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The Tlingit Encounter with Photography

Sharon Bohn Gmelch

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Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, shortly after the invention of photography, the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska encountered early Russian and American survey teams, ethnographic investigators, studio photographers, tourists, and resident amateur and commercial photographers.

Why were the Tlingit photographed and how were their images disseminated? How were they portrayed through photography? How active were the Tlingit in shaping the images taken of them and in controlling their representation? Did photography remain an alien technology and activity or did the Tlingit incorporate it into their own culture?

Based on research in thirteen North American archives (including the Penn Museum's Shotridge Collection), a close examination of hundreds of photographs, and extensive oral-history interviews in Sitka and other sites with both Tlingit and non-Native residents, Sharon Bohn Gmelch presents valuable insights on the motivations and reactions of Native subjects to being photographed. She shows the ways the Tlingit incorporated photography and came to use it for their own purposes, expressing a new sense of empowerment as they reclaimed images from public archives for their own purposes. This is the first book to explore the photographic imagery of the Tlingit during a critical period of change, from the 1860s through the 1920s. It also provides the first full treatment of the Tlingit photography of Elbridge W. Merrill, a neglected figure in the history of ethnographic photography.

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