

ATHENS ON THE FRASER
The Photographs of H.G.Cox

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PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

In April 1933 the business manager of the Vancouver Art Gallery sent a brief note to an artist who had shown his photographs at the Gallery. He wrote, "I enclose a small account for out-of-pocket payments by the Gallery in respect of your exhibition of pictorial camera studies.....If therefore you can, without inconvenience, let me have a remittance, I shall very much appreciate it." The amounts in question were \$3.18 for printing invitations and \$8.90 for the cost of printing the catalogues. It was a time when exhibition space at Vancouver's new public art gallery could be rented. The Depression was at its worst in 1933 and the Gallery, in another letter, informed the artist that "a charge of \$15.00 laid down by the Exhibition Committee will be reduced to \$10.00." The artist was Horace Gordon Cox, known as H.G., and the exhibition was one of three solo shows that Cox had at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the decade of the 1930s.

H.G. Cox was born in England in 1885 and attended the Kidderminster School of Art in the years before he emigrated to Canada in 1908. In 1911 he moved to New Westminster, taking up a post with the engineering branch of the B.C. Electric Railway Company. He was rejected for military service in the First World War on medical grounds. From 1913 to 1941 he was employed by the Public Works Department of the Provincial Government based in New Westminster, where he lived most of his life until his death in 1972.

Cox's earliest known photographs date from around 1924. Within a few years he was already an active member of the international Pictorialist salon movement, showing his pictures in the 1925 to 1940 period at exhibitions on four continents, from New York to Los Angeles, London to Lucknow, and in France, Italy, Spain and Sweden. He was part of the network of camera clubs on the West Coast, establishing friendships with photographers in Seattle and Portland. (The card for this exhibition shows a detail from the back of a Cox mounting board with its exhibition stickers.) Interestingly, one of his fellow jurors for a photo exhibition in Victoria in the mid-1940s was Jack Shadbolt.

Unlike his Vancouver colleague John Vanderpant, who declared his separation from Pictorialism in 1928, Cox subscribed to the Pictorialist ethos wholeheartedly until about 1936. His later pictures gradually became less 'tonal' and more clearly defined, a shift that was obvious in his third solo show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1938. That exhibition, *The Book of Muriel*, consisted of eighty photographs of a single nude model, some of which bear a striking resemblance to images Edward Weston made around the same time.

Cox was definitely a Pictorialist, but defining Pictorialism itself has been a challenge because so many differing practices were lumped under its name. In the 1920 volume of *Pictorial Photography in America*, Clarence White wrote a foreword meant as a reminder of Pictorialist first principles: "To many people photography is merely a mechanical process. To an increasing number, however, photography is being seen as an art, by which personal impressions of nature and human life may be expressed as truly as by the brush. These workers in photography see in it a medium by which the action of light upon sensitive surfaces may be so controlled as really to interpret scenes and persons in the individualistic spirit of a true art." Clarence White was the President of *The Pictorial Photographers of America*, who published the book; he adds that the book is published "in the hope... (of) stimulate(ing) interest in this branch of pictorial art." Pictorialists, then, intervened in the making of their pictures so as to take them beyond what would obtain if cameras, photo paper and film were simply left to their basic mechanical procedures. They also saw their work as one branch of a larger picture-making project.

The question of whether there are, or were, specific Pictorialist subjects has been around since at least the 1920s. Writing in his *Principles of Pictorial Photography* (1923) John Wallace Gillies states that there are not: "The pictorial worker is without restriction as to subject matter as long as he does something practical with it. He can very well make a picture of an old shoe if he creates a picture with the material he selects, seeing to matters of arrangement and control of values in such a manner that the average man will be impressed, not so much with the pictures and subject matter itself, but by the way the subject is handled." The distinction between 'creating a picture' and the now more common 'shoot a picture' is instructive, as it positions Pictorialists as creators and interventionists, not unlike today's users of PhotoShop.

We know Cox's photographs were carefully composed, in part owing to his interest in the principles of 'dynamic symmetry' proposed by Jay Hambidge. Cox wrote a book on 'dynamic symmetry' as well, the manuscript of which is seen here in the display case. *Dynamic Symmetry* posits, among other things, that the Golden Ratio can aid artists in making good pictures as well as telling viewers, after the fact, why certain pictures seem to 'work' and others not. Pictorialists, including Cox, used these principles as a means to an end and as a means to analyze ends – in both cases the 'end' was the pursuit of the idea of 'traditional beauty'. That pursuit may, in retrospect, be said to have been overshadowed by Modernist photography in the 1920s and 30s, but the mathematical basis of Cox's compositions gives them partial Modernist credentials even though his subjects were often more Symbolist than Modernist. Cox's pictures are certainly an extension of prior practice, and they could be said to rely on ideas that Alfred Stieglitz promoted in *Camera Work* in the early 20th century. Cox's graduated tonality and partial fuzziness are the same as Steiglitz's and Edward Steichen's from the period around 1910. In Pictorialism the dialogue between truth and beauty found an open-ended forum through which the exploration of photography as both recording device and as 'means of expression through image manipulation' found an outlet. In Cox's work we see the mood and setting of a prelapsarian world of his imagination.

The photographs in this exhibition span the period from 1925 to 1942 and are drawn from a pool of about 1000 vintage prints owned by Cox's descendants. Many other Cox images, including industrial scenes such as the construction of the Patullo Bridge photographed from the aerial view of the ironworkers, exist only as negatives (mainly 2.25" X 3.25") with no corresponding prints.

Cox worked within parameters formed by previous generations. Within those parameters he is probably the best practitioner that Vancouver has ever known. He was an 'amateur', with full-time work in another field; the same relation to 'the job' as his contemporaries William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot; amateurs both, by virtue of having a day job. Cox was not unusual in this among Pictorialists; Max Thorek in Chicago was a doctor who founded a hospital bearing his name, Charles Archer worked for the Carnegie Steel Company in Pittsburgh, A.D. Chaffee was a doctor in New York City and Cecil Atwater an office manager for the Liberty Mutual Life Insurance Company in Boston.

The question of whether Cox's images have a link to Romanticism depends of whether Romanticism can be said to have its origins in a rejection of science and the objectivity that science supposedly brings with it. Cox's table-top tableaux, utilizing tiny porcelain figurines, follow similar work by other Pictorialists and prefigure the table-top work of the Post Modern era. His nudes, exhibited freely in the 1930s, may cause us to wonder about his motives, but his entire approach to the nude follows a path laid down some twenty years earlier by Anne Brigman in California. In the introduction to 'his' *Dynamic Symmetry* Cox reveals an early sensitivity to gender issues: "the reader will meet with what may appear to *him or her* an intricate....". One has to wonder how common such a formulation was in the late 1920s. Cox's book was about what he called "the Greek Art Principle" and it is our hope that part of the manuscript will be published in the planned book on this exhibition. Cox's life on the Fraser River seventy years ago provides a window on some forgotten aspects of B.C.'s past, perhaps revealing that Greater Vancouver was a much more cosmopolitan place in the 1920s & 1930s than it became in the decades immediately after the Second World War.

Bill Jeffries

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