

# McCLUNG MUSEUM *of* Natural History and Culture

## ***In Conversation: Will Wilson***

### **Faculty Guide**

Diné (Navajo) photographer Will Wilson’s ongoing Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange project is dedicated to creating a contemporary vision of Native North America. Wilson responds directly to the work of 20th-century photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868–1952), whose photographs simplified and romanticized Native American life. In contrast, Wilson has created rich, complex portraits that center Indigenous perspectives.

### **Pre-Tour**

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms.

identity

agency

exchange

documentation

representation

authority

technology

mood

perception

repatriation

reclamation

authority

### **During your Visit**

*In Conversation: Will Wilson* may be explored through one of the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more to focus a conversation in the gallery, and/or to develop student assignments. Below you will find a summary of each theme and related questions to drive dialogue.

#### **Theme 1: Documentation vs. Exchange**

Curtis’ *The North American Indian* (1907-1930) was a series of portfolios that documented the supposed vanishing race of Native peoples. These photos shaped public perception of Indigenous communities due to the depictions of often fabricated, romanticized versions of archaic archetypes. Wilson’s photographs, seen side-by-side with Curtis’, create new conversations that emphasize working exchange over problematic documentation.

- Do you see any parallels between Wilson’s work and Curtis’ work? How about contrasts? What kinds of conversations are being provided by these pieces?
- Reflect on your K12 education. What did you learn about Native peoples? Did you learn it from the point of documentation or exchange? Why do you think it was taught this way?
- While examining the photos, consider how the exchange of conversation and knowledge might be used – both historically and contemporarily – to shape the way the Native community, and other marginalized communities, have been viewed, represented, and treated?

### **Theme 2: Old Technology + New Technology**

The photographs of Wilson and Curtis, in conversation, offer a chance to see different depictions of Native peoples and to think critically about how they have been portrayed in photography over the past century. For *CIPX*, Wilson presents an authentic, twenty-first-century depiction of Indigenous culture through his photography. He combines 19th-century wet plate (tintype) photography with 21st-century AR technology to bring his “Talking Tintypes” to life.

- Despite the cinematic feel of Wilson’s project, how does he avoid documenting his subjects? How is his project different from a documentary on Native peoples? Why do you think that is?
- Consider Wilson’s decision to use tintype to photograph his subjects. What kind of mood do you think he was trying to create? Would this differ if the photos were taken digitally? How about in color?
- After each session, Wilson gives his “sitters” the original photograph, while retaining the right to print and use scans for artistic purposes. Why do you think Wilson reciprocates in this way? Reflect on the historical implications of photographic archives like Curtis’.

### **Theme 3: Agency and Identity**

Wilson’s project aims to give Indigenous peoples back their agency by ensuring his subjects “are participating in the re-inscription of their customs and values in a way that will lead to a more equal distribution of power and influence.” Along with his implementation of “Talking Tintypes,” Wilson does this by allowing his subjects to choose the pose, clothing, props, and context of their photograph.

- Reflect on how Wilson’s project carves out space for both individual and communal identity. How does his work compare to Curtis’ work?
- Consider how different generations of Native peoples might be affected by Wilson’s work. How might this impact Indigenous representation and reclamation?
- Where do you see queues in Wilson’s work that highlight agency and self-determination in the portrait? How does this differ in Curtis’ portraits?

## Beyond the Exhibition

Faculty may consider the following prompts to extend conversations beyond the exhibition.

1. Documentaries are assumed as honest representation of a certain subject matter, and as such are intimately tied to historical memory and public perception. However, many documentaries, such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, seek to enlist the audience in the process of reconstructing historical narratives (<https://www.criterion.com/films/574-nanook-of-the-north>).

Using Flaherty's film as a starting point, research the history of documentaries. Identify prominent titles, especially ones pertaining to the representation of marginalized communities. Discuss the use of documentation as seen in these films. Reflect on the power of the filmmakers, and the stories being told. How do these compare to contemporary documentaries?

2. Historically, many museums have been rooted in colonialism and subjugation, holding collections largely acquired through unethical, illegal, and oppressive actions. The decolonization of museums is a process that seeks to expand on the diversity and perspectives of the people reflected within museum collections by addressing colonial structures and approaches in all areas of museum work.

Read *Museum Decolonization: Moving Away from Narratives Told by the Oppressors* by Leah Huff, published by The University of Washington (<https://smea.uw.edu/currents/museum-decolonization-moving-away-from-narratives-told-by-the-oppressors/>). Then, listen to the Archaeology Podcast Network's Heritage Voices episode "[Decolonizing the Museum of Us](https://www.archaeologypodcastnetwork.com/heritagevoices/61)," (<https://www.archaeologypodcastnetwork.com/heritagevoices/61>) which discusses the San Diego Museum of Us' decolonization efforts. Now, locate other institutions that are doing this kind of work. How are they choosing to recognize their past? What initiatives are they taking in the present? What are their plans for the future?

3. Read the poem, "[Aboriginal Australia](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/aboriginal-australia/)" by Indigenous Australian writer, Jack Davis (<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/aboriginal-australia/>).

What parallels, as illustrated in Davis' poem, can be drawn between "the real Australian story" and the American story? Consider themes of power, colonialism, representation, reclamation, and exchange.

## References

Art Bridges Foundation. (2003). *In Conversation: Will Wilson*.

<https://artbridgesfoundation.org/exhibitions/marketplace/will-wilson/>

Mennello Museum of American Art. (2022, October 4). *In Conversation: Will Wilson*.

<https://www.mennellomuseum.org/in-conversation-will-wilson/>

Rabinowitz, P. (1993). Wreckage upon wreckage: History, documentary and the ruins of memory. *History and Theory*, 32(2), 119-137. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2505348>

Wilson, W. n.d. *About*. Will Wilson. <https://willwilson.photoshelter.com/index>