

VISUAL CODES OF INCLUSION: FROM THE PROFESSIONAL TO THE VERNACULAR - EXHIBITION

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“Visual Codes of Inclusion” denotes a focus on identity and its perceived definition in the realm of professional and vernacular photography. As both curators and children of ethnic minorities or minority cultures, we will be contrasting professional images with our own vernacular photographs. When looking at the photographs presented in this exhibition we see how inclusion is an important element in a child’s life. Sharon Murray’s article “Frocks and Bangles, the Photographic Conversion of Two Indian Girls” discusses the binary of inclusion and exclusion, its relation to identity and how this dichotomy leads to how children are perceived. What visual markers associate children with a particular group? What is there in the image that indicates that a young person is different or the same as other children? If photographs are the embodiment of cultural consensus which visual cues lead the viewer to make this distinction? If Murray suggests that the family album is a forum for visual genealogy and identity then Looking at these photographs by professional photographs as compared with those taken by family members and friends makes apparent the visual codes of inclusion and exclusion that religion, ethnicity and cultural traditions provide.



Archile Gorky. *Garden in Sochi*. 1941. Museum of Modern Art.

Garden in Sochi in fact is a piece on Gorky's childhood. Unlike what the title suggests, Gorky was not a Russian citizen, born in Sochi, but an Armenian. The painting shows a holy Armenian tree, what we call 'Sosi' and the little bits of clothing are what passers-by would tear off themselves and add onto the branch of the tree for good luck¹. In this painting, Gorky is acknowledging his past but is not explicitly admitting his historical background.

Christopher Arkilanian



William Notman (1826-1891). *Miss B. Trudeau, Montreal, Quebec*. 1875. Silver salts on glass, wet collodion process. 25 x 20 centimeters. (Image: McCord Museum).

William Notman's photograph showcases Miss B. Trudeau in her communion apparel. An important part of Catholicism, Communion is one of the seven sacraments. The communion dress and the rituals associated with this occasion are ingrained with meaning. This is a rite of passage for children of the Catholic faith and this special dress symbolizes this. Consequently it serves as a visual code of inclusion. After Communion, young boys and girls are expected to actively partake in church services because this religious community now sees them as 'adults'. Communion symbolizes maturity both spiritually and socially and, as such, is an important event to document. Miss B. Trudeau stands proud, her legs crossed at the ankles, sure of herself, but not sure enough to gaze directly at the camera. Notman's depiction of this young girl shows her clutching her pray book in her left hand, a gift she would have received for her communion.

Helen Adilia Arceyut-Frixione



Unknown photographer. Balass Family Portrait. 1960s. Baghdad, Iraq.
(Image: Victor and Valentine Balass).

This portrait of the Balass family was taken sometime before the family left Baghdad, Iraq in the fall of 1970. A young Joe Balass who was four at the time, is sitting between his mother, Valentine and his father, Victor, while his two other brothers stand behind them. This image was featured in Joe Balass's documentary, *Baghdad Twist* (2007), which focuses on Iraq's Jewish community that once existed before they had to flee in 1970. The photograph has a palatable tension. It shows a Jewish family who living in Iraq for generations in a vulnerable state, soon before they were forced to leave. Knowing the tragedy of this family's forced exodus from Iraq influences our reading of these faces. The expressions seem sad and fearful. These are the faces of a marginalized "other" who, at one point in time, was included in the Iraqi community, now excluded, about to be exiled because they are Jewish.

Maya Dynbort



Unknown photographer. Iny Family Portrait. 1958. Montreal, Quebec.
(Image: Hilda and Naim Iny).

After fleeing Baghdad Iraq in 1948 the Iny family created a new life in Montreal. This photograph was taken 10 years after their arrival and depicts an Iraqi Jewish family celebrating a joyous event. In the foreground there is a round table traditional Iraqi food and two birthday cakes. This image is a memento that represents both the keeping of tradition and adapting to a new way of life. A portrait painting of these young girls mother with a pensive face hangs on the wall, her hand on her heart, a visible contrast to the family members standing together and smiling for the camera. The photograph represents a new Canadian identity for this family from elsewhere. At the same time, one senses that the strong beliefs and traditions of the Iraqi Jewish community will be passed down to the next generation to these young girls in the centre of the photograph with their mother and father at their side.

Maya Dynbort



Unknown photographer. Mary Helena Doreen Murphy, Communion. Quebec City. 1939. Vernacular photographic print. 5 x 7 centimeters.

Mary Helena Doreen Murphy (my grandmother), Helen as she was known, kneels down in a solemn gesture and poses for someone who could be presumed to be a family member or friend acting as a photographer. The background of the photographs shows a home not a studio. Unlike Miss B. Trudeau, Helen looks directly at the camera squinting at the same time, most likely due to the sun, as the overexposed photograph evidences. However, she looks at the camera in a daring way, perhaps showing this newly acquired spiritual and social maturity, which the act of communion symbolizes. Helen was now an active member in her community and this photograph would identify her as such. Both William Notman's photograph and the vernacular photograph of Helen served a purpose, they were meant to show to others as well as their family, that these girls were now young ladies.

Helen Adilia Arceyut-Frixione



Unknown photographer. 6th grade class. 1999. Sourp Hagop Elementary/High School. Montreal, Quebec.
Photograph.

This class picture is symbolic. It shows students posed, smiling, sure of themselves, and well prepared for the future. It shows how the community wants to portray its younger members, which in this case is an Armenian school. It is a fabricated piece because it does not show the students naturally, as children are, but rather shows them as little adults. In reality the students might not feel that way in this school either because they don't fit in or have bad marks in school.

Christopher Arkilanian

ENDNOTES

¹ Arshille Gorky, Michael Taylor and Harry Cooper, *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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