

Photography in the Convent: *Grey Nuns, Québec, 1861*

COLLEEN SKIDMORE*

The photograph Grey Nuns enjoys canonical status among connoisseurs and scholars of nineteenth-century photography in Canada, mainly because of its aesthetic value and the artistic genius credited to the photographer, George Ellisson. A focus on the subjects of the photograph and on the historical context in which it was taken reveals another dimension of its significance as part of the visual history of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec. The subjects, Céline and Séraphine Roy, were the first postulants to join the convent on its founding in 1849; during vocations lasting more than six decades each, these women assumed a variety of administrative roles and expanded the congregation and its work through eastern Quebec. The abundance and orderliness of the portrait photographs in the collection of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec show that such portraits were considered an important part of the historical record, documenting and linking the convent's members.

La photographie Soeurs grises jouit d'une réputation canonique parmi les connaisseurs et les érudits de la photographie du XIX^e siècle au Canada. Cela tient surtout à sa valeur esthétique et au génie artistique que l'on attribue à son auteur, George Ellisson. Une étude attentive des sujets de la photographie et du contexte historique dans lequel elle a été prise révèle une autre facette de son importance dans le cadre de l'histoire visuelle des Soeurs de la Charité de Québec. Les sujets, Céline et Séraphine Roy, furent les premières postulantes à joindre le couvent à sa fondation en 1849; durant une vocation de plus de six décennies chacune, ces femmes ont joué divers rôles administratifs et ont fait prendre de l'expansion à la congrégation et à ses œuvres dans l'Est du Québec. L'abondance et l'ordre des portraits photo-

* Colleen Skidmore is associate professor in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta. The author's thanks are due to many who have assisted and supported this research, including graduate research assistants Shirley Emeny and Lynne Lacombe Robinson at the University of Alberta, Pauline Greenhill, Judy Greenhill, and Joan Schwartz. The author is especially indebted to Sr. Frances Callan, s.c.q., and her colleagues in the museum and archives at the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, and to the archivists and researchers of the Good Shepherds Sisters of Quebec. The sisters' guidance, hospitality, enthusiasm, and friendship are gratefully acknowledged. An introduction to this research was presented at the conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada in Winnipeg in November 2000, in a session on photography history chaired by Dr. Carol Payne.

graphiques de la collection des Soeurs de la Charité de Québec montrent que l'on considérerait de tels portraits comme une partie importante du dossier historique, documentant et reliant les membres du couvent.

GREY NUNS, the albumen print (20.2 × 17.6 cm) by George Ellisson of Quebec City, was registered in Canadian photography history in 1965 when collector Ralph Greenhill published the first survey on the history of photography in Canada. *Grey Nuns*, Greenhill wrote, has “a directness and strength” characteristic of the Ellisson studio’s work, with “no loss of individual character.... The plain background and simplicity of the firm’s excellent photographs of the early sixties are in the tradition of the daguerreotype era, when anonymous daguerreotypists often produced work of realistic honesty and considerable charm.”¹ Today it enjoys canonical status among connoisseurs and scholars of nineteenth-century photography in Canada (Figure 1).

In 1972 the National Gallery of Canada purchased much of Greenhill’s collection, including *Grey Nuns*. Between 1993 and 1996, the portrait was seen in various Canadian cities as part of *Magicians of Light*, James Borcoman’s valedictory exhibition as founding curator of the photography collection.² Borcoman’s brief discussion of *Grey Nuns* in the exhibition catalogue, where it is dated c.1860, is the only sustained discussion of this image despite its prominence. *Magicians of Light*, as the title makes clear, is about photographers and aesthetics, not subject matter. Borcoman writes that part of the purpose of the brief commentary accompanying each image in the catalogue is to suggest “ways of looking at the photograph”. The images, including *Grey Nuns*, were “chosen because they have an ability to heighten

1 Ralph Greenhill, *Early Photography in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 42. In 1979 a new edition was co-authored with Andrew Birrell and published as *Canadian Photography, 1839–1920* (Toronto: Coach House Press). The portrait was first displayed at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in 1965 in an exhibition drawn mainly from Greenhill’s private collection. See Ralph Greenhill, *The Art of Early Photography* (ex. cat) (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1965). I thank Judy Greenhill for recalling the exhibition and Cyndi Campbell of the National Gallery of Canada for the catalogue reference and archival information. Ralph Greenhill was a professional photographer and photograph collector who lived in Toronto from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s. He then lived in Guelph, Ontario, until his death in 1996.

2 *Magicians of Light* circulated to Canadian galleries between 1993 and 1996. Previously, *Grey Nuns* was exhibited in six NGC shows: *Photographs from the Collection* (1975); *Documentary Photography in Canada 1850–1920* (1979); *The Magical Eye: Definitions of Photography* (1980); *Photographs from the Collection* (1981); *The Cherished Image* (1989) and *Women Photographed 1849–1988* (1993). It was also part of the commemorative exhibition *Remembering Ralph Greenhill 1924–1996* (1997). There are approximately 300 photographs in the NGC’s Greenhill Collection. The NGC’s photography collection, established in 1967, encompasses work from the 1840s to the present day. Borcoman explains that its purpose is “to illustrate the history of photography — specifically its history as an image-making process (or art form), not as a technical concern” with a “policy of acquiring significant bodies of work by selected photographers”. The NGC’s federal funding mandate was to collect international works while acquisition of Canadian works was delegated to the National Archives of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (an affiliate of the NGC). See *Magicians of Light: Photographs from the Collection of the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa: NGC, 1993), p. 13.

Figure 1: *Grey Nuns*, albumen silver print by George William Ellisson, ca.1860 (National Gallery of Canada no. 21645).

perception, stimulate the mind, arouse emotions, or contribute to our understanding of the nature of photography”.³

Grey Nuns has interested me for quite some time. Its simplicity of style and intensity of content are both engaging and contradictory; the anonymity

³ Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, pp. 14–15. Dating of the portrait shifts between 1860 and 1865 in NGC documents, but no explanations are given for the changes. Photographic aesthetics was Borcoman’s central preoccupation in his study of the history of photography. In 1993 he placed his analysis within a larger methodological parameter: “Defining the medium itself, its essential nature, has

of such formidable-looking women, identified no further than their habits, is disturbing. As such, *Grey Nuns* is an image rich with potential to recast issues for research in the practices of photography in Canada in the nineteenth century. Abigail Solomon-Godeau contends that “the issue of women in photography — as is always the case when gender is mapped onto existing fields, discourses, and practices — profoundly alters their terms and provokes new and difficult questions”.⁴ She argues that this is especially true with photography because the medium’s “supposed transparency, truth, and naturalism has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology — particularly the ideology of gender”.⁵ This study explores some “new and difficult” questions when focus is shifted from the male photographer, placing the female sitters at the centre of inquiry.

The analysis is meant to challenge the modernist formalism, a traditional art history approach valorizing aesthetics and artistic genius, exemplified by Greenhill and Borcoman. The divergence of use, meaning, and perceived economic, social, and cultural importance applied to this photograph by socially and historically diverse institutions is my central concern.⁶ More significant than aesthetic arousal is the trace this photograph represents of the historical intersection of the institution and practices of photography

become a burning issue in the photographic community in the second half of the twentieth century... If we are to come anywhere near to understanding the nature of the art form, it will be a result of examining the objects themselves. This, after all, is what justifies museum collections” (*Magicians of Light*, pp. 14–15). Yet, just as the formalist analysis praises the photographer while remaining blind to the subjects, this claim fails to acknowledge the parallel stream of thinking that was exerting tremendous intellectual pressure on the modernist paradigm from the mid-1980s onward: the premise that photography is a cultural practice, that photographic meaning shifts with the social context of use, and the argument for its interrogation as a cultural entity, rather than a work of human genius, its value judged by pre-existing formal or aesthetic criteria. For an introduction to this issue and key texts, see Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). Geoffrey Batchen outlines the differences between these positions, which he labels postmodernist and formalist. He argues that “both avoid coming to grips with the historical and ontological complexity of the very thing they claim to analyze”. In Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: the Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), p. 21. See also James Borcoman, “Purism versus Pictorialism, the 135 Years War: Some Notes on Photographic Aesthetics”, *artscanada*, vol. 31, nos. 3–4 (December 1974), pp. 69–82.

4 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Sexual Difference” (1987) in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 257.

5 *Ibid.*

6 John Tagg’s position on the relationship of photography practices and institutions informs this question. He writes, “Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence, and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular currencies they have. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.” John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), p. 63. My own methodology is interdisciplinary in nature, exploring issues of interest shared by the fields of sociology, women’s history, photography history, and cultural studies.

with a Roman Catholic convent and its spiritual and social *raison d'être* in mid-nineteenth-century Quebec. The issue that looms is the visual contradiction, to us, of a popular nineteenth-century technology taking up seemingly arch-conservative subject matter (that is, veiled women religious).⁷ Technology was primarily and ultimately cast as masculine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As we try today to understand how individual and group relationships to information technology are constructed and constrained by economic, gender, and race positions, some insight into historical aspects of women's use of technology during the industrial revolution may be useful. As research shows, an historical precedent is at play.

Seeking the Subjects

"We shall never know," Borcoman writes in his introduction to this portrait in the exhibition catalogue, "what went through George Ellisson's mind when he photographed the two nuns. But one thing is clear — the symmetry pleased him."⁸ But were the nuns pleased? What was going through *their* minds as they posed, mirroring each another in confrontation, or collaboration, with the camera?

Borcoman continues, crediting the photographer with the arrangement and comportment of the sitters in service to abstract compositional pleasure:

This we know from the care he has taken in the arrangement of the hands, the crosses, and the black ribbons that hang down the front of the nuns' robes. Such symmetry would seem appropriate, for not only was he faced with the challenge of photographing two persons in identical costume, it appears likely that the sitters, if not twins, were at least sisters. In order to avoid perfect repetition, however, which might be boring, the hands are not crossed identically. One nun looks at the camera, one looks away. The folds of one of the robes have an elegant sweep to the right, becoming part of the vertical column of drapery.⁹

That the women might have played a role in determining the composition is not contemplated, nor is the photographer's obligation to satisfy the sitters and those who viewed the picture. If one were to consider the image from these other two viewpoints, the comportment of the hands, for example, would be found to do more in the image than prevent visual tedium. Like the habit, the hands, their poses, and their accoutrements are markers of the women's vocation. The book marks both literacy and a life of spiritual contemplation; the ring symbolizes the nun's monogamous commitment to

7 The terms "woman religious", "nun", and "sister" represent different types of vows. Women religious take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Nuns are distinguished as members of congregations who take solemn vows, that is, in perpetuity. Sisters take simple vows, that is, for life, and these vows can be withdrawn. Because this article is written primarily for a secular reader for whom the nuances between these terms has been lost to colloquial usage, the three terms are used interchangeably.

8 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 86.

9 *Ibid.*

Christ; the hand resting inside the sleeve is customary and expected deportment of a nun's hands at rest.¹⁰

Guiding Borcoman's collecting policy at the NGC was the aim to aid in development of a critical vocabulary to assist in our understanding of the photograph....The problem of meaning in photography may, in the final analysis, be too complex to unlock. But if we are to come anywhere near to understanding the nature of the art form, it will be as a result of examining the objects themselves. This, after all, is what justifies museum collections.¹¹

Classifying photography generically as an art form justifies the medium's presence in the collections of a fine art gallery. Aesthetic composition and finish as well as the photographer's name justified acquiring the *Grey Nuns* portrait for the National Gallery's collection; the historical content — the women religious portrayed — did not.¹² Formalist aestheticism has dulled the senses at great cost to both the women portrayed and the historical value of this portrait. Reclassifying a commercially produced photograph as Art suppresses its nineteenth-century origins, purposes, and audience. It removes *Grey Nuns* — both the image itself and the sitters it portrays — from history. Curatorial assessment ignores the women's presence in the image; doing so presumes women's historical insignificance and authorizes a distorted image of the production, function, and reception of this portrait in mid-nineteenth-century Quebec.

The focus on the photograph as fine art object also met with objection in reviews of *Magicians of Light*, the exhibition in which the portrait was featured. "The odd portrait of two almost identical nuns" accompanies John Bentley Mays's irked assessment of Borcoman's curatorial practice. "To be sure," he writes,

the collection that curator James Borcoman has been building for the past 25 years is a cautious, canonical anthology, heavily weighted toward textbook

10 The book is probably not the nun's own but a studio prop and an echo of painting tradition in which sisters hold books, often with a finger inserted between pages, from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Quebec. Bibles were not read by nuns at that time; their most common reading was the congregation's rules or notebooks of contemplation which they composed in retreat. These were much smaller and not printed or bound as the book in the photograph or those in earlier paintings.

11 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 15.

12 Noted for its tonal qualities, with fine shadows visible in the black folds of the cape and the drapery, mid-tones in the background, and highlights on the skirts in which the problem of yellowing, common in 1850s albumen prints, is absent, this image competes as an exemplary example of the medium in its first decade. See James M. Reilly, *The Albumen and Salted Paper Book: The History and Practice of Photographic Printing 1840–1895* (Rochester, N.Y.: Light Impressions Corporation, 1980), pp. 103–104. Thank you to NGC Conservator John McElhone for this reference and the opinion that the photograph's enduring quality may be attributed to a double coat of albumen. See Reilly, *The Albumen and Salted Paper Book*, pp. 39–40.

classics and the standard historical and modern photographers.... Yet the headache induced by this show is less a product of what's in it than what's not. What's left out continually reminds the viewer of how staid and tightly corseted museum curators still are in the way they think about photography ... with an attention to the merely esthetic that camouflages the huge diversity of practices from which photos have always come.¹³

In a subtler criticism of Borcoman's focus on photographers and their aesthetics at the expense of subject matter, photography historian Alan Thomas reflects that "of course it is the miraculous quality of recovery, of bringing back the actual aspect of past life and real persons, that makes photography so powerfully affecting a medium".¹⁴ The consequences of Greenhill's and Borcoman's interest in the sitters portrayed in *Grey Nuns* as nothing more than formal challenges to the photographer are worrisome if left unquestioned. This can be understood in view of social historian Marta Danylewycz's observation that

chronologies of Church history that leave out the effect the mobilization of lay women had on charitable and educational work reinforce the traditional bias that women did not play a role in Quebec's past. They also negate the possibility of religious women having a history that is linked not only to the fate of the Church hierarchy, but one that is distinct from it, taking its shape in the larger context of women's culture and work.¹⁵

The context of women's culture and work is equally effaced by the blinkered view of modernist aesthetics. In contrast, Danylewycz insists on the material existence of women religious, the existence demonstrated by and resonating in *Grey Nuns*.

Subject matter, nevertheless, does press upon Borcoman's aesthetic sensibilities, and it is here that avenues for research open. He writes, "Ellisson's photograph contains a rich physicality that is strangely at odds with the plain, even austere, sobriety that would have marked these women's lives. No doubt this provides some of its charm."¹⁶ Greenhill, too, wrote that "charm" marked Ellisson's work, and I take this to mean that both collectors found the portrait visually striking and aesthetically pleasing.¹⁷ While "charm", with its diminutive overtones, is not what comes to mind when I confront the considerable presence of the women in this portrait, the characterization does make

13 John Bentley Mays, "National Gallery Photos a Delight and a Headache," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), July 23, 1993, p. A9. Mays does not explain his description of the portrait as "odd".

14 In Joyce M. Wilson, ed., *Canadian Book Review Annual 1993* (Toronto: CBRA, 1993), p. 2195.

15 Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Québec, 1840-1920* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), p. 159.

16 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 86.

17 Greenhill, *Early Photography*, p. 42; Greenhill and Birrell, *Canadian Photography*, p. 52.

me wonder what would happen if we were to explore the contradiction Borcoman marks between the “rich physicality” of the photograph and the presumed “plain, even austere” lives of the women religious portrayed.

Borcoman nods in this direction, however obliquely, in his final comment on the image: “In the end, however, our response is to a deeper truth than the photograph’s formal beauty. We have been given a glimpse into the nature of human relationships and into the courage and vulnerability that lie within the human soul.”¹⁸ Does the photograph afford us this view? I am startled by the presumption of insight into these unnamed women’s spiritual beliefs, vocations, and indeed their souls on the basis of a studio portrait made more than a century earlier and with no attempt made to identify them, to give them names and places, in the account of their image. Why did no one ask, “Who are these women?” Failure to do so implies that Greenhill and Borcoman believed these women’s identities to be irrelevant both to the value and significance of the image and to history. Had Greenhill or Borcoman sought to identify these nuns, they would have discovered that, like all women in times past, these two were neither anonymous nor generic. They would also have discovered that the historical significance of these *Grey Nuns* resonates far beyond that of the photographer lucky enough to have made their portrait.

Who are these women? In reply to a letter of inquiry to the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, Sr. Frances Callan, s.c.q., a community researcher, identified them as Céline and Séraphine Roy, known in religious life as Sr. St-Pierre and Sr. Marie-de-Bon-Secours.¹⁹ The Roys were the first postulants to join the Sisters of Charity of Quebec on the founding of the congregation in Quebec City in 1849.²⁰ The Sisters of Charity of Montreal, known colloquially as the Grey Nuns, sent six members to establish a foundation in response to a call from Bishop Turgeon of Quebec for sisters to assist with housing and educating orphans and nursing cholera victims. (The congregation was later made independent of the Montreal motherhouse at the Bishop’s demand.) The Roy sisters were ages 19 and 20 when they entered the community. After final vows two years later, these women assumed administrative roles in a variety of convent positions, including that of Superior at various branch houses, and expanded the congregation and its work through eastern Quebec by opening convents, boarding schools, and shelters during vocations lasting more than six decades each.²¹ Céline is also remembered for writing the first

18 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 86.

19 Letter to the author (in English), September 24, 1997.

20 In Quebec, the term “Grey Nuns” is most commonly associated with the Montreal foundation of the Sisters of Charity, while the Quebec City foundation is known as the Sisters of Charity of Quebec. In western Canada, the Sisters of Charity are best known as Grey Nuns. In keeping with Quebec tradition of usage and the preference of the Quebec City convent, this paper adheres to the term Sisters of Charity of Quebec.

21 Sisters of Charity in France were known as the “Soeurs Grises” (Grey Nuns) because of their grey habits. Biographers recount that, when the congregation was established in Montreal in 1737, an attempt was made to discredit the group by accusing them of selling liquor to Natives and consuming

biography of the foundress Marcelle Mallet, and both sisters were celebrated in their final years for their needlework and devotion to their faith.²²

The Roy sisters' choice of religious life was one made by ever larger numbers of young women in Quebec between 1850 and 1900.²³ They and their younger sister Chlorinde were the second family of a Cap Santé businessman who died in 1833, leaving the family with few financial resources when his parents claimed the children of his first marriage along with his property. Their widowed mother, Marie-Josephte Fitzbach Roy, with three daughters under the age of five, eventually took employment as a priest's housekeeper in St. Gervais while the girls were educated at convent boarding schools, a common practice in mid-nineteenth-century Quebec.²⁴ Just months after Séraphine and Céline's entry into religious life, their mother accepted a request from Bishop Turgeon of Quebec to assume from a lay women's charity the task of housing and assisting women released from prison. Her group became the first religious congregation founded in the city, officially named

it themselves. In French, *gris* means not only grey but drunk or tipsy. See D. S. Ramsay, *Life of Mde. D'Youville* (Montreal, 1895), pp. 16–17. In Quebec, the Sisters of Charity habits were a grey-brown in colour, often called *café-au-lait*. The congregation has published two extensive and detailed accounts of its history. See Les Soeurs de la Charité de Québec, *Une Fondatrice et son oeuvre : Mère Mallet et l'Institut des Soeurs de la Charité de Québec* (Quebec: Les Soeurs de la Charité de Québec, 1939); Nive Voisine and Yvonne Ward, *Histoire des Soeurs de la Charité de Québec*, vol. 1–3 (Beauport: Publications MNH, 1998).

22 Soeur Saint-Pierre, *Vie manuscrite de Mère Mallet* (Archives of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, 1916).

23 Prior to 1840, social support of women, children, and families was mainly delivered by charitable agencies established and run by lay widows, via the Church, who raised funds to help. These services were steadily converted to female religious communities as the Church directed resources and support to convents to take greater responsibility for, and control of, faith-based social work and education. From 1840, Quebec experienced strong growth in the number of convents in the province, as well as the number of women entering as postulants. Of these, it is estimated that only between one-third and one-half of those who entered remained to take final vows (Danelwycyz, *Taking the Veil*, pp. 74–75). Between 1837 and 1859, 11 new female communities were established in the province; another 11 were founded between 1860 and 1899 (Danelwycyz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 47).

24 The Roy sisters were boarders at the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame at Pointe-aux-Trembles from 1840 to 1842. They then moved to the convent in St. François de Bellchasse. In 1843 the two older girls transferred to the Quebec General Hospital while the youngest remained home with her mother because of ill health. Chlorinde died in 1846 at age 14. See Georgianna Juneau, s.c.i.m., *Mother Mary of the Sacred Heart (1806–1885)* (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Les Soeurs du Bon-Pasteur de Québec, [1935] trans. 1989), pp. 23, 30, 32. Séraphine and Céline were awarded first prizes for many of their academic subjects, including grammar, composition, and geography. See Soeur Marguerite Jean, “Marie-Josephte Fitzbach et ses Deux Filles”, *Le Courrier Bon-Pasteur*, vol. 5, no. 1 (June 1993), pp. 5–9. Marta Danelwycyz discusses the popularity of convent boarding schools in Quebec at that time. She outlines reasons why girls were sent to board, which included moral instruction, literacy, socialization, reliable childcare for working class parents whose employment moved out of the home and into factories, and stability during periods of family change. This latter factor may have been the reason the Roy sisters boarded. Convent boarding schools also served as sources for identifying potential postulants, as would seem to be the case with the Roy sisters. See Danelwycyz, *Taking the Veil*, pp. 125–129.

the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary but known as the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec. The Roy sisters' own status, distinguished though it was both by their being the first postulants with the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and by the work accomplished during their careers, is elevated further by the historical consequence of their biological mother as a religious foundress, a venerable position in Roman Catholic and Quebec history. Today, this blood connection is honoured by the two orders who refer to themselves as cousin congregations. Both communities are large, vibrant, and active in social work in Quebec, the northeastern United States, and overseas.

In her letter identifying the sitters in *Grey Nuns*, Sr. Callan draws upon convent histories to describe how the Roy sisters are remembered by their congregation today. Her description of these women is biographically and historically oriented in response to the question asked about the photograph. She honours the women's presence and recounts their accomplishments:

They labored, struggled, deprived themselves in many ways and gave themselves to their mission of helping those in need.... Indeed they were valiant, courageous, faith-filled, loving and dedicated to the end of their lives. Without such religious women much good would never have been accomplished.

Both Séraphine and Céline had been well educated according to the times and had taught school before entering the novitiate.... Well formed in their religious duties and equally zealous they followed the example of the Foundress' generosity. Neither extreme poverty nor excessive fatigue in caring for the sick, orphans and the elderly in times of epidemics and fires especially [shook] their constancy. Their degree of maturity was such that they were soon entrusted with responsibilities and tasks that put their faith and confidence in God's Providence to the test.²⁵

Whereas the collector and curator emphasize and value the photographer and his work, Sr. Callan's work shows that the religious descendants of the women portrayed value the portrait as a visual memento of their esteemed forebears. The hagiographic nature of Sr. Callan's description of the Roy sisters, like that of the curator's modernist account honouring the style, methods, and aesthetic merits of the photographer, forces a tough methodological question: how should spirituality be accounted for in research and analysis of this image of young women religious, whose lifelong social and spiritual commitments are proclaimed by the vocational attributes of habit and ring? Answering this question was essential to shaping the direction of research and analysis of this photographic portrait. Social anthropologist Suzanne Campbell-Jones, author of *In Habit*, calls this issue "the problem of faith"

25 Letter to the author, September 24, 1997. The Roy sisters' vocations are recounted in the congregation's *Circulaires Mortuaires*. See "Notice Biographique : Soeur Marie-de-Bon-Secours — Séraphine Roy", vol. 3, no. 49 (May 8, 1913); "Notice Biographique : Soeur Saint-Pierre — Céline Roy", vol. 4, no. 31 (March 13, 1917).

and wonders if it is necessary to sympathize or be a believer to understand.²⁶ Ultimately, she moves ahead in her work on the premise that the researcher is not looking for right or wrong, not examining or judging the substance of spiritual beliefs, not deciphering the meaning of faith or its truthfulness. Instead, she concludes, we should be looking “towards the context of the word or belief” to analyse its social use and position.²⁷

Historian Elizabeth Smyth argues for this approach as well: “Rather than dismissing them as hagiographic, these tales need to be examined for what they were: venues for community development and instruction intended for an exclusive use of nuns or sisters.”²⁸ Such a method is employed with great success by Marta Danylewycz in her ground-breaking work *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Québec, 1840–1920*. She describes her project as “a product of changing attitudes and perspectives. It makes religious women the centre of the inquiry and studies their individual and collective histories, relating them to the broader issues of culture, women’s work, and family organization....”²⁹ Danylewycz argues that hagiographers’ explanations for the large growth in vocations in nineteenth-century Quebec “set out to describe that which to a large extent cannot be described; they wrote about convents in otherworldly terms; they sought to capture the essence of faith and talked about the motivations of religious women in purely spiritual terms. Everything was ascribed to the single motive of complying with the will of God.”³⁰

The vocabulary used today developed out of a need to express the centrality of spirituality and enactment of vocation in religious life. Danylewycz adds that, while acknowledging “the importance of women’s spiritual longings, to focus on them exclusively as hagiographers have tended to do, places convent women outside history”.³¹ At the same time, she questions sociological explanations that prevailed in the mid-1980s. One line of argument held that convents supplied an appropriate patriarchal structure to absorb “redundant” women (in a society where women outnumbered men) who would otherwise be “doomed” to spinsterhood and lack a male authority figure or protector. Another line of argument conversely hypothesized that religious vocations

26 Suzanne Campbell-Jones, *In Habit: An Anthropological Study of Working Nuns* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 22.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Elizabeth Smyth, “‘Writing Teaches Us Our Mysteries’: Women Religious Recording and Writing History”, in Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), p. 109.

29 Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 16. An abridged segment has been published as “In Their Own Right: Convents, an Organized Expression of Women’s Aspirations” in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History*, 2nd ed. (Mississauga, Ont.: Clark Copp Pitman, 1991), pp. 161–181.

30 Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 85.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

offered women freedom from “social obligations” and “multiple births”, as well as the opportunity for intellectual development.³² Danylewycz maintains that both of these theories rest on “the persistence of certain preconceived attitudes toward the role of women in society”,³³ a problem from which Borcoman’s account suffers as well. In their place, Danylewycz argues for a “collective portrait” of women religious, grounded on historical materials such as archival records of the community and individual members.³⁴

The success of this method is clear. Danylewycz, disrupting twentieth-century myths and stereotypes of nineteenth-century women religious, finds that the massive growth in the numbers of women religious in the nineteenth century — and the Roy sisters and their mother were influential members of this movement — was in large part a matter of women’s agency, a deliberate, and deliberated, choice. A religious vocation offered opportunities in nursing and teaching, which were denied to married women, as well as a communal living environment (with its own social hierarchy and division of labour) in which women could pursue spiritual aspirations. This was a choice available to Irish and French-Canadian Roman Catholic women and an attractive alternative to marriage and motherhood or spinsterhood. Women who chose a religious vocation enjoyed esteem “in a society that seemed to value lay women solely as procreative beings”.³⁵ Under the aegis of a vocation, women like Séraphine and Céline Roy could pursue careers and be part of a community that enjoyed the ability to create its own sense of rank, status, and division of labour. Danylewycz argues that

the rise in women’s vocations can only be understood in the context of women’s work, education, economic, and political opportunities, and women’s own religious experiences.... Entering a convent entailed choice and a desire to practice virtue. Women did not stumble blindly into convents. Having religious vocations, they selected orders that suited their individual temperaments, occupational preferences, and social aspirations.... Under the protection of their vocations, women pursued life-long careers, wielded power, and, on occasion, entered the public sphere. In the final analysis, entering a convent could well mean overcoming the disadvantage of being a woman in a man’s world.³⁶

Stereotypes linger, nevertheless, and inform questions asked and answers proposed. The Clio Collective’s 1987 work on women’s history in Quebec relied on Marta Danylewycz’s work and viewpoint. While they note the short-term advantages of an alternative to a life under the direct control of men, childbearing, or spinsterhood and the opportunity to have a career, as

³² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–160.

well as the labour hierarchies in the convents and the service to male clergy that limited women's professional opportunities to helping or charitable roles, their conclusion nevertheless succumbs to late-twentieth-century assumptions that are not historically defensible: "the religious life offered an easy way out for women who wanted a different life from that of their mothers. They could achieve their aim without having to fight opposition to higher education for girls and the concept of working women."³⁷ By not considering the spiritual aspect of the vocation, demonstrating the economic value of the labour performed, looking at the limitations or opportunities of the day, acknowledging the nuns' role in expanding access to education among girls of all classes and races, as well as their own professional accomplishments as teachers and nurses, to see how these women were agents of social change in health care and education, or considering their day-to-day material existence, the Clio Collective shuts the door on inquiries, advocated by Danylewycz, that demonstrate lives and decisions that were something more complex and consequential than "the easy way out". Danylewycz alternatively interprets the circumstances in a nuanced way:

Women unable to find a niche were out of sorts. In Protestant England this surplus of women became the cradle for the first agitation for women's rights. In Quebec, the anxiety created by a lack of employment and opportunities for ambitious but religious women was neutralized by the possibility of finding a respectable and indeed highly valued alternative in the convent. In Quebec, as well, religion offered women a career, and perhaps this choice held back the tide of feminism.³⁸

A Photographic Tradition

The Sisters of Charity of Quebec (Grey Nuns) and their "cousins", the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec) in Quebec City, offer generous access to their visual and literary archives.³⁹ Both house photographs and textual materials relating to every woman who has

37 The Clio Collective (Micheline Dumont, Michèle Jean, Marie Lavigne, and Jennifer Stoddart), *Québec Women: A History*, trans. Roger Gannon and Rosalind Gill (Toronto: the Women's Press, 1987), p. 176.

38 Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, pp. 108–109. Mrs. Anna Jameson addressed the debate in England on organizing Protestant single women in religious communities. While objecting to the Roman Catholic vows of obedience, she argued for the benefits of education and purposeful work in teaching, nursing, and charity (in contrast, for example, to the boredom of needlework and musical accomplishments) using the Grey Nuns in Europe as examples of what properly trained women could contribute to society. See Mrs. Jameson, *Sisters of Charity, Catholic and Protestant: abroad and at home* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1855). A second edition with a new preface and enlarged scope of discussion was published in the United States under the title *Sisters of Charity, Catholic and Protestant and the communion of labor* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1857).

39 The Sisters of Charity motherhouse is in the Quebec City community of Beauport; the motherhouse of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is in the community of Sainte-Foy.

ever professed vows since the founding of the orders in 1849 and 1850.⁴⁰ Both have items related to Séraphine and Céline Roy: as first postulants and builders of the community in the Sisters of Charity of Quebec's repository and as the daughters of the Mother Foundress in the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's collections. The quality and quantity of these archival holdings are noteworthy, as women's individual and group histories and their material traces are usually very difficult to come by. The founding women of these religious communities clearly valued their members and strove to retain records with a view towards constructing congregational histories. The long-term stability of the motherhouses and the continuity of generations of women religious contribute to the safekeeping of individual and collective artifacts as well as an "institutional memory" that keeps those artifacts relevant.⁴¹

The practice of historical writing documenting the experiences of women in day-to-day life is listed by Elizabeth Smyth as one of many areas of accomplishment pioneered by women religious in Canada. This practice, which Smyth traces to as early as 1670 and which continues today, includes letters, annals (the day-to-day official record of events and activities kept by the order), and obituary notices as well as biographies of foundresses and community histories. The purpose of such writing is to reveal "community mysteries" to members.⁴² Its long-term effect is to "build a sense of historical community across time. They treasured women, who preserved the records of their past, often amidst trying conditions."⁴³ Smyth characterizes this as "the power of institutional memory within religious communities. Historical writing, oral tradition, and the sense of being surrounded by history were, and continue to be, the key means of its preservation."⁴⁴ The biographical files of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's archives — more than 5,000 over the past century and a half — include baptismal certificates citing birthplace and date, father's occupation and literacy, and mother's birth name; three-to-eight-page printed necrologies recounting the deceased sister's origins and religious life written by contemporaries for religious and lay family members; letters written by or to the sister; and in one case a Sister of Charity's handwritten notebook of reflections on her childhood, vocation, and religious experience, begun in English upon her taking final vows in 1853 and completed in French seven years later while she was terminally ill. These documents testify to the social origins and literacy

40 By 2001, 3,101 women had professed vows as Sisters of Charity; 2,225 had professed as Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec.

41 Elizabeth Smyth explains that the Code of Canon Law of 1917 recognized women religious as "historical beings" and that congregations were required to keep community records, including annals, yearly records that documented events. She notes that prior to 1917 requirements were "somewhat more flexible". See Smyth, " 'Writing Teaches Us' ", p. 103. Both congregations began annals in the first years of their founding.

42 Smyth, " 'Writing Teaches Us' ", p. 101.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of women religious in mid-nineteenth-century Quebec and offer their personal perspectives on aspirations, ambitions, choices, and goals couched in terms that emphasize the spiritual calling and purpose of their vocation.

Visual history, too, has a long-standing role in constructing institutional and historical memory in convents. Like most communities, the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec have museums and heritage rooms displaying artifacts and articulating events from the past; hallways and stairwells are lined with paintings of religious and historical subject matter, much of it made by community members as well as prominent lay artists; finely designed chapels, both historical and contemporary, are decorated with works also most often made by nuns in their convent art studios.⁴⁵ What has proven to be innovative is that the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec added photography to these practices from their very early years. In contrast, for example, the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, founded by Marguerite d'Youville in 1737, and with whom the Sisters of Charity of Quebec originated, have no similar photographic tradition, collection, or archives.⁴⁶ No reference to or explanation for the origin of this practice in Quebec City has yet come to light in annals, letters, biographies, invoices, or other print materials in convent archives.

The Sisters of Charity of Quebec's photograph collection in particular is startling in its comprehensiveness and consistency of practice. Studio portraits made of every professed nun but one since the community's founding (the one who, true to archival serendipity, left the notebook) are at the heart of the collection. Further, the Roy sisters were photographed regularly over the course of their vocations, individually and together, as young and mature professed nuns, and in group photographs with other Superiors.⁴⁷ There is also a photograph of Marie Fitzbach in her habit as Mother Superior of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec, flanked by her two daughters at about the

45 Archival photographs document the painting and sculpture studios of both congregations, as well as the printing presses of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec. For a brief study of the nuns who were Quebec's first professional women artists, see Lise Drolet, "L'art au pluriel les communautés à l'oeuvre", *Cap-Aux-Diamants*, vol. 21 (Spring 1990), pp. 43–46. One of the artifacts in the Sisters of Charity of Quebec's museum is a series of memorial wall plaques, made of wood about 4 inches high by 2.5 inches wide, decorated with calligraphy that names each nun by her birth and religious names and gives age at death and number of years in religious life, as well as the date of death. This practice continues today on wooden boards that run and turn like leaves in a book. The Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec maintain a wooden memorial wall. Smyth notes that, despite the many means of recording and preserving a community's history, it is through writing that women religious first began sharing their histories with history communities outside the convent ("Writing Teaches Us", p. 117).

46 In western Canada, photographs record Grey Nuns and their students in various communities from the 1880s onwards.

47 In the portraits made of these sisters over the years, the last together in 1909 on the 60th anniversary of the congregation and of the Roys' entry as postulants, it is the faces that stand out, memorable for their intensity of expression and, as they change dramatically with age, becoming almost unrecognizable when compared with the faces of the women's youth.



Figure 2: *Mother Marie Fitzbach and Her Daughters* by George William Ellisson, ca.1861 (Sisters of Charity of Quebec).

same ages in which they appear in their Ellisson portrait (Figure 2).⁴⁸ Yet, despite the extensive collection, the Ellisson portrait of the Roy sisters is not to be found there. Rather, it rests in the collection of a public art gallery in Ottawa. This displacement leads to the questions, for whom outside the convent was the portrait made and how, a century after it was made, did it come to be in the possession of Ralph Greenhill?

48 There are no known daguerreotypes of the three women, alone or together, made prior to religious life. A tintype portrait in the family collection of Marie Fitzbach's descendants bears a strong resemblance to her. Because the tintype was first invented in France in 1853 and not used in North America prior to 1856, this cannot be Marie Fitzbach's likeness prior to religious life. The photograph is reproduced and discussed in Emélie Allaire, "Madame Marie-Josephte Fitzbach-Roy", *Profils féminins* (1967), pp. 115–125; and in Sr. Thérèse Boucher, "La vertu de patience chez Marie Fitzbach-Roy" (Master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 1967).

The abundance and orderliness of the portrait photographs in the collection of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec strongly suggest that the use of photography by the convent was deliberate and considered. The earliest image is a much-faded daguerreotype made during the final vows of the first novice on February 22, 1850.⁴⁹ This is followed by albumen portraits of each nun. Imprints on the *carte-de-visite* mounts show that most were first made at the Ellisson studio and later at the Livernois studio, both located on *rue* St. Jean within a few blocks of the convent.⁵⁰ There are also group portraits of Superiors and other gatherings. In addition, in 1862 and 1870 promotional *cartes-de-visite* were made in the Livernois studio of foundress Marcelle Mallet with orphans representing the social work of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec. From 1893 to 1983 the Sisters of Charity of Quebec had their own fully-equipped photography studio in the motherhouse, and resident nun-photographers continued the portrait tradition but also made images of lay people for commercial purposes.⁵¹ The equipment, photo files, albums, and day-books (ledgers of portraits made with names, negative numbers, and dates) are in the congregation's museum today.

From the comprehensive nature of the photographic record, it is clear that photographic portraiture has been used by the Sisters of Charity of Quebec to document and link its members, not just those of distinction such as foundresses and Superiors, but also the rank and file. Certainly, these photographs function in part in a commemorative manner, marking the successful professional undertaking of each woman portrayed. As such, they follow in the painted portrait tradition of celebration and commemoration and have been used for those purposes by their religious contemporaries and descendants.

A Legacy of Deportment

Examining *Grey Nuns* in the context of the everyday use of photographs in

49 Postulant Alice Dunn (1825–1870) accompanied the foundress and her assistants when they moved from Montreal.

50 The convent was on *rue* de Glacis and *rue* St. Oliver, since renamed *rue* des Soeurs de la Charité. Ellisson's history is scantily documented compared to other Quebec studios such as Livernois and Notman, but he is known to have opened in Quebec City as a daguerreotypist in 1848, adding collodion/albumen technology in 1856 (the year of a studio fire in which everything was lost, but the studio reopened less than a month later). The studio closed in 1879 when Ellisson's negatives were purchased by Louis-Prudent Vallée.

51 The first photographer was Sr. Marie-de-L'Eucharistie, née Marie Elmina Lefebvre (1862–1946). She in turn trained her successor, Sr. Anatole (Exilia Tousignant, 1883–1972). Various sisters worked in the studio until it closed in 1983, when the last sister to work as photographer died (letter from Sr. Frances Callan, s.c.q., to the author, February 22, 2001). In 1896 Sr. Marie Marie-de-L'Eucharistie applied (in her birth name) for a letters patent for a new process for colouring photographs (known as illuminated pictures). The patent was granted August 5, 1896 in Canada (Patent No. 53,153) and on July 27, 1897 in the United States (Patent No. 587,007). It appears that the sisters were involved in photography long before opening their own studio. *The Annals of the Sisters of Charity of Québec*, 1855 (M.143, p. 88) record that in July 1855 a postulant was burned when a lamp broke while she was making daguerreotype portraits. No mention is made as to where the incident took place.

the convent of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec in the 1860s provides a means for viewing and comprehending the Roys' portrait in its original purpose and meaning: why it was made, for whom it was made, and what it signified to those who saw it. Contemplating *Grey Nuns* as an active cultural entity rather than as an archival document or as part of the fine art collection in which it resides today heeds Allan Sekula's argument: "in an archive, the possibility of meaning is 'liberated' from the actual contingencies of use. But this liberation is also a loss, an abstraction from the complexity and richness of use, a loss of context."⁵² It is this loss of originating context, along with the change of context in terms of time and place (a late-twentieth-century fine art gallery), that has left *Grey Nuns* to stand unquestioned for 35 years as a generic portrait of anonymous nuns while gaining iconic status within historical accounts of photography in Canada. Returned to the context of convent commission and use, the image testifies to more than historical identification. It begins to speak in terms of social identity, both of the specific women religious portrayed, Srs. St-Pierre and Marie-de-Bon-Secours, in terms of their vocations as well as of the goals, presence, and undertakings of the congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec. As such, at the time it was made and circulated, this presentation of the Roy sisters might have been read as representative of a Sister of Charity's vocation and profession. The quantity of similarly styled portraits in the archives, however, diminishes the likelihood that this portrait was commissioned or received as broadly representative of the community rather than specifically representative of the individuals portrayed.

The series of portraits made in the Ellisson studio of the women who became Sisters of Charity of Quebec during the 1850s and early 1860s share a standard composition, size, and finish (Figure 3). The prints are small, trimmed as ovals to irregular sizes (about 5.5 cm by 4.5 cm), mounted on stiff card but with no frame and with no studio marking front or back. Small enough to be cupped in the palm of the hand, these images invite the viewer to hold them close, seeking details that elude the eye, even aided by a magnifying glass, given the three-quarter length framing of the subject in the small image. While most of the nuns were photographed individually, those who, like Séraphine and Céline Roy, were sisters in lay life were often photographed together as sisters in religious life. Unlike the Roys in *Grey Nuns*, these siblings are posed with one seated and the other standing, the latter invariably on the left of the picture, but with no consistency as to whether it is the younger or older who stands. I wonder when and why they were photographed this way. To commemorate their profession day? For reasons of econ-

52 Allan Sekula, "Photography Between Labour and Capital", in Benjamin Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archive of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948-1969* (Halifax: Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, 1983), p. 194.

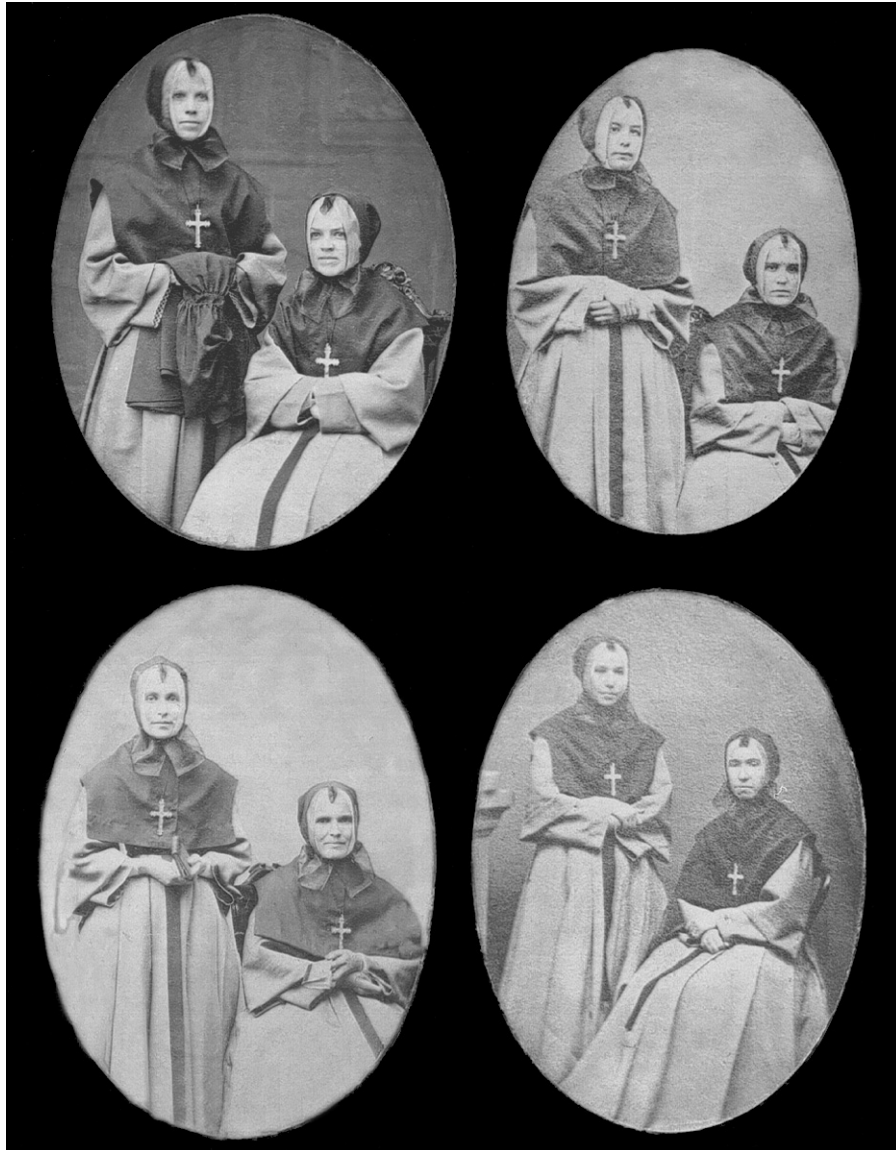


Figure 3: Double portraits (Sisters of Charity of Québec). Top left: Henriette (standing) and Zoé Labrecque; top right: Philomène (standing) and Geneviève Drapeau; bottom left: Euphémie (standing) and Héloïse Ringuet; bottom right: Céline (standing) and Séraphine Roy.

omy? To honour the special relationship as sisters in both lay and religious life? To represent or symbolize something about congregational values?

Séraphine and Céline Roy were not only the first postulants, but the first set of sibling nuns to join the community. In the 1850s, only two more pairs of sisters were among the 34 women who made final vows.⁵³ The first, Winifred and Mary Bennett, who professed vows in 1853 and 1858, did not have a portrait made together. This may be because Winifred died in 1860, predating the arrival of *carte-de-visite* technology in Quebec City in 1861.⁵⁴ Nor did the next set of siblings, Marie-Cécile and Mathilde Lamothe, who professed in 1854, have a portrait made together, even though both lived through the 1870s. In the early 1860s, however, the first four pairs of sisters to profess vows in that decade are documented in double portraits. Héloïse Ringuet, 26 years of age, and her younger sister Euphémie, age 22 and standing on the left holding a book, professed vows on November 21, 1861, and were later photographed together (Figure 3, bottom left).⁵⁵ Similarly photographed are Zoé Labrecque, 22, who professed vows on August 15, 1862, and her older sister Henriette, 24, standing with the small cape worn outdoors draped over her hands, who had made her vows a year later on August 6, 1863 (Figure 3, top left).⁵⁶ On that same day, Philomène Drapeau, 21, professed vows. She is photographed standing beside her younger sister Geneviève, who did not make final vows until March 18, 1865, at age 21 (Figure 3, top right).⁵⁷ An exception to the rule are the three Bégin sisters who professed vows in the early 1860s. In a double portrait (not reproduced here), Marie-Lucie Bégin stands beside her younger sister Célanire with whom she professed vows on November 4, 1863. Absent from their portrait is eldest sister Euphémie, who had professed vows two years earlier on November 21, 1861. A *carte-de-visite* of her, made in the Livernois studio, is in the archives of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec.⁵⁸ That these double portraits were made sometime after the second

53 *Mère Mallet et l'institut des Soeurs de la Charité de Québec*, Appendice II, pp. 584–586.

54 Winifred Bennett, the only Sister of Charity not photographed, left a notebook of her thoughts about her vocation upon profession of final vows and later contemplation on her vocation prior to her death. The *carte-de-visite* technology used to make these small images was only introduced in 1861 at the Livernois studio in Quebec City and at the Notman studio in Montreal. There is no evidence that the Ellisson studio was using the technology any earlier, and so this series of portraits likely did not begin any earlier than 1861.

55 Héloïse Ringuet (Sr. St-Gabriel) of Rimouski, Quebec, the 49th woman to profess vows (February 20, 1835–June 22, 1905); Euphémie Ringuet (Sr. St-Michel), #50 (October 11, 1838–December 24, 1872). Both served as teaching sisters.

56 Zoé Labrecque (Sr. Ste-Eugénie) of St. Jean, Île d'Orléans, Quebec, #56 (October 21, 1840–August 21, 1927); Henriette Labrecque, (Sr. St-Raphael), #59 (November 3, 1838–July 10, 1907).

57 Philomène Drapeau (Sr. Marie-du-Carmel) of Rimouski, Quebec, #60 (December 1, 1841–October 29, 1881); Geneviève Drapeau (Sr. St-François-de-Borgia), #77 (October 13, 1843–August 15, 1899).

58 Euphémie Bégin (Sr. St-Thomas), #51 (April 30, 1835–November 28, 1886); Marie-Lucie Bégin (Sr. Marie-du-Saint-Esprit), #64 (November 21, 1841–June 9, 1910); Célanire Bégin (Sr. Marie-de-l'Enfant-Jésus), #65 (August 20, 1843–October 16, 1876). The sisters were born in three different Quebec towns.

sister's final vows, and that with one exception only there were no single portraits made of the women who professed first, attests that in the beginning the occasion of having a portrait made did not coincide with the event of making one's final vows, as the tradition evolved in the twentieth century.

Confirming this is one particular double portrait composed in the same manner and of the same size and shape as the others (Figure 3, bottom right). What distinguishes it today are its sitters: Séraphine and Céline Roy, whose profession of final vows in 1851 preceded by a decade the arrival of *carte-de-visite* technology in Quebec City. Here Céline stands, a column at her right elbow, and her older sister, Séraphine, is seated to her left. Both women's hands are empty and folded. This small image was clearly made at the same time as the larger one because the disposition of Séraphine's habit, which disrupts the symmetry of the larger portrait with the domino (cape) in slight disarray over her left shoulder and the ribbons of the ceinture off-centre along the front seam of the skirt, remains the same. When portrayed and viewed in the smaller image and alongside those of other members of the community, the Roy sisters, despite their distinction as first postulants, community leaders, and daughters of a religious foundress, do not appear to be any different from their religious sisters. Indeed, they become but two among many, commemorated like all of the others.

In 1899 the Sisters of Charity of Quebec gathered up the small oval portraits to display in a photograph album marking the congregation's fiftieth anniversary.⁵⁹ Each woman's portrait was mounted in order of entry to the community. Most of the nuns were still living at the time. Organized and viewed in this way, these photographs stand as an inventory of the congregation's members while constructing an historical sense of the community, familial relations as sisters, and dedication to the congregation. When first produced, these portraits might also have been circulated as mementos outside the convent had additional prints been made for family members. There is no evidence that this was done, as only the prints in the convent collection have been examined, but it is reasonable to expect that there are copies preserved in family albums in Quebec.

The dominant impression of the portraits when displayed as a group in the convent's album is the uniformity of the figures in deportment and dress. This aspect, especially visible in the larger portrait of the two identically dressed nuns, engaged Borcoman, too, particularly "in the arrangement of the hands, the crosses and the black ribbons" which, in absence of comparison to dozens of other portraits much like it, he attributed to the photographer's desire to avoid repetition.⁶⁰ When this image is viewed among the *cartes-de-visite*, repetition is unequivocal, and the consistency in bodily deportment argues strongly that much less of the effect should be attributed

59 Sisters of Charity of Quebec museum artifact 74-R 1401.

60 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 86.

to photographic technology or aesthetic sensitivity and more merit attributed to self-conscious public presentation of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec's social identity and community role as represented by the sitters' demeanour. The careful symmetry of the Roys' presentation is, in part, a learned, institutionally ingrained behaviour. Individual bodily distinction is veiled by the habit and poses; individual personality is revealed in limited measure in the sisters' expressive faces.

The solemn look and straight spines of the nuns are not unlike those of secular sitters of the nineteenth century. This demeanour has traditionally been attributed to the wet collodion technology with which such portraits were made, requiring exposure times long enough that sitters had to be held in place with posing stands, manageable postures, and unchanging expressions. This would have been especially important with the longer exposure required for the larger negative and may account for Céline being seated in this image rather than standing as was more conventional, not only in the sisters' *carte-de-visite* double portrait but also in those of wives and husbands, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and other family groupings. The shortcoming of a solely technological explanation, however, is that poses and gestures are cast outside the historical realm of social mannerisms and expectations for bodily presentation at various class levels.

In the attempt to put pose and expression into historical perspective, it becomes apparent that photography's technological requirements and their impact on the visual outcome were compatible with expectations for middle-class women's comportment, including that of women religious and their traditional habits of dress and demeanour. Novices were trained in movement within the habit as part of their self-presentation as sisters, both in the privacy of the convent and in their public roles as teachers or nurses. Analysing the habits and physical demeanour of the nuns in her study, Suzanne Campbell-Jones writes, "the control of the body was certainly an important element in the continuing efforts of the nun to reach a degree of religious perfection. The 'imprint' frequently matched the fashions of the time, particularly middle-class manners."⁶¹

The Sisters of Charity of Quebec's photographic portraits both produce and reproduce ideas of the appropriate and desired bodily deportment. The design of the congregation's nineteenth-century dress not only represented the universal symbols of the habits of women religious which emphasize or publicly proclaim the values of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also veil the bodily form and limit viewers' access to the nuns' faces and hands, the only visible individualizing features. The habit was made of sturdy cloth in a muted colour with long sleeves that were designed to be pinned up while a sister was working but beneath which hands were folded and covered at

61 Campbell-Jones, *In Habit*, p. 175.

other times.⁶² The wimple prevented wide peripheral vision so as to keep the nun's eyes from wandering from her task and her ears focused on listening to the word of God.⁶³ It also protected nuns' faces from casual observers outside their scope of vision. Conversely, the wimple prevented nuns from knowing when they were being viewed and so encouraged self-regulation by making it necessary for them to act at all times as if they were.

The self-control required for a portrait exposure was a quotidian practice for nuns and would account, in part, for the self-possession that emanates from their portraits. These women were not intimidated by the camera, nor were they passive models under the photographer's direction. They sat in cooperation with one another and with the photographer in the composition of the portrait in the positions they had learned and manifested as the deportment of Sisters of Charity. They appear to be strong women in control of the situation, with a presence that suffuses the image and makes it so memorable. Is this what *Globe and Mail* critic John Bentley Mays found odd about this portrait?

The Roy sisters' deportment is replicated in that of all of the other nuns who were photographed. Conformation of the body to the expectations of how to carry oneself as a nun is documented by the camera, both as having been accomplished by the sisters portrayed and as an example to others of the time and who follow. Repetition that produces a generic image does not lead to anonymity, however. The individuality of each face is a prominent feature of these photographs, animating the image as the nuns meet and return the viewer's stare. Hands, too, are often active, holding a cape or book or displaying a ring. It is these details to which the viewer is drawn. The Roys' faces, for example, caused Borcoman to speculate that these women were sisters, "if not twins". Their expressions also motivated him to claim insight into their spiritual lives.

In the convent, the faces are read differently. Today, as in 1899, these portraits serve historical and institutional memory, are viewed as commemorative portraits honouring each woman's vocation and service, and are used for historical identification when family or other researchers come to call. The

62 Campbell-Jones writes about the "distinctive style and universal symbolism" of the religious habit that had become a norm over the centuries of Christianity. The capuche (cloak and hood from the Capuchin Franciscan friar), for example, represented "innocence and purity", the tunic stood for the "renouncement of works of this world and mortification", the scapular represented a "willingness to labour", the mafor (short cloak) "humility and poverty", and the cincture (belt) "purity" (*In Habit*, p. 174). The habit of novice and professed Grey Nuns was made of camelot cloth (imported from England) in a grey-brown (*café au lait*) colour, with a black ceinture (cincture or belt) and domino (or cape) covering the shoulders. Novices who were in their second year at the community and had taken temporary vows received the habit along with a new religious name, but wore no cross or ring. They spent their second year studying the rules and traditions of the order, as well as how to dress and walk, and learning about the foundress. Upon completion of these studies, final vows were made (Sr. Frances Callen, s.c.q., in conversation with the author, May 2000).

63 Campbell-Jones, *In Habit*, p. 175.

portraits represent for today's nuns material concerns about the bodily deportment in which they were trained as novices, as well as the practicality of the design and symbolic meanings of the historical habit (replaced after Vatican II in the 1960s after many of today's sisters had professed vows).⁶⁴ Given the complete collection of these images in the archives of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, it is possible that the congregation's administration paid for the portraits and approved the original representation, which then became convention, although there is no record of payment for photographs in the Sisters of Charity of Quebec's account books between 1849 and 1880. These small portraits were an innovative means of fulfilling one aspect of the congregation's duly recorded history. An inexpensive visual record of each nun is a compatible addition to other markers, from birth records to posthumous wall plaques and printed necrologies. As with the oil portraits of the foundresses, descendents in the community learn and take inspiration from viewing images of those who preceded them. Likewise, the sense of history evoked by the sepia prints is persuasive and constructive in institutional strength and memory.

A legacy of the bodily discipline and deportment displayed by the Roys is visible with nuns today. In 1998 two pairs of Sisters of Charity of Quebec who are also siblings again stood as portrait subjects, this time for Clara Gutsche as she constructed a photographic exploration of the lives of women religious in Quebec in the late twentieth century (Figure 4). To this end the sisters are posed, the objective being not to document a passing way of life, but to explore for outsiders the physical spaces and intimate relations that shape the lives of women living in religious community.

Unlike Ellisson in the early 1860s, Gutsche worked from within the congregations she photographed. She was welcomed warmly, as is convent custom: "I felt as if I had gone to visit lots of sisters, mothers and grandmothers. Many of their routines and pastimes are predictable and socially prescribed. ...A sort of cultural standardization of proper behaviour seems to extend even to their physical gestures, especially how they stand or use their hands."⁶⁵ The postures, gestures, and space of Céline and Séraphine Roy resound in this late-twentieth-century image.⁶⁶ The nuns stand straight, engaging the camera with their eyes and with bodies grounded on firmly planted feet. The fingers of the nun on the left weave together in a manner recalling Céline's hands as her fingers marked places in a book. Much like Séraphine, the sister on the

64 In conversation with members of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec (May 2000) and the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec (May 2001).

65 Clara Gutsche, lecture at University of New Brunswick Art Center, Moncton, January 26, 1996, quoted in France Gascon, *Clara Gutsche: La Série des Couvents/The Convent Series* (Quebec: Musée d'Art de Joliette, 1998), p. 18. See also Clara Gutsche, "Revelations", *Canadian Art*, vol. 12 (Spring 1995), pp. 66–71; Anand Anand, "A Dying Way of Life", *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), July 17, 1999, p. C3.

66 Clara Gutsche confirms that she was interested in the "learned and standardized comportment" of the nuns and that this was an element in *The Convent Series* (e-mail to author, August 20, 2001).

Figure 4: Clara Gutsche, *Les Soeurs de la Charité de Québec. Deux soeurs religieuses à la maison générale, Beauport, 1998*, © SODART (Montreal), 2003.

right folds her arms, the ring on the left hand clearly displayed. The descriptive title, “*Les Soeurs de la Charité de Québec, Beauport, 1998*” echoes that of the Roy portrait in the National Gallery of Canada, but for different reasons and to a different purpose. As public as this modern image is and was intended to be when made, the anonymity of these particular Sisters of Charity respects

their privacy while presenting their figures as representative of a community and a way of life. The exterior space in which the sisters pose signifies that theirs is an active congregation engaged in the secular world. Spatial meaning is especially clear when it is considered in the context of Gutsche's entire series of images and especially alongside those of cloistered nuns photographed behind grills in other Quebec convents.

A Clue to the Occasion

It is puzzling that the Sisters of Charity of Quebec do not own a print of the large Ellisson portrait. Its size and condition impart a presence and visual impact that lends a sense of ceremony, occasion, and public statement to the image. It is neither as yellow nor as faded as the smaller images. The question of why the portrait was made and for whom might have been answered quickly had documentation remained explaining where, when, and from whom Ralph Greenhill acquired this photograph — whether from a dealer, at an antique or flea market, or from a family collection. When the National Gallery of Canada acquired it, the print was no longer in the context or condition in which Greenhill had found it but rather had been mounted on “antique” card. In turn, the Gallery did not make any record of the photograph's provenance. Nor did it document Greenhill's attribution to Ellisson, despite the absence of a studio imprint on either front or back of the photograph.⁶⁷ The attribution is verified by a *carte-de-visite* portrait of Ellisson himself standing on the carpet that covers the floor in *Grey Nuns*, and another of journalist and editor Augustin Côté, with the same carpet and drapery, on the back of which is the Ellisson studio imprint.⁶⁸ Knowing the circulation history of the National Gallery of Canada's print would enrich understanding of its sites of viewing and possible meaning — perhaps as a memento in a Roy or Fitzbach family album.

Nevertheless, not all is lost. Another original print of the portrait has been located in the care of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec, the congregation founded by the Roys' mother Marie Fitzbach. It has been in circulation in the community since 1861 (Figure 5). The print is well worn. There is a large tear

67 Staff at both the National Gallery of Canada and the Ontario Archives told me that Greenhill's word was good enough for attribution in the early 1970s. (The Ontario Archives has an Ellisson portrait of Governor General Lord Monck, who was in Canada from 1861 to 1868, posed on the same carpet but also without marking, that was donated to the collection by Ralph Greenhill.) Such is the respect with which his collecting knowledge and accomplishments are viewed. With the assistance of Pauline Greenhill and Judy Greenhill, I contacted a number of Greenhill's collecting associates, none of whom remembered any word from him on the photograph's origins. The lack of fading on the portrait suggests that it might have been kept in an album and may not have been exposed to light very much over the 100 years prior to Greenhill's acquisition.

68 The Côté portrait is in the collection of the Archives nationales du Québec and was located by Sr. Frances Callan, s.c.q., with the assistance of archivist Jacques Morin. The location of the Ellisson portrait is unknown, and therefore it is also unknown whether there is a studio imprint on the back. The *carte* is not in the collection of the Archives nationales du Québec, despite attribution in Michel Lessard, “George William Ellisson”, *Cap-aux-Diamants*, vol. 3 (Summer 1987), p. 13.



Figure 5: *Céline and Séraphine Roy, Sisters of Charity of Quebec* by George William Ellison, 1861 (Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec)

across the lower right corner and minor tears elsewhere. It is slightly larger than the National Gallery of Canada print (23.5 cm by 18.5 cm) and mounted on card. A printing stain along the left hand side, strong yellowing in the carpet at the sitters' feet, and a slightly yellow cast to the whole suggest that this print was made with less care perhaps, exposed to light more frequently, and handled more often over the decades than the museum piece. Like the Gal-

lery's copy, the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's print has no studio markings recto or verso. An undated notation in pencil on the back identifies the sitters as "1. Sr M. de Bon-Secours Séraphine Roy/ 2. Sr Saint-Pierre Céline Roy/ Toutes deux filles de notre vénérée Mère Fon[...]". A copy of the print on display in the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's museum is dated c.1852, an estimate based not on photographic technology or the photographer's history but on an idea of the portrait's social function: that perhaps it was made to mark the occasion of the Roy sisters' professions in 1851, a practice that has been customary in the twentieth century.⁶⁹ Although Ellisson was advertising "photographs" as early as 1856, the sisters' profession date precedes by a decade the introduction in Quebec of the *carte-de-visite* technology used to make the smaller double portrait that was exposed at the same sitting.⁷⁰

While nothing is known of the origins of the print in the National Gallery of Canada, the origins of the print in the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's archives is well documented in the community annals, which record when, where, why, to whom, and from whom the photograph was presented:

6 juin [1861]: Nous saluons la Mère Assistante [Marie Fitzbach] dont la fête se célébrera demain; elle reçoit en cadeau le portrait de ses deux Filles, religieuses à la Charité, une robe, des chandeliers de cristal et un tapis pour le prie-Dieu de Notre Père. Deux Soeurs de la Charité viennent aussi lui offrir leurs hommages.

7 juin. Fête du Sacré-Coeur. Nous fêtons Notre bonne Mère avec toute l'allégresse de nos âmes. Delle Métivier partage notre fête.⁷¹

These entries reveal that the portrait was a gift to Marie Fitzbach from her own community on the occasion of her religious feast day, the Feast of the Sacred Heart. It was one of four gifts from the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec. In addition, the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec's 1861 account book records an expense on May 10 "pour des portraits", that is, for portrait photographs.⁷² It was customary each year for the community to mark the

69 It has been reproduced as well in Céline Jalbert, *Présence d'avenir au coeur du monde depuis 150 ans* (Quebec: Les Soeurs du Bon-Pasteur de Québec, 1999), p. 28; and Soeur Marguerite Jean, "Marie-Josephite Fitzbach", *Courrier Bon-Pasteur*, p. 9.

70 "Photography and All Its Branches", *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, May 27, 1856; "Ellisson's Photographic Gallery", *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, June 12, 1856.

71 *Annales de l'Asile du Bon-Pasteur, Québec* (Sainte-Foy: Maison généralice du Bon-Pasteur, 1991), pp. 223–224 (original manuscript, p. 278). After first serving as Foundress and then as Superior when Rome recognized the congregation as a religious community in 1856, Marie Fitzbach served as Assistant Superior from 1859 to 1865.

72 In nineteenth-century French Canadian usage, "des portraits" meant photographic portraits, as distinguished from painted images. On the same page on May 4 is an entry for a payment "pour peinture" (for paint or a painting). Account books of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Québec, *Journal caisse I*, January 1859–December 1872, May 10, 1861. The cost of the photographs was entered as 1–5–0, understood to be pounds, shillings, and pence, the British currency of the day. If this entry does refer to the Roy sisters' portrait, then it may also be that more than one print, such as that in the NGC collection, was purchased. The account books and annals of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec were also reviewed for any mention of portrait purchases but none was found.

foundress's feast day in June with gifts. The following year, for example, Marie Fitzbach received a ciborium veil (a cover for the church vessel which holds the Eucharistic host) embroidered in gold, a sofa, a veil, a pair of shoes, white curtains for her bed, and an embroidered scapular (cloak) made by one of the women sheltered by the congregation.⁷³ These presents were items of need or benefit to the community as a whole, as under their rule gifts to Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec are theirs in name but are ultimately the property of the community.

The annals evoke the esteem accorded to the foundress's daughters, always recording their visits by naming them and their relationship to Marie Fitzbach. The annals of June 15, 1860, for example, note that both daughters as well as Marcelle Mallet, the Mother Foundress and Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and a good friend of Marie Fitzbach, attended the celebration of their mother's feast day. In 1861, however, when their portrait was presented by the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec community, the Roy sisters were absent. Rather, the annals record the presence of two unnamed Sisters of Charity on the day of the presentation and that of a friend and patron of the congregation on the Feast Day following.

Why did the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec choose to present the gift of this portrait? In lay life, Marie Fitzbach had raised two daughters who were pursuing successful vocations with the Sisters of Charity of Quebec. Marie Fitzbach's daughters in religious life may have commissioned the photograph to symbolize their own relationship to Marie Fitzbach and to inspire them in their own positions and roles in the community and in relation to their Mother foundress. On a more personal note, the portrait may also have been offered to ease Marie Fitzbach's distress when Céline, and later Séraphine, were posted in branch houses at a distance from Quebec. Céline's correspondence with her mother between 1866 and 1879 when she was at points much further away than Lévis repeatedly begins with words soothing her mother on their separation.

While the Sisters of Charity of Quebec do not have a print of the double portrait, they do possess another portrait photograph marking the relationship and bond of the Roy women: a *carte-de-visite* of mother and daughters together in habit, the sisters appearing to be the same age as in their Ellisson portrait (Figure 2). Marie Fitzbach is seated between Séraphine on the left holding a book and Céline on the right with hands folded. In this case, the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec do not have an original print.⁷⁴ There is no studio imprint on this now much-faded work. The furnishings and background, however, are found in a number of *cartes* of Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec, one of which is dated 1865 and inscribed with the Livernois

⁷³ See *Annales de l'Asile du Bon-Pasteur*, p. 249.

⁷⁴ An enlarged restored copy of this portrait was presented by the Sisters of Charity of Quebec to the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec in honour of their 150th anniversary in 2000.

emblem.⁷⁵ The same background is also found in the tintype of a sister who professed vows in 1860 and died a year later.⁷⁶ On the basis of these dates and props, the Roys' triple portrait would have been made at the Livernois studio between 1861 and 1865.⁷⁷ In this case, though, the annals do not record the origins or purpose of the triple portrait, nor do the account books document its purchase.

A Significance Beyond Art

By seeing the women portrayed in *Grey Nuns* and inquiring about them, we return complexities of history to the photograph, which in turn open more aspects of photography history to examination and debate. The questions that began this inquiry — who were these women and why did they have their portrait made — have for the most part been answered. The question of the print that launched the inquiry remains open, however. For whom was it made, and where did it circulate prior to 1965 when Ralph Greenhill first brought it to public notice? The traces of its place may be found in due course in historical materials in Quebec that have yet to come to light. As matters stand the answer is elusive, the consequence of removing a photograph from the context in which it was found. Harvesting albums for their finest contents, whatever the basis for such an assessment, is common practice in the collection and archiving of photographs.⁷⁸ As this study shows, ignoring context not only leaves the collecting institution without evidence of provenance, it robs the image of its origins — who made it, who sat for it, who looked at it and why — and so compromises its historical value.

Does this same information, as well as the existence of a second print, compromise the photograph's value as a fine art object? Returning the photograph to the realm of commercial exchange complicates matters for modernist photography historians who judge an image on its formal merits. Greenhill's and Borcoman's intellectual and financial investment in the image as a fine art object, valued for aesthetic criteria alone, may have prevented them from asking such questions, including "Who are these women?" Nevertheless, had the origins of the National Gallery of Canada's print been documented by the collector and curator, more could have been

75 The sitter is Rose Couture, Sr. St-Michel, 24th to profess vows with the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec (born August 6, 1833; entered June 10, 1858; professed vows June 23, 1860; died June 10, 1896). The *carte* is inscribed on the back in ink with her name, number, and the date May 3, 1865, over the Livernois emblem. Most of the portraits of sisters from prior to 1880 and preserved in the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec archives were made at the Livernois and later Vallée studio. Portraits of all but 12 sisters who professed with the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec between 1850 and 1900 are in the congregation's archives.

76 Marie Proulx, #21 (born May 10, 1838; professed vows July 23, 1860; died November 6, 1861).

77 The annals of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec for February 28, 1868, record that Élise Livernois donated a portrait of Archbishop Baillargeon to the congregation in appreciation for the nursing care given to her late husband Jules-Isaï Livernois during his final illness in 1865.

78 Pauline Greenhill recalls that her father took apart albums and removed photographs (e-mail to the author, April 24, 2001).

learned about the photographer they so admire, whose work is documented in fragments in archives in Ottawa, Quebec City, and Montreal. What needs to be explored about Ellisson are his studio's practices, its economic and social position in Quebec City, and the reception and consumption of its images with a view to determining how the patronage of religious communities and their sponsors was a part of all this.⁷⁹

No doubt, as Borcoman suggests, Ellisson *was* pleased, not only with the symmetry but also with the finish of the portrait he had made of these two sisters for a well-known and respected religious community and their foundress. But were the nuns pleased in 1861? The wealth of photographic portraits in the archives of both communities, culminating in the embrace of photographic technology with a fully equipped studio at the Sisters of Charity of Quebec's motherhouse in the 1890s, suggests that they were. Are the nuns today pleased? Yes, they are. The community descendents of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec who commissioned the portrait as a gift for the foundress as well as the community descendents of the sitters, the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, value the physical trace and memento of these esteemed sisters and the tangible link to their communities' origins. Both congregations have been surprised to learn (as would Greenhill and Borcoman) that another print exists and is valued also, if for very different reasons.

The archival collections of the Sisters of Charity of Quebec and the Good Shepherd Sisters of Quebec demonstrate that from 1861 the communities had an informed agenda for the use of photographs. They embraced photography when the introduction of the *carte-de-visite* format made it viable to have commemorative portraits made for a modest price. The photographs were made for the use of the communities: to register and commemorate for posterity each member in her habit and deportment as a professed sister. Added to other documentary and commemorative practices, such as recording daily events in the annals, writing the community's history in the foundress's biography, printing necrologies, and maintaining community museums and archives, the series of portraits, large and small, comprise an engaging component of congregational history and memory.

Much is at stake in writing women into history. Simply seeing women's historical presence when they are seated in front of us opens new avenues to explore. The sometimes profound, far-reaching effects of the roles and actions of women religious such as Céline and Séraphine Roy are documented in an abundance of archival material about their lives along with evidence of the role of photography in their own institutions. This evidence invests the photograph with an historical significance well beyond that of the photographer's name or aesthetics. Today much more is known about the Roys than about Ellisson, and the sitters' engagement with and impact upon their society was far greater than that of the photographer. Borcoman's brief biography of the photographer asserts that Ellisson was well known for his

79 For an introduction, see the periodical *Cap-aux-Diamants*, vol. 3 (Summer 1987), which is dedicated to a review of the history of photography in Quebec.

portraits of “prominent national figures”.⁸⁰ Ironically, as we now know, these seemingly generic “Grey Nuns” were, in fact, prominent citizens, both during their lifetimes among Irish and French-Canadian Catholics of Quebec and in posterity to thousands of Canadian and American women religious through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for whom these sisters are their ancestors in religious life. Indeed, Ellisson’s reputation is enhanced, not compromised, by his commission to portray these women of stature and influence in their religious and secular communities. Even if, a century after having their portrait made, the women were not recognized by the collector or curator, the size and quality of the photograph itself, as well as its place in the tradition of portraiture of nuns in Quebec from the late seventeenth century, are enough to alert the viewer that these are sitters of significance, that the purpose and meaning of the portrait merit investigation, and that the women are worthy of being named: *Céline and Séraphine Roy, Sisters of Charity of Quebec (Grey Nuns), 1861*.

Afterword

The value of historical inquiry lies both in piecing together the historical puzzle and seeking knowledge of history to inform contemporary intellectual, political, or other social debate. As this inquiry ends, a “new and difficult question” has emerged: how does photographic representation bear upon the symbolic and practical ordering of women in social institutions today? The growing practice of posting portrait photographs of academic staff on university websites is a case in point. While in residence at the convents conducting research, I found that similarities became apparent between nuns’ lives and those of academic women and the impact and implications of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience we too make at the time of our appointments as faculty. When introducing this research at an academic conference in Winnipeg and later waiting with dozens of women scholars in an airport lounge when leaving Quebec City after another conference, I also realized the sociological similarities between women religious communities and the community of academic women with which I am familiar. Both groups made career a primary choice in life, with a sense of vocation. Among the academic women who gather, a group predominantly between the ages of 40 and 60, there is a sense that we are enjoying the fruits of the labour of the few “foundresses” of academic life for women, and in turn have built much; but also that the profession is growing and changing as more women enter and information technology changes the ways in which we communicate and do our work. While choices and opportunities have become much broader over the past 30 years, especially for those with access to education, academic women are doing the same work as nuns in the past: teaching, writing history, and making long-term personal commitments to an institution and its regulations.

80 Borcoman, *Magicians of Light*, p. 86.