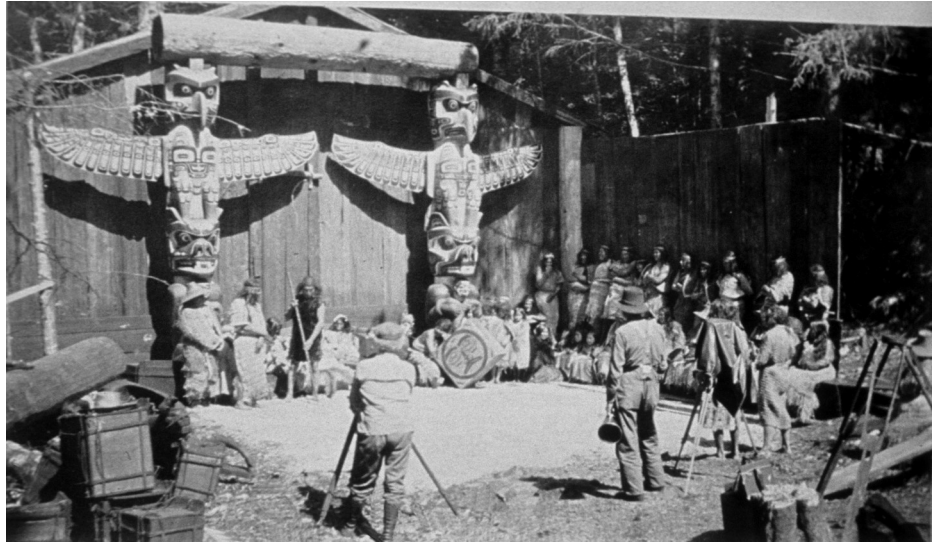


In the Land of the Head Hunters

By Brad Evans and
Aaron Glass

When famed photographer Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) released “In the Land of the Head Hunters” in 1914, he expected success to result from its spectacular representation of “primitive life” on the north Pacific coast. It was a six-reel silent feature film, extensively color tinted and toned, filmed on location in British Columbia with an all-indigenous cast, and accompanied by a full orchestral score promoted as being “native music symphonized,” now thought to be the earliest surviving orchestral score for a motion picture. Curtis had not intended “Head Hunters” to be received as an ethnographic record for academics. Rather, he hoped to impress popular audiences with the spectacle of a Pacific coastline populated by vast herds of sea lions and flocks of gulls; with the dramatic pageantry of the Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl) people, who were already known abroad for their totem-poles, war canoes, and ceremonial masks; and with the revolutionary potential of film for recording a way of life he had elsewhere described as that of a “vanishing race.”¹

Despite Curtis’s aspirations, “In the Land of the Head Hunters” was preserved in the late twentieth century as a “documentary,” not a groundbreaking feature film; now, in the twenty-first, we can appreciate both its cinematic artistry and its place in the historical record of First Nations cultural survival. “Head Hunters” would never have been made without the extensive assistance and talent of its salaried Kwakwaka’wakw cast and crew, who adopted the melodramatic medium of a silent feature film as one prong in a complex strategy of self-preservation. At the time “Head Hunters” was made, indigenous communities up and down the Pacific coast were facing intense pressures from trading companies, settlers, missionaries, tourists, anthropologists, and governments intent on forcing their assimilation. Filming was completed during the Potlatch Prohibition, a Canadian policy in place from 1885 to 1951 that made it illegal for Kwakwaka’wakw communities to practice for themselves the ceremonies they were allowed to perform for Curtis’s motion picture camera.



Edward S. Curtis (behind the camera) and George Hunt (with the megaphone) on the set of In the Land of the Head Hunters, Fort Rupert, British Columbia, 1914. Photograph by Edmund Schwinke. Courtesy of the Burke Museum.

The film’s production relied extensively on the brokerage of George Hunt (1854-1933), the son of an English Hudson’s Bay Company factor and a Tlingit noblewoman from Alaska. Hunt grew up at Fort Rupert, became literate in both English and Kwak’waka, and married into Kwakwaka’wakw families, from whom he received ceremonial standing. One telling image, taken by Curtis’s cameraman Edmund Schwinke, shows Hunt holding a megaphone on the set in the role of an assistant director. Hunt’s youngest son Stanley played the hero, Motana; other extended kin played both major and supporting roles (see our volume, *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters*, for a complete list). Hunt also coordinated the purchase or fabrication of masks and canoes, the manufacture of customary regalia, and the building of village sets. Extant, although increasingly obsolete, massive dugout war canoes were rented, repaired, and repainted. Apparently the main actors demanded that their ceremonial enactments conform to hereditary privilege; that is, only people with recognized claim to certain masks and dances would perform them in the film. While the main narrative—a highly conventional story of a love triangle set amidst warring clans—was certainly devised by Curtis, it is likely that his Kwakwaka’wakw collaborators helped him flesh out the action with culturally relevant—and acceptable—performances.

Unlike the scores of short “Indian pictures” at the time, “Head Hunters” is notable for many of its gestures toward an authentic representation of Native life, as well as for its artistic ambitions. It was shot on location, not on a set in New Jersey or in the hills of Los Angeles; and it told a dramatic story set be-

fore the coming of Europeans, with no cowboys or settlers in sight. Intertitle designs were created by Dugald Walker (1883–1937), an art nouveau book illustrator, based on totem pole motifs that Curtis had photographed. Promotional posters were printed by the H. C. Miner Litho Company, a New York lithography house known for promoting vaudeville, Broadway theater, and motion pictures, including those by D. W. Griffith. In at least some screening venues, the film was accompanied by “cyclorama” stage sets designed by Frank Cambria (1883–1966), a theater designer trained by David Belasco and a regular on the New York vaudeville circuit. Most notably, premier screenings featured the original orchestral score composed by John J. Braham (ca. 1848-1919), who was known at the time for his American performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. The film was well-received by New York and Seattle critics following its premiere, but it made very little at the box office and was quickly forgotten.

“In the Land of the Head Hunters” was restored—it might be more accurate to say reconstructed—once before, in the late 1960s, by the art historian Bill Holm and museum curator George Quimby.ⁱⁱ Confronted with what they took to be an incoherent narrative in the surviving and fragmentary film stock, and also struck by the potentially offensive qualities of the film, they made significant alterations. They changed the film’s title to “In the Land of the War Canoes,” making it less sensational; they rewrote all of the narrative intertitles; and they enlisted the help of the Kwakwaka’wakw to produce a new synched soundtrack featuring naturalistic foley as well as dialogue and song recorded in the Kwak’wala language. The summary effect of these changes was to frame the film as an ethnographic documentary.

The reconstruction completed in 2014, which we coordinated, is not meant to replace “War Canoes” but to supplement it given new archival discoveries that allow us to glimpse more clearly the film that Curtis and the Kwakwaka’wakw made together in 1914. This entailed restoring to the film its original title, intertitles, missing scenes, musical score, color tinting,

and advertising ephemera, in all their romantic sensationalism, spectacular framing, and promotional overstatement. It is our hope that the latest version of “In the Land of the Head Hunters” will serve as a document of the history of intercultural cinema, and of a particular strategy adopted by the Kwakwaka’wakw for cultural survival—that of actively participating in the making (and the sequential re-making) of a modern motion picture.

ⁱ The reputation of Edward Curtis has been hotly disputed in academic circles and indigenous communities for the last thirty years. He is widely admired for his stunning photographic work, but has been criticized for romanticizing Native Americans as a people existing out of time and for promoting the myth of the “vanishing race.” For a recent discussion, see Shamoan Zamir’s *The Gift of the Face: Portraiture and Time in Edward S. Curtis’s The North American Indian* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014). Our own suggestion is to shift the focus away from Curtis and onto the activities and motives of those Native peoples with whom he worked.

ⁱⁱ Bill Holm and George Quimby documented their own research into, and reconstruction of, the film in their book *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes* (University of Washington Press, 1980).

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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