

# THE UNIQUE GOLDTONES OF EDWARD S. CURTIS

By Robert W. Kapoun

Starting about 1919, Charles M. Russell and his wife Nancy began spending their winters in California. As usual, they were visited by many friends and when their good friends, Charles and Mary Bair and their daughters came to visit from Montana, they would stay at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. It was in this famous hotel also that Edward S. Curtis, after having moved from Seattle around the same time period, set up his photographic studio. Curtis was still trying to finish his opus documentation of American Indian people, but needed to get out of Seattle due to a nasty divorce settlement. Fortunately his daughter, Beth, convinced Curtis to move with her to Los Angeles.

Edward Curtis knew both "Charlies" from days gone by up in Montana. So when Russell had an exhibition of his paintings at the Biltmore in March of 1924, Curtis managed to get both friends into the studio and took their portraits. What was extraordinary about this portrait session was not only the photographic images taken, but the photographic process Curtis created for the final print of Charles Russell. The image of Russell (Figure 1) was printed by Curtis in what he called the Curt-Tone process, now



Figure 1  
Charles M. Russell by Edward Curtis, 1924, Curt-Tone/goldtone/orotone  
C.M. Russell Museum

more commonly referred to as a goldtone or orotone.

The goldtone process was not created by Curtis, but he refined the technique to the extent that he eventually was considered the greatest master of the process. In simple terms a goldtone is a positive image on glass, while most photographic prints are a positive image on paper. The process Curtis used was to take a clear plate of optical glass and spread a liquid emulsion onto the

surface of the plate. He then projected his negative onto the glass to create a positive image. The highlights and shadows, however, could not be seen unless there was some type of backing on the image. Mixing a combination of banana oils and bronzing powders to create a sepia or a goldtone effect, Curtis then spread this mixture onto the dried emulsion. The final process involved baking the glass image so that all the chemicals bonded together. For those familiar with early photographic processes, there was a similar technique known as an ambrotype which was also an emulsion on glass; however, this process used black paint or cloth as a backing. The framing of the goldtone was the final element of the completed piece,

which was also necessary in order to crate and ship the finished photographic work.

When viewed next to a paper print, the Curt-Tone/goldtone/orotone truly has a three-dimensional quality that transcends our normal perception of a photograph (see Figure 2 for an example of a paper print). When Edward Curtis was asked to describe the Curt-Tone process he said:

"The ordinary photographic print, however good, lacks depth and transparency, or more strictly speaking, translucency. We all know how beautiful are the stones and pebbles in the limpid brook of the forest where the water absorbs the blue of the sky and the green of the foliage, yet when we take the same iridescent pebbles from the water and dry them they are dull and lifeless, so it is with the ordinary photographic print, but in the Curt-Tones all the transparency is retained and they are as full of life and sparkle as an opal."

An early 1916 catalog, created by Curtis in an attempt to promote the Curt-Tones, illustrates 32



Figure 2  
Nancy C. Russell by Edward S. Curtis, 1924,  
sepia-toned paper print, framed, C.M. Russell Museum

different images available in the following sizes:

- Size 8 x 10, framed . . . \$10
  - Size 11 x 14, framed . . . \$15
  - Size 14 x 17, framed . . . \$30
  - Size 18 x 22, framed . . . \$50
- (No Curt-Tones sold unframed)

Needless to say, one could not buy just a glass photographic image without some protection, therefore, the framing of the goldtones was an important and integral part of the image. As a customer, you could choose from four different frame styles. The most often purchased frame style was what is now referred to as a "bat-wing" frame (See Figure 5). The gilded plastered corners showed a distinctive similarity to a spread-winged bat. Another frame style is now known as a "pie crust" frame (See Figure 6). This

style has the gesso coming up and over the corner to give the appearance of a lip. Two other frames were also available but were not as popular as the two mentioned above. Figure 7 shows what is now described as a "ribbon" frame, and Figure 8 shows a frame referred to as a "ranch-style" frame.



Figure 3  
Back of framed Curtis goldtone showing studio label from Seattle, Curtis' signature, and price tag for the Curt-tone photograph, Rainbow Man Collection

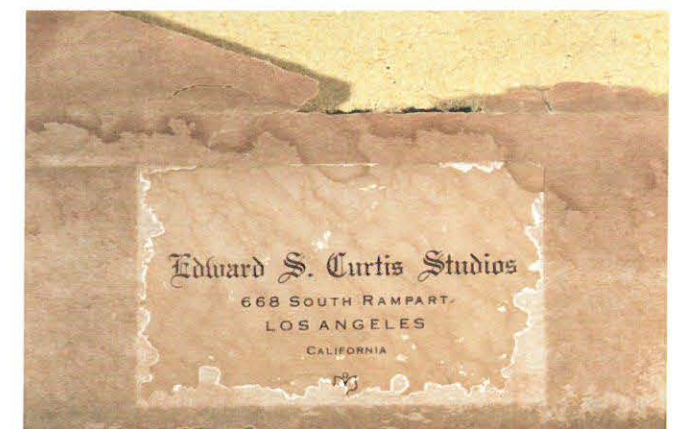


Figure 4  
Back of framed Curtis goldtone showing studio label from Los Angeles, Rainbow Man Collection

It is interesting to note that when Curtis took portraits of non-Indian people, he rarely created prints using the goldtone process. Because of this fact, it is intriguing to speculate as to why Charles Russell's image was printed as a goldtone. Note also that Nancy Russell's image was printed in the traditional paper format. Did Curtis insist on using his Curt-Tone process or was it Charles Russell himself or even Nancy Russell that wanted his image to be created using this unique and distinctive process? Or did Curtis himself have such high regard for Russell that he felt this already famous artist should be documented in this manner? ♣



Figure 5  
Chief Joseph - Nez Perce by Edward S. Curtis, 1903  
goldtone, bat-wing frame  
Rainbow Man Collection



Figure 6  
The Maid of Dreams by Edward S. Curtis, 1909  
goldtone, pie crust frame  
Rainbow Man Collection



Figure 7  
The Vanishing Race - Navaho by Edward S. Curtis, 1904  
goldtone, goldtone ribbon frame  
Rainbow Man Collection



Figure 8  
The Three Chiefs - Piegan by Edward S. Curtis, 1900  
goldtone, goldtone ranch frame  
Rainbow Man Collection

REFERENCES:

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# ON THE STREETS WHERE HE LIVED: Charlie Russell's Great Falls in Postcards

By Brian W. Dippie

Charles M. Russell was a home boy. By that, I mean simply that he liked to be home, following his routine, visiting with his friends, comfortable, relaxed, at ease—and home for him was Great Falls. When he wrote his Great Falls friends from New York or London or Los Angeles and said he wished he were there, he meant what he said. Home was where his heart was, and he explained its appeal in a letter to another Great Falls native who had strayed down to California and not returned to visit in some time. “Judging from the way you stick in the orange belt your warped on that country,” he wrote Dick Bodkin in 1925. “Things are about the same around here . . . Saw your Mother and she wants you to come home and make her a visit. She looked well you ought to come home onc and a while and see your folks the country looks better than it hase for a long time good grass. woldent you like to get a horse under you and ride over some

real grass country and get down on your belly and drink from a cold mounitian stream?”

The Russells lived in Great Falls from 1897 until Charlie's death in October 1926; before the year was out, Nancy and their son Jack had moved to Pasadena. The Russells had been away from Great Falls a good deal in Charlie's last years—not only on exhibition trips pursuing new markets for his art, but every summer at their cabin on Lake McDonald and, since their first winter vacation in California in 1920, several months each spring (with the sole exception of 1925) “in the orange belt.” Great Falls was a bit jealous. Though Charlie had no hesitation in affirming his preference for Montana, Nancy had her heart set on Pasadena, and had begun construction on a house there in 1926. Charlie died before he had to move, and was buried exactly where he wanted to sleep his long sleep, in the city he always called home. ♣

*Postcards depicting the Great Falls of his day show the city Charlie Russell loved, the places he knew, and the streets he walked—and often rode.*

## HOME—FOURTH AVENUE NORTH



Fourth Ave North Great Falls, Mont. (Great Falls Photo & View Co., ca. 1909)

Great Falls was divided by Central Avenue into two separate parts, the north side and the south side. For the most part the more prosperous citizens lived on the north side. Maybe that was because Paris Gibson, who also lived on Fourth Avenue, had had the

row of cottonwood trees planted, together with lawn boulevards on either side of the boardwalk. Anyhow, I recall it as the best kept steet on the north side.

—Walt Coburn, “The Injuns Called Him Medicine Man,” *True West* 16 (February 1969): p. 7.