

***A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians: Benedicte Wrensted.* Joanna Cohan Scherer. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. 157pp.¹**

Reviewed by Alison K. Brown

A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians is the culmination of over ten years of meticulous research into the photography of Benedicte Wrensted, who operated a photographic studio in the city of Pocatello, Idaho, from 1895 to 1912. Joanna Scherer first came across Wrensted's photographs of Shoshone and Bannock (Sho-Ban) people in the National Archives while undertaking research for the Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians*. She was struck by the aesthetic qualities of the images, which were, at that point, not attributed to a named photographer. Having chanced upon some associated images in museums in Idaho, Scherer was able to link the photographs that had so impressed her with Wrensted. Several years of detective work followed, drawing upon archival resources, content analysis of Wrensted's surviving images now scattered throughout public and private collections, as well as with interviews with descendants of the Sho-Ban people portrayed and relatives of Benedicte Wrensted herself. In this book Scherer has achieved her goals of bringing "back into view" the work of an exceptional photographer and, in so doing, of highlighting the role of women as professional photographers and recorders of the American West at the turn of the 20th century; in increasing knowledge about the Indian people of south-eastern Idaho and their relationships with their Euro-American neighbours (p. 3); and of reinserting Wrensted's images into their socio-historical perspective (p. 5). Moreover, through her analysis of the use of Wrensted's images, both by Sho-Ban and by others, the author explores how photographic images have figured as elements of the ethnographic imagination and, at the same time, as treasured family portraits.

The book begins with Scherer explaining her methodological approach and goals, and then situates Wrensted's work by summarizing very briefly the categories of photography of American Indians produced during the time she was active, specifically survey photography and pictorialism. She further explains that of the many amateur and professional photographers who also recorded the lives of American Indian people at this time, a large number were women, and she helpfully provides a list of some 20 or so of them. The first two chapters provide biographical information on Wrensted's family, her life, and her career. Born in Denmark in 1859 to a middle class family, Wrensted developed an interest in photography while working as an assistant to her aunt and was recognized in Denmark as a skilled photographer in her own right prior to her emigration to the United States in 1893. By 1895 she had settled in Pocatello and established a business as a studio photographer. She soon became popular with local families and residents of the nearby Fort Hall reservation.

The remaining two chapters present detailed analyses of images of Sho-Ban, including those created by other photographers as well as by Wrensted. Here Scherer convincingly demonstrates how visual clues within photographs enrich understanding of the varied responses of Sho-Ban people to the camera, while underscoring how images have too easily been used to categorize and stereotype. In several instances she compares Wrensted's images with examples of the same individuals as photographed by others to explore how photographs can become inserted into specific frameworks with particular intentions. Her arguments are

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augmented by further comparisons of Wrensted's Sho-Ban portraits with those of her European clientele. Crucially she notes that although photographs of indigenous people made by members of a dominant society are undoubtedly connected with relationships of power, it is not the case that such images only leave the subject subordinate and objectified (p. 83). Her fascinating discussion of the clothing worn by Wrensted's subjects, and the meanings it signified, is especially useful in this regard and points to the care that must be taken when "reading" images and drawing conclusions from them.

Other themes addressed in the book include Wrensted's professional practice and aesthetic approach, and the circulation of her images. The author's discussion of these topics, in particular, allow the reader to better understand why it is that Wrensted's images remain popular among Sho-Ban families even though those produced by her contemporaries do not (p. 64). Although she certainly used props to visually highlight the cultural identity of her Sho-Ban sitters, and in so doing, created images that fit the trope of the exotic Indian, Wrensted also took many photographs of Sho-Ban in Euro-American dress and, according to Scherer, "broke through the usual prejudices of Euro-American representations of Sho-Ban Indians" (p. 126).

The book is richly illustrated throughout and draws upon Wrensted's own images as well as those of her contemporaries. The captions are especially striking, not only because the majority include identifications of the sitter, but because in many instances, they incorporate additional biographical information about them. The inclusion of the sitters' names is much more than a demonstration of the care which has gone into the production of this book, however. Given that so few images of American Indian peoples in archival collections are identified, the process of reattaching names has become associated with reclaiming identity, dignity, and respect, a point that is repeatedly made by indigenous people worldwide when responding to archival images of their ancestors, and which Scherer firmly supports. It is for this reason that I found so disturbing her comment regarding the challenge of getting the National Archives to include identifying documentation when responding to requests for copies of Wrensted's images (p. 127), though she implies that the situation has been resolved. Though museums and archives that generate much-needed income from the sale of photographic reproductions of their collections cannot possibly fully control the subsequent use of those images and accompanying captions, it seems remarkable that there would have been any hesitancy at all to provide accurate identifications given that these had become available through such thorough research. That this debate even occurred is, sadly, indicative of the gaps that clearly remain between museum and archival practice, research findings, and the wishes of community stakeholders. As Scherer notes, Sho-Ban people "are proud of these photographs and do not want them used as generic Indian images" (p. 127).

This brings me to my final point, which concerns how Sho-Ban people today respond to the photographs and have incorporated them into their lives. The pride they have in these images and how they have used them to create their own visual history, for example on the tribal website, in displays at the Shoshone-Bannock Museum as well as in people's family albums, are referred to briefly both in the foreword, written by Bonnie C. Wuttunee-Wadsworth who worked with elders from her community to identify the images, and in the concluding "Afterimage." Though this book undoubtedly makes an important contribution to the histories of women photographers and photographic representation of North American Indians, the rich detail it contains about the lives of Sho-Ban individuals makes me suspect its even greater value to the Shoshone-Bannock people.

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