

SEEING AMERICAN INDIANS

***When you view photographs of American Indians,
what do you expect to see?***

We invite you to consider the photographs in this exhibition by participating in a brief reflective exercise designed by researchers from Occidental College. As you engage with the photographs, consider taking the perspective of the subject, thinking about a real person you might encounter today. Try to spend at least a few minutes with each photograph to reflect on your experience. *What do you notice about your experience?*

When the researchers are present, this exercise will involve measuring your emotional and physiological responses to American Indian subject matter using wristbands.

We invite you to submit your reflections to seeingamericanindians@gmail.com.

Seeing American Indians explores how a person's mindset may influence American Indian subject interpretation in museums, and beyond.

Research indicates that non-Indians often possess little understanding of American Indian history and “have a foggy, distorted set of perceptions about Indians, usually based on little direct contact and what some admitted were little more than Hollywood stereotypes and generalizations.”¹ How might we move beyond these false perceptions to attain a more accurate and compassionate cultural understanding?

Data gathered at Occidental College demonstrates that suppressing preconceptions may hinder understanding. Attempting to view a photograph of American Indians objectively often leads to a focus on decorative qualities alone such as clothing and appearance. These superficial readings can actually increase the mindset that thinks of Native peoples as stereotypically “Indian.” In contrast, taking the perspective of the person depicted in the photograph deepens one's appreciation and understanding. Perspective taking encourages viewers to make stronger eye contact with the depicted individual, leading to more compassionate and humanistic interpretations.

Seeing American Indians is directed by Occidental College Professors Aleksandra Sherman (Assistant Professor of Cognitive Sciences) and Nancy Marie Mithlo (Associate Professor of Art and Art History), in partnership with the Autry Museum of the American West, and is funded by an NEA Research: Art Works grant (AY 2015–2018).

1. Doble, John, and Andrew L. Yarrow. *Walking a Mile: A First Step Toward Mutual Understanding* (New York: Public Agenda, 2007), 2. Available for download at <http://www.publicagenda.org/files/walkingamile.pdf>.



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