

# TWO MASTER CARVERS OF ANCIENT QUEBEC

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IT is usually assumed nowadays that wealth must precede art, or that art is the first-born of luxury. A people without riches perforce dispenses with aesthetics, and genius is smothered when it is not nursed in milk and honey. Once wealth has been amassed, business patrons endow art galleries, opera houses and schools of fine arts. Nothing is overlooked, since money can buy everything. State, museum and university buildings rise out of the ground. They are the replicas, much enlarged of course, of every monument of architecture from the Parthenon to Georgian mansions. This is art as we now understand it in our practical way—art subsidized, or bought and paid for.

We may not all realize that this conception of art is modern, and quite different from that which prevailed in Europe before the early emigrants to America sailed across the seas and settled in the New World. It leaves out an essential, without which creative arts cannot have vitality and grow into the fibre of national life. Certainly it was foreign to the French colonists at the time when they established New France on the shores of the St. Lawrence, over three hundred years ago. To them art was part of life, no less essential to the soul than bread is to the body. They followed in this the traditions that had thrived in the motherland from the days of Gothic art to those of the Renaissance.

Essentials only, it seems, should have been thought of at that stage. Bare existence first of all had to be made secure. Wealth was lacking, and there could be no thought of leisure. Fine arts were out of place, from our modern standpoint. Not so in those days of the Renaissance. The belief that beauty and pleasure are necessary ingredients of life was still prevalent. Mgr. de Laval's plea at the French Court, where he sought financial assistance, was that churches once built should be embellished. Craftsmen were required for useful pursuits, no less than masters whose talent would implant abroad the traditions of their guild. New France, to thrive, must be a fit place where to live and worship, like the motherland. Its mission was to evangelize the natives and spread culture among them, that they may be better subjects

of the King. Schools must be established and training insure the continuity of manual skill and the growth of local talent. In this he won the support of patrons at the French court and elsewhere, and secured the services of craftsmen and masters, nearly thirty of them, the best he could get in Paris and Bordeaux. His school received the new recruits in 1675 and the years that followed. From that moment architecture and wood-carving—these two callings were still one—enjoyed public favour. Churches, chapels and public buildings had to be erected and decorated in the Renaissance style throughout New France.

The first master-carvers of that school belonged to the Francois I period, and were southern rather than northern in their traditionalism. Leblond de Latour, the leading master of the Cap Tourmente school of Quebec, had been engaged at Bordeaux, in southern France, by Mgr. de Laval, to help in implanting into New France the best traditions of the homeland. And the French Renaissance in those early days of the Medicis, while retaining earlier Gothic features, was closely linked with the Italian Renaissance. Michel Angelo was one of the outstanding masters of that period, whose influence was felt in France, and Leonardo died in the very castle of Francois I at Amboise. Masters and apprentices in New France handed down, chain-like, through the centuries, the early traditions of art transplanted to the New World by Mgr. de Laval. This tradition was so firmly established on Canadian soil that it survived almost to the present day. Two of its best master-carvers—Côté and Jobin—belong to the end of the nineteenth century; indeed, Jobin belongs partly to our century, as he died in 1928 at the age of eighty-four, at Ste. Anne de Beaupré.

Jean-Baptiste Côté distinctly belonged to the traditional Quebec school of wood carving. His artistic filiation can be traced back from apprentice to master almost indefinitely. Many of his carvings are still preserved, but most of them are lost. He seldom signed his work, a craftsman being one of many unnamed "companions" in a studio or a workshop. His general education was of a high order. He had studied classics at the Seminary of Quebec and had become an architect. But the lack of opportunities had forced him to fall back upon simple craftsmanship, wood carving. His individuality and achievements can be understood only in the light of his training and heredity. His earliest work was that of a figure-head carver for the sailing ships that were built in large numbers on the St. Charles river, near Quebec. When the days of the sailing ship were over, he was heard to say, "*Je suis un homme fini* (It's all over with me!)"

But it was not. Côté's resources and talent were varied. He had received his training as an apprentice, under the best master in town—Berlinguet, a distinguished architect, wood carver and engineer, who in turn inherited the traditions of the Baillairgés. Out of a job, he began to carve religious subjects in high relief, also statues of saints for churches, in the old traditional style. But the tradition, in the course of two centuries of independent growth, had developed a marked individuality in the New World, from which Côté benefited.

Humble and poor though he remained all his life, he was an artist of unusual gifts and inspiration, one of the best of the old school as well as one of the last—with Louis Jobin who survived him. His compositions are varied, from figure-heads for sailing ships and signboards to statues of saints for churches, high and low reliefs mostly on religious subjects for churches. He was also fond of carving animals; cows, dogs and birds sometimes in landscapes; and for that reason was known to some as an "animalier"—a carver of animals.

His sincerity and inspiration led him on to themes which he interpreted with mastery and feeling. Even when he borrowed his subject from tradition or otherwise, he vitalized it almost beyond recognition. His aged daughter says of him: "He did not like to carve the figure of Christ for it was that of suffering (*c'était peindre la douleur*). When he carved the Holy Family—three figures—it made him cry, 'How to represent well such saints!' He did not always finish his work. . . . He started with great excitement (*à la vapeur*), and sometimes lost interest in it". Or again "My father was unfortunate (*misérable*). He did not want to work for money, but only to please himself (*pour se satisfaire*)."

*The Last Supper* is one of his best wood carvings; it is about three feet wide. It is known under three different treatments, one of which is now preserved at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; another at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; and the third recently acquired for Hon. Vincent Massey, of Port Hope, Ontario.

Côté's sense of observation and criticism was acute. It made him restless. For an outlet once he founded a small periodical which he called *La Scie* (The Saw), which appeared for fifteen months. He used to stand in front of the basilica, on Sundays after Mass, observe the people—particularly the Tall Hats—and describe them humorously in *La Scie*. But his daughter remembers that "He once went too far with his pen (*Il avait été trop loin avec sa plume*)." It caused him much trouble: he was arrested for

libel. So he came back to his mallet and chisel. And when he died, he was a poor man, who did not even know that he had been a fine artist—one of the last craftsmen of the French Renaissance—on the American soil.

The last outstanding craftsman of the Old Quebec school was Louis Jobin, carver of the Beaupré coast. The significance of Louis Jobin and his career as a wood carver somehow extends beyond himself; he belonged to a past age that still survived with him on the threshold of our century. For this alone he challenges our attention. He may also be found worthy in the light of his own accomplishments. His finest work, still under study and largely unexplored, seems to rank high in pure sculpture.

The only three years I knew Jobin were those that closed his laborious life, between 1925 and 1928. I had heard of the old carver of saints of the Beaupré coast; strangers—writers and photographers—used to go and see him in his little shop, and to publish stories about him. One of them wrote a novel entitled "The Wood carver's Wife"—was it about him? His calling was unusual and picturesque. He seemed bodily to have been transplanted from a medieval town of Normandy to a French village of Quebec where the miracles still happen under the banner of Sainte Anne. The whole picture was reminiscent of the old world; miracles, relics and saints, and the aged craftsman plying his art in the shadow of a cathedral.

My first visit to him, in 1925, was like a pilgrimage; other pilgrims with me were Jackson and Lismer, two leading painters of the Group of Seven. They had joined me at Ile d'Orléans, opposite Ste. Anne, where I was studying ancient songs and handicrafts for the National Museum. We thought it would be interesting to go over to Ste. Anne and look at an old wood carver in the ancient style. As we approached across the greenish tide waters, we could see the huge new church there, perhaps the largest in Canada. I remembered having come there with a parish pilgrimage in my childhood. There remained in my memory faint impressions of a fountain with green waters under a tree and many statues of angels and saints. Jackson, Lismer and I indeed saw the fountain under a weeping willow, green as an emerald, and wondered at the numerous wooden statues all around. Were they all from the hand of Jobin? We could not tell, for they were not signed. Why not go straight to his shop? We could learn it at first hand.

In this little town that thrives on the belief in miracles, it seems as if Jobin himself must be a mystic, a visionary. We sought his little workshop where we were directed, down a narrow winding

street. Small and poor, it sat at the top of an elevation. Two statuettes of apostles stood on the gable, in the full light of mid-day; they were splendid, if weather beaten. They faced the eastern winds that had brought the early sailors up the St. Lawrence, also the many storms of the Atlantic seaboard.

Was M. Jobin still there? We wondered. We knew that he was eighty-two and, at that age, one never is quite sure. Yes he was. Still working? For an answer we were led downstairs to his studio, the wide door of which opened on to the declivity of a small court. An old man with a fine head and stately presence stopped working at a large log and greeted us inquisitively. His assistant, axe in hand too, stood in the background. They wondered who we were, what we wanted, for they often received strangers looking for wooden statues or something. All visitors were welcome; some of them occasionally became their customers. Ste. Anne was the right centre for Jobin's craft; that is why he had moved here from Quebec years ago. Parish priests and other religious persons came here on pilgrimage with their flock, some of them from as far as Florida and Louisiana, and they needed patronymic saints for the churches. And he was ready to meet the demand, chisel and mallet in hand, whatever the saints, on the calendar or not.

But we were not the ordinary kind of visitors; there were two artist painters from Toronto; they were curious to know what his statues looked like; the third was a museum man, who wanted to find out all sorts of unusual things; with whom he had his training, whether he carved from nature, and what not. Was he too busy to have a chat with us?

No, he was quite willing to sit down for a while at his age, for he was tired. He smiled at us, and showed us his swollen ankles. It was hard on him to stand all day, wielding a swift axe to rough-hew large statues, then working into them with chisel and mallet. And he had to stick to it all day to keep the wolf from the door. Prices were low, the wood was costly, and his son-in-law, his assistant, had a large family to support.

"Look at this!" exclaimed Jackson, who was exploring the workshop and its surroundings. We went out to see a statue he admired. It was a cherub singing to the heavens while holding a lyra in his hands. The face was inspired and angelic, the attitude was singularly free, and the drapery of the robe, classic and gracefully flowing. "A fine piece of work!" Jackson commented, and Lismer heartily concurred. "He is not a mere craftsman, but an artist." So we agreed, with surprise and admiration.

Would he sell that statue to an art gallery? We wondered. Surely he would; somehow it had failed to satisfy a customer and was thrown out, in disgrace. For some years it had stood under the eaves, playing its aerial melodies to the winds and the tides of the St. Lawrence. It was a bit battered, but still beaming with heavenliness. We hesitated to ask for the price. He spoke and understood only French; we discussed an offer in English. One of us said, "He would give it almost for nothing, since he considers it of no value!"—"That's it", insisted Jackson, smiling with cunning, "If those trustees should be asked to pay only a few dollars, they would think nothing of the angel. Find out whether he will take seventy-five!"—"Seventy-five for an angel thrown out of paradise!" He laughed and found it very funny. So it was agreed that he would pack the angel and send it to a new home, away from the rain under the eaves. It now graces the arch of a hallway in the finest court of sculpture in Canada.

Jobin was not a mere "ouvrier" (a workman) as he called himself, but an artist, a great artist. This we realized as we inspected a number of statues still unsold, and a number of sketches lying about in his shop. I told him what we thought of his work. He was gratified in his great humility. It was almost time he should hear of it, for he had come near the end of his long journey. Before the close of that season, I purchased many of his things for art galleries and museums; last of all, the two apostles, Saint Mark and Saint John, that stood on his front gable. I wanted to know where the two others had gone. He could not tell. Someone had passed in his automobile, had noticed them and bought two. The last two were taken down for me, and the son-in-law closed the front door of the shop, saying, "He has worked long enough"! He died two years later.