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PORTRAITS OF THE BARELY KNOWN SUBJECT

by Rosemary Donegan



The Hayashi Studio, "Kiyoshi Shinmoto with dog (C140-108)," 1907-1930, Contemporary gelatin silver print, 9.25 x 13"

The Hayashi Studio, Cumberland, Vancouver Island, 1907-1930

As portraits of an immigrant, frontier culture, the Hayashi Studio photographs emanate an almost sublime stillness, while the physiognomy and physical presence of the sitters assert an unusual determination and seriousness. There is something about the quality of the relationship between the photographer and the subject that is rare, a directness and spontaneity of the image that speaks to us immediately. Although the portraits make use of the standard conventions of commercial photography of the period (such as ferns and studio drapes), the assertive confidence of the sitters is modern and evocative.

The Hayashi Studio

Much of what we know of the Hayashi Studio are fragmentary facts, coincidences and larger conjectures. In approximately 1907, Senjiro Hayashi arrived in Cumberland on Vancouver Island and opened his photo studio, first in a district known locally as No. 5 "Japtown" and later moving to the third floor of the Willard Block across from the Post Office. Hayashi and his assistants, Mr. Kitamura and Mr. Matsubuchi, who later took over the Studio, produced thousands of portraits on 5 x 7 inch dry glass-plate negatives. The overall quality and consistency suggest that Hayashi developed a style and technical process that was continued by his apprentices. The sitters, willing and

paying subjects, spent five or six dollars for a dozen photographs, which were often to be sent "home" to family and friends as visual proof of their new status.

In the late 1920s, Mr Matsubuchi walked away from the Studio leaving the equipment, supplies and negatives. Over the years the building was vandalized. While some negatives remained in the building, others haphazardly turned up at lawn sales. Eventually a collection was assembled at the Cumberland Museum where the Hayashi Studio collection of 786 glass-plate negatives now resides.

Although we know very little about the people in the portraits, one can safely assume that they were attracted by the booming coal industry. They came to Cumberland from across Canada, Britain, Italy, China, Japan, and from the black mining communities of Pennsylvania. The Cumberland mines, along with Nanaimo and Ladysmith, were the only places to hire "Orientals" to work underground, primarily shovelling coal into box cars as they were not allowed to work with explosives. That task was generally reserved for the Italians.

The first generation of Japanese immigrants (*Issei*) who came to work in Cumberland brought their wives and children and were able to establish a prosperous community. At its peak, the Cumberland community consisted of 500 families with their own school; many worked in the mines, while others opened businesses, a jewellery store, bicycle shop, bottling works, pool hall, etc. In the summer, some of the women ran a Japanese tea house up at Comox Lake, where families swam and went on holiday picnics.

Cumberland and the Vancouver Island coal industry in general had one of the worst records of mining safety in Western Canada—130 miners died in twenty-two years—and

the company was aggressively and violently anti-union. The Asian miners, both Japanese and Chinese, were often scapegoated by local politicians for supposedly causing unemployment, while the mining company paid them half of the wages accorded to other miners and coerced them into becoming strike breakers, thus fuelling the racially intolerant attitudes of the times.

The Portraits

The Hayashi photographs draw the viewer in because of their intensity and visual power as portrait images. Technically excellent, the 5 x 7 inch dry glass-plate negatives were used in a cherry-wood box-camera with an *f*8 lens. The exposure times for the images would have been somewhere between four to eight seconds, using natural studio daylight. The backdrops, plants, valances and chairs were standard presentation props for a commercial studio of the time. Hayashi and his apprentices were obviously adept at using natural lighting, as it took some ingenuity to produce the range of lighting effects evident in the photographs. For groups, they often used a bright, diffused light, while solo portraits indicate more dramatic lighting with strong oblique angles and back lighting. A number of the photographs use darkroom techniques to produce dramatic portraits with a black silhouette in an oval form. In the portraits of **Kitty Pinfold** and **Joe Naylor**, the subject is encased in an intense glow, infusing the sitter with an almost eerie luminous quality.

Many of the portraits are nameless and the sitters remain unknown, the photographs having been catalogued with abbreviated descriptions such as **Japanese Man** or **Japanese Children**. These anonymous portraits taken during the 1910s

and 20s become markers: they take on the character of a future talisman, foreshadowing the tragedy to come when all adult *Issei* and their children were interned in 1942 and their lives and property stolen from them. The images take on a connotation of the imprisoned *Issei*, with the historical hindsight we now have of the racist treatment and particular tragedy of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. This symbolic transformation exists outside the actual image but imbues the sitters and their stories, adding character and strength as future history is appropriated onto the past.

Yet these portraits can be read in the subtle visual details and textures of individual sitters, as in the photograph **Japanese Man**. An unknown sitter poses, immaculate and well turned-out in his suit and brogue leather shoes, watch-fob and pen in his pocket. The photo tells the story of a young successful *Issei*, his gaze strong and determined. Yet on further inspection his hands are rough and his nails inflamed. This is a portrait of a labourer, a man who works with his hands.

Similarly, the anonymous portrait **Japanese Children**, in which two girls and a young boy pose around a child-sized wicker chair and fern plant, has a transparency and expressiveness. The two sisters, in their matching western dresses and pearl necklaces, are sombre and direct; yet the younger girl looks somewhat uncertain and worried. In contrast, their young brother, dressed in a wool hat, sweater and leggings, is oblivious to the seriousness of the situation at hand. He eagerly and playfully smiles at the camera, his childish spontaneity evocatively captured by the photographer.

The same quality of stillness and immediacy permeates the photograph of **Kiyoshi Shinmoto and his dog**. Dressed casually in a fashionable sweater, stiff collar and tie, with a

cloth cap and fine leather shoes, Shinmoto is accompanied by a small white dog, sitting in the unravelling wicker chair. His locked gaze and the dog, with its sustained alertness, present themselves to the camera with self-assurance, even boldness.

Many of the portraits have been identified, due to the efforts of researchers and local volunteers, who have also pieced together names and in some cases fragmentary information about the sitters that can be found in documentation files located at the Cumberland Museum. Interestingly, once this fragmentary historical information is present, the portraits immediately appropriate a range of historical meanings; they become receptacles of associations, memories, prejudices and larger cultural assumptions which are in turn extrapolated, almost unconsciously, onto the subject of the photographic image. For example, on viewing the **Cunliffe Sisters**, a photograph of two young women of British origin wearing identical Edwardian shirt-waist dresses and floppy hats, it is easy to attribute personality traits and make suppositions about their class and social position in a colonial mining town in the middle of the B.C. rainforest.

The sombre portrait of the **Bonora Children**, with their large dark eyes and gaze locked into the camera, takes on an emotionally charged intensity. The children—from the left, Chester, Rene, Olga, Irene and Isabelle—were part of the Cumberland Italian community, whose fathers worked in the mines, often specializing in explosives. What we know about these children is that “their father Azzo ‘Narco’ Bonora, along with four other Italians, died in an explosion in No. 4 Mine in February 1923.” Attaching the tragedy of their father’s death to the image moulds its meaning into a funereal image of the children’s sadness, a commemoration of their father’s death



The Hayashi Studio, "Cunliffe Sisters (C190-36)," 1907-1930, Contemporary gelatin silver print, 9.25 x 13"



The Hayashi Studio, "Japanese Children (C140-282)," 1907-1930, Contemporary gelatin silver print, 9.25 x 13"

and the hardship of their future lives.

Similarly, the tense, black, silhouette portrait of **Kitty Pinfold**, with her rather strained but quixotic expression, takes on enigmatic and potentially traumatic implications when the only information we have about her is that "she was a war bride who disappeared under mysterious circumstances." The portrait of **Mrs. White**, a black woman in her forties or fifties, with her stalwart physical presence, majestic posture and bearing, suggests a woman of determination and faith. Her face strongly illuminated but slightly shadowed by her hat, she gazes off with an almost transcendental otherworldliness. The power of her presence modifies the almost humorous irony of her name; yet we know virtually nothing about her. Most likely she was one of the domestic servants who worked for the early mine managers or in the local hotels.

In contrast to the majority of the portraits, **Joe Naylor** portrays a man familiar to Canadian labour historians. The photographer captured the political manner in which Naylor presents himself—his commitment and determination manifest in his face. This is enhanced by dramatic lighting which creates an image of silent intensity and almost foreboding muscular strength. In his heavy coat and sweater, Joe Naylor exemplifies the breed of British miners who brought to the Canadian coal-fields their radical history of working-class activism and mining unions. A socialist and local labour leader, Naylor was arrested and charged in the Cumberland riots in 1913; however, he was subsequently acquitted. He was also a friend and loyal protector of Ginger Goodwin, the pacifist socialist union-organizer who was ambushed and killed in the mountains above Cumberland by police in 1918. The historical facts of Joe Naylor's life transform the portrait into an iconic emblem

of Cumberland's dramatic and often violent labour history.

One of the most interesting photographs in the Hayashi Studio Collection is the casual yet proudly declarative portrait of **Four Japanese Miners**. The men look into the camera confidently and directly, yet the photograph exposes a more complex reality. The young miners, posing in their work clothes with pants carefully patched, with their fish-oil lamp caps, and holding their lunch buckets, look as if they have just come from the mines. The four men, proud of their work and their position, pose with a seriousness and youthful intensity. Although Japanese immigrants were usually reluctant to work in the mines, it was often the only work they could get, apart from fishing and canning in the summer months. The two men on the right, Mr. Higro and the anonymous foreground figure, are both wearing glasses, an unusual accoutrement for a miner. Their glasses serve as a reminder that many of the Japanese who immigrated to Canada were literate and could read and write Japanese. Interestingly, the same foreground figure is holding a glove, displaying a smooth, clean, uncalloused hand, subtly contrasting with the figure to his left whose hands are coarse and stained from work.

The portrait of **Johnnie Millar and Jim Potter** is an interesting contrast to the Japanese miners; two young (probably inebriated) miners humorously pose dishevelled and unbuttoned, almost slatternly. With cigarettes hanging out of their mouths, their pant legs rolled up, the young men take on the stance of sultry louts. They are framed by a strong directional light source, provocatively lighting their faces, exposed calves and unbuttoned flies. The texture of the lighting and the irascible attitude of Millar and Potter reveal the cocky brazenness of youth and the rakish practical jokes of working-class life.

Perhaps they had just dropped in to have their photograph taken after a few drinks at the local tavern, the "Bucket of Blood" in the Vendome Hotel.

The portraits of the Hayashi Studio form an incredibly modern, although historical collection of images, raising questions about the relation of photography to intention and meaning. What was the intention of the photographers? How did they interact with their sitters? Did they converse? Were the sitters instructed on how to pose? Yet there are few coy smiles, stalwart stances or fixed poses. The sitters appear to be defining their own presentation, their expressions serious and absorbed. They appear to be in control of their own image, presenting themselves directly to the camera.

The portraits also raise questions about the relationship between representation and historical experience, between the visual image and historical fact. In the search for the title and meaning of these images, we see our search for a history, a root, a family genealogy and a broader social and ethnic genealogy. We seek to find and reclaim these lost histories. Most particularly, the images of Japanese-Canadians read like a scar on Canadian history. The memory of the horrific rupture of their lives during the war punctures the beauty and strength of the individual photographs as visual images.

The Hayashi Studio Collection of photographs invites our emotions and ideas; the images extrapolate from history to produce new meanings in the present.

Portraits of the Barely Known Subject, Rosemary Donegan

Photographs courtesy of the Cumberland Museum, Cumberland, Vancouver Island, B.C.

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Rosemary Donegan is an independent curator, writer and visual historian currently teaching at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her most recent exhibition and catalogue project, *The Sudbury Basin: Industrial Topographies*, was presented at the Art Gallery of Sudbury (1999).

Photographer:

The Hayashi Studio was a portrait studio based in Cumberland, Vancouver Island, during the early twentieth century. The subjects were primarily the people of this small mining community.