

# Seeing Yourself Through Place and Time: Bringing History Alive with Graduating Class Composites

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My favourite primary source at Kitsilano Secondary School is the familiar and omnipresent feature of most high schools: the framed composite photographs of each graduating class going back to the building's beginnings. These documentations of the students who walked the halls and filled the classrooms from bygone eras stare down from the walls of the bustling corridors, reminding current students how much things have changed and yet stayed the same through the decades. They are rich evidence of the cultural and ethnic make-up of the community. They show what hair styles and clothing were chosen to reflect each person, making us wonder about their beliefs, priorities and attitudes. In a century before social media, the photos reveal the common desire of each student to project a carefully constructed version of themselves.



Figure 1. 1944 graduating class composite.

At Kits, the composites were hung chronologically side-by-side until they went into deep storage when the new school was built. It was fascinating to walk down the long halls, observing the demographic changes. The British and Irish names of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were punctuated by numerous Japanese students whose presence in the photos vanished for a decade after 1941 and Pearl Harbour. The Greek students increased in number, becoming the most identifiable group in the school up until the end of the 1960s when the community followed the relocation of their church outside the catchment area. The size of the grad classes even generates student curiosity. How could a school with a population of 2200 in 1960 fall to 900 in 1988, then build again to 1500 in 2020?

The composites were works of art in their own right. Their design and composition speak to the era to which were made. The geometry and clean lines of the early century 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art Deco movement is evident in the stylization of the Kitsilano logo and the Futura typeface announcing the school name, year and graduation – or matriculation class – in the decades prior to the Second World War. Cues were taken from the popular Bauhaus sensibilities and international style of the era. After the war, societal taste for high modernism was reflected in the composites. As recently as the end of the 1980s the name of every graduate was hand lettered, complete with the faint trace of the artist's pencil guidelines visible. The advent of computer and reproduction technologies in the 1990s produced a slicker, magazine-like product but their content retained the stamp of their time.

I have used the composites in combination with other primary sources in the school and online with my students to study the Second World War. In 2015, I developed a mobile interactive story called *Dilemma 1944* where students traveled back in time in the role of a graduating Kitsilano student who is choosing whether or not to join Canadian servicemen and women overseas in Europe and Asia.<sup>79</sup> They used their phones to walk around the school, triggering media like photos, newspaper articles, newsreels and fictitious conversations, all of which they considered in making their decision. At the end of the activity, they came inside the school to discover that the characters with whom they had interacted were real students who went to the school. They found them on the grad composites where their dilemma became real. In the final stage, they went to the bronze plaque in the front hall where all former students who were killed in the war were displayed. There, they discovered who survived and who did not. It is a very powerful learning experience. Seeing those former students' faces on the composites with their anticipation of life and hope for their future was an emotional tipping point for the present-day students and finding out that some of them died was very hard.

In 2018, Kitsilano celebrated its 100-year anniversary. In preparation for this "Centennial Celebration", my Grade 10 students conducted an inquiry project called "Kits Fallen." Each student was responsible for choosing an alumnus soldier commemorated on the bronze war board, finding them on their class composite, then answer the question, "Who was this fallen soldier who went to Kitsilano?" They researched online databases from Library and Archives Canada and sites such as the Memory Project in combination with artifacts from the school archives. One of the most impactful sources was a four-volume scrapbook compiled by the school librarian during the war years who went through the local papers every day and clipped articles of training, deployment, recognition, and death of the former students fighting overseas. It is a unique and captivating record, arranged chronologically by week, month and year.

The graduate class composites are the common source within these projects where students connect most directly to Kits students from prior decades. The combination of the research and storytelling, as virtual character, recipient, or narrator is brought to life through these picture treasures. It is rewarding to hear students say that their awareness and consideration of the composites has changed from inert wall covering to a rich resource. Some have shared that they used to pass under the composites day after day without paying much attention to them but seeing them within different historical contexts transformed them into something embedded with meaningful connections to the past. In the process, they see themselves through place and time.

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<sup>79</sup> "Shifting Connections: Safety, Security and Sacrifice in a Changing World," Craig Brumwell, <https://www.canadahistory.ca/education/lesson-plans/shifting-connections-safety-security-and-sacrifice-in-a-changing-world>