



SOCIAL SCIENCE

Whose Lens? Photography and Representation

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDING

- **Since time immemorial**
- **Identity**
- **History**
- **Lifeways**
- **Genocide, federal policy, and laws**

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will be able to ...

- Describe the power of photography to convey meaning
- Critique historic and contemporary photographs and develop arguments about the meaning and significance of images
- Explain the importance of Tom Jackson and his photography

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How has photography shaped or influenced the public perception of Native people?
- How have Siletz and other Indigenous artists used photography to tell their own stories?

LOGISTICS

- **Where does the activity take place?**
Classroom
- **How are the students organized?**
 - ☑ Whole class
 - ☑ Teams: 2 – 4
 - ☑ Pairs
 - ☑ Individually

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Overview

In this lesson, students will examine the photography of Thomas Jackson, one of the earliest Native photographers in the nation, to consider the tensions between identity and representation faced by Siletz people at the turn of the 20th century. By comparing photographs taken by Jackson with those created by famous non-Native photographers, students will build an understanding of the power of representation and the ways that Native artists have worked to undermine attempts by American society to confine Indigenous culture, life, and art to a narrow script of loss and assimilation. Students will gain experience analyzing photographs as texts through guided class discussion before independently researching the work of contemporary Native photographers and sharing their conclusions with the larger class.

Background for teachers

Photography in the early 20th century had unique and especially strong associations with Indigenous people across the globe. To white Americans, the very technology of photography encapsulated the sense of progress and achievement that they felt made their society superior to other races, like



TIME REQUIRED**1 hour and 50 minutes**

Native Americans. At the same time, as the United States brutally ended the Indian wars across the nation, American society began to view Native culture as a bygone relic that was quickly disappearing from the world. Photography became the ideal tool to document this moment both commercially and scientifically, memorializing Native people with the very type of technological achievement that seemed to prove the superiority of American culture. Photographers across the nation developed a distinctive genre of staged pictures that often featured elderly Native people dressed in traditional regalia. These photos were designed to relay a specific message to a larger popular audience: Native culture would soon be gone and replaced by Western civilization. Other photographs of Native students at boarding schools pushed the same message from a different perspective, presenting young Native people in Western clothing as proof of the efficacy of forced assimilation programs. This message resonated with both federal policymakers and the general public. In all, during the early 20th century, non-Native photographers produced thousands of carefully staged images of Native people for public sale and museum display. Many of these photos remain the most well-known images of Native people to this day.

STANDARDS**Oregon social science standards**

11-12.RH.7 - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media in order to address a question or solve a problem.

11-12.RH.9 - Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

11-12.WHST.9 - Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

MATERIALS

- PowerPoint
- Oral presentation rubric
- Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy: Curator Interviews <https://youtu.be/mkoBohYRpfw>
- Paper/pencil

But white Americans weren't the only ones taking pictures. In fact, one of the earliest Native photographers was a man named Thomas C. Jackson (commonly known as Tom or T.C.). Jackson was Alsea; his family came from a village near modern-day Waldport, and his ancestors had inhabited the area that became part of the Coast (Siletz) Reservation since the beginning of the world. Born within a decade of the creation of the reservation (circa 1864), Jackson lived through much of the upheaval of the early reservation times, marrying twice and raising four children while retaining his knowledge of his language and culture. As a child, Jackson was taken from his home to the Siletz boarding school but still managed to receive a traditional cultural education, learning the histories and traditions of his family and people. Jackson would later collaborate with ethnographers working in Siletz in the early 20th century, helping to collect and translate stories passed down for millennia by Alsea people. Like many of his generation, throughout his life Jackson had to find different ways to make a living, including fishing for commercial canners, logging, traveling outside the area for temporary jobs, taking up seasonal work like picking hops, and even organizing pickers from Siletz and Grand Ronde for hop-picking contracts. He also served in the agency police force and was an active member of county politics.

In 1891, already in his mid-twenties, Jackson enrolled himself at Chemawa Indian School in Salem where he learned about photography. By 1893, he

VOCABULARY

- **Alsea** - One of the people groups who now make up the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. Alsea homelands, centering on the Alsea River, encompass a significant portion of the Coast (Siletz) Reservation.
- **Assimilation** - After the American Revolution, the U.S. government enforced a program to permanently alter Native peoples' ways of living and being. The U.S. policy of assimilation was an attempt to destroy traditional Native peoples by forcing them to change their language, dress, habits, foods, and belief systems to match those of U.S. society.
- **Boarding school** - A school where students reside during the school year. Native children were forcibly removed or coerced from their homes and confined in boarding schools that prohibited Native language and culture.
- **Stereotype** - An oversimplified belief about a general category of people.

had returned to Siletz and set himself up as one of the earliest Native photographers in United States, operating a well-known studio in the Siletz area and becoming a fixture in the community with his camera. Though he continued working other jobs, over the next decades Jackson took hundreds of photographs—a mixture of individual and family portraits, scenes of community life, and landscapes from the Siletz Reservation, many of which survived in Siletz Tribal archives after Jackson’s death in 1929. Some of Jackson’s photographs even made their way east for exhibition, eventually ending up in the possession of Princeton University.

Some of Jackson’s photographs, like the set curated for eastern exhibitions, seem to have a focused message meant to challenge the idea that Native people are backwards and unable to adjust to modern society on their own. Most of his other photographs have more complicated meanings. Taken for dozens of different families across the reservation, these photographs capture the many challenges and realities of being a Siletz person in the early 20th century. In this sense, the images show how Siletz people and families wanted to be seen by the wider world and within their own community. Looking at these photos can help students begin to understand the ways that Siletz people maintained their connection to each other as resilient Indigenous people in the face of a hostile world bent on destroying Native culture and identity.

ADAPTIONS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING



The lesson is primarily structured around group discussion and exploration, but much of it can be adapted for distance- or independent-learning purposes. A suggested sequence follows. Be sure all students have either print or electronic access to the materials described.

Activity 1. Power of photography

- Share the slides in a virtual format.
- Facilitate online discussion using whole group or individual chat application.

Activity 2. Who is Tom Jackson?

- Share the slides in a virtual format.
- Facilitate online discussion using whole group or individual chat application.

Activity 3. Native photographers today

- Share the contemporary Native artist assignment ahead of time.
- Play the Portland Museum of Art video on an online platform for students to watch remotely.
- Allow students to work on research independently before presenting to their classmates on a virtual platform.

Activity 4. Reflection/closure

- Debrief with whole group using a virtual platform.

References

- Hight, E. M., & Sampon, G. D. (2013). *Colonialist photography: Imagining race and place*. Taylor and Francis.
- Friedel, M. K. (2022). The Indians are quiet: White supremacy in the first photographs of Native peoples in Oregon. *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 123(2), 134–169. <https://www.ohs.org/oregon-historical-quarterly/upload/Friedel-The-Indians-are-Quiet-OHQ-Summer-2022-web.pdf>
- Margolis, E. (2004). Looking at discipline, looking at labor: Photographic representations of Indian boarding schools. *Visual Arts*, 19(1), 54–78. <https://visualethnography.me/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Looking-at-Discipline-Looking-at-Labor.pdf>
- Wexler, L. (2000). *Tender violence: Domestic visions in an age of U.S. imperialism*. University of North Carolina Press.

Resources

- Some images in the PowerPoint are from a larger curated digital archive that teachers and students may wish to explore. See: *Framing the frontier: Photographs & the American West, 1850–1920*. Princeton University. <https://framingthefrontier.omeka.net/>
- This blog provides guidance about techniques for helping students learn to interact with visual images: *Contemporary issues in technology and teacher education: What does the eye see? Reading online primary source photographs in history*. <https://citejournal.org/volume-14/issue-2-14/social-studies/what-does-the-eye-see-reading-online-primary-source-photographs-in-history/>

Considerations for teachers

Assessment

Teachers can assess student learning by monitoring student discussion and by reviewing the content of written reflection products. In addition, students will be assessed on a cumulative research and presentation project.

Practices

Small group - Small group activities allow students to share and analyze ideas with one, two, or three other people. This practice can be good for students who do not want to share their ideas with the whole class and/or who may be afraid of others' reactions. The teacher should monitor group discussions to determine the degree to which students are understanding the concepts.

Student presentation - The teacher should be prepared to develop student presentation skills. For example, teachers should provide students with an understanding of appropriate volume and tone and best practices in developing well-organized and coherent content supported by visual aids. Helpful presentation links include:

- Common Sense Education: <https://www.commonsense.org/education/top-picks/best-classroom-tools-for-presentations-and-slideshows>
- Center for Teaching and Learning: <https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/improving-presentation-style-in-lectures/>

Learning targets

- I can describe the power of photography to convey meaning.
- I can critique historic and contemporary photographs and develop arguments about the meaning and significance of images.
- I can explain the importance of Tom Jackson and his photography.

Options/extensions

Students can work together to present the photos that they found and their analysis in a gallery format—working together to arrange and present photos in a way that highlights the story of each.

Appendix

Materials included in the electronic folder that support this lesson are:

- Contemporary Native Artist Assignment.pdf
- Oral Presentation Rubric.pdf
- Photography_Slides.pptx

Activity 1

Power of photography

Time: 90 minutes

In this activity, the instructor will facilitate a class discussion about the importance of photographs as historical sources as well as methods for critically analyzing and interpreting photographs. The teacher will need to prepare the class for a discussion about race, ethnicity, and identity and ensure that students interact in a safe and respectful manner. Teachers should also be aware that some of the stereotypical images critiqued in this lesson may be offensive to American Indian students and work to ensure that class discussion does not endorse or embrace the negative messages conveyed by these historical images.

Say:

Today we are going to talk about photography and Native communities. To get started, I want to discuss the different ways that historians and other scholars interpret photographs. Photos can be tricky to analyze because we tend to treat them as simply an unbiased representation of reality. In fact, photographers use photos to convey different ideas, messages, and even arguments—much like written sources. Historians and other scholars often say that they are “reading” photos, just like you might analyze a political speech to try and figure out the beliefs, attitudes, and desires of the person who wrote it as well as the audience that they are trying to convince. You might already be used to thinking about photographs this way. For example, let’s talk about social media influencers.

Say:

Please take moment to think about a few images you recently saw on social media. Do you think that the images that social media influencers create accurately reflect reality? Why or why not?

Activity 1 (Continued)

Say:

Thanks for sharing. Social media is a good example of the way that people use images to project a certain version of themselves or their society. That is, people create and post images on social media to tell a certain story. Photographs have been used this way since they were invented. This is especially true of photographs of Native Americans.

Say:

Before we talk more about this issue, I want to set some expectations about our discussion today. Many famous pictures of Native people were taken during a period in history when the general public didn't respect Native people or Native cultures. These photos often contribute to harmful stereotypes. We are looking at these images to understand how American society treated Native people in the past but we should be careful not to perpetuate those stereotypes in our own language and thinking today. As we engage in these discussions, please be mindful of words or phrases that might be hurtful or discriminatory so that we can all feel safe and valued in class today.

Say:

Let's start by thinking about what types of images come to mind when you hear the phrase "photographs of American Indians"?

[Teachers should allow students a few minutes to think before sharing answers in a round robin. Student responses may include feathers, headdress, tipis, horses, regalia, warpaint, tomahawks, and other caricatures. Teachers should be prepared to share that many of these images are stereotypical and inaccurate depictions of Native people.]

Activity 1 (Continued)

Say:

Thank you for your respectful and thoughtful discussion. Let's think more about this by looking at two images taken by two famous non-Native photographers from the early 20th century. These photographers toured the country taking photos of Native people from many different Tribes. As you look at these portraits, think about what story or narrative you think these photographers wanted to share with the public. Examine the detail in how the portraits were staged, how people were posed, what clothing they are wearing, and their facial expressions. On a blank piece of paper, write the heading "Portrait 1." Underneath that heading, write down your thoughts or key words that come to mind as we examine the first photo. You will repeat this for portrait 2. This way you can analyze the details and the message that each photograph seems to convey as well as compare the two images.

Say:

Are you ready? Let's look at this portrait taken by F.A. Rinehart in 1900 titled "Portrait of Clear, a Sioux Indian." [Show slide 2.] Please write down your observations and thoughts about this portrait. [Allow students 3–5 minutes to analyze and write.]

Say:

Ok, let's look at the next portrait. This portrait of Bick Juna, a member of the Zuni Nation, was taken by photographer Edward S. Curtis in 1903. [Show slide 3.]

Say:

Next, I would like you to compare your observations of both images. What is your analysis of differences, similarities, or representation you observe in the portraits? Do you see similar or different meanings conveyed through these two images? What do you think is the photographer's purpose in taking these photographs? What story are these photographers trying to tell about Native people?



Activity 1 *(Continued)*

[Allow students to share their thoughts with their neighbors first and then share out in a whole class discussion.]

Say:

Thank you for sharing. The story that these pictures try to tell about Native people is an especially powerful one and shows up in all sorts of media and photography about Native people ... even to this day. These photographs depict Native people as primitive—if not noble—relics of the past, consigned to be left behind by the progress of American society. This idea of the “vanishing Indian” is an especially powerful story in American culture in no small part thanks to photographers like these who carefully arranged images to appeal to a mass American audience. This story is of course untrue—it’s a lie. But it has been a very convincing lie in American popular culture.

Ask:

Why do you think that images like these have been so appealing to the American public?

KEY POINT - This way of thinking and talking about Native people absolves the government and general society from taking responsibility for reckoning with the history of stealing Native peoples’ land and for not honoring treaty commitments.

Say:

Thank you for sharing and thinking so deeply about the power of photographs. Hopefully, you are beginning to see how photographs can be used to convey a certain message about the world and that when we look at photographs, we must think critically about what message the photographer might be trying to convey. So far, we’ve looked at images produced by non-Native people and gotten a sense of the larger American cultural attitudes about Indigenous people. Let’s turn our attention now to the work of Native photographers.



Activity 2

Who is Tom Jackson?

Time: 40 minutes

In this activity, students will learn more about Tom Jackson, one of the earliest Native photographers in the United States. Students will analyze Jackson's photos and compare them to more mainstream photographs, like those from activity 1.

Step 1

Provide students with biographical information about Jackson. [Show slide 4.]

Say:

One of the earliest Native photographers in the United States is a man named Thomas C. Jackson, commonly known as Tom or T.C. Jackson was a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. His family was Alsea and came from a village near modern-day Waldport. His ancestors inhabited the area that became the Coast (Siletz) Reservation in western Oregon since the beginning of the world. Born within a decade of the creation of the reservation (around 1864), Jackson lived through much of the upheaval of the early reservation times, marrying twice and raising four children while retaining his knowledge of his language and culture. As a child, Jackson was taken from his home to the Siletz boarding school where education focused on manual labor. However, he also received a traditional cultural education from his family, learning the histories and traditions of his people. Jackson would later collaborate with ethnographers working in Siletz in the early 20th century, helping to collect and translate stories passed down for generations by Alsea people. Like many of his generation, throughout his life Jackson had to find different ways to make a living, including fishing for commercial canners, logging, traveling outside the area for temporary jobs, taking on seasonal work like picking hops, and even organizing pickers from Siletz and Grand Ronde for hop-picking contracts. He also served in the agency police force and was an active member of county politics.

Activity 2 (Continued)

In 1891, already in his mid-twenties, Jackson enrolled himself at Chemawa Indian School in Salem where he learned about photography. By 1893, he had returned to Siletz and set himself up as one of the earliest Native photographers in United States, operating a well-known studio in the Siletz area and becoming a fixture in the community with his camera. Though he continued working other jobs, over the next decades Jackson took hundreds of photographs—a mixture of individual and family portraits, scenes of community life, and landscapes from the Siletz reservation. Many of these survived in Siletz Tribal archives after Jackson’s death in 1929. Some of Jackson’s photographs even made their way east for exhibition, eventually ending up in the possession of Princeton University.

Say:

Before we talk more about Jackson’s photography, I would like us to reflect on the background knowledge you may already have of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. What can you recall from previous grades and lessons about the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians?

[Students can provide details and facts about geography, territory, culture, traditional foods, governments, and economies. Allow students to talk with their neighbors before having a whole class discussion to share background knowledge. The teacher may jot this information down on the board to have students connect back to after viewing Jackson’s photographs. The grade 11 lesson “From Homelands to Homesteads” is particularly relevant. Jackson took the majority of his photographs during and just after allotment, a period when the Siletz Tribe lost a significant amount of reservation land.]

Step 2

Share photographs taken by Jackson on slides 5–10. Ask students to jot down notes as they see each picture and begin thinking about the story or stories that Jackson may have wanted to share in his photography and how they compare to the photographs taken by non-Native photographers seen earlier.



Activity 2 (Continued)

Say:

Next, we are going to look at some of Jackson's photographs. Jackson's work gives us an opportunity to see the ways that Native people sought to portray their own world at the turn of the century and the stories that they sought to tell each other and the outside world. As you look at these images, I want you to jot down some notes and observations for each photo. As we go through the photographs, you can label the heading with the title of the photograph.

Step 3

Show each picture of Jackson's. Allow 3–5 minutes for each slide to give students time to write down their observations and thoughts. Teachers may choose to lead discussion after each slide or allow students to silently observe all photographs before discussion.

Step 4

Next, ask students to discuss their thoughts with their neighbor and then share as a whole class.

Say:

Now that you have seen a sample of Tom Jackson's photographs, how do his photographs differ from the first two photographs we viewed taken by non-Native photographers? What message about Native life does Jackson convey with his pictures? What stories were important for Jackson to tell? How would the audience have interpreted Jackson's photographs? How does what you see in the images connect to the background information of Siletz Indians we listed in the beginning of the lesson? Explain.

[There are many potential directions for this conversation. Jackson's work reflects the complex reality of being a Native person at the turn of the 20th century. If students need support, begin the conversation by highlighting the everyday community life captured by Jackson. Ask students to notice the age

Activity 2 *(Continued)*

and gender of the people in Jackson's photographs compared with the examples from non-Native photographers. Ask students to describe the setting and what is happening in photographs. (Are they portraits or action shots?) Then ask students to describe the world that they see in Jackson's photographs compared to the one projected in the work of Curtis or Rinehart.]

Activity 3

Native photographers today

Time: 45 minutes

In this activity, students will explore the work of contemporary Native artists to build an understanding of how Indigenous photographers today navigate the complex history of visually representing Native people.

Say:

Now we are going to switch gears and look at the work of contemporary Indigenous photographers from across the United States. You each are going to choose a photographer and find two images that stand out to you in their work. Then I want you to write a short written response that answers the following questions:

- *What stories (narratives) emerge for you when you look at the photos?*
- *What might have been the photographer's purpose or intent in creating this image?*

Finally, you'll share the photos that you analyzed and your thoughts in a presentation to the rest of the class. [Teacher will hand out the Contemporary Native Artist Assignment handout.]

Say:

To get started, let's watch a short video of curators from the Portland Art Museum reflecting on the meaning of photographers like Edward Curtis (who we discussed earlier) and the ways that Native artists today complicate that legacy.

[Show the video *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy: Curator Interviews*: <https://youtu.be/mkoBohYRpfw> (also embedded in slide 11)].

Activity 3 *(Continued)*

Step 1

Allow time for students to find a contemporary Native photographer, complete a short written response, and assemble their presentations. Then ask for volunteers to share with the whole class.

Activity 4

Reflection/closure

Time: 5 minutes each

Students will reflect on the power of visual representation.

Say:

Thank you for all your work! Let's recap what we learned. Because American Indians have been portrayed as a people of the past, it can be easy to overlook the fact that Tribal nations still exist today and that Native people are contributing members of our communities. We've also seen how things are starting to change as more and more Native artists take charge of presenting their own stories about Tribal peoples. Let's wrap up this lesson by thinking about a question.

Say:

How do you think the development of new technology, like virtual reality, will impact the way that people view and interpret images like photographs?