THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR INDIANS: WHAT CIVILIZATION IS DOING TO EXTINGUISH AN ANCIENT AND HIGHLY INTELLIGENT RACE BY TAKING AWAY ITS ARTS, INDUSTRIES AND RELIGION: BY FREDERICK MONSEN

WITHIN the past few years that hitherto almost unknown land, the Great Desert of the Southwest, has been discovered by artists and travelers alike to possess an interest and a charm that belong to it alone out of all the world. The glowing atmosphere, the vast stretches of sand that fairly pulsate with light and color, the towering cliffs of rugged, rich-hued rock, and the primitive, peaceful Indian folk who still live after the manner of their forefathers in villages that seem to have been a part of it all since the morning of the world, all these have been found to be eminently worth expressing on canvas or with camera, and the Desert has taken its place as a field of unparalleled richness for the man who has the power and the understanding to find and express what is there.

It was still a land undiscovered by all save an occasional prospector or a stray cowboy when I first wandered into it eighteen years ago. I went there as a member of the Geological Survey, but the fascination of the Desert and its people laid hold of me, and I soon realized that, for me at least, no other lifework could possess a tithe of the interest that would come from being able to depict truthfully the life, character and customs of the Desert Indians, and to give to the world some idea of the charm to be found in them and in the strange splendor of their environment. These Pueblo Indians are now but the remnant of a fast-vanishing race, one of the many magnificent aboriginal races that have decayed so swiftly under the death-giving touch of the white man’s civilization. That the peaceful Desert tribes have hitherto been able to preserve so much of their original vigor and individuality has been due to the fact that the Indian is dominated in such a marked degree by his environment, and also that these Indians live a life as natural and primitive as that of their forefathers before the advent of the white man. That is, they have lived so, but the chances now are that the paternal care of the Government will educate and civilize them to a swift and final doom.
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For these reasons it seemed to me that any truthful record of the lives and customs of the people of the Pueblos, made while they were yet unspoiled, would have an ethnological and historical value even greater than the quality of picturesqueness that is now coming to be of such keen interest to artists. The only way to gain the true impression that alone would be of value, instead of merely gathering a collection of unusual and attractive pictures, was to become intimate with the people, to understand them and be understood by them, to gain their friendship and so coax them by imperceptible degrees to forget to be watchful and conscious in the presence of a stranger, and to live and pursue their daily occupations as if no camera or sketch-block had ever been brought within the borders of the Great Desert.

THIS at first was not an easy task, in spite of its constant and ever-increasing interest. The Indians were friendly and hospitable enough, and showed no annoyance at my presence in their villages, but the customs and manners of a primitive people differ so widely from ours that the whole viewpoint of a civilized man has to be changed before he can come anywhere near to comprehending the nature of an Indian or realizing the way he looks at things. Before I could understand the Indian, I had to learn how to "get behind his eyes,"—to think as he thought, to live as he lived, and to become, so far as was possible for a white man, an accepted member of his society. While this, of course, was primarily for the purpose of gaining the greatest possible degree of success in my work, which I had determined should be the truthful and natural expression of the Desert Indian and his environment by means of thousands of pictures made of himself, his home, his industries, ceremonials, festivals, and all that pertains to his life, my interest in all this considered merely as a subject very soon grew into a broader and keener interest and understanding of the life itself and the people who lived it. Making one's home in an Indian village tends to give great elasticity to one's point of view. One sees and experiences many things that seem strange when measured by the standards of civilization, but the strangeness vanishes with the dawning perception that life in the Desert gives one of the number of our customs and conventions that would shock and revolt the Indian, accustomed as he is to the simple directness of a purely natural life. It is all a matter of taste, which in turn is a matter of custom, and the
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man who is privileged to learn a sufficient catholicity of taste to appreciate and enjoy both sides adds greatly to the interest of life. The white man is horrified at the thought of eating dog, but heartily relishes a meal of roast pig, the Indian is revolted and disgusted at the idea of using pig for food, but is delighted with a dish of savory stewed dog. If one can learn to eat both dog and pig with relish it follows that he greatly widens his field of experience and doubles his capacity for enjoyment.

That my own experience of Indian life might be as broad as possible, I drifted from one village to another, always accepting their customs, eating their food, interesting myself in what interested them, and never by word or act reminding them that I was a white man. I never adopted the Indian costume, as that would probably have been considered an affectation and so have been quietly ridiculed, but I made a point of wearing old and entirely inconspicuous clothes and of keeping my photographic apparatus concealed until such time as the people of the village were thoroughly accustomed to having me around, and paid but little attention to what I did. While associating myself as much as possible with their daily life, I carefully avoided making any attempt to become identified with any of their peculiar ceremonial clans. I have seen the sacred and secret ceremonies, of course, but the opportunity to do so was merely a courtesy extended to me by the High Priests, who have told me that no white man has ever been admitted as a member of such an organization. In spite of claims to the contrary made by some white men, I have never, during all the years of my close association with these Indians, seen or heard anything to cause me to doubt that the priests were speaking the truth. In my own case, even had it been possible, I should have considered it unwise to join any one of these clans, for the reason that it would have debarred me from association with other societies. As it was, I was able to retain without hint of rivalry or jealousy the friendship and goodwill of all.

WHEN I first began working among the Indians, eighteen years ago, it required much diplomacy and careful arrangement to secure at all the sort of picture I wanted. Almost any Indian or group of Indians would have posed for me, for a consideration, but a posed, self-conscious picture was of little use to me,
as the unconscious expression of daily life and character was what I had set my heart on obtaining. Naturally, in those days, all the pictures I took had to be posed and focused, as there was nothing to use but the tripod camera, the slow lens, and the heavy glass plates. True, these were dry plates, so I was not hampered by the paraphernalia necessary to the use of wet plates, but as it was the scope of my work was much limited, not only on account of the excessive weight of the instrument and plates, but also, and more particularly, because with this process it was impossible to avoid posing my subjects and making them keep still during a time exposure. When films were invented, I was, I believe, one of the first to use them in a professional way, and, although they were then by no means so reliable as they are now, they proved so indispensable to the kind of work I was doing that I persisted in experimenting with them in spite of the fact that I failed repeatedly in my attempts to secure satisfactory results. In this way I gained my first actual experience and best practice in the instantaneous photographing of Indians, and when films were finally brought to such a degree of perfection that I could feel entirely secure in taking them out on long, difficult, and expensive journeys, I began to get results such as I had never been able to achieve by the old method of using plates. A photographer who uses the large camera and plates the full size of the finished picture can seldom get either atmosphere, perspective or the freedom from consciousness that is so desirable when photographing Indians, that is, if one wishes for genuine individuality and convincing local color instead of more or less conventional or dramatic picturesqueness. The groups form themselves, melt away and change like cloud-shapes, and the best and most characteristic attitudes and groupings are absolutely impossible to obtain if one has to set up a tripod, adjust the camera, focus it, put in the plate, go over to his group and pose each one until the general effect is just what he wants, and then take the picture. It may be an interesting and well-composed picture, but it is the photographer’s idea that is expressed in it, not the artist’s nor a phase of Indian life and character. By the use of the small cartridge films and the rapid action of the hand camera, one is able to snapshot any number of charming, unconscious groups that show just what the Indian is like in his daily life at home. My own method of working is to carry three small cameras, which fit in cases without covers that are slung
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to a belt around my waist and are concealed under my loose coat. One turn of my hand and the camera is out and ready for use. Long practice in focusing has made it possible for me to do it almost by instinct, as a rifleman will hit the target when firing from the hip or at arm's length almost as often as when the weapon is sighted, and my subjects seldom know when they are photographed. Of course, all my Indian friends know in a general way that I make many pictures of them, and some of them are occasionally asked to pose for some especially desired effect, but when they do not see the camera as I stroll around and chat with them, they have no consciousness of being on dress parade for a possible picture, and those who do notice my movements at all particularly pay but little attention to an occasional unobtrusive snapshot of someone else.

In addition to this convenience for working, which puts the hand camera almost on the level of a fountain pen carried for hasty notes, there are two other reasons why the small hand camera and cartridge films are so desirable for the Desert photographer. The first is purely practical, it reduced the weight of one's equipment for a reasonably long journey about ninety per cent., a matter worth considering when one travels in a rough and little known country. The second concerns the artistic quality of the large, finished picture. I have found that a direct print made from a large negative taken in the burning sunlight of Arizona or New Mexico is apt to be so sharp that it looks flat and hard, and seems to possess but little atmosphere or artistic feeling. By enlarging the picture from a small negative, I not only obtain a sense of perspective that gives some idea of the vast distances, but find myself able to produce a picture that, by its softness of outlines and the effect of mellow, diffused light and deep, velvety shadows, conveys the feeling of all the sunshine and color that go to make up the characteristic atmosphere of the Desert.

SO MUCH for the work itself. What the work strives to express is a different matter and a much more interesting story. My acquaintance with the Desert Indians includes all the Desert people—the Hopi, the Navajos, the Apaches, the Mojaves, the Rio Grande Indians, and others. They are all interesting, and all have distinctly individual characteristics, but the gentlefolk of the Desert are the quiet, industrious Hopi. The meaning of the word "Hopi" is
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"gentle," and it is a true word. Only to be among these Indians, to hear them talk, and to observe their treatment of one another and of the casual stranger that is within their gates, is to have forced upon one the realization that here is the unspoiled remnant of a great race, a race of men who have, from time immemorial, lived quiet, sane, wholesome lives very close to Nature. The Hopi pueblos are in the northern part of Arizona, and are fenced off from civilization not only by the wonderful Painted Desert, but by the much larger Reservation of the Navajos, which encloses them on all sides. Owing partly to this situation, the Hopi have retained their primitive manners and customs to a far greater degree than any other Indians in this country. Such benefits of civilization as jails, saloons, and asylums have not yet reached them and all my years of living and working among them have brought to my knowledge only one instance of crime committed by a Hopi, and that was when an educated Hopi boy raised a check. Their neighbors, the Navajos, are more aggressive than the Hopi, and a good deal of jealousy exists between the two tribes, but even they have only eight policemen to keep in order a population of twenty thousand souls living on a Reservation of sixteen thousand square miles. These policemen are Navajos employed by the Government and their position entails no work or responsibility beyond looking dignified and drawing their pay. There is rarely anything for them to do.

The only trouble with these Indians is that the too-benevolent white race can not let them alone. All they ask is to be left in comparative freedom to live their own lives, pursue their own industries, follow their own religion and govern without interference their own peaceful communes. They ask no favors, they burden no one, and their one desire is to be allowed to live in peace after the manner of their forefathers. It may be urged that this is made impossible by the new conditions created by the rapid march of Western civilization, but even admitting that this is true, it does not follow that the interference of the white people with the life, religion, and industries of the Indians need be carried on with such utter lack of judgment.

TO GO directly to the root of the matter, the thrusting of the Christian religion upon these Indians, in the way it is done, is a mistake that could hardly be made even by a missionary society if the members who so zealously work to raise money for the
From a Photograph by Frederick Monsen

ONE OF THE ELDERS OF THE TRIBE. A WISE MAN IN COUNCIL
“EVERY ACT OF THE DAILY LIFE OF THESE PRIMITIVE DESERT PEOPLE HAS SOME RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE”
A GENTLE PATRIARCH WHO FORMERLY RULED THE PUEBLO OF ORAIBI AND WHO NOW CHEERFULLY FILLS THE PLACE OF SECOND IN COMMAND
"Many Horses," a Navajo chief whose son was "Big Man" when Kit Carson went through the country with his volunteers.
ALL THEY ASK IS TO BE LEFT IN COMPARATIVE FREEDOM TO LIVE THEIR OWN LIVES
"THE HOPI IS A HARD WORKER, ANXIOUS TO MAKE A LIVING AND TO MAKE BOTH ENDS MEET"
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"THE UNCONSCIOUS EXPRESSION OF DAILY LIFE AND CHARACTER WAS WHAT I HAD SET MY HEART ON OBTAINING"
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salvation of the heathen had even a glimmer of understanding of the old belief they are trying to displace, and of the inevitable effect of its destruction. Taught in the Nature religion of his forefathers, the Indian knows no hypocrisy. His life is an open book, and from his ceremonial birth to his ceremonial death he is open, honest, and truthful. He is a hard worker, anxious to make a living and to make both ends meet, and for this very reason he has developed many traits of character which the civilized man of modern times would do well to seek for himself. Of course, there are Indians and Indians, but I speak of the Indians of the Desert, where the means of life are not easily obtained. They show in a marked degree the strength of moral fiber, and the purity of life that comes from a hard struggle with an austere environment. Religion is inborn in every natural man, and the Indian, being wholly a natural man, has that sense of oneness with Nature and that worship of the Spirit lying behind the great natural forces, which is as far superior to the dogmatism that ordinarily is called Christianity as the music of the spheres is to the jangling of warring creeds. Every act of the daily life of these primitive Desert people has some religious significance. They are as simple and sincere in their faith as little children, and everything in life to them is founded upon that faith. It is handed down from father to son by word of mouth and is kept unchanged from generation to generation. When a child reaches the age of six or seven he is taken to a kiva, or underground ceremonial chamber, where are gathered the elders of the pueblo, and there he is taught, word by word, and sentence by sentence, to repeat in metrical form the belief and the religious history of his people. This is impressed so deeply upon his childish brain that thereafter it colors and controls all of his life. His work, his play, his festivals, his ceremonial, all have to him a deep and sacred significance, all his art is founded upon his religion and everything fashioned and ornamented by his hand is an expression of some phase of his religious belief. Take away his religion, and you take away his art, his morals, his motive for industry, in fact everything that goes to make up his life. And what have we to give him in place of these? A creed that he can not understand, and that seems to him foolish and opposed to the Nature he knows so well, therefore a creed that he can not profess or follow without hypocrisy, and so concealment and dishonesty are born; a small smattering of the white man's stereotyped
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book learning in the place of his own deeply significant and symbolic Nature lore, and so all his standards are upset and his mind set adrift in unknown seas of incomprehensible thought; a half knowledge of some of the white man's minor trades and industries, with the assurance that only by these can he earn a living, and so his own ancient and wonderful industries are destroyed, and not only does he lose his only sure means of securing a livelihood, but the country loses a true and natural expression of art that our modern civilization can ill afford to spare. Truly, the present methods of "converting" and "educating" the Indian have much to answer for.

TO ONE who knows the conditions, it is a matter of never-ceasing amazement that the United States Government did not realize years and years ago that the Indian, left to himself, would be an asset that the country could ill afford to lose. If, instead of trying to force upon him the white man's education, industries, religion and "art," the Government and the missionaries would send to the Reservations intelligent, practical men and women who were capable of making some effort to understand these people, and who would confine their teaching to showing them how to improve the sanitary conditions of their dwellings, giving them medical attendance when necessary, helping them to improve their stock, and teaching them how to improve their food supply and to grow a superior kind of food, there would be no danger that their efforts would be unwelcome or unappreciated. And also, if the Indian were given just enough of the white man's education to enable him to transact the business of an ordinary herder or farmer, it would be well. In competition with the white man at one of the white man's trades, the Indian has about as much chance as a lamb in a den of wolves, but he can easily make a living from the soil and from his herds in the country where he is at home and happy. And more than all, if the conscientious people who, with more zeal than knowledge of art or any true craftsmanship, now try to teach the Indian some of the lesser industries of the white man, would only qualify themselves to give practical instruction as to the best methods of reviving partially lost arts such as the old use of vegetable dyes and the ancient method of glazing pottery, and so give him better facilities for working at his own primitive, beautiful crafts, there would be no difficulty as to the ability of the Indian to earn his living, or about
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finding a ready market for his fabrics, baskets, and pottery made and decorated after the ancient manner of his race. Instead, the world is losing something of pure beauty because it knows no better than to thrust aside these things, and to force the Indian to make hideous commercial trash that has no value to himself or to anyone else. He is doubly helpless, because the smattering of artificial teaching that has been given has blunted his naturally keen and true perception and destroyed all his native feeling for beauty, and also because his own simple standards can not stand for a moment against the arrogant assumption of superior knowledge on the part of the white man.

Some day when it is too late, we may realize what we have lost by “educating” the Indian, and forcing him to accept our more complex but far inferior standards of life, work and art. These sound like strong statements, but let any man who doubts their truth take a journey through the Painted Desert and live for a while with these gentle brown children of an ancient race. The chances are that he would find himself the learner instead of the teacher, and if he had ears to hear and eyes to see, the spell of the Desert would be upon him all his days.

EDITOR’S NOTE.—This is the first of a series of four articles on life among the Indians of the Desert that Mr. Monsen is writing for THE CRAFTSMAN. The foregoing article is more or less introductory in its nature, giving the general outlines of the subject; the second deals with the houses and villages of the Indians and their home customs, showing how closely both building art and customs are derived from the ancient cliff dwellers; the third treats of the superb physical development of these Indians, showing how this is brought about by their simple, austere life and vigorous outdoor sports; and the fourth tells of their sports, festivals, and ceremonies, which reveal so clearly the Indian’s conception of the joy of life. All four of the series will be illustrated with photographs taken by Mr. Monsen at intervals during the many years of his life among the Indians.