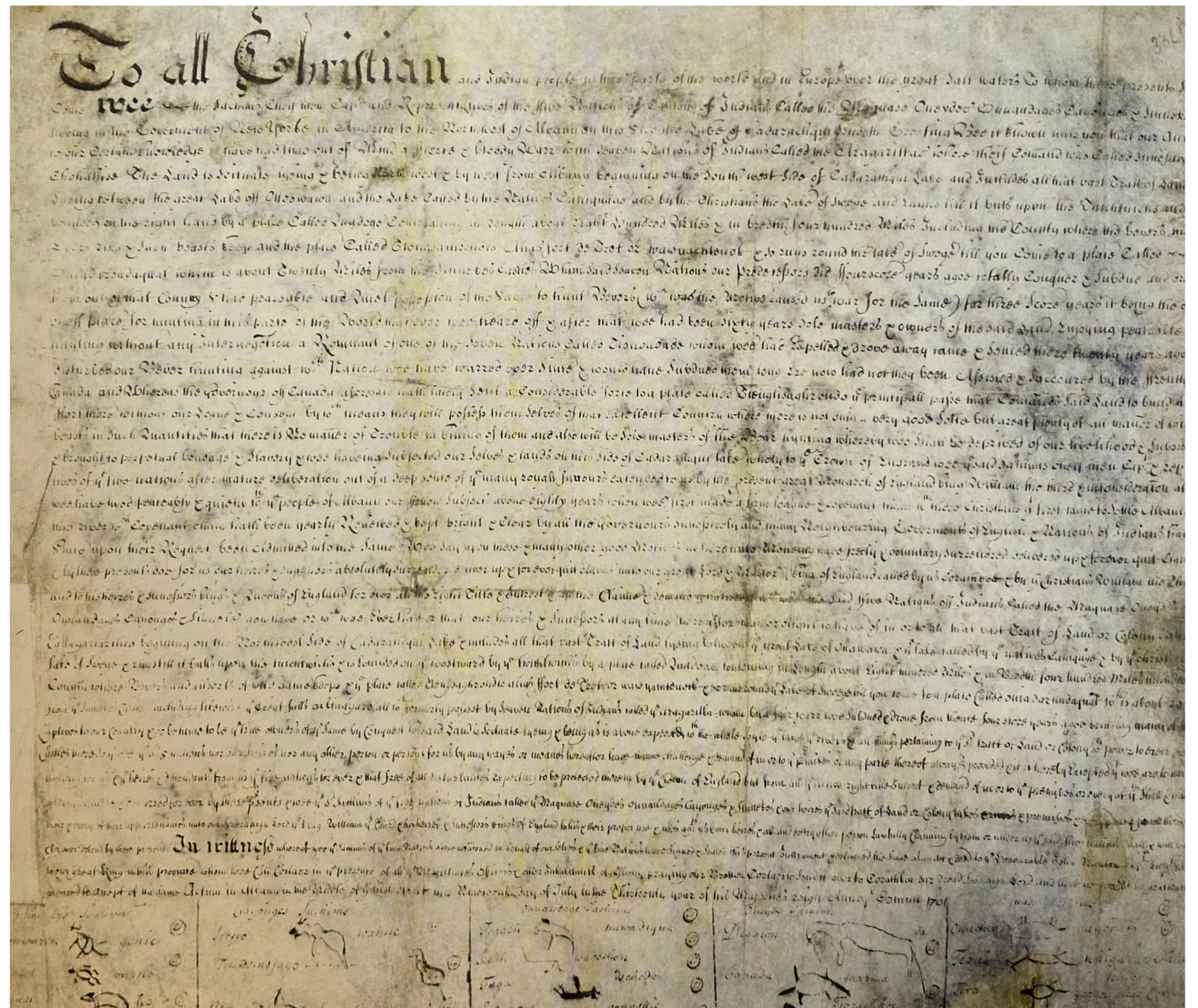
*Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museum Zu Berlin,  
Berlin, Germany*

By the time Catlin painted this scene of an Ojibwa encampment, showing the typical migratory dwellings that have come to be known as “Teepees,” the upper Midwestern homeland of this people was well within the range of white settlement.



**Five Nations Treaty** (1701).  
Ink on Paper  
National Archives,  
London

This Peace Treaty signed by representatives of Great Britain and the five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy - Mohawk, Seneca, Onodaga, Oneida, and Cayuga - reflected the growing dependence by the British settlements upon an alliance with the Iroquois against the French in Quebec, the tribes' longtime enemies.





“The Iroquois were not a single tribe, but a confederation of five tribes: from east to west, these were the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas.”





**George Catlin** (1796-1872).  
Not-to-Way, a Chief. 1835-36  
*Smithsonian American Art Museum,  
Washington, DC*

By the time Catlin began painting native Americans, the power of the once-mighty Iroquois Confederation had been broken. Beginning in the 1830s Catlin traveled west, seeking to study and portray tribes not yet affected by encroaching settlement. He began exhibiting his “Indian Gallery” in 1837.





***Mask*** (Iroquois).

Carved Wood

*Private Collection, New York, New York*

Masks such as these were central to the rituals of the *False Face Society*, a healing society of the Iroquois. Representing mythical entities or apparitions, they were worn during ceremonies conducted in order to drive disease from individuals who had summoned a society member. Membership was conferred upon those healed, or on those who had a revelatory dream.





***Moccasins*** (Cheyenne).

Buckskin and Glass Beads

*National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution*

*Washington, DC*

The “*Medicine Wheel*” pattern was characteristic of moccasins worn by the Cheyenne. Moccasins made from hides were ubiquitous among native American peoples, although the word itself is Algonquin. Designs varied greatly from tribe to tribe; fur linings were generally added for winter wear, and ornamentation was done with pigment or quills before beads became available through trade.



**Coat** (Delaware).

Buckskin, Silk Ribbon, Glass Beads,  
Length 39 1/2 in.

*Founders Society Purchase.*

*Detroit Institute of Arts*



By the early decades of the nineteenth century, contact between eastern native American tribes and Europeans had been established for some two centuries, and it had long been the practice of native artisans to incorporate trade goods such as silk ribbon and glass beads into garments they would once have been ornamented with local materials such as porcupine quills.



***Mans Shirt*** (Cheyenne).

Ca. 1860

Buckskin, Wool, Ermine Skin,  
Human Hair, Glass Beads, and Pigment,  
46 x 62 in.

*Founders Society Purchase.*

*Detroit Institute of Arts*



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**War Bonnet** (Sioux).  
Eagle Feathers and Rawhide.  
*Plains Indian Museum*  
*Buffalo Bill Historical Center,*  
*Cody, Wyoming*



The eagle-feather bonnet of the Plains was regarded as a source of spiritual power among warriors. Ingenious construction made the feathers' movements resemble those of an eagle, imparting the bird's grace and gift of noiseless approach to the wearer.





***Edward S. Curtis*** (1868-1952).

*Sioux Chiefs.* 1905

Photogravure.

*Library of Congress*

By the time Curtis began chronicling the world of the North American Indian, much of that world had vanished-in 1905, the Sioux no longer ruled the prairie. But Curtis was always careful to pose his subjects in attire and equipage that were historically and culturally appropriate to the time and many of them still remembered.



**Edward S. Curtis** (1868-1952).

*Goyathlay* (“Geronimo”)  
(1829-1909). 1907.

Photogravure.

*National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, DC*



The great Apache warrior Goyathlay (the name “Geronimo” is Spanish, of obscure derivation) was the leader of the last Indian guerrilla band to surrender to U.S. authorities, in 1886. His portrayal by Curtis was part of the photographer's vastly ambitious 20-volume project *The North American Indian*.





***Edward S. Curtis*** (1868-1952).

*Kutenai Woman.* Ca. 1910

(1829-1909). 1907.

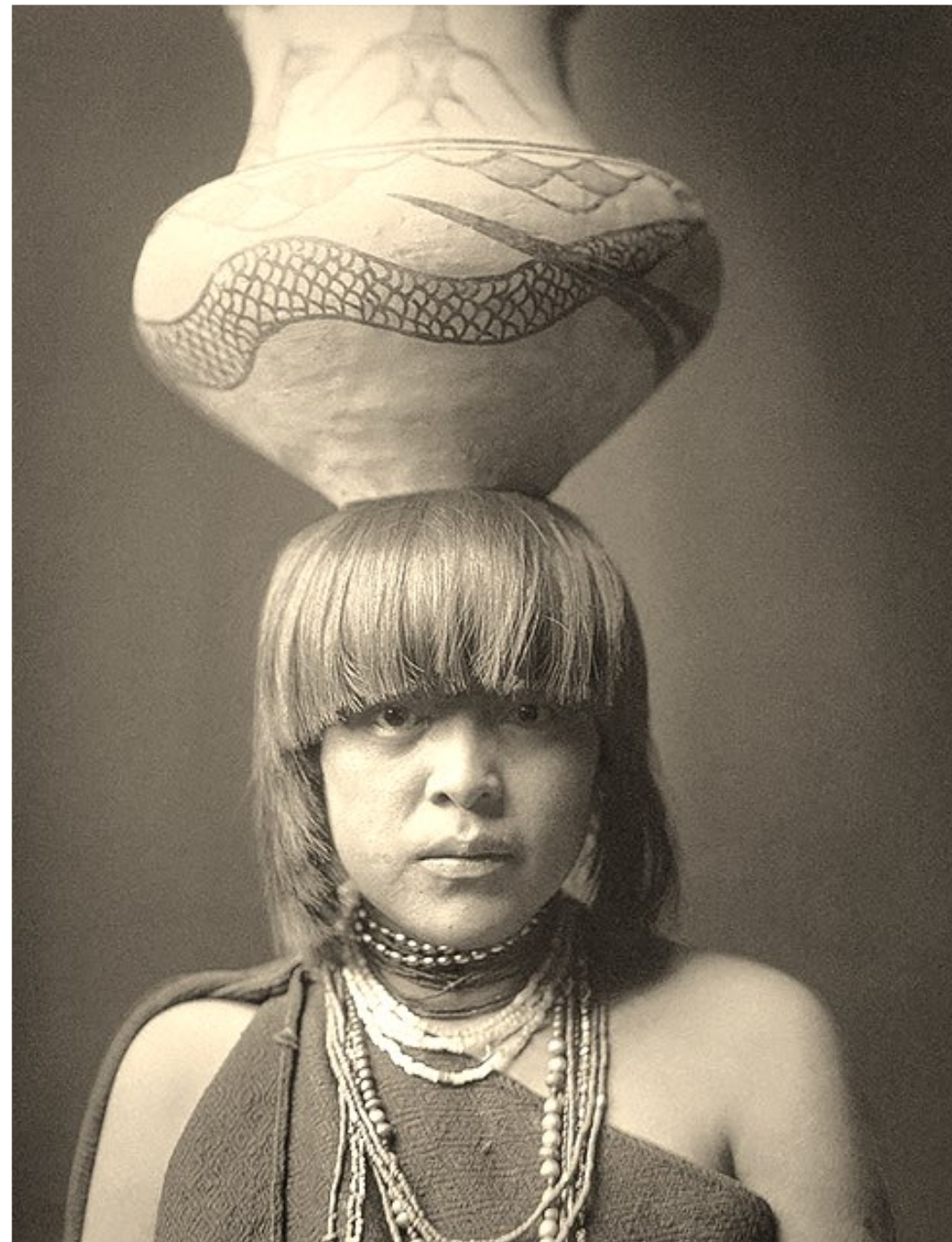
Photograph

*Library of Congress*

Curtis's seminal work *The North American Indian* was leather-bound and printed on the finest paper. At a price of \$4,200 by 1924, the richly illustrated set was affordable only to those with some means. But the images were truly fascinating - many of them haunting, such as this photo of a Kutenai woman in traditional buckskin dress gazing out at late waters - probably in Idaho or Montana - a major food source for this hunter-gatherer people.



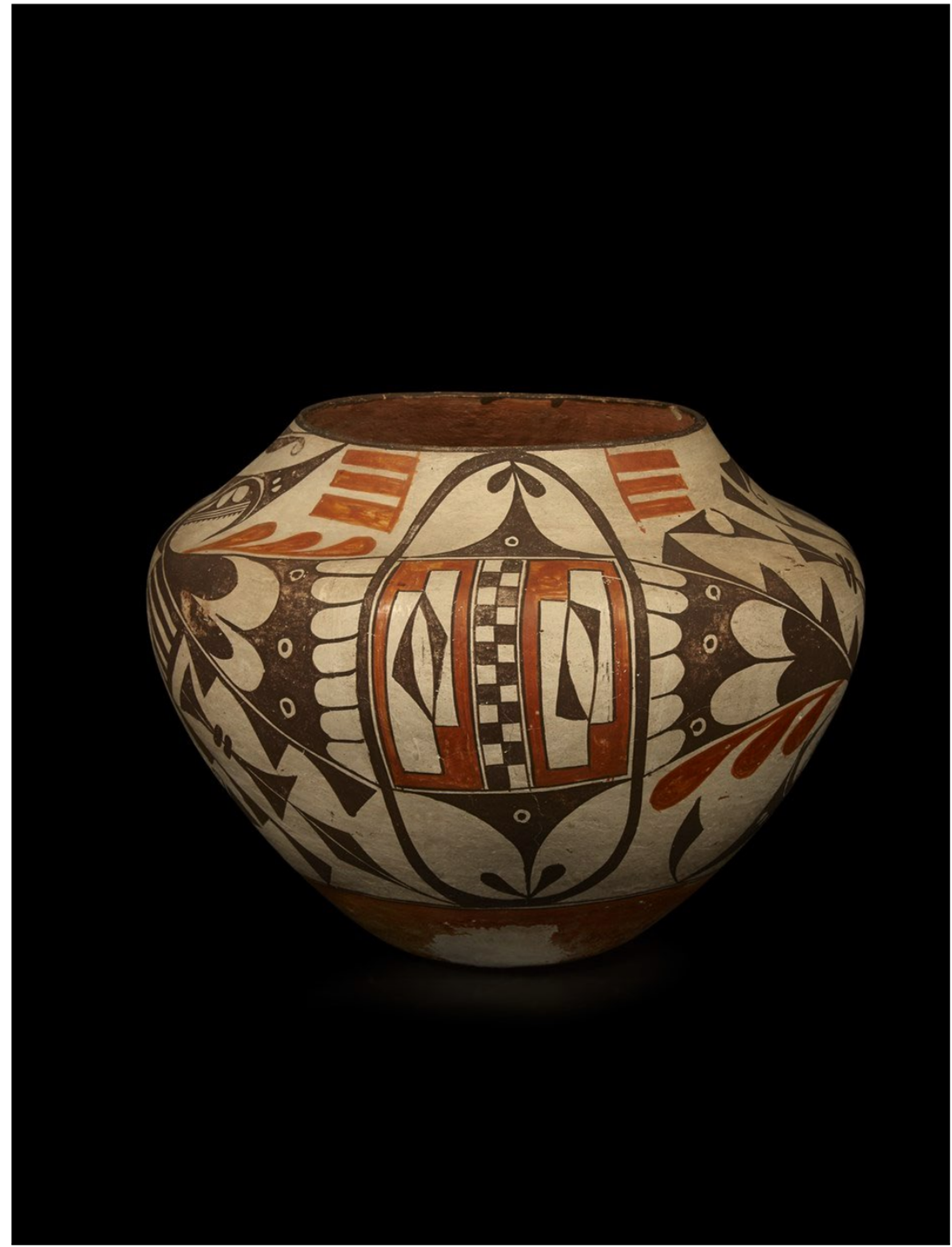
**Edward S. Curtis** (1868-1952).  
*Girl and Jar, San Ildefonso.* 1905.  
Photogravure, 16 5/8 x 12 1/4 in.  
*Library of Congress*



San Ildefonso, where Curtis photographed the News girl, is one of 19 surviving New Mexico pueblos. "Pueblo women are adept at balancing burdens on the head," Curtis observed. "Usually a vessel rests on a fibre ring, which serves to steady it and to protect the scalp." The jar's decoration indicates the serpent importance to the Tewa.



**Jar** (Acoma). Early Twentieth Century  
Dried Clay, Height: 10 1/2 in. x 13 1/2 in.  
*Gift of Mrs K.W. Hobart, 1956*  
*Collection of The Newark Museum,*  
*Newark, New Jersey*



Drawing on a superior local clay source and a long tradition, the people of the Acoma Pueblo near Santa Fe, New Mexico, continue to produce light, graceful hand-thrown pottery, tempered with crushed potsherds and decorated with geometric, bird, and animal motifs. The Acoma Pueblo is considered to the oldest continuously inhabited village in The United States.



***Edward S. Curtis*** (1868-1952)

*Iron Breast. Ca. 1900*

Photogravure

*Library of Congress*

Iron Breast, of the Piegan Blackfeet, fulfilled Curtis's image of the sublime native American - in full-length portrait and attired with a war bonnet, tomahawk, and draped animal pelt, the trappings of a proud and resilient people.

Curtis first encountered the Piegan in 1898, during the season of the medicine-lodge ceremony, a yearly festival of prayer and sacrifice to the chief god of the Blackfeet, the sun.





***Asseloa, a Seminole*** (1868-1952)

*Leader. Ca. 1842*

Colored Lithograph

*Library of Congress*

The Seminole of Florida are the only native American tribe that has never signed a peace treaty with the U.S. Government.

Asseola was a skilled guerrilla commander in the Seminole wars of the 1830s, harassing the U.S. Army in Florida's swamps. Lured into a council of truce, he was treacherously captured, and died in prison.





