

MARIE-ALICE DUMONT, FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHER DURING EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IN RURAL EASTERN QUEBEC: AN ANALYSIS OF A PHOTOGRAPH OF HER ADOPTIVE DAUGHTER ROSALIE

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Marie-Alice Dumont (1892-1985) is considered the first professional woman photographer in Eastern Quebec. Her photographs are ethnographic portraits showcasing Karmouraska, a small farming community located at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River north of Quebec City. Dumont's photographs have been recognized for capturing the socio-cultural norms of rural Quebec during the first part of the twentieth century. In this paper I will focus on *Rosalie s'initie à la broderie*, a photograph of her adopted daughter Rosalie Bergeron, to show how the private and personal side of Dumont's documentation of her daughter coalesced with her professional practice (fig. 1).

Dumont, a self taught artist, began her photographic in 1920, alongside her brother, Abbot Napoleon Dumont, a professor at Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière College. Under his supervision she would take and develop photographs.¹ This endeavor began when her brother presented her with a gift, a Kodak Brownie. Over the years her expertise expanded to include photographs of the everyday life of Karmouraska, its people and places. In 1920 Dumont opened a photographic studio that was in operation from 1920 to 1961 with the technical guidance of Ulric Lavoie an experienced photographer with his own studio, Lavoie Studio. Dumont's photographic style developed as her daughter grew.² It became more formal and focused on the studio work. From the outdoors to indoors Dumont portrayed the community of Kamouraska initially as she observed them and eventually as they wanted to be seen, through her studio work. The pivotal image of *Rosalie s'initie à la broderie* is a studio portrait that shows Rosalie at a crossroads between two worlds, that of a girl and a young woman. This is the Rosalie that Dumont captures. Just as Rosalie bridges these two worlds so does Dumont, both as a mother and as a professional photographer working within a particular style of portrait photography. A comparison of this delicate portrayal of adolescence with other works by Dumont of her daughter will situate the significance of this work.

Before beginning this analysis it is important to understand how Dumont came to be a professional photographer and the kinds of photographs she took of her community. Dumont's initial use of the Kodak Brownie is an example of her role as a woman in the society of that time. North American women during this period became amateur photographers; most were previously excluded from photographic practice because of the expense and complexities of the photographic equipment and the fact that women were expected to stay at home and have a family.³ Kodak changed that because the target market for the Brownie camera was the ultimate amateur photographer. The process of photography was made easy enough so that women and children could take photographs: "You press the button, we do the rest."⁴

Dumont's sensitivity to the photographic medium, professional commitment, social status and familial ties with her brother, the abbot, placed her at an advantage. She was able to move beyond the realm of the Kodak Brownie and operate her own commercial studio successfully: "Photographe professionnelle, c'est avec courage et détermination que Marie-Alice Dumont met sur pied en 1925 un studio de photographie à Saint-Alexander de Kamouraska."⁵ This success afforded her the chance to take

more candid and personal shots and to explore what was truly of interest to her. It also afforded the opportunity to work with more complex methods of developing photos. The portraits of her immediate community are subtle and touching. Dumont's relationship with these subjects, most of which were her relatives, evoke an intimacy that the viewer can sense. Looking at *Mme Ulderic Dumont et son petit-fils Origène Dumont*, 1925 reveals this intimacy to the viewer (fig. 2). Here we see the daily ritual of making bread. Dumont's mother rolls and kneads dough on a table while a young boy, presumably her nephew, looks back at the camera. She is able to candidly capture these people in the activities of their daily lives⁶ while revealing the customs and traditions of eastern Quebecers during this period. The photographs introduce the viewer to a world that is far beyond the day-to-day routine. Such subjects are the stuff of chronicles as they suggest a pattern of regular notation⁷ of the everyday and its associated routine habits.

Dumont's most interesting work can be found when she chronicles what happens outside her studio walls. Her sense of understanding of her community and vernacular snapshot photography is apparent in many of the images she took. Yet her strong observational qualities and understanding of character are still present in her studio work they are just constrained by calculated setting of the studio environment. Each portrait reveals the personality and strong character of the person regardless of where it is set outside or inside the studio, "La simplicité des sujets est émouvante. Ses images dégagent douceur, tendresse et pureté."⁸

The image of Dumont's adoptive daughter Rosalie presents the viewer with more than just a studio portrait. Here the viewer sees the everyday of the daughter relationship brought to life including its expectations and hopes for the future. Dumont's photograph of *Rosalie, s'initie à la broderie*, 1927 combines the intimate relationship of the subject and the photographer within a controlled studio environment that ultimately reveals Dumont's skill as a studio photographer. When comparing this image to another of Dumont's portraits of a young girl *Angelina Desjardins*, 1937 there is a strong difference in the treatment of the subject by the photographer (fig. 3). The Desjardins portrait reveals a staged photograph. The young girl glances back at the viewer with a faint smile her hands are crossed on her lap, body language that seems unnatural for a young girl. With Rosalie's portrait the viewer feels a sense of spontaneity and candidness present in Dumont's outdoor photography. As the caption reads in *Aux Limites De La Mémoire: Photographies du Québec, 1900-1930*:

"Un éclairage bien dose, digne de peintre Rembrandt, fait que l'atmosphère de doucher et de clame qui se dégagé de ce portrait est presque palpable. On n'y sent pas l'effet de "mis en scène". La complicité évidente entre le modelé et l'artiste (mère, fille adoptive) rend ce portrait touchant de vérité."⁹

The viewer does not need to know the identity of the subject, as it is obvious that there exists a level of intimacy between the photographer and subject, an intimacy beyond a mere professional relationship. There is an apparent discrepancy between the mis-en-scene; the painted studio backdrop and props present in the portrait and the overall feeling that is conveyed by the photograph of Rosalie. These stagnant elements play off of what can be perceived as an informal and day-to-day environment for Rosalie. Rosalie sits legs crossed at the ankles her eyes gazing at her embroidery work and not at the photographer or the viewer. This was a common style in studio portraits during this era. It is this

downward gaze that allows for the sense of closeness and opens up Rosalie's world. The viewer is allowed to observe her activities without the repercussions of a returned gaze.

By following Rosalie's eyes the viewer can see that her embroidery is of utmost importance to her. Embroidery was an activity that distinguished a young lady as accomplished. The education of the perfect homemaker consisted in embroidering sheets or cloths for trousseaus and covering and smothering each item of furniture.¹⁰ Embroidery, then, was associated with virtue and skill. In portraying her daughter in such a light, Dumont demonstrates that although still an adolescent girl, Rosalie has the makings of an accomplished young woman. Embroidery would require patience and dexterity, small sewn squares of fabric [show] off [a women's] manual skill and consummate domesticity.¹¹ Such skill would prepare her for household responsibilities and chores.

Embroidery skills were a sought after virtue. Nuns taught this skill at schools and in some cases these skills would merit recognition in the form of medals (fig. 4).¹² In an account from *A Canadian Scrapbook*, 1854-1930, a young girl named Yvonne discusses her jealousy regarding her lack of skill and creative freedom to embroider as well as 'Madame': Yvonne expresses that her limited means should not prevent her from indulging in the strange embroidery I did, 'Ma foi the nuns at The Mal-Baie Covent la-bas would stare at such work'..."¹³ Unlike Yvonne, Rosalie's embroidery serves as a symbol as well as a creative outlet. Firstly, it can be presumed that with a professional photographer as a mother, Rosalie, unlike other young French Canadian girls, would be able to creatively engage in embroidery and other crafts without strict limitations. Secondly, embroidery in this photograph also acts as a prop, similar to the chair, stool and backdrop present in the photograph. The background props also suggest she is entering womanhood. Unlike Dumont's pictures of children outside here she portrays her daughter in the parlor home engaged in a domestic activity. However, unlike these objects it serves to symbolize the pending entrance into womanhood. Rosalie, like many other girls and young women, would likely perfect this skill.

Nonetheless, Rosalie's haircut and dress show that she is far from womanhood. Rosalie's hair style is youthful cut that accentuates the rounds of her cheeks. Her dress has no shape and therefore plays down her figure while her shoes are flats. What is of interest is that her legs are crossed at the ankles, in this era a woman would have her legs covered to the ankles, but a girl like Rosalie can still show her legs. The vernacular photographs, *Pour l'amour d'une fleur* (ca. 193) and *Le terrain de jeu* (ca. 1930) circa 1930, taken by Dumont, reveal to the viewer a young girl that resembles Rosalie (figs. 5 & 6). *Pour l'amour d'une fleur* depicts a young girl picking flowers in a play dress and hat, her haircut resembles Rosalie's. The actions of this girl are innocent, as is her downward gaze, obverting the eye from the camera and the viewer. The photograph shows a vernacular snapshot displaying the everyday, the common. This style of dress and quotidian activity is present in *Le terrain de jeu*, where the viewer sees three children to the left in the foreground of the photograph. Two of these children are dressed and styled in a similar fashion and they are playing games in the town street. The candidness of both these vernacular snap shots carries over to the image of Rosalie and her embroidery. The viewer seems to be looking at a causal moment in Rosalie's day – a habitual activity interrupted by an unnoticed viewer. Despite being staged, Rosalie was most probably used to her mother's working environment, much like these other children were used to picking flowers and playing in the streets. *Rosalie, s'initie à la broderie* captures the feeling of this everyday within the confines of the studio environment. The staged elements

are in place to create a scene of adulthood and transition but Rosalie's the girl also present. The photograph of Rosalie depends on her embroidery, dress and style to illustrate to the viewer a young girl at the crossroads between childhood and womanhood.

Marie-Alice Dumont faithfully captures Rosalie's adolescence by using the studio portrait style to confine this fleeting moment and her motherly sentiment and photographic eye to reveal a tender moment between mother and daughter. Dumont is therefore a two-fold observer: mother and photographer. The portrait reveals more than just the interaction of a sitter and a photographer; it illustrates a mother's point of view. We see Rosalie Bergeron, daughter of Marie-Alice Dumont, growing up before her mother's eyes and before the viewer's eyes (fig. 7). The viewer is looking at photographs that were meant to capture important moments in a previous generation's life. These photographs were used figuratively to emblemize the stories of their lives.¹⁴ *Rosalie s'intie a la broderie* is one of many photographs of Rosalie in the Marie-Alice Dumont archives that consist of 10,000 negatives. In the Dumont archives we see Rosalie grow up and meet a significant other in *Mlle Rosalie Bergeron et M. Lorenzo Dumont* (fig. 9). The ordinary and the expected are what is pictured: the album gives voice to the intensity of human experience,¹⁵ and *Rosalie s'initie à la broderie* is a pivotal image in this collection that depicts adolescence at a crossroads while blending Marie-Alice Dumont's keen sense of observation and ability to capture character and personality in an indoor studio setting.

FIGURES



FIG. 1.

Marie Alice Dumont. *Rosalie, s'intie a la broderie*. 1927. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup
<<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAoY2F0YXNzb2MgTEILRSAnJSMxYmU3ZDcLJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)



FIG. 2

Marie Alice Dumont. *Mme Ulderich Dumont et son petit-fils Origène Dumont*. 1925. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup
[\)](http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAOY2F0YXNzb2MgTEILRSAnJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>)



FIG. 3

Marie Alice Dumont. *Angelina Desjardins*. 1937.
 (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup
[\)](http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAOY2F0YXNzb2MgTEILRSAnJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>)



FIG. 4

Soeur Marie-de-l'Eucharistie (Elmina Lefebvre). 1900. Glass plate negative, *Nouvelles de l'ACPC: Archives photographiques*, un groupe d'orphelines et une religieuse, avec des travaux de broderie et jouets d'époque (victorienne).

(Image: <http://pistard.banq.qc.ca/unite_chercheurs/Anq_Afficher_image?p_page=1&p_anqsid=2010040807124821&P_cote=P910,S3,D4,P3&P_codedepo=03Q&P_numunide=1032988&p_hauteur=705&p_largeur=1136>)



FIG. 5

Marie-Alice Dumont. *Pour l'amour d'une fleur*. Ca. 1930. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup

<<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAoY2F0YXNzb2MgTEILRSAnJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)



FIG. 6

Marie-Alice Dumont. *Le terrain de jeu*. Ca. 1930. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup

<<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAoY2F0YXNzb2MgTEILRSAnJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)



FIG. 7

Marie Alice Dumont. *Mlle Rosalie Bergeron*. 1943. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup
<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAOY2F0YXNzb2MgTElLRSAJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)



FIG. 8

Marie Alice Dumont. *Mme Ulderic Dumont et son petit-fils Origène Dumont*. 1925. (Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup
<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICAOY2F0YXNzb2MgTElLRSAJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)



FIG. 9

Marie-Alice Dumont. *Mlle Rosalie Bergeron et M. Lorenzo Dumont*. 1918-1961.

(Image: Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont - Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent Rivière-du-Loup

<<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cybersr.php?c=|IFdIRVJFICaOY2F0YXNzb2MgTElLRSAJSMxYmU3ZDclJyk=|&phpMyAdmin=sX1Cg8DSJTDXcQrtj6nQGNSTjQd>>)

ENDNOTES

¹ Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont, Archives du Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent

<<http://www.mbsl.qc.ca/cyberad.php?e=Nw>>.

² Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont.

³ Marc Olivier, "George Eastman's Modern Stone-Age Family: Snapshot Photography and the Brownie," *Technology and Culture* 48 (2007): 1.

⁴ Olivier, 1.

⁵ Jean Regis, *Mademoiselle Marie-Alice Dumont, photographe* (Rivière-du-Loup: Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent, 1991) 5.

⁶ Fonds Marie-Alice Dumont.

⁷ Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001) 130.

⁸ Regis, 31.

⁹ Guy Bouchard, and Jean Regis, *Aux Limites de la Memoire: Photographies du Quebec 1900-1930* (Saint-Foy, Quebec: Les Publication du Quebec, 1995) 104.

¹⁰ Frederique Joseph-Lowery, "Broderie et art contemporaine/ Embroidery Goes Contemporary," *Art Press* (Jan. 2009) 2.

¹¹ Joseph-Lowery, 2.

¹² "Educational Establishment for Young Ladies - Gloucester Street, Ottawa Ontario, The Dominion of Canada," Early Canadian Online, 10 Nov. 2010

<http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/05729?id=7de82aa30c1b2b90>>.

¹³ Lady Jephson, *A Canadian Scrapbook* (London: M. Russell, 1897) 56; and Early Canadian Online 10 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.canadiana.org/view/07609/0066>>.

¹⁴ Langford, 20.

¹⁵ Langford, 20.

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