

Louis Jobin (1845-1928)

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L O U I S J O B I N

(1845 1928)

Early Quebec art developed along two distinct lines which paralleled the evolution of Quebec society. While Théophile Hamel and Antoine Plamondon painted portraits which superficially followed the tenets of European portraiture their art was more decorative, naive. Ultimately the academic style on which their own art was based was forgotten. The tastes of the new colonial élite for *high culture* -the Drummonds, the van Hornes mirrored the standards of European society with its art historical traditions and écoles. Their own lifestyles imitated these standards whose art was imported without adaptation into Quebec and Canada.

Quebec's sculptors followed a more ambiguous role -along side the mannerist style of religious carving developed in the early ateliers of the Levasseur and Baillargé families and filled the village and city churches which formed the main part of the religious and economic infrastructure of Quebec society. The second tendency more populist and free evolved unrecognized officially but often present even in the commissioned sculptures of the churches.

Louis Jobin's sculpture was a good example both of these tendencies. Sculpture in Quebec adhered superficially to traditions of religious representation in Europe. For Jobin whose style developed as a response to market demands for wood carvings and sculptural commissions, it was as accessible as the woods that stood in the back lots of seigneurie tracts and habitant farms of Quebec.

Born in 1845, Jobin left his family home in Petit Capsa (now known as Pont Rouge) near Neuville to work for his uncle as a woodcarver at the age of 15. Originally intending to become a painter, and then a photographer he was further directed towards sculpture by Father Napoléon Lacasse, a teacher at the École normale de Laval in Quebec City. As a result he began apprenticeship at François-Xavier Berlinguet's atelier on Rue St-Jean in Quebec in 1865 where he worked for room and board obtaining the skills which would stand him in good stead for his entire life. At the time Quebec City employed half of its population in the shipbuilding industry, and much of Jobin's early work was carving for the sailing ships. As he worked on design, ornamentations, angel and animal representations and ship's mastheads, he gradually acquired a sense of working to scale of fitting a design to a required dimension. In his free time Jobin carved for the sake of carving and delighted in creating detailed minor works as a form of amusement. His *Self Portrait* (1867) now in the Musée du Québec is from this period. Carved in relief and painted it has the naive quality of photographic portraits of the time with its full frontal hieratic format. Few of Jobin's private works from this period now remain, as they were un-

signed and seldom preserved being considered formative, working material -an effort to learn the technical language of his craft.

In 1868, Jobin went to New York City where he continued to learn his trade in the studio of William Boulton, a British sculptor renowned for his work in marble. There were demands for ships mastheads -often female figures-, shop signs, insignia and cigar store figures of Indians and negroes.

By the time Jobin returned to Quebec in 1870, Montreal was a thriving commercial metropolis with an expanding population of over 100,000 people. There were major influxes of immigrants -Italians and Germans- and farmers from the countryside came to Montreal seeking the greater opportunities in the shopkeeping and mercantile sectors of the economy. At his first atelier on Rue Notre-Dame, Jobin mostly made ships carvings. Tobacconists shops became increasingly popular and life size cigar store Indians also became a speciality. Painted in bright polychrome colours they attracted customers to the shops as they were rolled out onto the streets each day. Shop signs carved in relief of animals and trade symbols were also in demand and were more visual than verbal -intended to be read by the illiterate, and immigrants who spoke neither French nor English.

With the decline of the construction of new wooden sailing vessels which were supplanted by steamers and metal ships, competition among wood carvers increased for dwindling business. Jobin showed the good judgement and adaptability which kept him in the trade for life and left behind this faltering market to install himself in Quebec City in 1865. His new atelier on Rue d'Aiguillon employed carpenters and apprentices and the market for religious carving became a principal source of income. Jobin interpreted his subject matter instinctively with a simple, colourful

style. He often worked from live models and sketched outline form on the wood leaving much of the preliminary work to his apprentices. Although he would draw from reproductions of the masters -Raphael, Thorvaldsen, and Murillo for prototypes and had an extensive knowledge of religious iconography his work was more indigenous for its folk art character, its odd sense of the physical force of nature. Commissions included works for church interiors, architectural facades and exteriors, for grottoes. Larger than life monuments were also required and these were considered of great social importance to a developing Québécois society dominated by Catholic institutions.

Always a pragmatist, Jobin adapted his work to the financial capabilities of his client, cutting the cloth to fit the cloak. A carved white pine saint or madonna could be painted in white enamel, or polychromed.

For exterior works Jobin would cover the wood in metal which was hammered over the form and detailed using finer tooling instruments and moulds. The quality of the metal would vary according to the client - lead or copper- and these were then painted in white or polychromed.

The most spectacular of Jobin's commissions was *Notre-Dame du Saguenay*. Created in 1881, it was the largest wood sculpture in North America weighing 7000 pounds and standing 25 feet tall, and still stands in a site 506 feet above the Saguenay River. Commissioned by Charles-Napoléon Robitaille the work was paid



Louis Jobin, *Ange à la trompette*,
c.1902. Wood, 152 cm.
Coll. : Saint-Calixte, Plessisville, Qc.
Photo : Patrick Altman, Musée du Québec.

for through a popular fund raising campaign which reached patriotic proportions. Constructed of three enormous blocks of pine wood sheathed in leaves of lead the statue was exhibited in Quebec and Montreal before being installed where adults paid 10¢ and children 5¢ to see it. An article in *Le Canadien* dated May 21, 1881 reads... «If you wish to be enchanted, take a few steps towards the SKATING RINK and enter the STELLA MARIS as if you were on a new continent for the first time, one that is represented by a colossal, marvellous figure. Once you are there... a thousand emotions will cross your heart and soul... Canadian eyes have never seen the Mother of Christ in such large dimensions... Those who miss seeing it before it is sent to its destination will certainly have regrets. They will have missed such an easy opportunity to see the largest, most beautiful statue ever seen in America.»¹

After being exhibited, the statue was transported along the St. Lawrence by schooner and up the Saguenay River to the foot of Cap Trinité. Upon being brought to shore, a crew of workmen set about blazing a trail through the woods and chose a sight high above the shoreline where the statue would be visible from passing boats and ships for all to see. A railway of trees was then laid down over which the huge sculpted blocks were dragged upwards with block and tackle from ledge to ledge.

During his stay in Quebec City, Louis Jobin created literally 100's of angels, saints and historical personages. Angels with banners, torches, lyres, trumpets and saints of every names and description were carved for every location and physically changed the architecture and landscape of Quebec. It was the very accessibility of his work, its preponderance which caused it to remain unrecognized by Canada's historians who preferred to record the *high culture* to the more vernacular culture which was a part of everyday life in Quebec. It was only in the 1920's that Marius Barbeau, the renowned cultural ethnologist, recorded Jobin's comments on his life which give us some record of his experience as opposed to his art.

Some of the most extraordinary work Jobin ever created were his translucent ice sculptures created for the Quebec Winter Carnival of 1894 and 1896. These represented famous figures in Quebec's history: Monseigneur François de Laval, Frontenac, Father Jean de Brébeuf and Champlain. He



Photo of Notre-Dame du Saguenay taken at Quebec in 1881. Beside the work : Charles-Napoléon Robitaille and Louis Jobin. Coll. : Société historique du Saguenay.

created a colossal statue of *Liberty Lighting Up the World* which weighed 7000 pounds and stood 16' 6" (5 metres) high. This work was a faithful reproduction of Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty which had been inaugurated 10 years earlier in New York harbour. Commissioned by J.-B. Laliberté for the sum of \$150 the work was a play on words of the name of its patron and had an electric light for a torch which lit up Rue St. Jean. Jobin worked out of doors in the cold and invented his own set of shears to cut the ice without shattering it while carving. At the time the works attracted large crowds and were immensely popular among carnival goers.

In 1901 Jobin moved his atelier to Ste. Anne de Beaupré whose church attracted pilgrims from across Canada and the United States. By so doing he increased his chances of obtaining commissions as pastors and priests who visited saw his work in his atelier. To further encourage business Jobin promised to pay the freight charges for shipping commissioned works anywhere in Quebec or North America. This marketing strategy worked extremely well and works were shipped by rail to Labrador, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Ontario, New Orleans, Florida, Wisconsin and New England. He further beat his European competitors by keeping his Quebec prices at 40% below that of French and Italian ateliers. In writing a parish priest he suggests, «I met M. Bussière and he told me to write you to give you the price of angels standing 7 1/2 feet high carved in wood and sanded or in

marble dust with gold trim for the very low price of \$70. each delivered to Ste Basile station at my expense next May. You see, father, between 7 1/2 and 9 1/2 feet there is a large difference for price since (for the former) it is easier to find the wood and ensure transport to the destination.»²

Although Louis Jobin's name remains largely unknown outside Canada, he is the best known sculptor of his generation in Quebec. He created over 1000 commissioned sculptures during his lifetime and numerous smaller pieces. He was first and foremost a sculptor whose technical knowledge allowed him to undertake commissions which others were unable to. As the nature of the market for sculpture changed he adapted and this gave him greater longevity in his profession than any other sculptor of his generation. He preferred to remain active in his profession, charging moderate prices rather than to wait for

work. His art remains a part of the formation of Quebec's cultural identity and presents a distinct countercurrent to the more intellectual aesthetics of the écoles and élitist patrons. Now we can see these two trends -the indigenous and the international merging in the sculpture of Quebec.

1. Mario Béland, *Louis Jobin maître-sculpteur*, Musée du Québec, Fides, 1986, p. 36. Le Canadien, 20 mai 1881.
2. Idem, p. 60



Louis Jobin, *Sainte Bernadette*.
Coll. : Parks Canada
Photo : Jean Jolin