

Saint-Laurent: Montreal's Main / Saint-Laurent, la Main de Montréal (April 17 to October 27, 2002) / (17 avril au 27 octobre 2002) Pointe-à-Callière, Musée d'archéologie et d'histoire de Montréal

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Exhibit Review

***Saint-Laurent: Montreal's Main /
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Commercial and residential streets fascinate me: the specific qualities of the street environment that reveal rich layers of meaning in people's lives, the rhythms attached to their movements, their social character and class structure. In Montreal, the current vestiges of working-class sociability and a sense of community, are rooted in the historical development of streets and suburbs. The unique circumstances encompassing their growth beg for a comparative analysis. Overall, this museum exhibition about Saint-Laurent fulfils expectations, particularly in the subtle ability to combine factual accuracy and popular delivery. Pierre Ancil and his collaborators are to be commended for their innovative displays and historical imagination, as well as for a superb video.

Following reflection on an evocative poem that captures the eclectic qualities of Saint-Laurent, the visitor encounters an overview tracing the origins and development of the street to the *chemin Saint-Laurent*. Various visual sources – including the street plan devised by Dollier de Casson in 1672, Louis Charland's original 1801 map, and an 1831 sketch by James Duncan – show the extension of the road from the walled town to the Faubourg Saint-Laurent. As part of a network of Montreal pay roads, a toll gate operated at the corner of Duluth Street to control access to Rivières-des-Prairies from 1840 to 1922. In-migration led to subsequent street expansion in the suburbs of Saint-Laurent, Saint-Jean-Baptiste and Saint-Louis-du-Mile-End by the late nineteenth century. In 1876, the Montreal-Saint-Jérôme railway line, which stretched as far as the northern edge of today's Plateau Mont-Royal district, provided transportation to the Laurentians via *le p'tit train du Nord*. Canadian Pacific Railway travel stretched westward to the British Columbia frontier by 1886. Constructed largely by Italian workers, the Mile End train station was then added.

State-of-the-art practices in museology enhance aesthetic dimensions and offer a reprieve from the scrutiny of written text. In a visual piece by a contemporary artist, lyrics from Leonard Cohen's song "Suzanne" are displayed in stencilled lettering encased in a black metal box. Informative panels document waves of ethnic and racial migration in the twentieth century as one moves toward a digital presentation positioned in the centre of the room. Finely crafted, "A Surrealistic Digital Opera in Three Acts" begins with an inverted T-formation of the two main commercial streets in late nineteenth-century Montreal (Notre-Dame and Saint-Laurent). Longitudinal lines representing additional streets are superimposed with rectangular street grid patterns and buildings. One is then transported through a sequence of graphic images of people who populate and frequent "the Main" by day and night: a Chinese businessman, a flamboyant pink-haired youth, a spectacled box-office attendant gazing through a peephole at Ex-Centris, fleeting customers in Schwartz's, a Portuguese couple, a leather-booted prostitute. The video is structu-

red with refrains or repeated segments and accompanying musical strands, conveying the vibrancy of everyday street life.

The core of the exhibition is divided into three main sections: Planète Saint-Laurent, Saint-Laurent inc. and Saint-Laurent by night. A series of vignettes of inhabitants at select addresses draws mostly from *Lovell's Montreal Directories* from 1880 to 1976. This methodology is comparable in some respects to the interactive heritage database of Old Montreal, *Le patrimoine du Vieux-Montréal en détail: Hall*, which draws from different evidence.¹ The use of objects culled from private collections is invaluable. Examples comprise a seal from Léonidas and Joseph-Octave Villeneuve's lumberyard established at the corner of Bellechasse in 1878; a staple structure created by Michael Rossy, a descendant of Lebanese pedlars who settled around Saint-Sauveur parish in Old Montreal in 1892; a cigar mould from Louis-Ovide Grothé's tobacco factory (1906–38); a colourful set of fine gloves acquired by Madame Lord, a brothel keeper on Ontario Street. In the concluding portion on 'The Artist's Main', the exhibition recognizes the important contributions of painters and designers such as Betty Goodwin and George Lévesque.

To my mind, the conception could have eliminated the repetition of identifying certain owners, occupants, and their belongings by varying the method of presentation between day and night. Perhaps, in congruence with the video, the entire night section could have highlighted specific people on the street who shaped social practices, labour struggles, and night clubs: sex-trade workers, Madame Bolduc, Léa Roback and Camilien Houde, for instance. The expression of Montreal street culture could have integrated history, art, and political forces within an institutional context.

The published study of Jean-Marc Larrue on the Monument National is duly noted.² Additional references could be made to the book he wrote with André G. Bourassa, *Les nuits de la 'Main': Cent ans de spectacles sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, 1891–1991* (Montréal: VLB, 1993), and Julie Podmore's doctoral dissertation in Geography at McGill University, "Saint-Lawrence Blvd. as 'Third City': Place, Gender and Difference along Montreal's 'Main'" (1999).³ Finally, the collective efforts of the researchers, designers, and actors of the exhibition and video could be more prominently acknowledged. I look forward to further exhibitions of this calibre on Montreal streets. Would a public display on the evolution of the main commercial streets of Saint-Paul, Notre-Dame and Sainte-Catherine be overambitious?

Notes

1. <http://www.vieux.montreal.qc.ca/inventaire/hall_fla.htm>
2. Jean-Marc Larrue, *Le Monument Inattendu: le Monument national de Montréal, 1893-1993* (Montréal: Éditions Hurtubise, 1993).
3. The book accompanying the exhibition contains these citations. Pierre Ancil, *Saint-Laurent: La 'Main' de Montréal* (Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 2002).