Benedicte Wrensted's Indian Photographs

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Joanna Cohan Scherer resurrects the career of Benedicte Wrensted (1859-1949), a photographer who emigrated from Denmark in 1893 and set up her studio in Pocatello, Idaho, a town of about 4,500 population. Over the next seventeen years, Wrensted produced approximately one hundred seventy known photographs of Northern Shoshone, Bannock and Lemhi tribal members who lived on the nearby Fort Hall Indian Reservation, along with numerous pictures of the Euro-American citizens of Pocatello as well. Though several of Wrensted’s photographs of the Sha-Ban (as the tribes refer to themselves) were well known and had been frequently published, it was not until Scherer’s work that the identity of the photographer was known and, subsequently, her oeuvre began to be reconstructed and analyzed. The Sho-Ban were not as extensively photographed as other tribal peoples, so that Scherer’s work on Wrensted not only brings recognition to this Danish immigrant female photographer, but also to the Indian nations, and particularly to this period of transition for the Sho-Ban. As the Anthropologist/Illustrations Researcher for the Smithsonian Institution’s Handbook of North American Indians, Scherer first noted the then-anonymous photographs of Wrensted around 1984 and began the process of recovering the identity of the photographer. In addition to the Indian photographs, Scherer also investigated the Euro-American subjects and was able to provide insight into this mixed Idaho community during the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. One conclusion that can be drawn from the author’s extensive and very
thorough research is that Wrensted’s main distinction is that she allowed her Indian subjects to define themselves in their photographs, with much the same autonomy and self-determination she afforded to her white subjects. In the history of photography of American Indians, Wrensted’s practice of even-handedness and lack of manipulation is remarkable and rare.

Born in Hjørring, Wrensted was likely trained by her aunt, a professional photographer in Frederikshavn, before setting up her own studio in Horsens sometime before 1891. Scherer’s work on this early part of Wrensted’s career reveals how common it was for Danish women of the later nineteenth century to establish themselves as well-patronized and recognized photographers. Unmarried and widowed women in particular found a socially acceptable means of support through photography. Female photographers were so distinguished in Denmark that even the official photographer of the Danish Royal Court was a woman, Mary Steen (appointed in 1888)—and it was Steen who nominated Wrensted for membership in the Danish Photographic Association (1892). Searching deep into Danish archives, Scherer has located substantial information on Wrensted’s years in Denmark, including photographs from her Horsens studio, and has revealed what seems to be an enlightened Danish environment for women seeking to practice a profession independently. When Wrensted emigrated from Denmark late in 1893, it was probably not for financial or similar reasons but, in what Scherer shows to be a common impetus, to join family who were already living in the United States, in her case, a brother in Pocatello, Idaho.2

Wrensted established her studio in Pocatello in 1895 and began competing with photographers already in town. She advertised consistently in the local newspaper and actively solicited business, as shown in an 1897 announcement. “Photographs: I am Prepared to Compete with all Comers in Workmanship, Artistic Finish and at Reasonable Prices. All work Guaranteed. I am Here to Please and Customers’ Satisfaction is my aim. I am here to Stay, not for a few days, but to Remain with you. Patronize those who Patronize you. Miss B. Wrensted.”3 She was often commissioned to photograph civic organizations, such as the Pocatello Fire Department, and was
popular among the Euro-American citizens of the town for typical family portraits, a selection of which Scherer reproduces. Her success enabled her to furnish her studio with the backdrops and props common in the period (used for both white and Indian sitters), to add improvements such as an arc light (1907) for taking photographs at night, and even to enlarge her building to what the Pocatello Tribune called "a respectable business block"—known as the Wrensted Building. Just as she had been taught her profession by her aunt in Denmark, Benedicte also trained her niece, Ella, who seems to have been responsible for much of the photography done outside the studio for this thriving business. In 1912, Wrensted closed her studio and moved with her niece to California where she lived for the rest of her life. Though she was a member of the Photographers’ Association of the Pacific Northwest, attended its conventions, and actively sought to increase her professional abilities and credentials, she appears to have ended her photography career with the move to California. Information on why she made this and other decisions as well as insights into her personal life and ambitions, artistic or otherwise, is lacking. With no diaries, letters, or other private papers to search, Scherer has relied on a broad range of other sources in her reconstruction of the photographer’s life and career, including members of Wrensted’s family.

Though her photographs present a collective image of white society in Pocatello, it is primarily the Indian photographs on which Wrensted’s reputation now rests. Most of the Indians lived on the Fort Hall Reservation, about ten miles from Pocatello, but Wrensted apparently did little or no photography on the reservation. Instead, the Sho-Ban came to her. They arrived at her studio not as subjects, but as customers, and they were depicted in much the same manner as her white customers. In contrast to most historic photographs of American Indians, the Sho-Ban themselves determined what they would wear, what they would hold, who would be in the picture, and all the elements that people who desire to have their picture made would decide. Presumably, the Sho-Ban paid her for her work, so it seems safe to assume that Wrensted was, as advertised, “Here to Please” her Indian customers as completely as any others. She was not an ethnographer; she was a businesswoman who was as
eager for "Customers' Satisfaction" from the Sho-Ban as she was from anyone else. She made little attempt to create a context for the Indians or to overtly comment on them culturally, socially, or ethnographically. She allowed them to do that for themselves. Ironically, considering how much photography has been used to define Indians in terms other than those determined by the Indians themselves, this equality of approach (based in commerce, it seems) is the great strength of her photographs.

Many of Wrensted’s Indian photographs found their way into state and national archives, but were largely anonymous until Scherer began her investigation. In addition to her documentary research, Scherer also involved present-day families, both giving and receiving information, in her quest to learn who exactly Wrensted had photographed. Some of these portraits (nearly all of Wrensted’s Indian photographic work is clearly of individuals) had descended through the Sho-Ban families, even when some of the specific names were no longer known. The rediscovery of Wrensted’s work has importance for the Sho-Ban partly because of the positive self-identify they contain. The director of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes Museum, Bonnie C. Wuttunee-Wadsworth (who wrote the foreword for the book), observed that previous photographs of these peoples (including those by William Henry Jackson) depicted them negatively. But Scherer found that Wrensted’s provoked a different reaction among tribal members today. “They proved neither to reflect a predatory motive on Wrensted’s part nor to have held negative connotations for the people photographed or for their descendants.”

Theoretical issues are addressed (Scherer draws particularly on Susan Sontag’s largely condemnatory assessment of photography, On Photography of 1977) as are sociocultural conflicts and uses (or misuses) of photography as they have been applied to Native Americans. But it is the photographs themselves that are the most compelling aspect of this publication. Wrensted’s photographs present the Sho-Ban as a people in transition but retaining (or perhaps allowed to retain) a strong sense of individual, familial, and tribal pride. Most often, the sitters chose to dress traditionally, and their clothing and other objects, such as bandolier bags, provide a
rich source of information about these remarkably designed forms; in other portraits, they show themselves in European dress. In several intriguing instances, the sitters elected to have themselves photographed in the well-known “before and after” imagery, first wearing traditional attire and then also in European fashion, as if to document their intent to assimilate into the dominant society. The pejorative tone that usually accompanies these sorts of photographs is avoided by the fact that these were commissioned by the sitters themselves. Possibly Wrensted had a particular appeal for the Sho-Ban. As a Danish woman entering a post-conflict society, she could see them as clients and allow them their own personality. They were not and never had been “hostiles” to her, but they still remained different, as perhaps she herself was different.

The book is handsomely designed, using restrained tonalities, clear and readable titles and ample white space that encourages focus on the illustrations, which are generally arranged in sequences that make narrative sense. The assignment of illustration numbers causes considerable confusion, however, since a single number is sometimes given to more than one reproduction, and the ensuing large amount of object identification information is difficult to sort out. The book represents an important contribution to the histories of photography, of Danish emigration to the American West, of women photographers and businesswomen, and of the town of Pocatello. But its greatest legacy will be its restoration of the identity not only of the photographer, but also of her Sho-Ban subjects.

1 Beyond the work of Wrensted, Scherer, 54, has located only eighty-eight photographs of subjects that can be clearly identified as Sho-Ban. The other photographers of these peoples include William Henry Jackson, who depicted them in the 1870s, and De Lancey W. Gill and Wells M. Sawyer, who photographed for the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology in the 1890s.

2 Scherer, 22-26, provides substantial information on the reasons for Danish emigration, the choice of destination, and practices once settled in the U.S., especially in regard to women. Wrensted was a founding member of the Pocatello (Idaho) chapter of the Danish Sisterhood of America and helped to establish a Danish Lutheran mission in the community. According to Scherer’s research, 126 photographers entered the U.S. from
Denmark during the years 1868 and 1900. She also reports that 25 to 33 per cent of photographers in Denmark in the years 1880 to 1900 were women and that the 1900 census for Idaho, eleven per cent of the photographers in the state were women. With these kinds of statistics, Scherer, 51, laments the lack of research on these women.

3 Scherer, 30. Scherer has reproduced a number of Wrensted's advertisements and includes also photographs of the exterior and interior of her studios.

4 Scherer, 44.

5 Wrensted had certain props, such as a blanket, that were used variously in several photographs, but is questionable the extent to which these were used to suggest "Indianness" or who decided when or how to use them. Some objects, such as a pipe bag, occur in more than one photograph, but it is not clear whether this belonged to Wrensted's studio or whether, more likely, it was an Indian possession that several individuals chose to include in their portraits.

6 Scherer, 16.