

Milestone Presents

# In the Land of the HEAD HUNTERS

a film by Edward S. Curtis

One-Hundredth Anniversary

A MILESTONE FILM RELEASE PRODUCED/DIRECTED BY EDWARD S. CURTIS PHOTOGRAPHY EDMUND AUGUST SCHWINKE INTERPRETER/RESEARCH GEORGE HUNT STARRING MEMBERS OF THE KWAKWAKA'NAK OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
ORIGINAL SCORE JOHN J. BRAHAM SCORE PERFORMED BY TURNING POINT ENSEMBLE IN COLLABORATION WITH THE VANCOUVER FILM ORCHESTRA PERFORMING EDITOR DAVID GILBERT COURTESY OF THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
MUSIC SCORE FUNDS PROVIDED BY ROTGERS OFFICE OF UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS RESTORED BY UCLA FILM & TELEVISION ARCHIVE IN COOPERATION WITH THE FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY RESTORATIONIST JERE GOLDIN  
RESTORATION PRODUCED BY MILESTONE FILM AARON GLASS BRAD EVANS ANDREA SANBORN VINCENT PIAZZI DIGITAL TRANSFER BY MODERN VIDEOFILM POSTER DESIGN BY LAUREN CADDOCK © 2014 MILESTONE FILM & VIDEO



[www.milestonefilms.com](http://www.milestonefilms.com) [www.inthelandoftheheadhunters.com](http://www.inthelandoftheheadhunters.com)

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## Credits

Original title: *In The Land of the Head Hunters: A Drama of Primitive Life on the Shores of the North Pacific*. 1914. USA and Canada. Produced by the Seattle Film Company. Distributed by the World Film Corporation. Story written and picture made by Edward S. Curtis. Camera: Edmund August Schwinke. Interpreter and Research: George Hunt. Original Score: John J. Braham. Period: "Prior to European presence on the North Pacific Coast (pre-1775). Cost: \$75,000. 6 reels. Tinted. New York premiere: December 7, 1914 at the Casino Theater (Broadway & 39th). Selected in 1999 by the Library of Congress for their National Film Registry. Running Time: 67 minutes at 16 frames per second. ©2013 UCLA Film & Television Archive and Milestone Film & Video

### Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) Cast & Crew

By Brad Evans and Aaron Glass

This list includes the known actors and crew members in the film—with their character names (italicized), various aliases in Kwak'wala and English, and band affiliations [in square brackets]—as identified by elderly Kwakwaka'wakw in the late 1960s. The list was compiled from multiple sources: Holm and Quimby (1980:57-61, 71, 82), although we updated their orthography for writing Kwak'wala to the system developed by the U'mista Cultural Society; two documentary films containing interviews with surviving cast members—a short accompanying the release of *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1973), and T.C. McLuhan's *The Shadow Catcher* (1974); and personal correspondence with William Wasden Jr. and Bill Holm. Identifying people by their Kwak'wala names can be difficult due to a number of factors: many individuals have more than one name at any given time in their life (everyday names, nicknames, hereditary titles, ceremonial titles) and are bestowed new names periodically; multiple individuals often carry the same Kwak'wala name; and orthographies for spelling Kwak'wala have been inconsistent over the past century. As a consequence, some of the Kwak'wala names listed here were held by the individuals at the time of filming in 1913/14, while others may have been common terms for them at the time of identification in the late 1960s.

<i>Motana</i> .....	Stanley Hunt/ Łiləlgamlilas [Kwagu'ł]
<i>Naida</i> .....	Margaret (Maggie) Wilson Frank/ U'magalīs [Kwagu'ł]
<i>Naida and a Na'nalaləł Dancer</i> .....	Sarah Constance Smith Hunt/ Tłəkwəgilayugwa/ Abaya/ Mrs. David Hunt/ later Mrs. Mungo Martin [Ławitsis]
<i>Naida and the Sorcerer's Daughter</i> .....	Mrs. George Walkus/ Gwəkilayugwa [Gwa'səłə]
<i>Kenada</i> .....	Paddy 'Małid/ Kamgidi ['Nakwaxda'xw]
<i>Waket, Yaklus, and a village-mate of Motana</i> .....	Bəłutsa (a Kwakwala-ization of the English family name "Brotchie") ['Nakwaxda'xw]
<i>Sorcerer</i> .....	Kwagwanu/ Ha'ełə'las/ Long Harry [Kwagu'ł/'Nakwaxda'xw]
<i>Clam digger, captive, wedding dancer</i> .....	Francine Hunt/ Tłəłə'łəwidzəngə/ Tsəkwani/ Mrs. George Hunt ['Nakwaxda'xw] (also worked as prop/clothing maker)
<i>Fisherman who drops a paddle on the rocks</i> .....	Bob Wilson/ I'dənsu [Kwagu'ł]

#### **Extras:**

A'widi ['Nakwaxda'xw]  
Alfred "Skookum" Charlie/ Gixsistalisəmə'yi ['Nakwaxda'xw]  
Jonathan (Johnny) Hunt/ Kwakwabalasəmə'yi [Kwagu'ł]  
Helen Wilson Knox/ Łəłəndzəwik/ "Nunu" [Kwagu'ł]  
Emily Hunt Wilson/ Gwəkamgi'lakw [Kwagu'ł]  
Yaxyagidzəngə [?]

## 2013 Restoration Credits

### ***In the Land of the Head Hunters Project Producers***

Aaron Glass, Brad Evans, and Andrea Sanborn

For more information on the film and project:

*Return to the Land of the Head Hunters:*

*Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka'wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*  
(Edited by Brad Evans and Aaron Glass, University of Washington Press, 2014)  
[www.curtisfilm.rutgers.edu](http://www.curtisfilm.rutgers.edu)

### **2K Digital Transfer by Modern Videofilm**

Colorist: Kathy Thomson

Supervised by Jere Guldin, UCLA Film & Television Archive

Produced by Vincent Pirozzi

Produced by Milestone Film & Video

### **Original Orchestral Score by John J. Braham**

Courtesy of The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (850111)

Performing Edition by David Gilbert

© J. Paul Getty Trust.

The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2008.M.58)

### **Performed by Turning Point Ensemble in collaboration with The Vancouver Film Orchestra.**

Music Producer: Hal Beckett

Score recorded and mixed by Vince Renaud

Musician Contractor: Meagan Carsience

Recording Studio: Warehouse Studios, Vancouver, B.C.

### **Turning Point Ensemble**

Co-Artistic Directors: Jeremy Berkman and Owen Underhill

Conductor and Musical Director: Owen Underhill

Flute: Brenda Fedoruk

Clarinet: François Houle

Trumpet: Marcus Goddard

Trombone: Jeremy Berkman

Percussion: Vern Griffiths

Violins: Mary Sokol Brown and Marc Destrubé

Viola: Marcus Takizawa

Cello: Ariel Barnes

Bass: David Brown

<http://www.turningpointensemble.ca>

### **Music Score Funds Provided by**

Rutgers University, Office of Undergraduate Academic Affairs

### **Milestone also thanks:**

Virginia Mokslaveskas

Dr. Jan-Christopher Horak

Pauline Stakelon Lopez

George Quimby and Bill Holm

Denise Clark

Kevin Brownlow

## One of the Rarest of “Lost” Films: The Survival and Restoration of

# IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD HUNTERS

*“Edward S Curtis, as a portrait photographer, was a genius. His original photographs of Native Americans fetch enormous sums. He is little known as a filmmaker, mainly because his work has only been seen on 16mm. Milestone is restoring some of his In the Land of the Head Hunters (1914) in 35mm. The film has been described as a forerunner of Nanook of the North. And it is undoubtedly among the most important factual films ever made in America. Curtis’s skill with the camera, allied to his incredible knowledge of the Indians, won the film ecstatic reviews. Moving Picture World said “it has never been surpassed.” It was extremely difficult to enter an Indian community in order to film in those days. Whatever remains of Curtis’s motion picture work will therefore be of exceptional value.”*

— Kevin Brownlow  
Oscar®-winning film historian, author and film restoration expert

It was 1914. Edward S. Curtis was known as the most popular photographer in Pacific Northwest. He was a close friend of American President Theodore Roosevelt and had the financial support of John Pierpont Morgan, one of the wealthiest men in the world. Thanks to his millionaire patron, Curtis was in the midst of creating one of the greatest and most lavish achievements in publishing history — the twenty-volume *The North American Indian*. Yet a decade into the project, Curtis was secretly in massive debt. Morgan had paid for much of the cost of his expeditions throughout the Indian territories but Curtis had been working for free all that time. Not even Morgan’s money was enough to cover the scope of Curtis’s ambitious travels.

The famed photographer decided to band together investors for a go-for-broke gamble that he promised would make a \$100,000 profit. It was to be a film of the Kwakiutl (now known as Kwakwaka’wakw) of Canada’s Vancouver Island — the most artistically accomplished tribe he had met in all his travels throughout Western Canada’s central coast and Vancouver Island. The Kwakwaka’wakw were renowned for their magnificent totem poles, carved canoes and painted houses, as well as their mesmerizing religious ceremonies and costumes. At a time when the world’s most experienced film directors had only been making long-form films for two years, it was an incredibly ambitious risk. (D.W. Griffith’s own first feature, *The Birth of a Nation* was still a year away.) To add to this high-wire act, Curtis envisioned an epic feature made on location without experienced actors and crew members. He planned to travel to what was then the Canadian wilderness, far from electricity and other modern conveniences, with only the Kwakiutl to help shoot and star in the film.

Curtis was renowned for the Tiffany-style quality of his photographs, often printed with platinum and gold as well as other time-consuming and costly methods. So for his foray into filmmaking, he decided that *In the Land of the Head Hunters* would be the most beautiful film ever made. Advertising created for the film’s release proclaimed that “the Hochstetter process,” a *natural* color process, had been used in the making of the movie. In examining the original nitrate, it seems that this was promotional ballyhoo, but the film did feature an incredible multitude of tints and tones — perhaps more than any other in the silent era. Even in

1914, these prints would have been enormously expensive and time-consuming to create. With its remarkable Kwakiutl costumes, dancing, and carvings along with Curtis's spectacular cinematography, and vibrant hues, the film must have been a marvel for contemporary audiences. Curtis commissioned composer John J. Braham (known for his American arrangements for Gilbert and Sullivan) to write one of the very first orchestral scores for a feature film. Braham purportedly based his music on the field recordings that Curtis had produced with the Kwakiutl.

But bad luck and bad decisions had haunted Curtis' entire life. Although *In the Land of the Head Hunters* opened to great reviews and good box office, the film's income did not come close to meeting Curtis's projections. Worse, he found himself in a dispute with his distributor, World Film Company. Founded that year (1914) in Fort Lee, New Jersey, this production and distribution company was a short-lived but important member of the early film community. It launched first-time owner Lewis J. Selznick's film career, starting a family tradition that later included Lewis's sons: Hollywood agent, Myron, and legendary producer, David.

After six premieres and a \$3,269 gross, Curtis and World Film argued over who would pay the costs to take the film to other markets. Curtis, saddled with debts and a film that was already over budget, was furious. The film's theatrical release ended in litigation, killing any chance for financial success.

In retrospect, with such a limited number of 35mm nitrate release prints, the ultimate survival of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* was always in doubt — especially with the knowledge that certain color tints and tones often accelerated nitrate film decomposition. In 1922, Curtis sold the film's negative, thereby relinquishing its copyright, and sold one print to New York's American Museum of Natural History for \$1,500. These disappeared and by the 1980s, almost all nitrate film at the Museum was destroyed in favor of BetacamSP tape. In 1947, a 35mm print popped up, owned by a Chicago film collector. The collector, Hugo Zeiter, was by no means well-known and maintains that he probably received this copy of the film from a friend who found it in a dumpster behind a theater. After a disastrous screening during which part of the print burst into flames, the Field Museum of Natural History created a 16mm B&W copy and destroyed the 35mm print.

In 1972, art historian Bill Holm, museum anthropologist George Quimby, and colleague David Gerth created a new edit of the film, working with the Field Museum's 16mm materials and adding a soundtrack of songs and dialogue by the Kwakiutls. This version, which featured all new intertitles, was renamed *In the Land of the War Canoe* and was heralded as an invaluable ethnographic record of a vanished culture. Shortly thereafter, it was reported that the Field Museum's original 16mm reels had been lost.

In the 1970s, film archivist David Shepard found two reels of Curtis's 35mm nitrate that he donated to the UCLA Film Archive. When asked in 2013 about where this discovery came from, he explained:

*"...I got them (with a lot of other film) from George T. Post, a retired projectionist in San Francisco. George was a white Russian who came to the U.S. via the Crimea and Turkey. He worked as a projectionist his whole life, so he never had much human interaction and never learned much English. He built a nice theatre in the basement of his home at 188 16th Avenue (then a heavily Russian neighborhood) and collected 35mm silent films that he would show his friends, also Russian-speaking. They could handle English intertitles but not English dialogue. I got most of his silent fiction films for The Library of Congress (there were lots of treasures) around 1970, but not the non-fiction films of which there were many."*

But by 1992, when Milestone first inquired into the whereabouts of that 35mm material, it seemed that these reels had deteriorated and been destroyed. There seemed to be *nothing* left of the original film. In 1999, the Library of Congress even chose *In the Land of the War Canoes* for its National Film Registry, though no one had seen Curtis' *original* version since the 1940s.

However, in the past decade, academics Brad Evans and Aaron Glass discovered that the original 16mm elements still existed at the Field Museum *and* that the two reels of 35mm nitrate film at UCLA were indeed still in the vault. They also learned from Holm that the original copyright filing of the film with the Library of Congress in 1914 included a large number of film frames in story order. (A common practice in those days



rather than donating a print.) Archivist Jere Gulden realized that it might be possible to recreate missing scenes using these original stills. Propelled further by Glass's discovery of the original score at the Getty Research Institute, thus began collaboration between UCLA, the Field Museum, and the Getty to restore *In the Land of the Head Hunters* back to its original version. Miraculously, a film that perhaps had only ever existed in a handful of prints still had enough footage preserved to recreate much of what had thrilled audiences in 1914.

## UCLA Film & Television Archive: Film Restoration Process

By Jere Guldin, film restorer, UCLA Film & Television Archive

Neither of the two sources for surviving footage from *In the Land of the Head Hunters* were even close to being complete. Only an approximate total of three reels of scenes from the original six reels were represented by the Field Museum footage. The UCLA material added the better part of another reel of missing footage, primarily from the final reel. The UCLA footage was copied wetgate to 35mm negative, yielding an image vastly superior in quality to the Field Museum footage (copied "dry" to the lower-gauge 16mm sixty years ago).

Prior to its being copied, few repairs were made to the Field nitrate, which was splicey, fragile, water-damaged, and decomposing. This resulted in numerous onscreen jumps and misregistrations, some of which were adjusted on the fly during printing by the optical printer operator. Extensive repairs and the benefit of improved printing techniques during the intervening years yielded a cleaner and steadier image from the UCLA nitrate, which is also in about the same condition as was the Field's. However, even if a perfect condition nitrate print of *Head Hunters* had survived the years, evidence suggests it never originally looked pristine due to ragged editing and poor camerawork that resulted in frequent image pull-down and second framelines.

For this restoration, a few short shots were lengthened, some out-of-frame shots re-framed optically, and when Field and UCLA footage overlapped, intercutting of portions of shots from each was performed to secure as complete a final product as possible. Even so, many frames were removed to eliminate the worst jumps and splices for a smoother overall presentation. Because many of the intertitles were short or badly degraded, all titles were re-created digitally. Missing main and end titles were re-created in the manner of other World Film Corporation releases of the time. Missing intertitles were derived from plot synopses and other sources. Images from approximately fifty missing shots were obtained from single frames submitted to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes and a tinting scheme for the entire film was derived from the UCLA nitrate. Tinting of the screening print was effected through dye-bath immersion.

The restoration was undertaken by UCLA Film & Television Archive. Optical work, printing, and tinting was performed by The Stanford Theatre Film Laboratory. Processing and color printing was completed by YCM Laboratories and titles were generated by Title House Digital.

## The Milestone Film Version

UCLA created one hand-tinted projection print of their *In The Land of the Head Hunters* restoration and the film played several times in 2010. However at some point that print was severely damaged. Unfortunately, because creating such an elaborately tinted 35mm print is both time-consuming and expensive, no new print was struck and none will be created in the near future.

There were two additional problems. The restored film has to be shown at 16 frames per second (16fps). These days, fewer and fewer theaters have *any* film projection equipment and far fewer are equipped with variable-speed projection. Also, because it must be shown at slower speed, a 16fps film print cannot accommodate a playable soundtrack. Instead, any 35mm screening of *In The Land of the Head Hunters* would need to be shown with live musical accompaniment — and few venues can afford the financial cost to mount the original orchestral score.

Due to the film's age and the original 1914 projection speed of 16 frames per second, Milestone decided that this unique masterpiece must be distributed digitally. The elaborate tinting scheme found in the original nitrate print — twelve different tints — was re-created under the supervision of UCLA's Jere Guldin. Modern Videofilm's Kathy Thomson was the colorist and Vincent Pirozzi supervised the digital work. For ease of use, a 2K digital file at 24 frames per second was created. Modern Videofilm then spent hundreds of hours on a major digital cleanup of the material, but since the 16mm footage was relatively soft, it turned out that much of the film's detail was lost by these corrections. After consultation and comparing a "before and after," Modern went back to square one with the digital transfer before the extensive cleanup. Bad frames and film jitter were still eliminated, but there was a lighter cleanup of nitrate damage, dust and scratches in order to keep as much detail as possible. From this, Modern created a new digital version at 16fps so the Milestone release could be projected at the proper speed and the new soundtrack could be added.

Milestone acquired the rights to the original score from the Getty and Vancouver's famed Turning Point Ensemble performed the music soundtrack based on UCLA's David Gilbert's arrangement of the original score. Brad Evans was able to obtain partial funding for the score through the Rutgers University Office of Undergraduate Academic Affairs. Working with Modern Videofilm, Milestone added the completed score to the 2K files and then created DCPs to be shown in theaters around the world.



## Synopsis

(From the original 1914 program)

To gain power from the spirit forces, Motana, the son of a great chief, goes on a vigil journey. Through the fasting and hardships of the vigil he hopes to gain supernatural strength, which will make him a chief not less powerful than his father, Kenada.

First upon a mountain's peak he builds a prayer-fire to the Gods. After long dancing about the sacred flames he drops from exhaustion, and in vision-sleep the face of a maid appears in the coiling smoke; thus breaking the divine law, which forbids the thought of women during the fasting.

Now he must pass another stronger ordeal. Leaving his desecrated fire to go to the Island of the Dead he meets Naida, the maid of his dream, and woos her. She tells him she is promised to the hideous Sorcerer. Motana bids the maid return to her father and says that when this vigil is over he will come with a wealth of presents and beg her hand in marriage. Now he renews his quest of spirit power and tests his courage by spending the night in the fearful "house of skulls." And to prove his prowess he goes in quest of sea lions and then performs the greatest feat of all — the capture of a whale.

Then, for his final invocation to the Gods, Motana again builds his sacred fire upon the heights. While he fasts and dances there about his sacred fire the Sorcerer, in a dark glade of the forest, has gathered about him fellow workers in evil magic and they sing "short life songs" to destroy him. The Sorcerer sends his daughter to find Motana and in some way get a lock of his hair, that they may destroy his life by incantation. This plotting woman, however, on seeing Motana asleep by his fire, becomes infatuated with him and



decides to risk even the wrath of her Sorcerer father and win the love of Motana. When she awakens him with caressing words, he bids her be gone, as he is not thinking of women, but of the spirits. With angry threats she departs, but in stealth watches the faster until he drops asleep, then creeping up steals his necklace and a lock of hair, and disappears.

Motana, returning, asks his father to send messengers demanding the hand on Naida. Her father, Waket, replies to the messengers: "My daughter is promised to the fearful Sorcerer of Yilis. We dread his evil magic. We also fear Yaklus, the

headhunter, the brother of the Sorcerer. The Sorcerer is proof against knife and spear and arrow. Yaklus and his clan know no conqueror."

The followers of Motana and Kenada prove that the power of the Sorcerer cannot avail against the wrath of the raven-clan members, who are determined to rid the region of the Head Hunters. The head of the Sorcerer they bring, to prove his death. But unknown to them, Yaklus, the headhunting chief, has escaped. In great pomp of primitive pageantry, Naida and Motana are married. Yet even while the wedding dancers make merry, a cloud of tragedy hangs above them, for Yaklus and the survivors of his village are athirst for vengeance. Enraged at the death of his brother the Sorcerer, he runs "pahu-paku," and it is really Yaklus, "the short life bringer."



In his magnificent high-prowed canoes he starts upon his war of vengeance. It is his law that the war party destroy all who are met, whether friend or foe. While on their foray fishing parties and travelers are encountered.

Then they make their night attack upon the village of Motana. Kenada and his tribesmen give way before the infuriated Yaklus, and amid the smoke and flames of the burning village Motana is wounded and Naida is carried away to captivity.

Yaklus, returning to his village, gives a great dance of victory. The frenzied warriors demand the life of Naida. Yaklus bids her come and dance for them. If she dances well enough to please him he will spare her life. If not, they will throw her to the "hungry wolves." So well does she dance that Yaklus spares her.

In the sleeping hours Naida sends her fellow captive slave with a token and message to Motana, who has been revived by surviving medicine men of his village. When he receives the message from his bride-wife Motana calls for volunteers.

By stealth he rescues her. Yaklus in rage starts in pursuit. Motana, hard pressed, dares the waters of the surging gorge of Hyal through which he passes in safety. Great was his "water magic." Yaklus attempts to follow but the raging waters of the gorge sweep upon him and he and his grizzly followers become the prey of the evil ones of the sea.



## Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868–1952)

*“In Mr. Curtis we have both an artist and a trained observer...[who] because of the singular combination of qualities with which he has been blest, and because of his extraordinary success in making and using his opportunities, has been able to do what no other man could do...He has lived on intimate terms with many tribes of the mountains and the plains. He knows them as they hunt, as they travel, as they go about their various avocations on the march and in the camp. He knows their medicine men and their sorcerers, their chiefs and warriors, their young men and maidens. He has not only seen their vigorous outward existence, but has caught glimpses, such as few white men ever catch, into that strange spiritual and mental life of theirs; from whose innermost recesses all white men are forever barred. Mr. Curtis...is rendering a real and great service...not only to our own people, but to the world of scholarship everywhere.”*

— President Theodore Roosevelt

Edward S. Curtis is one of the most highly regarded yet frequently criticized photographers of Native Americans. His photographs made in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century evoke the majesty of their subjects along with a sense of innocence and loss. In the 1970s, the documentary work of Teri C. McLuhan and other researchers revived interest in Curtis and his popularity has increased with each year. Today, his photographs sell for record prices and museums continuously mount exhibitions of his work.

Edward S. Curtis was born on February 19, 1868 in Madison, Wisconsin. His father, a discharged Civil War private, was in poor health and was often unable to provide for his wife and four children. Curtis often foraged for what he needed while growing up, including both food and educational opportunities. His formal schooling ended in the sixth grade at around the same time that he discovered a camera lens his father had acquired during the war. Curtis built a body for the camera from an instruction manual that he borrowed from a friend and became enamored with both the technology and its possibilities. He moved to Seattle where he became a full-time studio photographer and married his sweetheart, Clara Phillips. He quickly became successful and was able to invite his entire family to join him in Washington so that he could continue to support them as best he could. This presumably was the first and last time that Curtis would be financially secure.

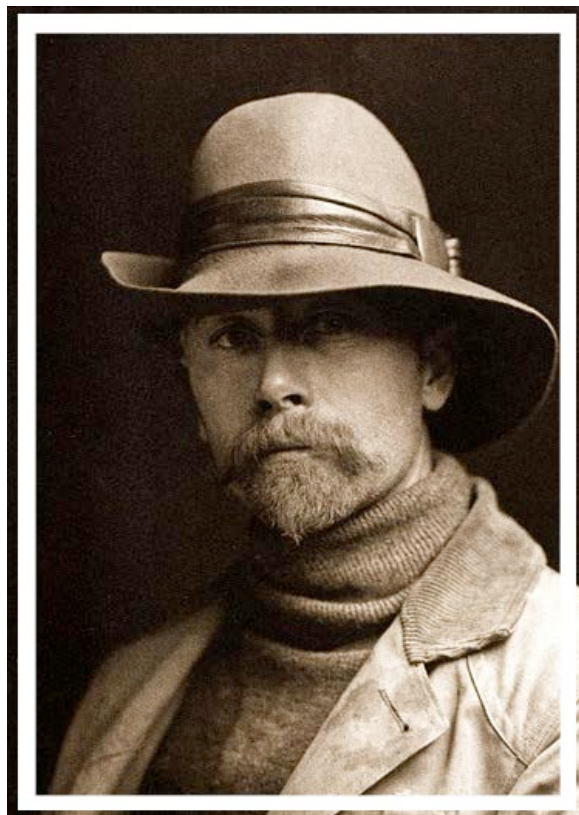
While in Seattle, Curtis developed a reputation for being able to capture the truest essence of an individual. From sailors to young women, public figures to tycoons, Curtis’s mastery of photographic skills shone through each image and was applauded widely. He claimed, “Good pictures are not products of chance, but come from long hours of study.” His family recalls him working constantly, even at home. He studied the works of old masters and his own contemporaries and was always thinking of his next great picture. He was known to work well into the night and often slept in his studio surrounded by his inspirations and ideas. His nephew, William Phillips, once said, “I can still see him now, sitting on the floor, his knees drawn up and held between clasped hands, his head tilted back against the wall, with clippings and pictures of all sorts scattered about in front of him, a book of poems by his side, lighted only by the flames from a fireplace.... When he broke the silence, his usual remark was, ‘Wait till you see the next picture I make; it’s going to be a cracker jack.’”

After beginning to take portraits of American Indians in the Seattle area such as Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe and Princess Angeline, the last surviving child of Chief Seattle, Curtis befriended George Bird Grinnell and Clinton Hart Merriam on a chance hiking trip and was subsequently invited to be the official photographer for the famous Harriman expedition to Alaska in 1899. Curtis, accompanied by acclaimed zoologists, botanists, geologists, and ethnologists, gained a wide knowledge of the Northwestern terrain and its inhabitants. It was on this trip that Curtis became familiar with an audio recording device in the form of a wax cylinder that he would later use in his own ethnographic pursuits. As Curtis and Grinnell's relationship strengthened over the course of the trip, Grinnell saw a strong interest in recording the lives of the Northwestern tribes in the young photographer; he extended an invitation to accompany him on another more intimate trip the following year. That second expedition marked the moment when Curtis realized his true passion in life. Curtis was determined that the Indian culture and way of life would not pass without being documented. He wrote that he wanted to record "every phase of Indian life of all tribes yet, in a primitive condition, taking up the type, male and female, child and adult, their home structure, their environment, their handicraft, games, ceremonies, etc."

Grinnell became a mentor for Curtis and always challenged him to become a more thoughtful and forward-thinking photographer. It was Grinnell that encouraged the artist to not rush interactions with his subjects and to get acquainted with them on a personal level before proceeding. George Bird Grinnell wrote of Curtis, "The work that he has done and is doing is, from the ethnological point of view, of the very highest value...But while he does this, he considers also – and, I fancy, considers chiefly – the art side; and the result is that his pictures are full of art.... The results which Curtis gets with his camera stir one as one is stirred by a great painting; and when we are thus moved by a picture, and share the thought and feeling that the artist had when he made the picture, we may recognize it as a work of art."

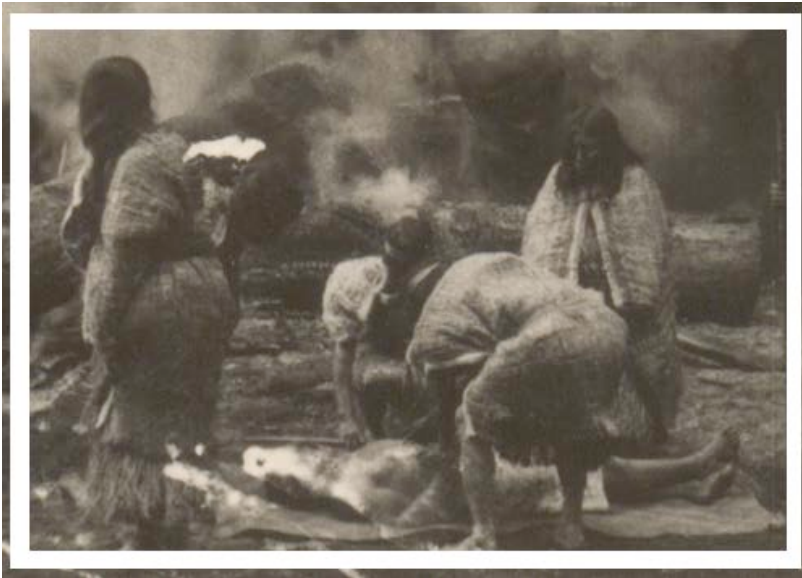
Even though Curtis liked to maintain that his endeavors were only for his "amusement," it was the most lucrative part of his portrait business. His photographs of Indian tribes sold for far more than his studio portrait work; but the sales of his award-winning pictures would not be enough to finance the next project that Curtis had in mind, a project that would become a decades-long pursuit.

His goal was to publish a set of twenty volumes entitled *The North American Indian* that would document eighty indigenous tribes. It would be one of the largest anthropological projects ever undertaken in the United States. He would also make audio recordings of the tribes' songs and languages so that their words would never be lost, even if the culture disappeared – a standard assumption at the time. He made an exhaustive presentation to the Smithsonian Institution in hopes of receiving funding for this endeavor, but ultimately was turned down due to his lack of formal training as an ethnologist. This failure did not deter him and he appealed to his friend President Theodore Roosevelt for financial assistance. While Roosevelt ultimately decided that he could not provide him with funding, he gave Curtis a written endorsement for the purpose of accompanying any proposal for the project henceforth. Curtis then arranged an appointment with J. Pierpont Morgan who, after some persistence on Curtis's part, agreed to put up \$75,000 toward field expenses, to be paid out at the rate of



\$15,000 per year for five years. In return, Morgan was to receive twenty-five of the \$3,000 sets, along with their matching portfolios of at least 500 photogravures.

Curtis raised additional funds for *The North American Indian* by creating and performing what he called a "picture musicale" in 1911. He wrote a detailed script and arranged his lantern slides and a select few motion picture reels to follow a narrative and hired composer Henry F. Gilbert to write a score based on his wax cylinder recordings. Despite attendance by prominent figures such as President William Taft and Alexander Graham Bell and the copious amounts of critical acclaim, the production costs exceeded the ticket sales and Curtis fell more deeply into debt. His last-ditch effort at saving his colossal project was a



projected series of feature films about the Indian tribes, beginning with the Kwakiutl. He said about this particular tribe, "Theirs was a populous region, the people proud, vigorous, crafty, cruel, constantly engaged in warfare, and depending mainly on the sea for food...Their ceremonial masks are in decoration and variety scarcely surpassed...Pictures should be made to illustrate the period before the white man came."

After a painstaking production process, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* was released to a plethora of praise, including poet Vachel Lindsay's declaration that the film

"is a supreme art achievement." But the profits from the film were meager and could not sustain the production of more feature films; much less make a significant contribution to *The North American Indian*.

Nevertheless, the epic volumes were completed by 1930. During the project, Curtis had taken over 80,000 photographs of over 80 Indian tribes. The New York Herald called his work "the most gigantic undertaking in the making of books since the King James edition of the Bible." The final product consisted of twenty volumes of text printed on imported hand-made paper. Each volume was bound in irregularly grained morocco leather and contained approximately three hundred pages of text and photogravure prints. There were fifteen hundred prints in the twenty volumes and each volume was accompanied by a corresponding portfolio containing thirty-six or more copperplate gravures. There were 722 total plates in the twenty portfolios. The set was costly to produce and an expensive purchase in the early 20th century. They were published and distributed via subscription to patrons and museums over the course of 23 years.

In the throws of the Great Depression, Curtis took a job as a Hollywood still photographer. He joined the Screenwriters' Club and became good friends with stars such as William S. Hart, the director D.W. Griffiths, and Cecil B. DeMille. It was DeMille who asked for his assistance on the set of his film *The Plainsmen*, but Curtis's knowledge of the tribes and the landscape were not called upon in the production process and he slid once more into the background.

Curtis spent the later years of his life living quietly amongst his own writings and corresponding with the occasional librarian who would discover his work and inquire about his well-being. His wife had divorced him long ago, but he was able to reconnect with his children, some of who had only met him on a handful of occasions in their childhood. On October 19, 1952, Edward Curtis died of a heart attack at the age of 84. Because of his constant financial struggles, he left virtually no money nor any possessions, but there was one exception that he held in the highest regard: a single complete edition of *The North American Indian*.

Since the 1970s, Curtis's career has experienced a cultural revival and a steady stream of literature, from coffee table books to academic critiques, have emerged over the last few decades. This extensive attention to Curtis encapsulates the history of the debate about the visual representation of Native Americans and the re-release of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* has the chance to further that discussion.

## The Production of the Film

In 1911, as part of his massive undertaking, Curtis travelled to Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to visit the Kwakiutls. Curtis had already shot moving images in 1906 of the Hopi Snake dance, which he had previously showed during his talks, but this film project was to be on a grander scale. On March 28, 1912, Curtis wrote in a letter to Frederick Webb Hodge: "I am still doing some figuring on the possibility of a series of motion pictures, and am very much in hopes that it will materialize, as such an arrangement would materially strengthen the real cause [his books]." In his promotional letters to raise money for the series, he estimated the profits would be \$100,000. This was simply not to be. By the time the film came out, its distributor World Film Corporation (run by Lewis Selznick) was in financial trouble and the bookings and income never materialized.



It took three years of preparation for *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. Assisting on the film was George Hunt, a man born and raised at Fort Rupert who had achieved a high status amongst the Kwakiutl long before becoming Curtis's associate. Hunt had served as an interpreter for the famous anthropologist Franz Boas nearly twenty years prior. Part of this responsibility was ensuring that all signs of western influence were eliminated from each shot. Many of the participants recall Curtis as being "cranky" because of his perfectionism. Curtis even went so far as to say that those whose white ancestry was too evident were not allowed to participate in the film. Hunt helped contribute substantial portions of the film's story as well. He oversaw the carving and painting of masks, totem poles, dugout canoes, and other artifacts, as well as the making of costumes. Hunt's wife (who appears in the film) and other women made capes, aprons, blankets, neck rings, and cedar-bark regalia for the actors to wear while his son, Stanley, played the leading man in the film. An entire village of roofless houses and false fronts with three walls a la Edison's Black Maria studio were built solely for the purpose of Curtis's film. When he finally arrived after all was constructed, Curtis brought boxes of nose rings and wigs from China, much to the amusement of the villagers. The Kwakiutl men has worn their hair short for decades, so Curtis paid them each fifty cents a day to shave their facial hair and wear nose rings for their scenes.

Originally titled "In the Days of Vancouver," the detailed scenario for those days of early cinema was elaborate. Curtis had already decided that the film could not be a simple documentary record. It would have to be a story that reflected the rich dramatic character of the people.

*In the Land of the Head Hunters* was shot on Deer Island on a protected beachfront opposite Fort Rupert. Other scenes were shot on location in and around Blunden Harbour as well as the north end of Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands). Curtis also sailed to what he called "Devil Rock" to

film the sea lions. Curtis and his assistant were ferried over and left to spend the night at the island. According to Curtis' uncorroborated story, they had consulted government charts that indicated that the island was forty feet above the high-tide mark. When they explored the island, they found to their horror that there was not a single piece of driftwood. This meant only one thing — the charts were wrong. They packed all their equipment in watertight bags and moved to the highest point of the island. During the night, they could not sleep, knowing that they might not live through the day. At dawn, the high tide swept in and flooded over them. For hours, they hung on to their rigged lifelines, barely surviving until the boat returned. Curtis later wrote, "To this day, I cannot read about a human being sentenced to death without recalling that moment on Devil Rock." A corresponding scene appears in the film; a magnificent sequence of hundreds of bulls diving off the rocks into the ocean in a long line.

A problem Curtis had throughout the making of the film was the casting of Naida, the female love interest. As shooting went on, relatives of the actresses cast as Naida disapproved of the women's participation and took them off the film. As a result, there are three women credited in the role. Another casting difficulty that he faced had to do with the social class system of the tribe. The actors could not wear a mask or costume, or perform a dance, that was not entitled to them, so only the Native nobility could play the main roles.

The film, released in December 1914 under the title *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, received rave reviews from critics at its New York premiere. In April 1915, Curtis met aspiring filmmaker Robert Flaherty and his wife, Frances and gave them a special screening of *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. Flaherty, who had already tried and failed to film the Baffin Island Eskimos two years before, was strongly influenced by the Curtis's film and six years later he recorded his own masterpiece on Native American culture, *Nanook of the North*. In their romanticism and desire to film native culture before the further onslaught of western civilization, Flaherty and Curtis shared much the same sensibility.

## A Response to the Curtis Controversy

By Bill Holm

The work of Edward Curtis is seen by viewers in different ways. For some years there has been a widespread tendency to see his photographs of Native Americans as misleading and even demeaning because he emphasized the Native cultures of bygone days and even dressed his subjects in regalia that they didn't customarily wear in their everyday lives at the time his photographs were made. It has frequently been alleged that he carried along trunks of clothing and regalia, and convinced his Native subjects to dress up in long out-of-date style. Most of this criticism is by people who know little or nothing about the circumstances of Edward Curtis's work. The "trunks of costumes" charge has no basis in fact. The story probably arose when viewers recognized a Lakota war shirt worn by a number of different men in his northern and central Plains photographs. A careful review of all the photographs in Curtis's monumental twenty-volume series of books and portfolios reveals this shirt to be the only example of a piece of ceremonial clothing worn by men of several different tribes, and probably was furnished by Curtis. Every other example of an article of dress worn by more than one person proves to have been the belonging of one of them, and was worn only by his tribal fellows in Edward Curtis's pictures.

My own personal research among subjects of Curtis's photos who were still living, and with the descendants of others, has been with the Kwakwaka'wakw people, and there we find quite a different perspective. First it is necessary to place Curtis's photography in the context of time. In the several years leading to and including 1914, when he made his moving picture, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* with all Kwakwaka'wakw actors, there were many of them who had been born and raised in traditional bighouses, many of which were still standing and in use in 1914, heated by fires, with packed earthen floors swept with eagle wing brushes. The great carved houseposts were and are still considered valuable family prerogatives. The Kwakwaka'wakw did not give up their traditional ways in spite of the efforts of missionaries and government officials, as is clear from their constant complaints about the recalcitrant Kwakwaka'wakw. The great crackdown on Native ceremonial activities did not come until 7 years after Curtis made his pictures. In fact, the Kwakwaka'wakw never did give up the potlatch or the making of traditional masks and ceremonial regalia. The great artists-- Willie Seaweed, Mungo Martin, Charlie Georg Sr., Xexanius, among them-- lived and worked through and beyond the assault on their culture, and their heritage continues to this day. It's true that people in Curtis's time did not ordinarily wear cedar bark clothing, but many of them had in their youth, and the knowledge and skills needed to make and wear that clothing was known and practiced.

A particularly good example is that of George Hunt's wife Francine, who made many of the cedar bark robes and dress for use in Curtis's film. She also was depicted shredding cedar bark in a Curtis photograph, and she demonstrated the technique, as well as others, for Franz Boas's 1930 Kwakwaka'wakw motion-studies film. She appears in a number of Curtis's published pictures, two of which ("Nakoaktok chief's daughter" and "Gathering abalone") were among the Curtis pictures commented on. Although, technically speaking, she is "anonymous" in the Curtis volumes, she is far from it in fact. Known familiarly by her everyday name "Tsaqwani" and more formally by the chieftainess name Tl'at'at'awidzamga, her very traditional life was documented in 45 pages of a very long family history published in Kwakwaka'wakw and English in Franz Boas's "Ethnology of the Kwakiutl," 35th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Twelve pages of this account are devoted to a detailed description of her marriage to Sisaxolas, a Gwa'sala chief! Anyone assuming that this 1914 subject of Edward Curtis's photography was not steeped in the culture and knowledge of the traditional Kwakwaka'wakw, and that she was merely following Curtis's romantic notions of how she should act, is sadly mistaken.

## The Innovation of *In the Land of the Head Hunters*

by Brad Evans and Aaron Glass

(from the website: <http://curtisfilm.rutgers.edu/index.php>)

When it was first screened in 1914, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* entered into a field crowded with “Indian pictures.” From the beginning, Native Americans were not merely represented by the motion picture industry, but played a central role in its emergence. One of the first studio short films was the Edison Company’s twenty-second *Sioux Ghost Dance* (1894). Filmed at Edison’s studio in West Orange, New Jersey, it featured Oglala and Brulé Sioux who were touring in Brooklyn at the time with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. This short was followed by hundreds of others featuring Native American actors, many of whom had been involved with Buffalo Bill while others were brought in specially for the occasion.

What *Head Hunters* brought to this mix was a desire to elevate the Indian movie to a new level of artistry, as well as a desire to portray Native American life outside the stereotypes established for it by the prior two decades of filmic representation — not to mention the even longer history of Native American representation since the 1830s in dime novels and Wild West shows. The mere fact that Curtis chose a picturesque but not stereotypical First Nations group —lacking the ready-made Indian icons of feathered headdresses, horses, tomahawks, and tipis — suggests his desire to avoid those clichés, even as he indulged in others (head hunting, sorcery, fire dances, vision quests). Perhaps this denial of audience familiarity also in part explains its box-office failure.

Technically, Curtis’s film is remarkable not only for the quality and originality of its production, but also for the hyperbole of the advertising for it, which was clearly aimed at distinguishing it from other films in the market. Everything about the film — from the identity of its actors to the source for its musical score — were vigorously claimed to be “authentic.” It was a six-reel film, which was fairly long for the time, and it was shot entirely on location in the Northern Sea. It featured innovative moving camera shots. Its sequencing demonstrated Curtis’s basic understanding of principles of narrative continuity. The original advertising for the film stressed the significance of what was called “the Hochstetter process,” supposedly a natural color process that had been used in the making of the film. Although technical analysis indicates that it had, in fact, been tinted and toned in the standard way in the studio, the coloring of the Kwakwaka’wakw costumes and homes, as well as of the pacific coast landscape, is quite complex for the time.

In terms of its portrayal of indigenous life, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* differs significantly from previous examples of the genre because of its combination of fictional and non-fictional elements. Whereas “Indian pictures” followed standard plot lines — ranging from cowboy and Indian spectacles in the mold of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, to more delicately framed interracial love stories (known as “squaw romances”) — *Head Hunters* withdrew all traces of contact with whites or modernity. There is still a love story; only it is between the Native Americans themselves. And there is warfare, but not the standard fare with frontiersmen or cowboys. Moreover, at a time when the Canadian government had prohibited the performance of many ceremonial rituals in an attempt to force assimilation, the film portrays most such rituals in accordance with Kwakwaka’wakw protocols. It might be argued that by removing the film’s narrative from the historical moment of its production, Curtis denied the modernity of its actor/participants. However, in asking them to be movie actors in the first place, Curtis complicated his other claims to documentary realism and proved that Native people could perform their past as a way of imagining a cultural future. There is no clearer hallmark of modern consciousness.

Curtis brought to his film his own aesthetic proclivities, commercial ambitions, and racialized cultural imagination. For their part, the Kwakwaka’wakw contributed their significant artistic and dramatic talents as well as editorial input. Although Curtis retained control over its initial structure and shape, the film is best appreciated as an intercultural co-production, the first of its kind at this scale and in the cinematic medium. The peculiar history of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* suggests its potential for contemporary relevance



and continual re-imagining by film historians, students of cultural and colonial representation, and Kwakwaka'wakw communities alike.

But like many independent films today, Curtis' masterpiece was over budget and the film's distributor, the World Film Corporation was underfunded. *In the Land of the Head Hunters* was only shown sporadically after its Seattle and New York premieres, and within ten years it had vanished and been forgotten, leaving *Nanook of the North* to be considered the first milestone in exploration documentary history.

# U'mista Cultural Society

## Statement of Participation

*La'misan's Kwakwaka'wakw laxan's gweta'asi laxux da U'mistax olak'ala amya'xalax i'ax'ine'yas Edward Curtis la'e sabadzawegila xan's k'walsk'wal'yakwi laxa k'wisata 'nala. La'ma'as ikamas xan's ni'noka'yi le'gan's 'namaxas dlu' dukwamxda'xwax. La'misan's ugwaka k'odfa'nakwala le'gan's dukwalax yaxwata'ena'yan's k'walsk'wal'yakwi dlu'wi da ik sixwa laxa xwak'wana. Yu'am i'al'stsa k'walsk'wal'yakwi yaxus gaxex xit'saxalasu'wa. La'misux 'namaxas gaxs laxwe'yan's k'walsk'wal'yakwi la'ex 'wi'la dli'dlagad laxan's gwaya'ya'elasi. Giwalida Kwakwaka'wakw lae' sabadzawe'gili Curtis lax 1914, it'ida giwala lax 1973 laex hifasuwxda axadzawe' yasa sabadzaweyu. Ikanuxw ninokayi leganuxw gige'xuxda eyaxalax ka oxda sabadzaweyuxw ka ugwakamaxs dafax gwefasesanuxw nala.*

The Kwak'wala speaking peoples—the Kwakwaka'wakw, represented by the U'mista Cultural Society—are indeed indebted to Edward Curtis for his work in documenting some of our traditions in this early film. To see our old people as they looked in those early days is very special. We continue to learn by watching the dance movements and the expert paddling in the film. The young people who participated in the live performance as part of this project are descendants of the people you see in the film. Because they have all been initiated and named in our ceremonies, they bring a true spiritual connection with them in their singing and dancing. The Kwakwaka'wakw people helped make Curtis's film in 1914 and then helped again in 1973 when it was remade. We are proud to have been involved in the current project, as this film is part of our history.

Chief William T. Cranmer  
Chair, U'mista Cultural Society

## Review from 'Motion Picture World' – December 19, 1914

By W. Stephen Bush

### **"In the Land of the Head Hunters": Remarkable Motion Picture Produced by Edward S. Curtis, Famous Authority on North American Indians**

If I were asked to point to some particular film illustrating the educational value of the motion picture I would unhesitatingly mention this production. As a drama it may be a mere curiosity though even as a drama it has a singularly compelling charm. As a gem of the motion picture art it has never been surpassed. As I saw it at the Casino, New York City, with suitable music the picture is overwhelmingly beautiful and impressive. You get the impression of having feasted one of the world's great picture galleries and there follows that most delightful of sensations, a new perception of pleasure in which the eye and the brain take special shares.

I remember many efforts to make the life of remote countries and strange tribes live on the screen. I remember how the attempt was made to get the natives into a moving picture scenario and thus render the film more acceptable. It is not a pleasing recollection by any means because all these efforts were strikingly futile. Mr. Curtis has found the short cut of genius and he eminently succeeds where others have dismally failed. It is said that Mr. Curtis is a profound student of Indian lore. That is evident enough from the films, but it does not at all explain his success with this subject on the screen. The cause of that must be sought in an extraordinary perception of artistic and dramatic values, in an uncommon skill of selection and in a sort of second sight with the camera. I confess that I learned a good deal looking at this picture. It has brought before my eyes a new vista of camera miracles. The low flight of the birds over the waters tinted and burnished by the setting sun is a veritable revelation of motion picture art. I am loath to confine myself to this one example when the recollection of others equal in beauty and power still linger hauntingly in my mind, but here I can do no more than allude to one or two beside: the capture of the whale, the scenes of the sea lions, the dances, the wedding ceremonies, the vigil of the hero. The direction of this play entitles Mr. Curtis to high rank in that difficult profession, but it is after all only one of the lesser merits.

Mr. Curtis conceived this wonderful study in ethnology as an epic. It fully deserves the name. Indeed, it seemed to me that there was a most striking resemblance all through the films between the musical epics of Richard Wagner and the films between the theme and treatment of this Indian epic. The fire-dance, the vigil journey with its command of silence and chastity, the whole character of the hero were most strangely reminiscent of Parsifal and the Ring of the Nibelungs. I have indicated but a few general outlines, any one can pursue the likeness in all its details to his heart's content.

Mr. Curtis has extracted from his vast materials nothing but the choicest and nothing but that which will please the eye and stir the

thoughts of an intelligent white audience. All the actors are full-blooded Indians. The Indian mind is, I believe, constitutionally incapable of acting; it cannot even grasp the meaning of acting as we understand it. Probably nobody understands this fact better than Mr. Curtis. The pictures speak volumes for the producer's intimacy with the Indians and his great power over them. They are natural in every move; the grace, the weirdness and the humor of their dances have never been brought home to us like this before.

I cannot say enough for the scenic beauty of this film. Beauty does not describe that aspect of the film as fully as I would want to explain it. There is a natural beauty which simply soothes and flatters such as a pretty sunset, a fine river view, a bold rock or a beautiful shore. In this film the scenic portions have character, we feel instinctively that a virgin wilderness is conjured up before us and that the conjurer is a master craftsman, a wizard with the camera. The very solitude is there on the screen and the stern moods of Nature, the frowns no less than the smiles.

I speak advisedly when I say that this production sets a new mark in artistic handling of films in which educational values mingle with dramatic interest. Even the scenes showing the head-hunters is redeemed from the gruesome by the exceeding skill which characterizes the production as a whole. "In the Land of the Head Hunters" is a title which does not begin to describe all the film contains. It is not a feature for the nickelodeon or the cheap house, but it ought to be welcomed by the better class of houses that are looking for an occasional departure from the regular attractions and that want to give their patrons a special treat.

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## About Milestone

*"They care and they love movies."* — Martin Scorsese

Milestone enters its 24th year of operations with a reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company's work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*, *Portrait of Jason* and *Ornette: Made in America*, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis, then at the *LA Weekly*, chose Milestone as the 1999 "Indie Distributor of the Year." In 2004, the National Society of Film Critics again awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award. That same year the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award and the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award "in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films." In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission's first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. Milestone/Milliarium won Best Rediscovery from the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for its release of *Winter Soldier* in 2006 and again in 2010 for *The Exiles*.

In January 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association chose to give its first Legacy of Cinema Award to Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Film & Video "for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation." And in March 2008, Milestone became an Anthology Film Archive's Film Preservation honoree. In 2009, Dennis Doros was elected as one of the Directors of the Board of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists and established the organization's press office in 2010.

In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of Film Critics for the release of *On the Bowery* and *Word is Out*. The American Library Association also selected *Word is Out* for their Notable Videos for Adult, the first classic film ever so chosen.

In December 2012, Milestone became the first-ever two-time winner of the prestigious New York Film Critics' Circle's Special Award, this time for its work in restoring, preserving and distributing the films of iconoclast director Shirley Clarke. And a week later, the National Society of Film Critics gave Milestone another Film Heritage Award as well for Project Shirley.

In 2014, Martin Scorsese and the Film Foundation chose Milestone to distribute the landmark series, "Martin Scorsese Presents Masterpieces of Polish Cinema" that toured North America followed by an international screening series.

Important contemporary artists who have co-presented Milestone restorations include Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Kopple, Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme, Dustin Hoffman, Charles Burnett and Sherman Alexie.