

QUEBEC WOOD CARVERS

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ONE often wonders at the requisites for the growth of art among a people. But it is not easy to discover them in operation: the independent evolution of collective art in odd parts of the world has come to a stop, and given way to centralization. Yet can we not, somehow, grasp the cause for individual incentive to creation? Is it isolation alone, is it the stimulus of tradition, or is it prosperity and patronage? In other words, is art a spontaneous effervescence, derivative or otherwise, or is it born out of wealth and leisure?

An illustration of such growth and its incentives can be found on the North American continent; I mean the remarkable school of wood carvers of Quebec, between the years 1780 and 1850. Little was known of it until recently, except in so far as fine wooden decorations and statues can be observed in a few old churches and chapels, and old-fashioned yet graceful furniture is found in private houses and the shops of curio dealers. But abundant records have been unearthed of late; much wood work has been studied and measured; and a great deal of light has been shed upon an intensive growth of decorative art. It is easy now to understand the unique circumstances that prepared the ground for it, led it to full fruition, and then hastened its downfall.

The Quebec School of wood carving and architecture, in short, has sprung out of an early colonial tradition, that of the French Renaissance, well rooted on the shores of the Saint Lawrence. But tradition was not all. Its chief merit lies in its powers of adaptation. Unawares, its numerous masters and craftsmen found themselves, soon after the Conquest of New France by Great Britain, in surroundings wholly favourable to initiative and originality. Dictates of fashion from the motherland being removed, the workers were left to their own resources. The need for their services was intensified by the devastation wrought by the war, the subsequent return of good times, and the wide-spread demand for larger churches and finer decoration in the new styles.

Old French ways still survived among the people themselves, in their isolation. Churches must be decorated and embellished. They were the centre of communal activities. They must be worthy places of worship. Nothing was spared to make them beautiful.

Not that the parish corporations were well-to-do; far from that! They mortgaged the future to pay the craftsmen on the instalment plan and often in kind, but always met their obligations. Art was an essential, as in mediaeval times, not a mere luxury, as it has now become in modern life. Hence its vitality, at a time when most of America was still a wilderness.

A business letter written in 1816 by the carver-architect François Baillargé will acquaint us with his school of craftsmen and their dealings with a typical rural community in the Laurentians, that of Baie-Saint-Paul, sixty miles northeast of the town of Quebec. It is here translated from the French:

Dear Sir: I should have answered your letter earlier, but I have been very busy starting work for the church of Saint-Joachim, which is not an ordinary thing. My son (Thomas) and myself have given it all our solicitude: as much for the proportions as for the style of architecture, which are quite novel, particularly in the reredos around the high altar. We are deeply attached to this enterprise, since we want to justify the confidence of the clergy and its distinguished chief in ourselves, as well as of the parish priest.

Your contract came upon us at a time of crisis when we could not give it all the consideration it deserved. We have since been able to take the work in hand, and it is now in progress abreast with the other. But I need your indulgence as to time. We intend to invest all our ability upon this piece of craftsmanship, which must be as perfect as we can make it. For this reason, it could not be delivered to you before the opening of navigation next year. . . .

What keeps us from going as fast as we might wish to is that our work consists of wood carvings in a decorative style at once rich, classic and natural (*sculpture riche, savante et naturelle*). We have to finish it ourselves. With us, myself and my son Thomas, we have my nephew (Flavien), who has a very fine hand for the finishing touches and who helps along. But he is not very fond of his job and often takes leave.

If other contractors for church embellishment proceed faster than we do, it is due to the simplicity of their designs and the low relief of their chisel work, towards which they employ more hands than we can, in our studio. . . .

This old Baillargé letter will lead us to the scattered elements of art incentive and growth we are now looking for.

Who was Baillargé, whose first name was François? The head of a family of hereditary craftsmen, whose shop was located in lower town, Quebec; also, an architect, and artist of talent and originality, whose choir reredos, altars, statues and carvings still deserve praise and admiration. His personal skill was founded upon both *tradition* and *schooling*.

On tradition: His father Jean, from whom he inherited his calling, was an architect, who had been brought from Tours, on the Loire River, to Quebec, in 1741, during the French *regime*. Jean's own father in France was an architect. Architecture was hereditary among the Baillargés. So it has remained since, on both sides of the Atlantic.

On schooling: Born in Quebec in 1759 (the year of the Conquest), he went to various local schools, and at fourteen he began to work as a joiner and carver. He studied architecture, the French Renaissance, under his father, Jean, and wood carving under Antoine Jacson, his father's partner (*compagnon*). At seventeen, he was learning drawing from Maître Nicol, a Swiss engineer, then also his father's partner; and later he added mathematics to his studies. His father must have been satisfied with his talent and progress, for he sent him to France at the age of twenty to complete his training.

For three years in Paris, from 1778, François studied: sculpture and painting at the *Academie royale*; historical painting, and anatomy, under some of the best masters of the day. And in March, 1781, he travelled to London, where he stayed a month, and sailed back home to Quebec.

The first Canadian artist—and perhaps American as well—to complete his training abroad, he brought back with him a wider perspective of culture than his predecessors enjoyed, and a greater technical skill. His knowledge of contemporary French art of the last decades of the kingdom enabled him to instil new life into the century-old tradition of New France that showed signs of fatigue.

François Baillargé's first enterprise when he became a full-fledged architect and master-carver was that of the Saint-Joachim church, on the Beaupré coast. It kept him busy for several years. His fine work there—particularly the beautiful medallions illustrating the Scriptures—survived almost intact to the present day. With his father Jean, his brother Florent, and later, his son Thomas, he erected several large buildings and worked at the decoration of many churches and chapels, in the course of many years, notably the Quebec basilica, recently destroyed by fire.

He was right when he said in his letter that his decoration was rich, classic and natural. For that reason, he and his son Thomas had to finish it with their own hands, rather than leave it to their companions and apprentices. Their work was natural. By this François meant that he was not satisfied with the conventions of the old Canadian school alone as practised by several generations of LeVasseurs, of Labrosses, and others. His preferences in decor-

ation were for high and low reliefs from live models and themes derived from nature itself. His figure work was vigorous and vital, and his floral adornments on panels were deep, sensitive and graceful. The flora of Canadian gardens found its way on to the panels of altars and choir reredos.

The local tradition which he revived and enriched spread to many other craftsmen; it was handed down to wood carvers no less skilful: Thomas, his son, the leading architect and carver of his day in Canada; André Paquet, Berlinguet, Vallière and many others, whose work is still profusely represented along the shores of the Saint Lawrence. Those craftsmen in turn formed in their shops many apprentices. Their tradition has survived in chain-like fashion to the present day.

François Baillargé and his fellow workers could not have thrived in their profession without widespread support and appreciation. Their art was considered not a luxury, but a public utility. Churches must be richly decorated. In this the people were of one opinion with the clergy, those of Baie-Saint-Paul like the others. They vied with their neighbours in emulation; and they were not devoid of knowledge and appreciation. Baillargé took this for granted when he wrote: "We intend to invest all our ability upon this piece of craftsmanship, which must be as perfect as we can make it." Or again: "We want to justify the confidence of the clergy and its distinguished chief in ourselves, as well as of the parish priest."

He and his associates were not mere joiners and wood carvers, but conscientious artists, blazing the trail, inventing new forms and improving their designs as fresh inspiration prompted. Most of them served their public with great fondness, which was reciprocated. Their reward was greater popularity and more contracts; and their lives were the busiest in those days. More of the public funds were spent on them than on any other business private or public.

The quality of an artist's *chefs d'oeuvre*, as they were called, was not lost on his customers, and Baillargé knew it. The Baie-Saint-Paul people were not behind the others, as a glance upon their antecedents will show. Two of their parish priests before the time of Baillargé were outstanding craftsmen themselves, and they had left their mark upon the traditions of the place—which was part of the *seigneurie* of the Seminary of Quebec, the earliest school of learning and craftsmanship in America.

The first of these priests was Leblond de Latour, and the second, Antoine Créquy: the first, once a master carver; and the second, a painter.

Leblond de Latour was an outstanding French artist, engaged as early as 1690 by Mgr. de Laval, the first Bishop of Quebec, to direct his school of arts and crafts at Cap-Tourmente, north-east of Quebec. After decorating several of the early churches and chapels in the colony, he went into orders and became parish priest at Baie-Saint-Paul, where he died in 1715. More than any other he contributed to the establishment in New France of the French tradition in architecture. He was an excellent wood carver, as we know from documents and samples of his work still preserved. Born and trained at Bordeaux, in southern France, he belonged to the Bourguignon school, and the style of decoration he helped to implant in the colony was of the early French Renaissance. From him the parishioners of Baie-Saint-Paul must have acquired a respect for art and a taste for culture.

This was developed later, after the conquest, by another parish priest, M. Créquy, who was a painter of religious pictures by avocation. A number of his large *tableaux* are still preserved in the churches of eastern Quebec, and we read of him, in the parish records: "He was not naturally robust and his assiduity in painting undermined his health."

The population and resources of French Canada no sooner began to expand after the Conquest than the need for larger and finer churches everywhere became insistent. Craftsmen grew more numerous and skilful under constant practice while reconstructing the churches that had been burned or ravaged during the siege. New fashions in architecture developed out of what was sheer necessity. The basilica of Quebec, rebuilt mostly by the Baillargés, father and sons, set up new standards. Yet other architects and decorators proceeded in their work independently. Pierre Emond, for one, carved the reredos and altars on the Briand chapel in his own remarkable way, decorating several chapels and altars in beautiful style, partly Corinthian and partly naturalistic.

A race for reconstruction was on in the old parishes of Quebec far and wide. Rivalry once before had developed between towns as to which would excel the others in the building of fine Gothic temples. Just so once again in a humbler way in Quebec. The parishes vied with each other in the embellishment of their churches. Architects and craftsmen, numerous though they became under stress, hardly sufficed to meet the requirements. Baillagré refers to this shortage when he speaks of "a time of crisis;" the crisis to him was caused by a demand greater than the supply. He was forced to plead for indulgence "as to time;" not as to quality, though, for he insists that it "must be as perfect as one can make it."

Baie-Saint-Paul also was in the running. Its second church had been erected in 1753. It was under fire, during the invasion by the British troops, in 1759. Fifty years later, it was no longer thought large or fine enough. A new choir was built, and a transept in the form of two chapels. The Baillargés—François, *pere*, and Thomas his son—were summoned forth, in 1811. In spite of other calls upon their time, they furnished a handsome plan for a choir reredos—a plan which is still preserved in the parish archives. It was beautifully executed a few years later.

The parishioners and workers so far had collaborated for the success of a common enterprise. The parties were mutually indispensable. One could not exist without the other. And when the structure was completed, in 1827, the authorities stepped in, to conclude the affair. The Bishop of Quebec asked his delegate to inspect the church, and later sent his congratulations: "M. Demers has examined the work, and he has come back satisfied." As a proof of his appreciation he presented £25 to the church, for which he received warm thanks.

The collaboration among common people, the craftsmen, and the diocesan authorities is what made the growth of architecture in Quebec possible. It brought this art to a high point of perfection, and would have continued indefinitely along the same path, without another factor that now confronts us: *interference from outside*. And interference here produced the same results as it does in other fields of art at large.

Interference first appeared under the form of competition. Resented though it was at times, it only spurred ambition and talent on to new efforts. It was stimulating. Baillargé touched lightly upon this when he wrote to his Baie-Saint-Paul customers: "If other contractors for church embellishment proceed faster than we do, it is due to the simplicity of their designs and the low relief of their chisel work, towards which they employ more hands than we can, in our studio." To whom does he allude? Abbé Jerome Demers, teacher of architecture and controller of churches for the bishop, makes this point clear, in his course of architecture, which is still preserved in manuscript. He wrote:

Those worthy Pastors deserve much praise. For many years they have shown great zeal for the decoration and embellishment of their churches. But they are not always given free rein in the choice of craftsmen and their work. Second-rate architects there are, alas, who ignore the essentials of each order and their inter-relations, yet force their way into the field. They organize a body of partisans in their favour wherever there is a church to build or decorate, then they submit plans for choir reredos,

cornices and vaulted ceilings. The parish wardens are called upon to examine and discuss them. Each of them proffers his opinion as to the neighbouring churches he has visited. A few changes in the plan are suggested. Then a contract is signed for the work at a reduced price, often against the wish of the parish priest, whose views are lightly dismissed (*souvent contre l'avis du pauvre cure dont on prend plaisir a fronder l'opinion, dans cette sorte d'assemblies*)

Both Abbé Demers and Baillargé had in mind what they dubbed with the term *quevillonnage*. It was their bogy, and they were honest about it. Quevillon, the head of the Ile-Jésus school (near Montreal), and his followers invaded the preserves of the Quebec craftsmen and competed with them. Hence the rivalry between them, from the conflict of interests, which is reflected in Abbé Demers' censure of bad taste in decoration. Yet the Quevillon school had skilful masters, produced beautiful work in the Louis XV style, formed a large number of apprentices in a regular school organized in the manner of a guild of art, and decorated many churches on the Saint Lawrence, mostly above Quebec.

The rivalry between the two Canadian groups (Quebec and Montreal) of the early nineteenth century is illustrated in an amusing episode, at Sainte-Famille, Ile d'Orléans, in 1812.

Quevillon and some of his companions for some years had quietly practised their art in the neighborhood of the town of Quebec, but on the south shore, opposite. One of his former apprentices, David, decorated the church of Saint-Jean (Ile d'Orléans). His brand new carvings were seen by some leading parishioners and Sainte-Famille, across the island, who liked them. David was still there, looking for a new job. So he was given the contract for a new ceiling, caisson style, in the church of Sainte-Famille. The older decoration of the LeVasseurs was scrapped. The work was under way when curé Gagnon journeyed to Quebec, and discovered his mistake; unawares he had committed his parish to a ceiling in deplorable rococo! David was naught but a former apprentice of Quevillon! The abbé's red blood began to rise.

He went back home and, the next Sunday, flayed his wood carver from the heights of the pulpit. But the parishioners, stubborn like Normans, would not change their mind. Rococo or no rococo, they wanted the caisson ceiling and so informed the bishop, in a petition, of their belief in contracts. They won their point. The ceiling was completed and still subsists. It is in the Quevillon manner (Louis XV). But the reredos supporting it is from the Baillargé workshop, in fine Corinthian and floral wooden appliqués.

The stylistic variations in the decorative work of the schools and individuals in old French Canada are a most appealing feature. If the Baillargés and Quevillons differed, the difference was not fundamental. The craftsmen often met on common grounds, and the quality of their treatment was on a par.

The Baillargés adhered by tradition and by preference to the early forms of the French Renaissance in their purity; they studied Greco-Roman art, particularly the five classic orders of architecture. They knew the printed works of their day—Vignole (1573) and Blondel, and also consulted such English and American treatises as were available—Gibbs (1739), and others. They absorbed the mixed elements that came to their knowledge and blended them into a whole, which is refined and distinctive in itself—a thing quite apart, of French Canada. Their own personality was not swayed aside by any individual influence. It kept on growing according to its own laws, adapting itself to new surroundings, those of the New World. Its growth was so vital that it survived intact till the middle of the last century, long after the Renaissance had given way to revivals in other lands: the neo-Gothic, neo-classic and so forth.

The Quevillon craftsmen of Ile-Jésus did not differ materially in this respect from those of Quebec, except in so far as their decoration was, in a way, more modern. They preferred the Louis XV style to the earlier Renaissance, which was a matter of taste and fashion.

As long as both rival schools vied with each other, their craft thrived and flourished. Competition brought them no real harm. Under its stimulus, architecture and decorative arts reached the apogee. But pitfalls were in the way. I mean, *subtle interference from abroad*, and, *within, the loss of self-confidence*. A set of circumstances caused the almost sudden collapse of an art that seemed firmly entrenched along the Saint Lawrence and capable of weathering storms worse than the Conquest itself.

Abbé Demers, in spite of his love for the classics, let the door be opened to an ugly substitute that soon threatened to invade the whole field. He allowed Regali, an Italian and a new-comer, to paste his plaster mouldings to the ceilings of the Basilica, while Thomas Baillargé still was pegging his wood carvings to its massive walls. One thing would kill the other. Plaster had many points in its favour. Its decorative designs were executed much faster, being stereotyped; and they were cheaper. Even their dead smoothness appealed to the average man, under the guise of novelty. Speed was progress; the machine was a worthy substitute for the

hand in toil. One thing was left out—art and the spirit. But no one seems to have noticed it, until the carvers lost their jobs, and Berlinguet, the later leader of the Quebec group, forsook his shop and apprentices, about 1860, and built one of the earliest railroads in Quebec.

Plaster in the place of wood, in the modern Italian style of Regali: that was the first blow from outside.

Another blow shattered the backbone of the Renaissance itself. The old cathedral of Notre-Dame of Montreal dated back to 1672. In the course of time, it had grown into a fine structure, worthy of respect and admiration.

La Hontan, a French visitor in the early days, wrote of it: "That church is nothing less than superb." Its tabernacle was rich and valuable. The Swedish naturalist, Peter D. Kalm, in 1749, declared that it was the most beautiful in New France. It was constantly improved and embellished by later craftsmen—Liébert, Dulongpré and Quevillon. It symbolized several chapters of early Canadian history. Why demolish it?

British strangers, too, admired it, though it was profusely decorated after the fashion of French Catholic temples—which on the whole was not likely to appeal to austere Puritans. Talbot said of its altar that it was one on which the pagan gods of Greece would not have been loath to receive immolations. Charles Dickens, who arrived in Montreal in time to see the last of it, in 1842, wrote: "In the open space (of Place d'Armes) stands a solitary, grim-looking, square tower, which has a quaint and remarkable appearance, and the wiseacres of the place have consequently determined to pull it down immediately."

How this change of heart had happened in Montreal is an illuminating story of human absurdity, but cannot be retold here in detail.

One of the "wiseacres" Dickens speaks of, a fur trader and church warden, had gone to New York and chanced there upon an Irish-American architect, named James O'Donnell, and trained in London, who had just finished a neo-Gothic church. O'Donnell improvised on the spot two sketches of a new cathedral for the fur trader, who showed them to his friends at home, and exhibited them at Doucet's. All of Montreal was delighted with the novelty, whatever its name.

O'Donnell signed the contract. His new church soon rose out of the ground, in spite of the protests of abbé Demers and other thoughtful traditionalists.

Deep-rooted habits of craftsmanship cannot be broken in a day. The local men whom O'Donnell employed often misunderstood him; at times they were almost rebellious, trained as they had been at another school. But no handicap could deter him. He would see the end of his enterprise, die if he must in the harness. He did die, of over-exertion, before the two heavy square towers crowned his work—Notre-Dame as we know it to-day.

Montreal stood at the centre of things. Its example was like a land-slide along the whole front. The barriers of heredity in handicrafts soon vanished. The French Renaissance from that time fell into discredit. The craftsmen were left to shift for themselves.

If some excellent woodcarvers of the old school, like Côté and Jobin, practised their art almost to the present day, it is in the form of a survival, after the ground, as it were, had been taken from under their feet.