

# Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

## French Canadian Art

E. R. Adair

Volume 8, numéro 1, 1929

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300560ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300560ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

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### Citer cet article

Adair, E. R. (1929). French Canadian Art. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 8(1), 91–102.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300560ar>

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## FRENCH CANADIAN ART<sup>1</sup>

By E. R. ADAIR

In a very sporting paper which he read before this association at its meeting in Toronto in May, 1927, Dr. Clarence Webster explored the cultural development of Eastern Canada and deplored the barrenness of the land. In the field of art and its appreciation he found little to lighten the gloom of the picture which he spread before our eyes. In the province of Quebec alone, there seemed some relics of past enlightenment, for there he admitted that "there are many old country houses and churches with architectural features of great charm and dignity." But, and here he slams in our face the door he has half opened, "these belong mainly to the old régime."

As Quebec was the only province that received even the meanest praise in this connection, it would be ungracious to quarrel with the form in which it was given. And yet, I do not quite like the implication that it is in the field of true architecture that the praise is merited or that such praise must be limited to the work of the old régime. The actual structure of the larger buildings of the province, even those erected under the French régime, is inclined to be undistinguished, solid and austere if one views them with a kindly eye, prison-like and gloomy if a more jaundiced but hardly less truthful spirit controls one's tongue. The smaller buildings, be they cottages or churches, have as their chief external and structural quality a certain simplicity, often degenerating into crudeness, but on occasion fitting admirably into that atmosphere of bucolic and peaceful charm which we like to think envelops the French Canadian village. The buildings are well enough, their architecture is not alien to what one would expect from their builders and the circumstances that controlled their erection, but it is not really in the architecture, pure and simple, that we must search, if we are to discover any real contribution that French Canada has made to the history of art; and that it has made such a contribution I believe to be the case, notwithstanding Dr. Webster's cheerful despondency. We must instead turn to wood-carving and wood-sculpture, a handmaiden to architecture if you will, if we would reveal the one avenue through which the artistic soul of the French Canadian has found expression.

At the best art is not an easy subject to discuss and its history must necessarily be intricate and at times very dubious, for judgment has often to be based upon internal evidence and questions of style. Moreover, in this case, we have a subject that has been almost totally neglected until very recent years and our knowledge is still extremely inadequate; therefore any judgments I may pronounce must be tentative and subject probably to later revision. That I am able to pronounce any judgments at all is due very largely to the researches of Dr. Marius Barbeau among the parish records of the Island of Orleans and especially to my colleague, Professor Traquair of the Department of Architecture of McGill University, whose knowledge of the subject has always been placed at my disposal with the very greatest generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> When the paper was read before the Canadian Historical Association at Ottawa it was illustrated by lantern slides which served far better than mere words to show the real merit of the work described.

What were the beginnings of this art of wood-sculpture in the Province of Quebec? The Abbé Gosselin in his work on "*L'Instruction au Canada*" has described how Bishop Laval founded the Little Seminary at Quebec in 1668 to provide for the education of boys for the priesthood; but they were not to concern themselves only with philosophy and theology, for, as the oldest surviving regulations lay down, "they shall all have some trade to occupy them when they are not busy with their lessons and they shall try to see that their work shall be useful to the Seminary and to the Church."<sup>2</sup> From the very commencement the keynote of the whole artistic development of New France was struck—it shall be established under the protection of the church and for the greater glory of God. Bishop St. Vallier writing in 1687 of what he has seen at Quebec gives evidence that these rules are being observed. "This study," he says, "does not prevent them from learning in particular some trade which shall serve to occupy them in the house. As each is allowed to follow the art to which he is naturally inclined, they attain success in the one they choose; they fashion with skill a hundred little things not only for use in the house, but also for the ornament of the altars which they embellish with seamliness and ability."<sup>3</sup> The pupils of the Seminary are believed to have carved the rétable in the chapel of the Sainte Famille in the first cathedral at Quebec,<sup>4</sup> and La Potherie at the end of the century bears a glowing tribute to their skill when he writes in his "*Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*" that the sculpture in the Seminary chapel "which is estimated to be worth 10,000 écus, is very beautiful; it has been fashioned by the seminarists themselves and they have spared no effort to perfect their work."<sup>5</sup> When in 1701 the Seminary was burnt down it was a cleric working at his sculpture who heard something crackling beneath his room, opened his door, found the building full of smoke and at once sounded the alarm.<sup>6</sup>

Thus even in his own lifetime, therefore, Laval's hopes of providing some training in the arts were being realized and, as we know, his work was crowned with a striking success, but the Abbé Gosselin will have us believe that he achieved much more than this, for he describes in glowing terms the establishment by Laval of another school thirty miles down the St. Lawrence, the famous *École des Arts et Métiers* of Saint Joachim. That pupils were sent as early as 1676 from the Seminary to the Bishop's farm at St. Joachim is certain, but that the arts of sculpture and wood-carving were ever taught there rests entirely on an anonymous and rather dubious document dated 1685.<sup>7</sup> The Governor of New France, M. de Denonville, writing in the same year, says that there are sent to St. Joachim boys "who are fit only to be artisans and there they are taught trades" and he sees its possible development into a school for teaching the making of cloth;<sup>8</sup> the artistic side, if it exists at all, makes very little impression. St. Vallier in 1687 says that the twelve boys working there at trades will make good artisans,<sup>9</sup> and Bertrand de la Tour in his "*Mémoires sur la vie de M. de Laval*" writes that the school at St. Joachim consisted "for the most part of the children of peasants who were brought up and maintained rather roughly and at less cost (than in the Seminary). They were taught trades

<sup>2</sup> Gosselin: *L'Instruction au Canada*, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> St Vallier: *Estat présent de l'Eglise et de la Colonie française dans la Nouvelle France*, (Paris, 1688) pp. 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Gosselin: *Les vieilles Eglises de la Province de Québec*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. I, p. 235.

<sup>6</sup> Gosselin: *L'Instruction au Canada*, pp. 400-401.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>9</sup> St Vallier: *L'Estat présent*, pp. 53-54.

and when they were found to have intelligence they were sent off to the Seminary in the town. It was a nursery of good workmen . . . whence were drawn the servants, the husbandmen, the tenants for the lands of the Seminary.<sup>10</sup> Gosselin himself admits that the establishment at St. Joachim had become a mere school of farming by 1705<sup>11</sup> and when the Swedish botanist, Peter Kalm, visited the village in August, 1749, he finds nothing but "two priests and a number of young boys, whom they instruct in reading, writing and Latin."<sup>12</sup> There is indeed no real evidence that this school ever played a part in the development of French Canadian art.

What exactly was this art, in what way did it strike a new note? Of course there was figure sculpture and the carving of low reliefs out of solid slabs of wood, but the French Canadians developed a further and different technique. Their ideas were those of seventeenth and early eighteenth century France; there, plaster work or elaborately carved stone were probably the most popular forms of decoration; but in Quebec plaster was unknown and stone suitable for carving was not easily obtainable. There was, however, all around them immeasurable quantities of wood, and they proceeded to produce in wood the same effects that they had admired in France in other materials. The method was really very simple: the space to be decorated was first covered with plain boarding and to this were attached thin strips of wood cut into the designs that it was desired to produce. If the work were on an altar it would be painted or gilded, if on a ceiling it would be whitewashed and the effect at a little distance would be quite indistinguishable from good plaster work. Almost the whole of the decorative work of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was achieved by means of this appliqué technique and the results are often strikingly beautiful.

The difference in material made all the difference in the world to the workmanship. Plaster is too easy, it can be elaborated without end, and decadence always tends to overelaboration; individual effort is submerged, its designs can be stereotyped and duplicated continually without any real difficulty. The result is the appalling lusciousness of late plaster work and finally the commercialized monstrosities that disgrace the ceilings of our suburban villas. But wood is not so easily worked; in the days before the advent of machinery, each strip had to be cut by hand, individual skill was required and individual design could have free play; patterns never became completely stereotyped; the carver will often go to the natural objects he sees around him and consequently a freedom of line, a freshness of conception and, in the best work, a delightful simplicity is preserved. There are to be discovered plenty of examples of this type of carving taken from the early nineteenth century and yet in them you find early eighteenth century French work at its best entirely untouched by the extravagances of the later part of that century or by those unfortunate influences which made European architecture what it was in the reign of Queen Victoria. And this Canadian work was no mere antiquarian survival; it was still alive and still drawing fresh inspiration from nature as interpreted by the skill that comes from training and imagination.

Who provided the training in the first instance, what are the connecting links with French art in the late seventeenth century and who carried

<sup>10</sup> Ed. of 1761. p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. p. 359.

<sup>12</sup> *Travels into North America*, (ed. of 1770), vol. III, pp. 196-197.

on the tradition in New France across the Atlantic, when this art was left, by the cutting off of communications with old France, to set its own standards and develop along its own lines? First of all, there is no evidence whatever, that Laval sought out in France skilled artists and induced them to cross the sea to teach his pupils in Quebec. Technical artistic skill was much more widely spread then than it is to-day and it is not surprising if among those who emigrated to New France there should be two or three, whether secular or clerical, who had acquired the necessary technique. We know of one such who settled in Quebec and who possessed considerable artistic experience—Jacques LeBlond de la Tour, painter of Bordeaux, who from 1690 to 1706 taught sculpture in the Seminary, at first as a layman and later as an ecclesiastic. Whether there still remains any work that actually came from his hand it is difficult to say, but seventy years after his death the tradition persisted that he had carved the rétables of Sainte Anne de Beaupré, Ange Gardien and Château Richer.<sup>13</sup> The last has been completely altered, but the two former remain, though much changed in later years. Tradition spoke also of his splendid Corinthian columns and it is interesting that both Ange Gardien and the old rétable in the "Chapelle commémorative" of Sainte Anne have fine Corinthian pillars of a design not, so far as I know, met with elsewhere except in the Ursuline chapel in Quebec. It might almost be safe to say that these columns at least date from about 1700 and come from the chisel of Jacques LeBlond de la Tour.

Contemporary with LeBlond, though of a decidedly younger generation, comes Noël Levasseur, young enough indeed for it to be quite possible that he was one of LeBlond's pupils. Born in Quebec in 1680, son of another Noël Levasseur and grandson of the Jean Levasseur who had come from Rouen in the middle of the seventeenth century, he was a member of a family which dominated the art of wood carving in Quebec during the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1697 we hear of an enlargement of the first cathedral of Quebec which was to be entrusted to a Noël Levasseur.<sup>14</sup> This was probably the father, of whom otherwise we know nothing at all, for his more famous son was then only seventeen years of age. In 1701 Noël Levasseur the son was in Montreal getting married, of which more hereafter, and in 1703 he returned to Quebec to settle down as a master-sculptor. Of his work little has survived, but what there is is good, though as his two sons, Francois Noël born in 1703 and Jean Baptiste Antoine born in 1717, entered their father's workshop, all that can be said is that down to his death in 1740 his was probably the directing mind though part of the work might well have been executed by his children.

In the church of St. François de Sales in the Island of Orleans there is an admirable Easter candlestick of which M. Le Guerne, the curé of the parish in 1773, writes in his inventory "A beautiful Easter candlestick by Noël Le Vasseur formerly used in the Cathedral which has replaced it by a larger one made in rather bad taste. I bought it for 36 livres."<sup>15</sup> M. Le Guerne can be congratulated on his own admirable taste. As the candlestick must have been in use for some years in the cathedral before 1773 when it was cast forth by the authorities for something that was bigger and better, it was most probably Noël and not his son Francois Noël who fashioned it. It does him credit.

<sup>13</sup> Gosselin: *L'Instruction au Canada*, pp. 361-3.

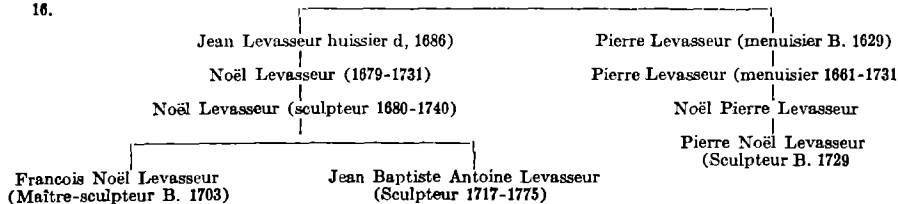
<sup>14</sup> Gosselin in *Les Vieilles Eglises de la Province de Québec*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Note by M. Le Guerne in Inventory of 1789. Parochial Archives of St. François de Sales.

But Noël Levasseur's masterpiece is the great altar and rétable of the Ursulines at Quebec which he, assisted by his sons, carved in the years 1732-1736. Here the most striking features are the Corinthian columns, distinctly similar to those at Ange Gardien or Sainte Anne which I suggested above were the work of LeBlond, and the finely carved panels at the base of each columns and in the two lateral doors. After Noël's death in 1740 his two sons carried on the work until 1775 when Jean Baptiste Antoine died, while their cousin Pierre Noël Levasseur,<sup>16</sup> the product of three successive generations of carpenters, had so good a reputation about the middle of the century that in November 1750 he was given the contract to make the tabernacle and rétable for the Jesuit church in Quebec at a cost of 1,300 livres.<sup>17</sup> The best surviving work of the two brothers is to be found in the island of Orleans. For the church of Sainte Famille the high altar was made by them in 1749 though the spaces between the little columns have been filled in by later and cruder work.<sup>18</sup> What it originally looked like can be seen from the small altar in a boundary chapel near St. Francois de Sales in the same island. This was one of the side altars made for the church by the brothers Levasseur in 1771-3;<sup>19</sup> it is impossible not to admire its delicate grace and purity of line. The grades on which it stands are decorated with the rocaille scrollwork which is identical with that found on the Sainte Famille altar and appears to be typical of the ornament used by the Levasseur brothers. In another way also these altars are typical. So far as we know at present, this style of altar built up of free columns with no filling between them is almost invariably old—dating usually from the first half of the eighteenth century. Another admirable example which illustrates this conclusion is to be found in the side altar in the church of the Hôpital-Général—a composite work made of fragments neatly fitted together—but the top of which is certainly old, and of a very graceful free design.

The Levasseurs were not only decorative wood carvers, they were also figure sculptors. In 1748-9 they adorned the west front of Sainte Famille church with five wooden statues, slightly more than life size;<sup>20</sup> the statues that are to be seen there to-day are almost certainly not the originals, but even if they are only copies of copies of the original ones they show a sureness and vigour of carving that is worthy of admiration; the expression of sad resignation on the face of Sainte Anne is particularly well done. These large pieces of figure sculpture are rarely to be found in the Montreal district and appear to be especially typical of the Quebec

16.



There were of course in almost every case many other children but they do not interest us here.

<sup>17</sup> Note by the Abbé Joseph S<sup>r</sup> Denis in the *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, vol. XXXIII, p. 40 (1927).

<sup>18</sup> Traquair & Barbeau: The Church of Sainte Famille. (*Journal of the Royal Arch. Inst. of Canada* May-June 1926).

<sup>19</sup> Traquair & Barbeau: The Church of St. Francois de Sales (*Journal of the Royal Arch. Inst. of Canada* Sept.-Oct. 1926).

<sup>20</sup> Account by Rev. J. Gagnon in parochial archives Sainte Famille.

school; there are several, probably of some considerable antiquity, at Les Eboulements; and we meet with others at St. Joachim, though there they are used for interior decoration.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the position of artistic supremacy at Quebec hitherto occupied by the Levasseurs was in dispute; on the one hand was Pierre Emond, on the other the Baillairgé family. In 1790-93 Emond was making rétables for two of the chapels in the old cathedral,<sup>21</sup> but undoubtedly his chef d'oeuvre had already been accomplished when in 1784 he had done the whole of the wood carving for the private chapel of Mgr. Olivier Briand in the Seminary at Quebec. The work on the olive branch—a play on Briand's Christian name—and on the cornice is extraordinarily vivid and free, but I am not sure if it is not surpassed by the delightful brackets that flank the altar. This work gains enormously because it has never been painted or gilded and the delicate sharpness of the carving has therefore never been blurred.

Jean, the founder of the Baillairgé family in Canada, came from Poitou in 1741 and, after serving an apprenticeship in Quebec, set up for himself in the rue Sault-au-Matlot as a sculptor and carpenter. He is known to have done work in the old cathedral but none of it survives.<sup>22</sup> His son, François, born in 1759, was sent to Paris to study in 1778. He remained there for three years working in the Académie royale de Statuaire, de Sculpture et de Peinture. On his return he joined with his father in the work in the cathedral, his baldachino being especially praised,<sup>23</sup> but a design which he drew up for the Banc d'Oeuvre there shows evidence of a sophistication which may well have been the result of his contact with French art. It is however in the church of St. Joachim de Montmorency that we have the best surviving example of his skill, and here he was assisted by his son, Thomas, who had been born in 1791 and trained under his father and under René St. James of Montreal.<sup>24</sup> The decorations show a magnificence uncommon in a mere parish church and here again we find the life-size wooden figures and the panels carved in relief that seem so typical of the Quebec school of craftsmanship; both the figures and the panels are thoroughly good pieces of work. Thomas Baillairgé, like his father, was an architect almost in the modern sense of the word, yet we find him also undertaking the making of carved wooden rétables for village churches quite in the traditional manner. He was responsible, for instance, for the rétable at Sainte Famille which he put up in 1820,<sup>25</sup> and though his work is a little heavy, yet there is still preserved in an amazing manner the feeling that the artist was carving direct from nature the flowers that he saw in the cottage gardens around him. In the decorations here at Ste. Famille and at St. François we can perceive clearly the fondness of the Quebec craftsmen for rather solid carving, for masses of flowers, and for cartouches applied to the panels. Even as late as the forties there is no real deterioration, as can be seen if one looks at the rétable André Paquet put up in the church of St. François de Sales during the years 1838-1844;<sup>26</sup> the cornice, the scroll work and the designs of flowers have all the old vigour and delicacy, while the pots of flowers carved at the bottom of the panels are as free and as naturalistic as in the earliest days of the wood carver's

<sup>21</sup> Gosselin in *Les Vieilles Eglises de la Province de Québec*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Note in *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, vol. XIX, pp. 307-308 (1915).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XX, pp. 17-18 (1914). Note by G. F. Baillargé.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XX, pp. 348-351 (1914). Note by G. F. Baillargé.

<sup>25</sup> Traquair & Barbeau: *The Church of Sainte Famille (Journal of the Royal Arch. Inst. of Canada, May-June, 1926)*.

<sup>26</sup> *Livre de comptes: St. François de Sales*.

art in Canada. But the end was already in sight: Thomas Baillairgé's Jerome Demers, Professor of Architecture at the Quebec Seminary, had advocated, as early as 1828, in his "*Précis d'Architecture*" the use of plaster instead of wood because it imitated stone more effectively.<sup>27</sup> By 1850 the Quebec school of wood carving was on its deathbed; a few skilled craftsmen might linger on even into the twentieth century, but the door was opening wide to all the flamboyant and often meretricious qualities that mark the new style of church decoration that has spread over the province so disastrously even down to our own day.

Meanwhile Montreal was developing her own school and her own styles. That there was some connection with Quebec is indubitable, but I do not think that it can be maintained that the Montreal school was wholly derivative. Until very recently it was considered that the woodcarver's art in Montreal hardly went back of Quevillon who flourished in the early nineteenth century. In his little book "*Une Maîtrise d'Art en Canada*", M. Vaillancourt says that "it is to Louis Quevillon — that we owe the rebirth of this art", that "Louis Quevillon was his own master. He had a taste for the arts. Without other guide than this quality and some old books — he gave himself to the decoration and embellishment of churches by means of woodcarving";<sup>28</sup> while Wallace in his recent "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*" speaks of Quevillon as "an illustration of one of the first native impulses in Canadian art." Neither of these assertions can be maintained; Quevillon was a great craftsman, but he had his masters and his predecessors, and he was one of a long line of artists who developed their traditional style in and around Montreal from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.

Montreal was a much younger town than Quebec and far more exposed to the turbulence of its enemies, therefore it is natural that art of any sort should be later in taking root. The earliest workers in wood, like the famous Gilbert Barbier, were probably little more than competent carpenters, but in 1701 we hear of one Charles Chaboillez who originally came from Champagne in France and who is specifically termed a sculptor in wood. In that year, feeling old age weighing upon him, he determined to enter the hospital of the Brothers Charon who in 1691 had received permission from the king to establish arts and crafts within their house; there he would "serve God and the poor in all that he could by his art of carving as well as by carrying out such carpentry as should be needed in the Community." In return he wanted nothing but a room where he could work at his designs, carry on his carving and sleep, and when he died, thirty masses said for the repose of his soul. But he soon tired of this semi-monastic life, left the hospital and, in May, 1702, decided to join forces with a retired sergeant who owned sixty arpents of land just outside Montreal. There they would live together as soon as Chaboillez had finished an altar which he was making for the church of the Recollets. Alone in the world, the two old gentlemen agreed to leave all their worldly goods to the first child to be born to a certain young sculptor from Quebec, Noël Levasseur who was then living in Montreal and has just married. In 1704 Chaboillez took for a term of three years an apprentice in the art of wood carving; all seemed at peace when, suddenly swept off his feet, he married a girl in her twenties, giving his own age in the register as 50 years. He at once repudiated his deed of gift to Noël Levasseur, became the proud father of three

<sup>27</sup> O. Maurault: Jerome Demers, (*Journal of the Royal Arch. Inst. of Canada*, Jan. 1926, p. 35).

<sup>28</sup> pp. 12-13.



children and, four years after his marriage, died at the age of 70—a mathematical discrepancy which is explained not so much by the ageing effect of married life as by the natural vanity of an old man wedding a young wife. Levasseur had already returned to Quebec to become famous there as a sculptor, and his only further relations with the district of Montreal seem to be in 1725 when he came to Boucherville just across the river St. Lawrence to make a rétable for the church there.<sup>29</sup> The whole story is rather charming and the connection with Levasseur very interesting.

In 1721-2 we hear of a Paul Raymond Jourdain dit LaBrosse who was a sculptor and a maker of organs; he had been summoned from Montreal to Quebec to repair a small organ in the cathedral there and apparently to prepare the woodwork for and set up a large one.<sup>30</sup> He is probably the LaBrosse whom we find working at Sault au Recollet just outside Montreal in 1737 and again 1741,<sup>31</sup> and he is certainly the man who executed for the old parish church of Notre Dame in Montreal the rétable in the chapel of St. Amable which had been built in 1739 according to his plans.<sup>32</sup> But the only specimens of his work which we know to have survived to this day are the great cross which he carved for Notre Dame and the face which he made about 1770 for the clock of the Sulpician Seminary—the hands being made by Liébert.<sup>33</sup>

The church of Sault au Recollet lying on the Rivière des Prairies some 5 miles N.W. of Montreal is not only one of the most beautiful churches in the whole province of Quebec, but is in itself almost an epitome of the Montreal school of sculpture.<sup>34</sup> It has been mentioned above that LaBrosse worked there but that was in the church that preceded the present one which was not built until 1751. The oldest pieces of work existing in the church to-day are the two magnificent doors leading from the sanctuary into the sacristy. They each consist of two solid panels carved in relief with a vigour and beauty unsurpassed in any other single piece of work that we possess. They are delicately tinted in polychrome and probably date from about 1750, though we have no record whatsoever of their execution. The tabernacle of the high altar was set up in 1792 and is an excellent example of the work of a certain Philippe Liébert of Pointe aux Trembles, a slightly senior and very successful contemporary of Quevillon. Throughout the last ten years of the eighteenth century Liébert, rather than the younger Quevillon, secures the most important pieces of work and was regarded as the superior artist. In 1791 he had provided Sault au Recollet with a pulpit, four years later he was doing the sculpture in the choir of the old church of Notre Dame and the churchwardens entered into negotiations with him for a pulpit and a banc d'oeuvre as well. That we have been able to identify the tabernacle at Sault au Recollet as Liébert's work is due to its fortunate resemblance to one in the church at Vaudreuil which we know to have been made by him in 1792; not only is the general design and the strapwork decoration very similar, but the small statue of St. John is identical in both tabernacles. Undoubtedly Liébert and his apprentices were turning out a good deal of work and a certain amount of duplication in design was inevitable. Liébert was fol-

<sup>29</sup> E. Z. Massicotte in the *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, vol XXVIII, pp. 184-186 (1922); vol. XXXIV pp. 532-540 (1928).

<sup>30</sup> Note by Mgr. Têtu in the *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, vol XIV, p. 359 (1908).

<sup>31</sup> Sault au Recollet: Livre de compte, vol I, fos. 1b, 3b.

<sup>32</sup> *Annuaire de Ville Marie*, p. 369.

<sup>33</sup> O. Maurault: *Le vieux Séminaire*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> For the account that follows see Traquair & Adair: *The Church of the Visitation, Sault au Recollet* (*Journal of the Royal Arch. Inst. of Canada*, Dec. 1927) & the references there given..

lowed by Louis Amable Quevillon of Saint Vincent de Paul, who dominated the Montreal school of wood carving for the first twenty years of the nineteenth century and whose designs were perpetuated and developed by his partners and pupils so long as wood carving existed as a living art. He followed Liébert in his work at Notre Dame where he set up the great baldachino; he followed Liébert at Sault au Recollet where in 1802 he executed the two tabernacles on the side altars and in 1806 the three altar tables "à la Romaine" for the high altar and the two chapels. This work is all extremely typical and admirably executed; the delicate arabesque and scroll work, the fine loose sprays of foliage, the ear of corn, the vine in its graceful curves, the swags of flowers all speak eloquently of the high pitch to which Quevillon and his followers brought the art of wood carving. Their work is to be found in many churches in this district and in the very last years of his life Quevillon and his partner René St. James were given the chance to carry out the complete decoration of a whole church—that of St. Mathias sur Richelieu; the work was almost entirely executed by St. James, but it is true to the Quevillon style and forms a splendid and harmonious whole. At Sault au Recollet, Quevillon was followed by two of his pupils. Between 1816 and 1820 David Fleury David, an inhabitant of the parish, put up what is one of the finest wooden vaults in the province of Quebec, not only in its general effect, but in the delicate charm of its detail. Finally in the years 1820-23 David built a great rétable at the east end and redecorated the whole nave—a delightful piece of work. The last piece of wood carving to be added was the pulpit which was erected by Vincent Chartrand in 1836 and which shows how strongly the Quevillon influence persisted.

And though Sault au Recollet is the finest example of the work of this school, it is in no sense unique. Church after church in the neighbourhood of Montreal has some fine examples of wood-carving to show that it may often be hidden beneath coats of paint or unpleasant marbling. To take but two examples—neither of them large or important churches—Vaudreuil which possesses panels of excellent quality, all round its choir, and Ste. Jeanne in the Ile Perrot, which not only has ceiling decorations that are admirably naturalistic, but also an extraordinarily fine carved wooden front.

Thus we have two different schools of craftsmanship—that of Quebec and that of Montreal—each with its peculiarities. Quebec showing a fondness for rather solid carving, for cartouches and masses of flowers, for life-size statues and solid carved panels, Montreal laying more stress on the delicate line, the loose arabesque, and the open scroll work. Of course this does not imply that there was no contact between the two. In the beginning Montreal undoubtedly owed a good deal to Quebec; we have seen Noël Lévassour at Montreal from 1701 to 1703 and at Boucherville in 1725. Beyond that we have no evidence of the influence of the Quebec school in the area round Montreal—but, much to Quebec's disgust, Montreal sculptors were not infrequently invited to adorn churches within the territory of the rival school. We have mentioned above that LaBrosse was sent for to Quebec to set up the organ there in 1722; Quevillon himself is recorded as doing work at St. Henri de Levis in 1804, at St. Charles de Bellechasse where he made the tabernacle in 1806, and at the old church of St. Laurent in the Island of Orleans in 1807. About 1811 a certain Louis Bazil David, a pupil of Quevillon, did a considerable amount of work at St. Jean in the Island of Orleans, where the typical Quevillon scroll

work can be seen in the cornice, the pulpit canopy is very like that at St. Mathias, while the large cornucopia over the side altar is very common in the work of the Montreal school. From St. Jean he went in 1812 to Sainte Famille where he put up the wooden vault which shows coffering rather reminiscent of that at Sault au Recollet. He tried to persuade the people of Sainte Famille to engage him for further decorative work in the church, but the curé did not approve of the foreigner from up the river, and apparently nothing more was done. The transitional stage that the craft had reached at this time in the country districts is shown by the curé's attack upon David because he did not do all the carving himself, but was away part of the time supervising other work.<sup>35</sup> At Beaumont, the rétable put up by Etienne Bercier in 1812 with its delicate open arabesques in the panels undoubtedly belongs to the Quevillon school, while about the same time Thomas Baillairgé himself was being trained by the Montreal sculptor René St. James. It is obvious that, in the early nineteenth century, the Montreal school must have enjoyed a great reputation in the province if its influence was so widespread.

Of other arts connected with the church little need be said. Fine gilding for the woodwork was done by the Ursulines<sup>36</sup> and the nuns of the Hôpital Général<sup>37</sup> at Quebec and by the Gray Sisters of the Hôpital Général and the Sisters of the Congregation at Montreal,<sup>38</sup> as well as by the master sculptors themselves. The paintings that were executed by French Canadian artists were almost universally beneath contempt. A few of them, such for example, as the Recollet Frère Luc or LeBlond de la Tour enjoyed some contemporary reputation; it will be kindest to that reputation if we assume that none of their works have survived. The majority were of the quality, but lacked the resignation, of that priest of the Seminary at Quebec, M. Pommier, of whom Bertrand de la Tour writes. "He prided himself on his painting making many pictures, but nobody liked them: he hoped that in France his talent would be more appreciated, but he had no better success there and so devoted himself to the cause of rural missions."<sup>40</sup> Most French Canadian artists could have followed his example with profit to the world. Of embroidered robes and altar frontals we know very little; the nuns produced a certain amount, probably not of a very high quality. The chasuble and altar frontal which Jeanne Le Ber made for Notre Dame in Montreal at the very beginning of the eighteenth century and which the church still possesses are heavy and magnificent rather than aesthetically beautiful. The embroidered frontal for the altar of Indian Lorette is early work and almost certainly Canadian and not French. It is done in coloured wools on linen and has considerable charm, though it would not compare with the best European embroidery. Its fellow altar frontal done in incised silver on a gesso and wood base, with gilded wood carvings applied to its surface is old and battered, but still a very fine piece of work, especially when seen gleaming in its proper place in the midst of the ceremony of the mass. It is, incidentally, almost the only piece of artistic work in which Indian influence

<sup>35</sup> Notes by Mr. Gagnon in the parochial archives of Sainte Famille.

<sup>36</sup> e.g. They gilded statues at St. Pierre Island of Orleans in 1751. Pater Kalm, *Travels in N. America* (ed. of 1790, vol. III, p. 176).

<sup>37</sup> e.g. They gilded tabernacles at St. Pierre (1765), Sainte Famille (1768), St. François de Sales (1793).

<sup>38</sup> Bulletin des Recherches historiques, vol XXXIII, pp. 40, 223 (1927); O. Maurault: *Le Vieux Séminaire*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> Gosselin: *L'Instruction au Canada*, pp. 364-365.

<sup>40</sup> La Tour, *Mémoires de la vie de M. de Laval* pp. 108-9.

can be seen, for the lower part of the frontal is decorated with a design which includes an Indian squaw and little rounded Indian houses. Of other early Canadian silver work we know practically nothing. Of the iron work we do not know very much more. On the whole, as can be seen in church crosses, such as that at Sainte Famille or the one of about 1788 at St. Pierre, it was good rather than distinguished; all over the district of Montreal can be found windows with distinctive and very pleasantly made iron gratings, often quite modern; while iron hinges and catches also not uncommonly show a real attempt at artistic design.

But all these are very minor achievements; the true artistic triumph of French Canada lies in her wood carving and I have tried to show in this paper that in that branch of art at least she has made a real contribution, she has achieved something that is at the same time intrinsically beautiful and historically interesting. For no historian of French Canada can afford to neglect this manifestation of French Canadian spirit. Its importance lies in the way it was achieved, for it must always be remembered that it was the Catholic Church that was its only begetter. Even in the best examples of domestic architecture, such as the fine house of John Caldwell in St. Peter street, Quebec, the panelling, dating from about 1780, is honest and simple, but hardly comparable in beauty with the work in the churches, while in the smaller houses and cottages anything so pleasant as, for instance, the corner cupboard in the Hebert House in the Island of Orleans is the decided exception. When Quebec was resisting the guns of Sir William Phipps, when Frontenac could write home "The enemy is upon us sea and land, send us a thousand men next spring if you want the country to be saved. We are perishing by inches; the people are in the depth of poverty; the war has doubled prices so that nobody can live, many families are without bread. The inhabitants desert the country and crowd into the towns"<sup>41</sup> when Montreal was still cowering from the Indian massacre at Lachine and in revenge four Iroquois were burnt alive by its soldiers just outside the town, the Church and the Church alone provided that encouragement and that peace of heart that made possible artistic practice and artistic development. It is not an accident that the Puritans of New England, though they lived under no worse frontier conditions, possessed no such art as this, that as the people from the eastern states spread over the middle west their culture diminished, leaving them nothing but that crude materialism which they enjoyed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Their churches, in their cold austerity, frowned upon all decoration made by hands, and in their bitter struggle with nature there was no time and no strength left for other inspiration. But the Catholic Church knew no better and no nobler task than making beautiful the House of God, and the French Canadian gave to it his best endeavour. For the Church was the dominant factor in his existence; it baptised him, it married him, it advised him in his worldly affairs and kept his peace in those of the spirit, and finally it buried him well and sumptuously, and his funeral was often the most important event in his life. In this art there is no humour, for religion was a serious thing, not to be approached lightly, and the Church kept a strict hand upon what it would admit within its doors. Thomas Baillargé had the pleasant task of painting more clothes on the figures in two of his father's pictures of which the Church had disapproved.

At times we may feel that the Church is not sufficiently awake to the treasures that it possesses. The danger from fire is terribly great; old

<sup>41</sup> Atherton: *History of Montreal*, vol. I, p. 297.

churches are still being pulled down to make way for bigger and better ones—has not Montreal seen its old cathedral replaced by that ghastly neo-gothic edifice that James O'Donnell brought up from New York, and its seemly little church of Bonsecours, restored with results more horrible even than complete destruction? But it must be remembered that the business of the Church is not to serve art but to save souls, and if its work demands these things it can hardly be blamed for providing them. And even the best intentions sometimes breed disasters; it is only too easy to rip away the wood carving in order to repair the boarding behind it and I remember my horror when a good vicaire explained how well they had repaired the decorated roof and proudly showed me a pile of carvings that they had left over when they put the designs back. But as historians, in pleading for more knowledge, for more reverence for things of the past, for more care for their preservation, we must after all never forget that it was the Church and the Church alone that has given us this beautiful thing, the most beautiful thing in French Canadian art—the wood carving of the province of Quebec.