

THE BY
STANDING FRANK
ROCK BENNETT
PORTRAITS FISKE

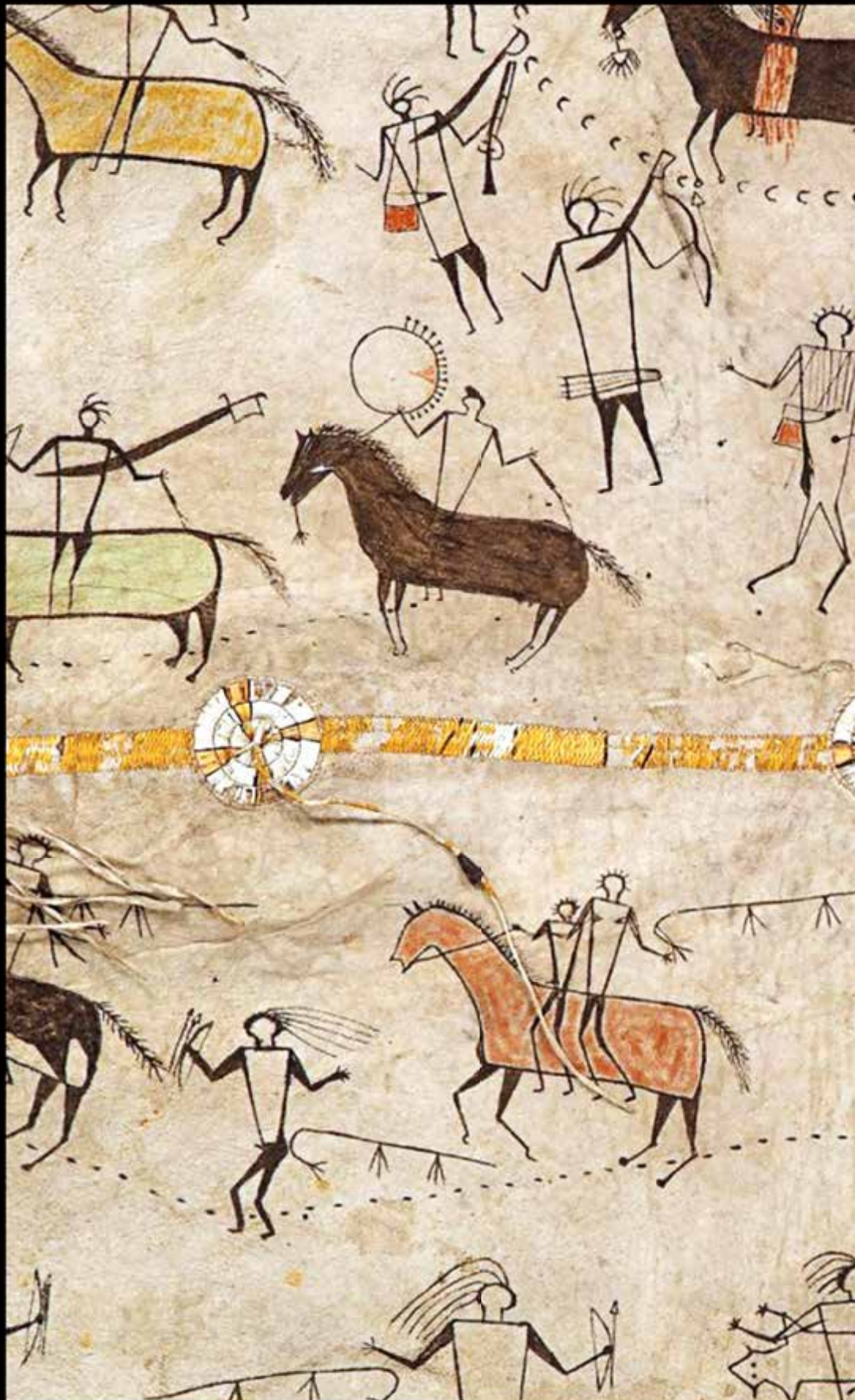


Frank Fiske at age 16, photograph by S.T. Fansler ca. 1899

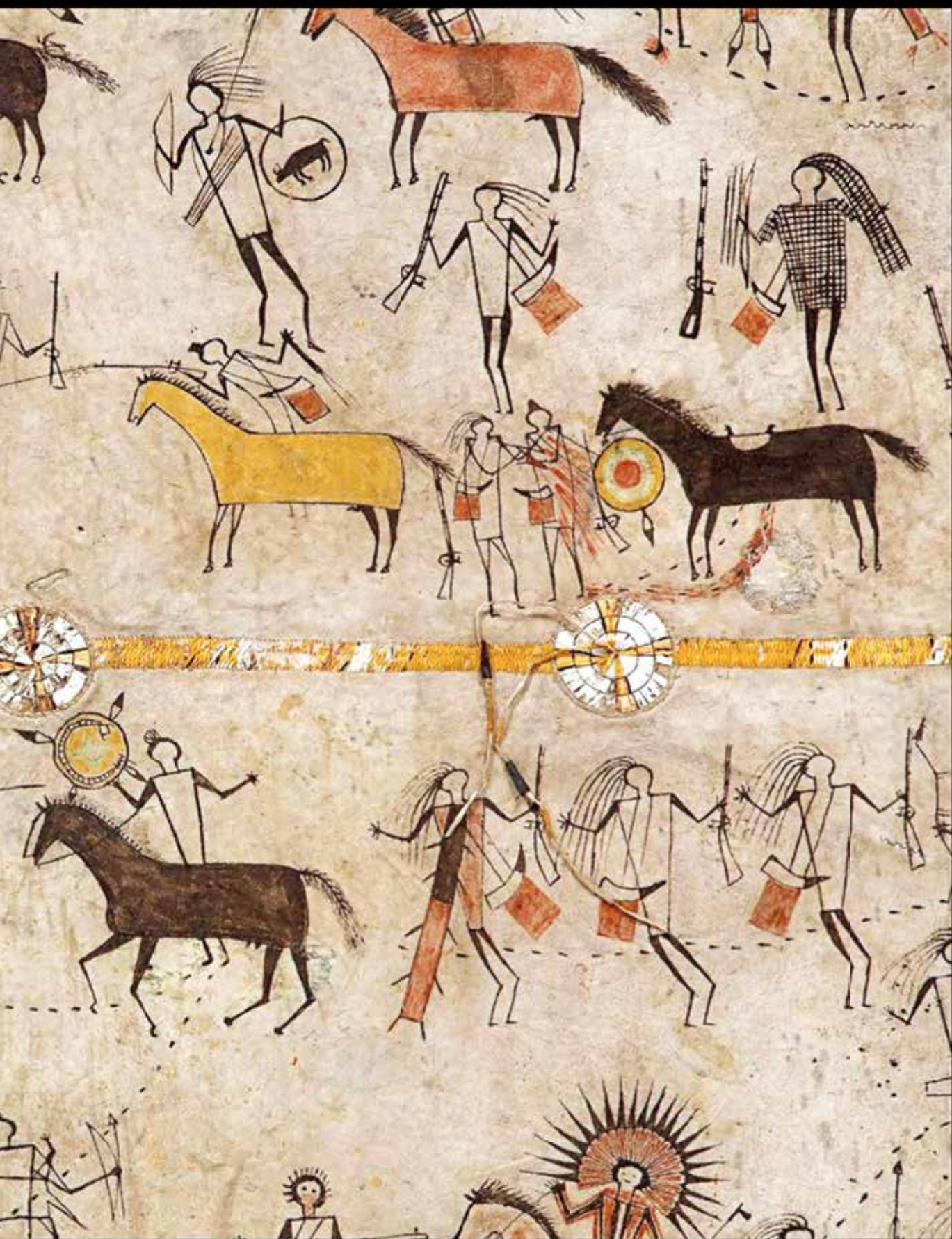
Plains Indian Pictograph

'By the early 1800s, Plains Indian art expressed both the culture's worldview and its wealth. Spiritual power and beauty imbued ceremonial clothing, headdresses, horse gear, and weaponry. Pictographic histories of men's achievements in war adorned robes, shirts, and tipis. Visionary images appeared on shields and drums. The sacred geometric imagery used on objects made for women was quilled, beaded, and painted on robes, dresses, moccasins, containers, and ritual objects. Plains Indian art had come of age.'

—Gaylord Torrence, Curator
Metropolitan Museum of Art



—Gaylord Torrence,
Curator



Frank Bennett Fiske

by Frank Vyzralek

Franks Bennett Fiske was a rarity among those American photographers whose work centered upon the American Indian. Unlike most such artists, Fiske was a native of the Dakotas and grew up with many of those people who later became subjects for his camera on the reservation lands bordering the Missouri River. The Sioux Indian people of the Standing Rock agency were friends and neighbors – a part of his life and upbringing.

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The son of a soldier, Fiske was born June 11, 1883 at the military post of Fort Bennett (from whence came his middle name), about 30 miles north of Pierre, South Dakota on the west bank of the Missouri. After an abortive fling at ranching, George Fiske hired on as a civilian wagon-master with the U.S. Army, and in the spring of 1889 moved to Fort Yates, North Dakota where the military post coexisted with the Standing Rock Indian agency headquarters. During the decade that followed, Frank Fiske attended school both at the fort and at the boarding school for Indian children. His summers were spent herding cows for families at the post, practicing his violin, working as a cabin boy on the river boats and helping out at the post’s photograph gallery.

Fiske’s boyhood ambition was to become a steamboat pilot, and after being hired as a cabin boy he learned the trade from Captain John Belk and other boatmen of that day. Unfortunately, boating on the Missouri River was then in its waning days. Fort Yates was an important river point only because it didn’t have a railroad and was the destination for considerable government freight. Nonetheless, Fiske spent many hours on the river and came to know its ever-changing bends and shoals intimately.

Photography was another absorbing interest, and the young Frank Fiske devoted many hours to learning the business from S. T. “Dick” Fansler, operator of the post photo studio at Fort Yates. Most 19th century Army installations had such galleries; usually the buildings were government property and were made available to the first photographer, transient or otherwise, who asked for its use. The Fort Yates studio had been occupied in the past by such distinguished artists as David F. Barry and Orlando Goff. During October 1899, Fiske learned that his mentor Fansler would not return, and successfully won permission from the commanding officer to occupy the building the following spring. Though several months short of his seventeenth birthday, by 1900 Frank Fiske had a photographic studio of his very own.

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Business was good until 1903 when the military post of Fort Yates was closed down. With great expectations and even greater enthusiasm, Fiske opened a studio at Bismarck; by March 1905 he was back home again, the Bismarck venture having apparently been something less than successful. With more leisure time, he then concentrated on improving his camera technique and began making portrait studies of the Indian men, women, and children of the Standing Rock agency. As time went on, he became proficient in posing his subjects effectively and his collection of negatives grew.

At the same time, his interest in the culture and history of the Sioux people developed and he began reading all he could find on the subject, as well as interviewing any of the reservation old-timers who would talk to him. By 1917, he felt knowledgeable enough to publish *The Taming of the Sioux*, his own story of the tribe’s history. Fiske’s attitude toward the Sioux, as demonstrated by his writings, was generally sympathetic to the plight of the tribespeople, though it is clear he viewed them as a culture largely different from his own. While chafing at the government



Finishing Day



Frank Bennett Fiske and Western Photography

by Rod Slemmons

When Frank Fiske began his career as a photographer at Fort Yates, North Dakota in 1899, he was following in the footsteps of several of the earliest portrait-makers among the Sioux people. His significance and style is best understood as an inheritance of his predecessors, Orlando Scott Goff, David F. Barry and S.T. Fansler.

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Goff, who is credited with making the first portrait of Sitting Bull, came to Dakota Territory in 1871. After working there and in Montana during the 1870’s, he established a studio in Bismarck in 1880. Goff and his apprentice, David F. Barry, produced an important body of work documenting participants in the “Indian Wars,” which had captured the attention of the nation in the years following the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In 1886, Goff moved to Montana and turned his Bismarck studio over to his assistant. Barry continued to photograph Indians. More than one thousand of his most important negatives are now housed at the Denver Public Library.

At about the time Goff left Bismarck, S.T. Fansler took over the studio at Fort Yates where Goff and Barry had worked briefly. Fansler also made portraits of the Sioux, but the lucrative trade in pictures of the wild west had diminished by the end of the century as the nation’s attention focused on the Yukon Gold Rush and the Spanish American War. When Fansler decided to give up his business at Fort Yates in late 1899, his sixteen-year-old assistant, Frank Fiske, took over the studio.

Although the bulk of Fiske's work at Fort Yates was studio portraiture of military personnel and local families, he retained an enthusiasm for Indian portraits. Growing up among the Sioux provided a rare opportunity to know the people he photographed in more than a passing manner. This familiarity, along with the tradition of Indian portraiture established by Goff and Barry, undoubtedly informed Fiske's style as a photographer.

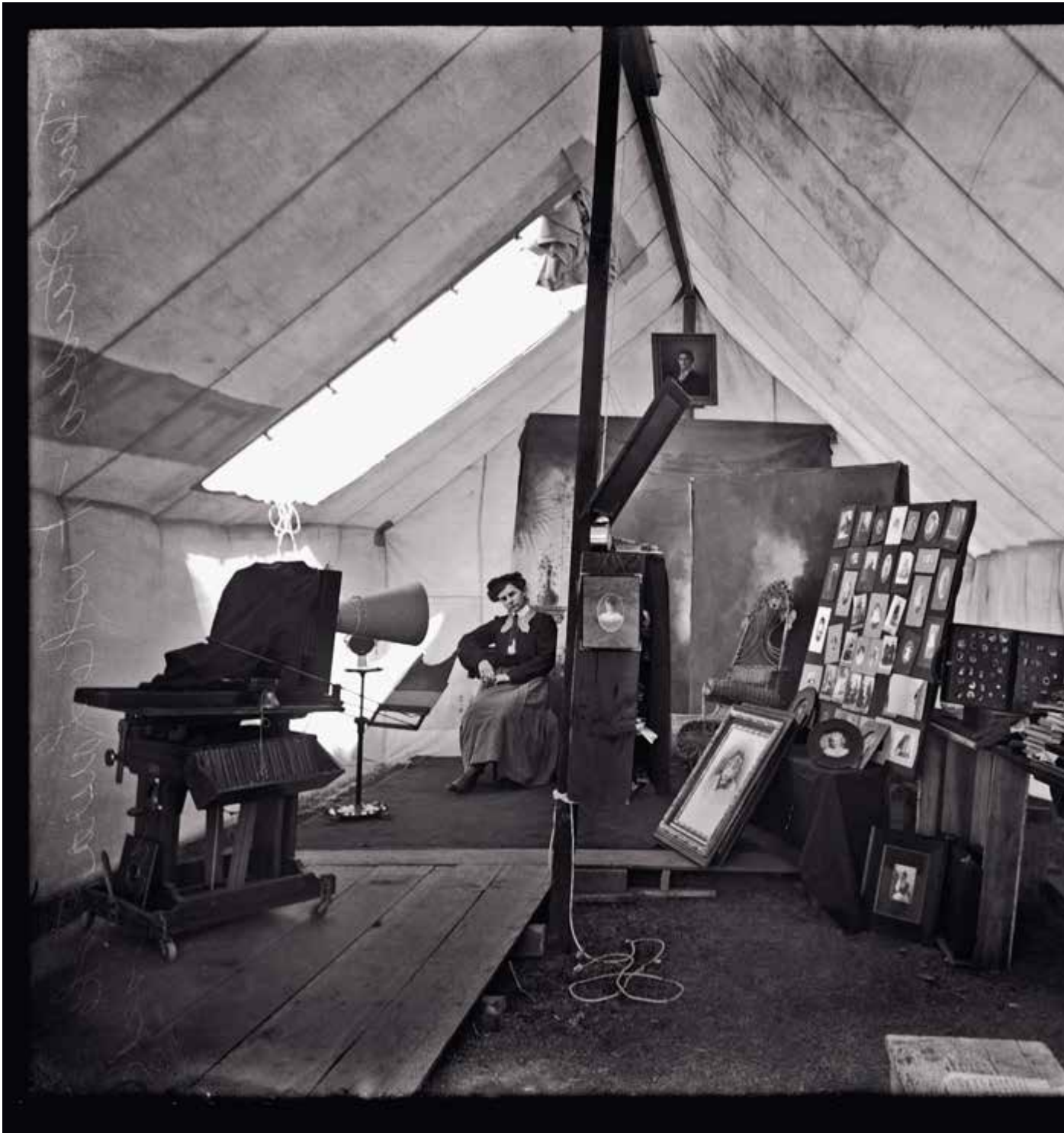
The focus is as sharp as the cameras and lenses of the time would allow, in order to document every detail in the faces and costumes. The lighting, often raking and from a single source, heightens the dramatic effect. It would appear that stock, commercially produced backdrops were used, depicting a fanciful Indian camp or, ironically, Victorian interiors and gardens. George Fiske, Frank's father, may have painted the backdrop showing the Indian camp. There is evidence to suggest he did; he listed his occupation in the U.S. Census for 1900 as "painter," and is known to have made backdrops for theatrical productions at the military post. Straight-forward clarity, the strength of Fiske's style, is important for the contemporary viewer because of the wealth of detail it provides.

Interestingly, both Barry and Fiske inherited their styles and equipment from an earlier time. Self-taught, itinerant photographers; those who worked in the more remote areas of the country continued to use equipment and devices which had already been discarded elsewhere. In Fiske's portrait, *Indian Wranglers*, one of the men sits in a fringed, one-armed chair, an artistic device dating from the days of the daguerreotype. But more importantly, by the time Fiske began his career, the style he had learned had been replaced, among others of his profession, by Pictorialism, which was characterized by soft-focus lenses, dramatic close-ups, flattened tonal range, backgrounds either abstractly textured or without detail, and angular composition. Fiske's contemporary (they died in the same year) Edward S. Curtis was a master of this style.

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Curtis photographed the Sioux in North Dakota between 1904 and 1908. Until Fiske's diaries, currently in private ownership, are available for research, we won't know whether the two met. As both men photographed the Sioux at Standing Rock agency in 1905, it is likely Fiske would have known about Curtis' presence in the area. Curtis was in the habit of giving proof prints to the Indians he photographed. Fiske might easily have seen the proofs, and he may have been influenced by the new style. In the Fiske Portfolios, the portraits of Loon, One Bull, and Red Fox show influences of Pictorialism, but Fiske avoided soft focus lenses, a primary element of the new style used by Curtis.

Curtis published his photographs of the Sioux in volume three of *The North American Indian*. Some striking similarities link his images to Fiske's work of the period. In both cases, the Sioux are dressed in a combination of traditional and non-Indian clothing. Much of the same kind of ornamentation is evident: ear pendants, breast plates, bead and quill work. However, because Fiske used sharper lenses, the traditional clothing and ornamentation is easier to identify and study in his photographs. A greater variety of costume is visible in Fiske's work; many of Curtis' male subjects, for example, are wearing the same decorated deerskin shirt.

A stranger to the area, Curtis was working against a publication deadline, and was serving both the dictates of current serious ethnology and the demands of his patrons, Theodore Roosevelt and J. Pierpont Morgan, that he produce convincing, salable pictures of the "noble savage." While Fiske clearly subscribed to the same 19th century attitudes concerning native Americans as Morgan and Roosevelt, he just as clearly had more familiarity with his subjects as people rather than as abstract members of a "vanishing race," as Curtis sometimes referred to his subjects.

The strength and clarity of Fiske's imagery and its usefulness to students of ethnology compare favorably to the works of two other photographers who were his contemporaries. F.A. Rinehart made a remarkable set of portraits of the Sioux at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904. Although many of his subjects are unidentified, some appear to be those also photographed by Fiske. William Dinwiddie also made portraits of Sioux Indians, both in the field and in Washington, D.C., in the 1890's. Both men contributed to the Bureau of American Ethnology, and their best work is now in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. In a sense, Fiske falls somewhere between Curtis and the documentarians. His work is neither self-consciously sentimental and pretty, nor is it coldly analytical.

If photography, at its finest, is seen as a bridge between documentation and interpretation, it should succeed in providing important information about what is pictured, and it should increase our understanding of the subject. John Szarkowski, curator for the Museum of Modern Art, has described photographs as either mirrors or windows. As a mirror, a photograph shows as much or more about how a photographer sees the world, and why he sees it so, as it shows the world itself. As a window, it depicts the world as defined by the photographer's own point of view, yet essentially looks out onto the world. In the less sophisticated days of early western photography there are more windows than mirrors: the motivation was to document the lands and peoples of the frontier. The photographs in the Fiske portfolios are important windows, historically and artistically, for they show a proud people during a period of difficult and often painful transition. Through the glass of Frank Fiske's negatives lies an abundance of information and understanding.

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Kicks Iron

The headdress is of golden eagle feathers tipped with hair strands and porcupine quill-work headband. Deerskin jacket decorated with fine quill work. The breast plate is of cow bone "hair pipes" commercially manufactured for trade to Indians, trimmed with brass tacks in elk hide spacers.
[ca. 1900]

