

The missing faces of Montreal

A SIDEWALK EXHIBIT of historic photographs lacks any images of blacks - but worse, a local activist notes, contemporary pictures accompanying them also lack colour

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The winter of 1856 was blisteringly cold in Montreal. Thick ice formed over the St. Lawrence River and most business in the port town came to a standstill.

As temperatures dropped, many retreated into their homes to await the first signs of spring. But a young Scottish immigrant working in the shipping industry wasn't fond of the idle time.

William Notman decided to draw upon a hobby he had honed in the Highlands to make ends meet. He opened a photography studio in the back of his Bleury St. home and within a few years had created one of the most successful photographic businesses in North America, photographing mostly elite, white anglophone Montrealers.

These pictures now form the McCord Museum's Notman Photographic Archives, some of which are on display along McGill College Ave. as part of the open-air exhibition called Inspirations: The Notman Photographic Archives Converge with the Next Generation.

The McCord Museum asked a small handful of talented students at Concordia University's studio arts department to choose a Notman archival photograph, which they would juxtapose in a evocative way with one of their own contemporary works.

But something is missing from the collection of both new and old photographs, said Dolores Sandoval, president of the DaCosta-Angélique Institute, a think tank on issues of race and representation in Canada.

"I walked along the street hoping that this year there would be some



CREDIT: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE

Dolores Sandoval finds one image of a black face in the Notman Archives exhibit - that of a 19th century doll dressed as a maid.

representation of black people in Montreal," Sandoval said. "I was shocked to find that for the second year there was not one photograph of a black person."

In fact, the only black figure in any of the pictures is of a doll, but as one passer-by pointed out: "The only black doll is a maid."

Sandoval had complained about the same lack of representation during last year's McCord outdoor photography exhibit called Configurations. Its purpose was to "provide a glimpse into Quebec society from the late 19th" century to today.

Sandoval was told that most of the McCord's collection is donated and that they've received few donations from Montreal's black community.

"But the museum should do more to research and find these pieces of our history. My grandparents arrived in the 1850s and there are many photographs representing the black community around that period," she said.

As a museum receiving federal and provincial funding, "you better represent the taxpayers," she said. "So many young people gather downtown and many can't even see themselves represented in a major exhibit showcasing Montreal's history and present."

The purpose of the exhibit, however, is to showcase the Notman collection and emerging Canadian photographers, said H el ene Samson, curator of the Notman Photographic Archives and the outdoor exhibit.

"We're aware that most of the 19th century studio photography represents people of a certain status and class. You could also argue that no francophones are represented, either," Samson said.

"As for the new photographs, all we told students is that we wanted to focus on the human form and portraits. But other than that they had complete artistic freedom," Samson said.

"For this exhibit, I chose the best photographs based on a number of criteria, including both technical quality and emotive factors."

But that doesn't mean representing Montreal's minorities won't be the focus of a future exhibit, she said. The museum has an exhibit on loan from the Japanese Canadian National Museum in B.C. and an Inuit art exhibition, she said.

But Sandoval argued that fewer people actually go inside the museum.

"An incredible number of people - both locals and tourists - see these photos.

"It should be a priority to represent Montreal's racial diversity when we're putting the photographs in the public sphere."

But Samson said many of the young photographers themselves represent Montreal's diversity.

Olga Chagaoutdinova immigrated to Canada from Russia several years ago and has four photographs featured in the open-air exhibit.

"The Notman photographs are actually very sophisticated and

conceptual images," Chagaoutdinova said. "Even though they're over a hundred years old, they create this illusion or mood, like what we try to recreate with digital," she said, adding that she only uses film.

"It was a great project and I'm happy I got to be a part of it."

Hanna Kang also has a photograph in the exhibit and said it's exciting how many people are exposed to the photographs.

"It's not just the usual art and museum crowd seeing the work. I think these kinds of public installations bring art to everyone," Kang said.

"But if everyone's going to see it," Sandoval argued, "let's make sure everyone is represented."

The exhibition *Inspirations: The Notman Photographic Archives Converge with the Next Generation* is on display along McGill College Ave. near Ste. Catherine St. until Oct. 19.

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