

# Family of Man



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*Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.*

The town of Clervaux, a small village in northern Luxembourg, has a population of just over 1,300. It does not really have much to offer tourists, yet my wife and I made our way there one spring day last year. The reason for our visit was to look at some photographs.

Edward Steichen, a prominent American photographer from Luxembourg who became the Director of the Department of Photography in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) after WWII, had taken great effort to assemble a collection of 503 photographs by 273 photographers from 68 countries.

The collection was divided into 37 themes, centred on love and faith in man, depicting birth, children, family, education, work, sports, war, peace and death. The photographs were first revealed in an exhibition titled "Family of Man" for 3½ months in early 1955. The response was so overwhelming that the exhibition soon embarked on a world tour, covering 37 countries in 6 continents over a period of 8 years and attracting over 9 million viewers.

That happened more than half a century ago.

In 1962, Steichen retired from MoMA at the age of 83. He later moved back to his country of birth and died in 1973 at the ripe old age of 94. In accordance with his wish, MoMA donated the Family of Man collection to Luxembourg. After they were touched up and restored by experts in Paris, the photographs, all original silver gelatine prints on baryta-based paper, began a new lease of life as a permanent exhibition in Clervaux Castle in 1994.



Admission to the exhibition was €4 each and we spent some 3 hours going through the photographs in sequence. The presentation follows quite closely the layout of the original exhibition in MoMA and visitors are expected to view the exhibits as a photo-essay on human development and cycles of life. A poetic commentary accompanies the exhibition. It was written by Steichen's brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1951.

Clervaux Castle was badly damaged at the end of the World War II during the German offensive in December 1944, known as Battle of the Bulge. It was subsequently restored and now it also houses the Battle of the Bulge Museum.

With the conservation of cultural heritage for posterity as part of its responsibilities, UNESCO added the Family of Man collection to its

Memory of the World Register in 2003. The Memory of the World Register was created in 1995 by a 14-member International Advisory Committee under the auspices of UNESCO to preserve and promote documentary heritage. This can be a single document, a collection, a holding or an archival fonds which is deemed to be of such significance as to transcend the boundaries of time and culture. The first batch of 38 documents was inscribed on the Register two year later.

That was my first acquaintance with the Memory of the World Register. Browsing through the pages of a copy of the Register in the museum, I was very pleased to see 4 items from our country on the list: *Batu Bersurat of Terengganu*, *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and *Correspondence of the Late Sultan of Kedah (1882-1943)*. ■