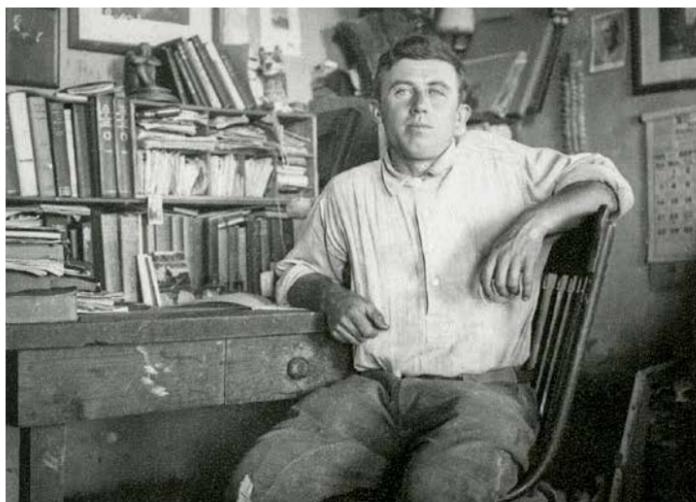


# MASTER OF THE ARTS

ALTHOUGH HE NEVER BECAME A CONCERT VIOLINIST, AS HIS FATHER WOULD HAVE LIKED, EMBRY KOPTA DID BECOME A RENOWNED ARTIST WHO CREATED SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST IMPRESSIVE SCULPTURES OF HOPI PEOPLE. TURNS OUT, HE WAS A MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER, TOO.

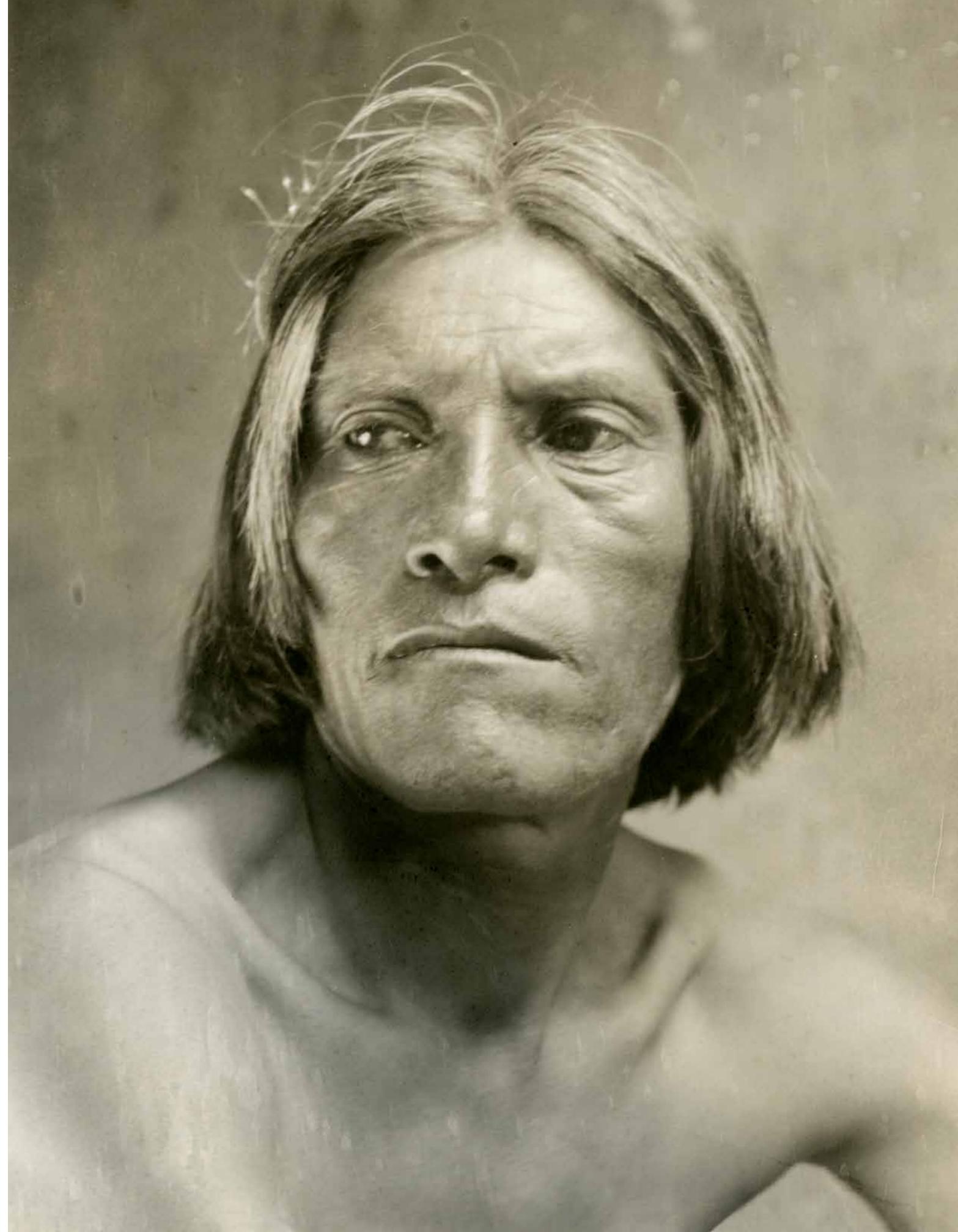
A PORTFOLIO BY EMBRY KOPTA  
TEXT BY KELLY VAUGHN

Photographs: Museum of Northern Arizona



**ABOVE:** Emory Kopta's love of the Hopi people informed both his sculpted works and his photography. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-099)*

**RIGHT:** The Hopi man in this portrait may have been Harry Co-ya-wy-ema, the chief priest of the Snake Society and a favorite subject of Kopta's. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-067)*



FRY KOPTA WAS NEVER GOING TO BE A CONCERT violinist. Not according to his father, anyway.

“When he was well along in his training he played a concert piece for his father — and promptly was told that he was not good enough, and probably never would be,” wrote Walter Collins O’Kane in the August 1957 issue of *Arizona Highways*. “The boy took the verdict at full value, gave up the violin and turned to sculpture.”

For Kopta’s collectors, that turning point in his life proved fortuitous. In the decades that followed, the young artist created some of the most iconic representations of the Hopi people in art history.

While visiting his father’s ranch in California’s Sacramento Valley, the Austria-born Kopta was pinned under a horse-drawn wagon. The accident crushed his knee and left him with a limp that would characterize his walk for the remainder of his life. Shortly thereafter, in 1904, Kopta enrolled in the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art in San Francisco. By 1911, he’d finished his studies and moved to Los Angeles, where he met Arizona painter Lon Megargee.

In 1912, John Lorenzo Hubbell invited the two artists to his trading post on the Navajo Nation in Northeastern Arizona. Together with artist William R. Leigh, they journeyed to Polacca, on Hopi Tribe land. There, Kopta fell in love with the people, rented a room and studio space from a member of the community, and decided to close out his affairs in Los Angeles.

And so he began sculpting the Hopi people.

“He was considered a great friend of the Hopis,” says artist Ed Mell, who has a collection of five Kopta sculptures. Among them is a bust of Harry Co-ya-wy-ema, the chief priest of the Snake Society. A photo of the bust accompanies O’Kane’s 1957 *Arizona Highways* story.

But in addition to casting great sculptures, Kopta also began photographing the people, landscapes and cultures that surrounded him. Decades later, Mell came across a collection of Kopta’s photographs in an unlikely situation.

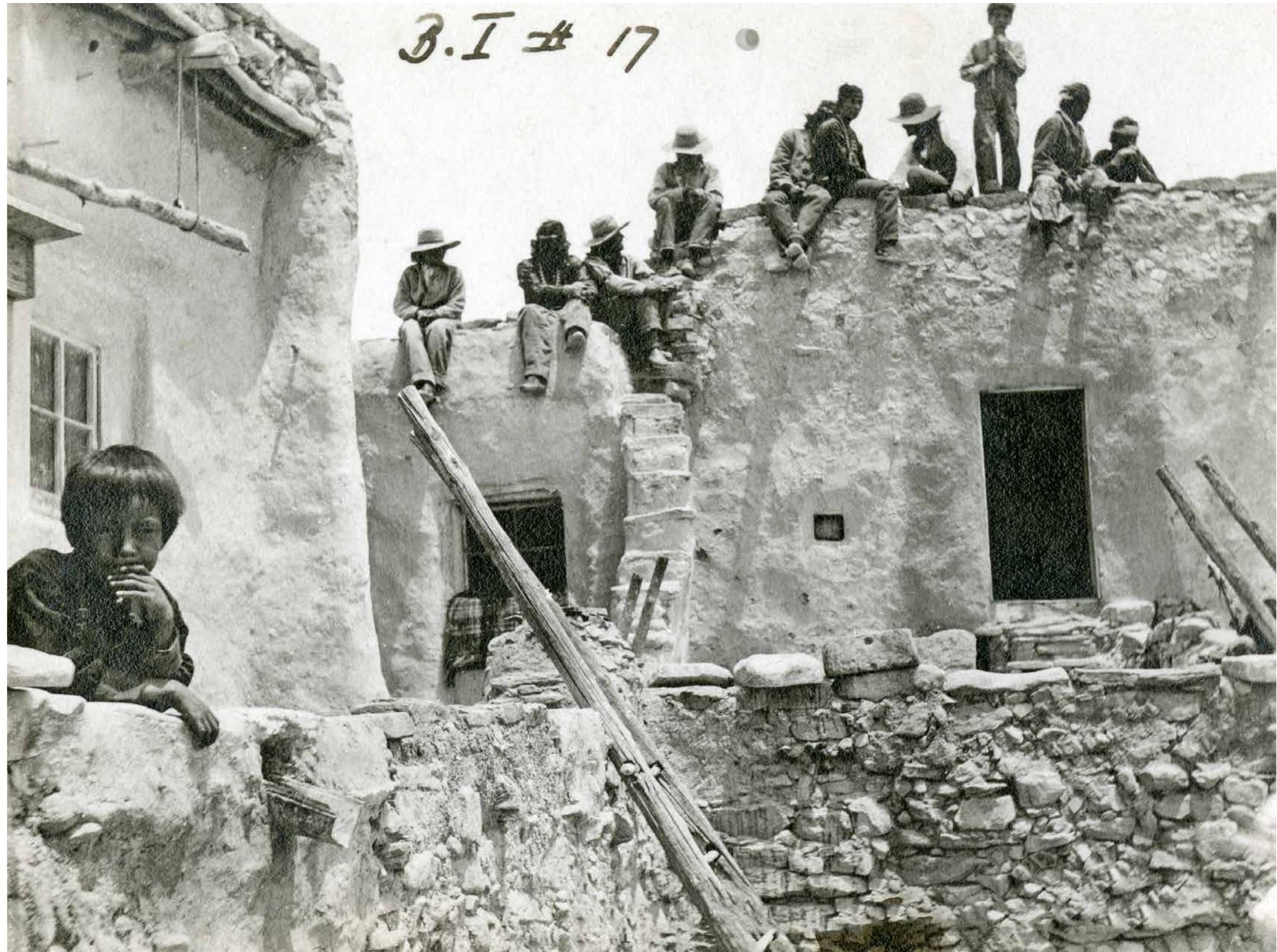
“It’s interesting,” he says. “My younger brother, Lee, found them at a yard sale in Phoenix’s Coronado neighborhood. That was 30 years ago.”

As he looked through the images, Mell realized that he’d seen some of the work before — in that old issue of *Arizona Highways*.

“I went, ‘I know I’ve seen this,’” he says. “I found the article and realized who Kopta was. I was unraveling a mystery — discovering different things about the images, who he may have been with, where he was. He did a lot of notations on the back of the images — he had beautiful handwriting.”

Kopta used many of the photos as studies for his sculptures, which are installed in the Phoenix area, including at Steele Indian School Park, the Arizona Biltmore and Arizona State University. The latter is the home of a Kopta fountain in front of Old Main on ASU’s Tempe campus.

Kopta died in Phoenix in 1953, but his wife, Anna, whom he met at the Phoenix Indian School, continued his advocacy work on behalf of Arizona’s Native people and was instrumental in having Hubbell Trading Post designated a national historic site in 1965.



Hopi men sit on the roof of a pueblo building. *Kopta Collection* (MS 240-2-377)

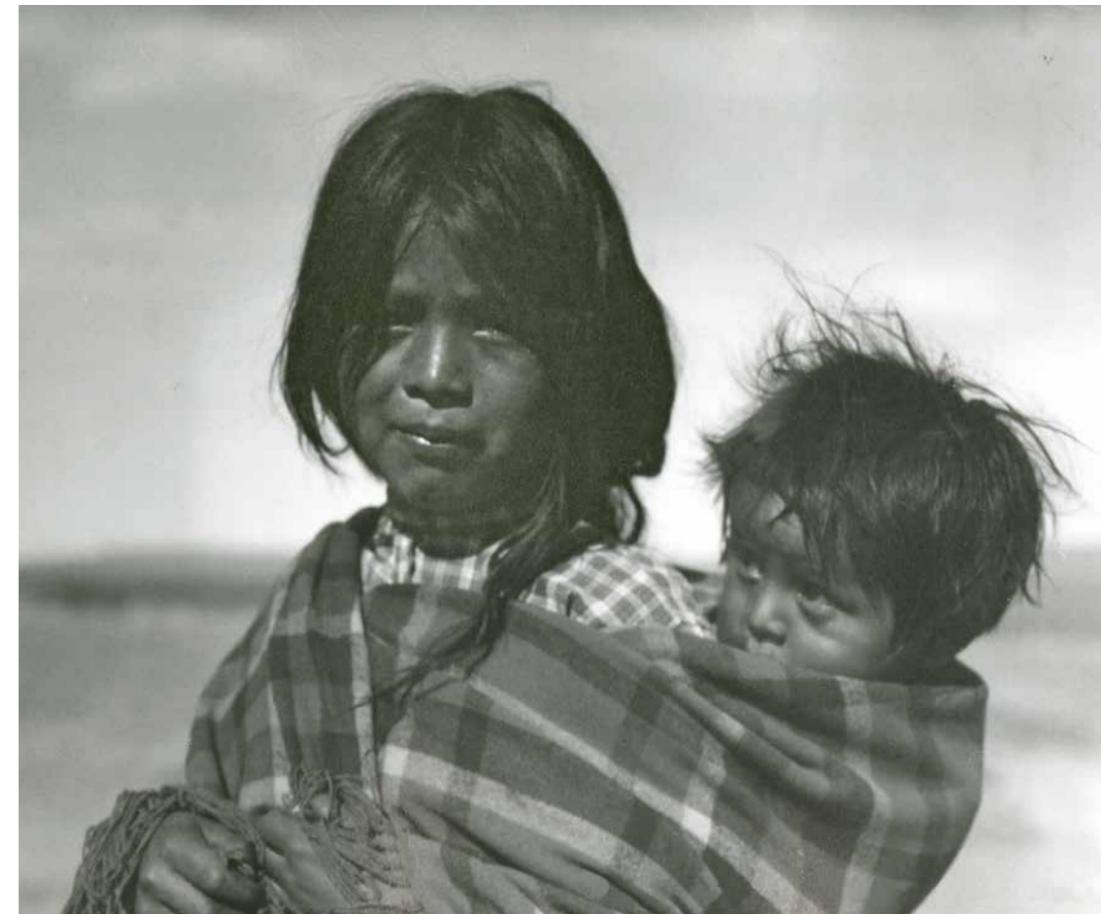
EDITOR’S NOTE: Unfortunately, most of these photos do not include the names of those pictured or when and where they were made. If you recognize someone, drop us a line and tell us what you know about him or her.



**LEFT:** Kopta photographed this Hopi maiden with her hair in whorls — the traditional hairstyle for unmarried women. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-060)*

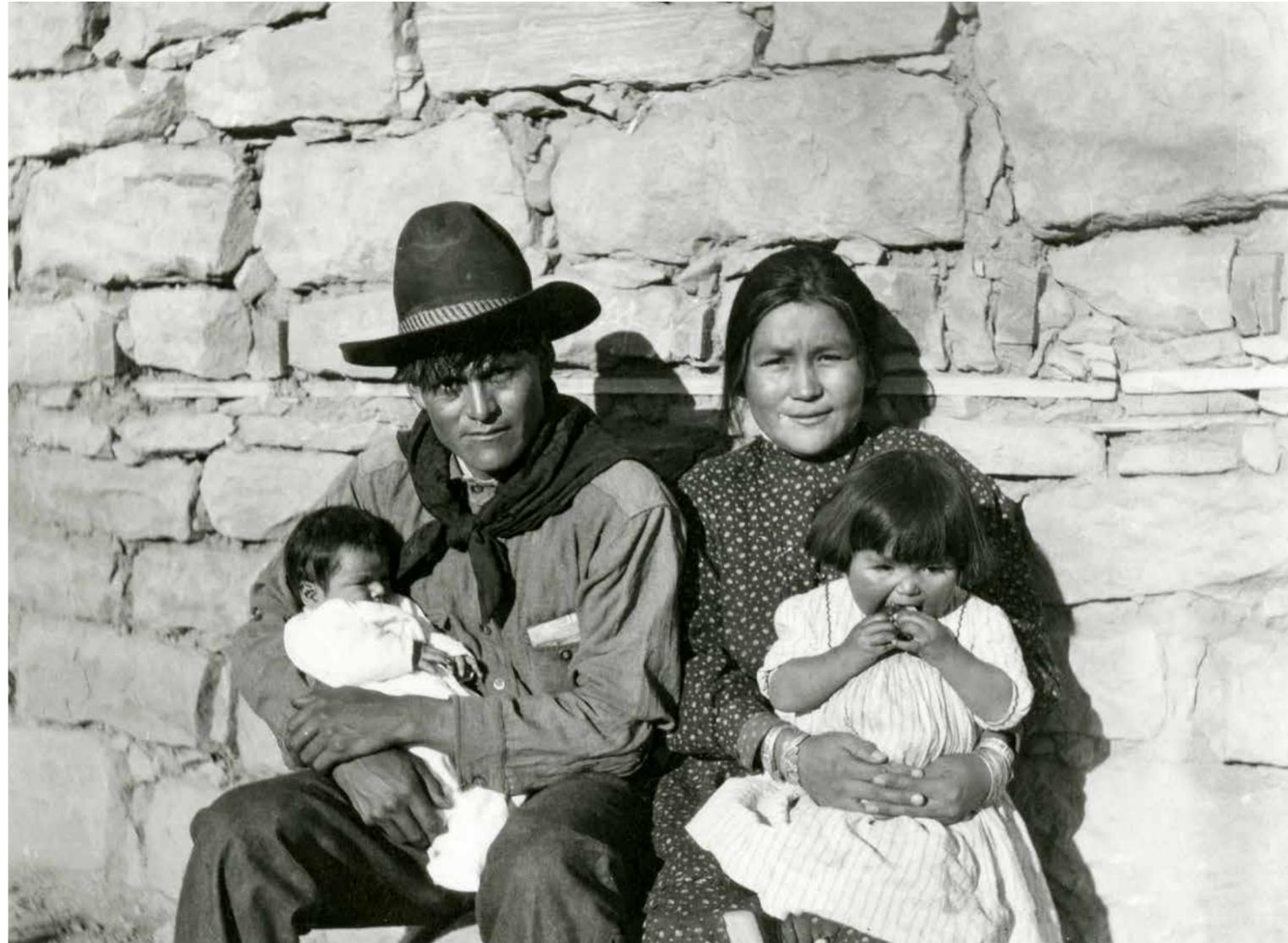
**RIGHT:** A young Hopi woman carries a baby, wrapped in a blanket, on her back. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-145)*

**BELOW:** Kopta's close relationships with Hopi families enabled him to make intimate portraits, such as this image of a young girl. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-191)*





Kopta returned to his muse, Harry Co-ya-wy-ema, for this photograph, made at Kopta's studio in Polacca. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-193)*



**LEFT:** Kopta frequently photographed Harry Co-ya-wy-ema, and he also sculpted him multiple times. One such sculpture now belongs to Phoenix artist Ed Mell. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-049)*

**ABOVE:** A Hopi man and woman hold their two young children. *Kopta Collection (MS 240-2-096)* [AH](#)