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Historic photographs reveal complexity of Native American identity



Fred F. Shiffert, Portrait of a very young girl. Photo: Courtesy Spencer Museum of Art.

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LAWRENCE, KS.- In a society built on cultural encounters, what do we mean by authenticity as it relates to race, history, and ethnicity? This question, in all its complexity, lies at the heart of a small exhibition of never-before-displayed photographs at the [Spencer Museum of Art](#).

The eve of the 20th century was marked by ambition, curiosity, and change. Technological advances allowed photographers to document new the landscapes and cultures that surrounded them. Most of the photographs displayed in Conversation XVII: Photographic Memory date back to the turn of the 20th century and highlight intersections between early photography, historical memory, and Native American identity. Some portraits show important historical figures while others capture but a single moment in the lives of now-unknown individuals.

"Cabinet cards," or commercial studio photographs from the 19th century mounted on cardstock, are commissioned portraits; studio backdrops situate the subjects in particular settings, often Victorian home interiors. This exhibition includes several cabinet cards depicting Native American sitters who visited the studios to have their photographs taken. Documentary photographs from the same time period depict Native American subjects outside the studio. Alongside these historic images are nuanced works by modern and contemporary photographers.

Among the contemporary selections is a series titled *An Indian from India* by photographer Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. As an immigrant to the United States, Matthew answers question about her ethnicity by stating that she is Indian. She has been intrigued by frequent requests for verification that she is an Indian from India. "It seems strange that all this confusion started because Christopher Columbus thought he had found the Indies," she writes. Matthew explores the resulting relationship between these two cultures by pairing reprinted 19th-century portraits of Native Americans with self-portraits in which she poses in similar scenarios. She uses modern digital technologies and materials in recreating historic photographic processes to uncanny effect.

Conversation XVII: Photographic Memory is on view through May 18, 2014. *Up Close With Cassandra Mesick: Photographic Memory*, a free curatorial tour of the exhibition, takes place on Sunday, February 2 from 1-2 PM at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi Street in Lawrence Kansas.



Today's News

December 24, 2013

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4.- [Frank Auerbach goes on show alongside Rembrandt at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum](#)

5.- [Exhibition in Sydney presents more than 80 works spanning 200 years of American art](#)

6.- [The Courtauld Gallery joins Your Paintings project to put the nation's paintings online](#)

7.- [National Gallery of Ireland's traditional exhibition of Turner works opens in Dublin](#)

8.- [Celebrated artist, El Anatsui, to transform facade of Royal Academy's Burlington House](#)

9.- [One of the most important exhibitions of the Maya opens at the National Palace in Mexico](#)

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