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## First Son: Portraits by C.D. Hoy Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec Feb 1 to Sept 3, 2002

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I first heard of the *First Son: Portraits by C. D. Hoy* photography exhibit months before seeing it. CBC Radio was interviewing the exhibition's curator in the spring; it was August by the time I was next in the Outaouais area able to visit the Museum of Civilization. The curator, Faith Moosang, spoke lively about C. D. Hoy, revealing her excitement over the photographs and her ability to present them to Canadians. Hoy, who emigrated from China in the early 1900s at the age of seventeen, was a local merchant and the first professional portrait photographer in post gold rush interior British Columbia. He came to Canada because, as the firstborn son of his poor family, he had to find a way to support them. The way in which the curator spoke about the exhibit, her descriptions of the honesty and simplicity of Hoy's images, and the hardships and perseverance of being a photographer at that time — in that context — peaked my curiosity. Yet, I felt unfulfilled after going to the exhibit. It was not Hoy's images that made me feel this way; his images are rich and fascinating. Rather it was the coldness and simplicity of the display in general that left me wanting more.

What initially bothered me was the location of the exhibit deep in the bowels of the museum. The Museum of Civilization was not the original venue for the exhibition, and its final home will be in Hoy's community of Barkerville, British Columbia. However, the fact that this museum is accustomed to traveling exhibits, I expected better visibility and directions. It took my husband and I a lengthy bout of confused maze walking before we finally found a poster about the exhibit (this was the first advertisement we had come across in the museum about the display, and it was hidden behind some escalators). The arrow on the poster further led us along twisting corridors and (bafflingly) empty rooms before settling us at our destination. The images were housed in a room that was large and bright enough to properly display them and accommodate large groups of visitors, although my husband and I were the only ones present. I am afraid that our experience locating the exhibition was not unique, but others may not have been so lucky to find it.

The wall at the entrance of the exhibit introduced the photographer and contained images of C. D. Hoy, his family, and the buildings which housed his merchant businesses. The written synopsis, however, was simple and superficial, telling the visitor little about the man's biography and why his images were important to display. This first section of the exhibit — which is the most important part, as it is meant to attract people to the rest of the display — did not 'hook' me the way

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the radio program had. If it were not for that interview, which really made me think about Hoy's life and try to feel what he experienced, I doubt I would have stayed and given myself the chance to get lost in his photographs.

In fact, during the time it took for my husband and I to look at the hundred or so images, three families entered the exhibit, looked at the introductory wall, glanced at a few pictures near the entrance, and within 3-5 minutes they had turned around and left. At one point I thought some people walked through the exhibit with the hopes of finding an exit or shortcut so they would not have to retrace their steps through the maze that brought them there in the first place. In a museum full of hands-on exhibits and life-size displays of recreated villages, the C. D. Hoy presentation, sadly, did little to maintain the interest of those who made their way to it. It was my love of photography and curiosity in the biography of photographers (especially those who worked before the advent of simple 35mm photography) that kept me there long enough to be captivated by the images.

Disappointment at the exhibit's planning aside, C. D. Hoy's photographs themselves were worth the trek. Being the first professional photographer to service two small northern communities, it seems as though Hoy photographed almost all the inhabitants of the area. There are images of other Chinese immigrant families, Euro-Canadian families, many area Natives, elderly residents, children, and local merchants. Photos, for the most part, were taken expressly for the purpose of being sent back home to China, Europe or elsewhere in North America as proof of prosperity. Most of those photographed stand proudly in their best outfits, while others pose with their prized possession: a horse, a fur coat, gleaming white shoes. Despite the purpose of the pictures to display status, they were generally taken in very informal settings: patrons seated in one of Hoy's shops; women standing in their household doorways; or people standing in front of haphazardly pinned up bed-sheets. The goal being to prove ownership of certain items — to prove a certain level of success — despite the roughness of the social, economic, and physical environments.

The collection of images also contain pictures that are more historical records than commissioned photographs. There are pictures of the local blacksmith at work, the doctor and his family, the area's first black man, and non-romanticized images of local Native residents. Hoy also took some playful photographs. One image is of a man in a suit riding his bicycle on a muddy main street. Another series of images is of a woman in different poses trying to best display her ankle length hair. The cross section of people and types of photographs taken by Hoy stand as testament to the relationship he had with his community.

However, it is impossible to know much about the people whose portraits are included in the exhibit as there is not much information provided about them. Some photos are accompanied by a couple lines explaining who the people were, but for the most part the only information is the sitter's name. In fact, the entire exhibit reveals little about the communities, the large Chinese immigrant population, Hoy's relationship with the portrait sitters, let alone the people themselves. This may be due to there not having been much in Hoy's archives pertaining to this sort of information. However, the curator could have made this known for inquisitive visitors or found a way to include other displays explaining the historical context in which the images were produced. Instead viewers are left with unanswered questions.

What little information is provided about Hoy (found in a short biography on

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a single sheet of paper nestled near the entrance) reveals that he was a hardworking individual who came to Canada in 1902 without being able to speak English. He slowly built up his entrepreneurial skills by learning the language and working as a houseboy, dishwasher, and camp cook. He later started his own trading business through which he learned some of the Central Carrier dialect. It was in the gold-mining town of Barkerville, when he was working as a barber and watch repairman, that he began to learn photography. It was not until 1912 that his skills as a photographer became more profitable. It is also at this time that he was establishing himself as a local shopkeeper and merchant. His photographs are valued today as historic records that honestly represent the area's residents, particularly the images of Carrier and Chilcotin peoples that were not romanticized or taken as 'scientific records'. They also provide evidence of the multicultural beginnings of this country and the way hard work and perseverance were more important than cultural differences.

It is a shame that the exhibit did not do more than simply display the fabulous images created by C. D. Hoy. Bringing to visitors' attention the context in which Hoy worked, providing more biographical information about him and (where possible) those he photographed, could have enriched the experience. More people would have been attracted to the display and benefitted from seeing the images had it been more engaging — perhaps including a smaller display of the types of photographic equipment that would have been available to Hoy at that time. This should not have been too difficult since early photographic history is Moonsang's specialization. Additionally, since his images are now being recognized and admired for their honesty in representing Natives, immigrants, and Europeans in a northern Canadian community, the exhibit could have benefitted from more discussion and visual display on that point. I think this final consideration is most important as in it is housed a knowledge that I fear went beyond the thoughts of most visitors. It is an important aspect of the images as it can teach people about the way cultures change and adapt, that they are not static and do not get 'lost'.

During the time that Hoy was a photographer, pictures of Native people were generally one of two types: romantic or scientific. The romanticized images were of the Edward Curtis style, with Natives in stereotypical feather headdresses posing before painted backdrops in indoor studios (see Edwards 1992). The scientific images, on the other hand, tended to be the products of 'salvage ethnography', developing visual records of 'vanishing races'. The pictures creatively excluded any signs of European contact while creating 'racial types' out of carefully selected individuals (Poignant 1992). Such photographs supported and constructed cultural stereotypes, but did not reflect the actual lives of many people represented by these descriptors.

C. D. Hoy's photographs provide simple, honest glimpses into some of the actual lives of Native people and new immigrants residing in the interior of British Columbia during the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One image in particular stands out to me from his series of Native portraits. Three young men pose in one of Hoy's shops. They are dressed in suits, but they do not look as though on their way to church or other such formal function. They appear relaxed in their outfits, as if it was their regular attire. It would be nice to be provided with more information as to who the young men were and why they were having their picture taken.

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Regardless, it is refreshing to see a photograph from that era that does not try to lock Native people into one type of image, one type of representation, specifically the 'noble savage' image. Some might argue that the photo is a sign that these people had lost their native culture — and perhaps they did completely assimilate to European ways — but that is the beauty of culture and the failing of photography. People can have multiple outward appearances and still be considered of a certain culture. Photographs, on the other hand, if taken out of context (or not provided with any), can lead to misrepresentations, misinterpretations, and hasty generalizations. No matter the amount of historical information missing or available for the exhibit, this final aspect could have been highlighted to make stronger cultural and historical commentaries.

Though the exhibit left me wanting more engagement, C. D. Hoy's photographs were fascinating from technical and cultural perspectives. The parallax error resulting in some people missing the tops of their heads, or the inaccurate use of a tripod (or non-existence thereof) creating tilted compositions, betraying Hoy's amateurish style. Yet the contents of the pictures speak volumes about the hard work and relentless perseverance of this man. Despite the information lacking about the people and places, perhaps Hoy is a metaphor for the community and time in which he worked. Photographs taken in any era can be storehouses of data and be educational. Collections such as this one teach valuable lessons not only about historical moments, and also how to live in the present. I really enjoyed seeing Hoy's portraits — it was a real treat, but exhibition curators could do well to think more creatively about how to make photographic displays more engaging and contextual.

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## References

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