"Probably the Most Beautiful Rowboat Afloat": The Form and Meaning of the St Lawrence Skiff

JOHN SUMMERS

Résumé

La yole du Saint-Laurent est parvenue au faîte de sa popularité en tant qu'embarcation régionale vers la deuxième moitié du XIX^e siècle. La yole était construite et utilisée des côtés américain et canadien du fleuve, dans la région des Mille-Îles. Si les yoles américaines et canadiennes partageaient la plupart des caractéristiques de base qui démarquaient cette embarcation de toutes les autres, les yoles construites de part et d'autre du fleuve présentent des différences.

Cet article examine la forme et la raison de la yole, tant à titre d'embarcation que comme objet de la culture matérielle. En passant en revue les notions actuelles relatives à la manière dont on crée, perçoit et illustre le sens d'un objet façonné, l'auteur ouvre le débat sur les nombreuses significations de la yole et leur contexte. L'analyse des différents sens de la yole montre comment cette dernière a évolué pour passer d'un outil au départ créé localement selon un procédé propre aux embarcations, par ses utilisateurs et pour ceux-ci, à un véritable bien de consommation et emblême de l'identité régionale. L'article se termine en montrant comment on peut redonner aux objets conservés dans les musées leur sens inhérent et replacer celui-ci dans les cultures contemporaines.

Abstract

The St Lawrence skiff came to prominence as a regional watercraft type in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Skiffs were constructed and used on the American and Canadian sides of the St Lawrence River in the Thousand Islands region. While both American and Canadian skiffs shared most of the defining characteristics that made St Lawrence skiffs a recognizable watercraft type, there were also differences between skiffs built on either side of the river.

This paper will consider the form and meaning of the skiff as both a watercraft type and a material culture object. A review of current notions of the ways in which artifact meaning is created, perceived and displayed sets up a discussion of the skiff's multiple meanings and the contexts in which they occur. An analysis of the skiff's categories of meaning shows how it evolved from a tool originally made locally by and for its users in a small-scale craft process to a fully realized consumer object and an icon of regional identity. The article concludes by considering how the meanings inherent in museum artifacts can be rehabilitated and relocated in living cultures.

Reading Things: Object Meaning and Its Perception

In order to begin a discussion about the material nature of historic watercraft, it is necessary to generally consider how we derive meaning from things. It is a fundamental premise of material culture studies that artifacts have meanings, and this is no less true of small craft than of any other class of objects. There is less of a consensus, however, about the ways in which we derive that meaning as we consume and study artifacts. Before discussing the particular meanings that have been ascribed to the St Lawrence skiff during its history, I would like to consider in a general sense several questions of how artifact meaning is understood, since the methodological discussion that follows will be applied specifically to small craft, but also has wider implications.

In a provocative recent article about using a material culture approach to environmental history, Christopher Clarke-Hazlett offers a widely accepted metaphor for the way in which objects reveal meanings: "we believe," he says, "that objects tell stories, or rather, that objects can be made to reveal stories."[1] Upon examination, it is evident that these two phrases are not as directly equivalent as he proposes: the first suggests that it is the recipient of the story that is passive, simply listening to the artifact tell its tale, and the second that the object itself plays a less-active role as the story is forcibly drawn from it. Neither iteration truly captures the nature of our transactions with the things around us.

A more accurate metaphor is to say that artifacts can indeed reveal meaning, but that the meaning must first be read from them. The framework for the transaction is therefore textual, and not oral, with all that implies about the necessity for a grammar, a syntax and membership in a community of discourse as preconditions for reading. As a written language is meaningless to one who is unable to read it, so too are the various meanings of, say, a sword, to one without the relevant formal, material and symbolic grammars necessary to read it as a thing. The most basic identification and naming of the object as a sword is common across many if not all cultures, much as we can identify a book written in a foreign language as a book. Beyond that, however, the sword will not reveal much until it is approached with the appropriate background. The linguistic metaphor has been widely applied as a critical tool in the last twenty-five years, and it can also offer insights for material culture study.[2]

The most thorough critique to date of the real nature of artifact meaning and the viability of the linguistic metaphor has been offered by Grant McCracken. His ground-breaking work "Culture and Consumption" analyses whether or not items of material culture, and for him most notably clothing, really do convey meaning in a linguistic way.[3] He too, along with Clarke-Hazlett, acknowledges the explanatory promise of the language metaphor.[4] In the end, though, he concludes that artifacts fail to function as a true language, largely because their vocabulary is limited and they have no discernable syntax. For him, the linguistic code that artifacts embody contains no demonstrable rules of combination, and combination therefore does not constitute a crucial part of the creation of their messages (in this specific instance, the messages carried by items of dress).[5]

McCracken is able to demonstrate the shortcomings of the linguistic metaphor as a means to describe material culture's expressiveness, particularly as regards factual, denotative communication. But in the connotative, affective realm, the expressive power of items of material culture is far greater. The linguistic (and, by association, reading and text-based) metaphor may therefore break down at the level of the individual speech act, but in a more general sense it is nonetheless very useful for capturing the degree to which the audience of a material culture object is crucial to the perception and actualization of its meaning. He does acknowledge, in the end, that material culture can function effectively as a communicative medium, and that "it allows a culture to insinuate its beliefs and assumptions into the very fabric of daily life."[6]

Yet McCracken, while confirming the expressive power of things, fails to specify a crucial component of the transfer of artifact meaning: how do we perceive the meanings that inhere in items of material culture? We may yet be unclear on exactly how the meaning of artifacts is constituted, though we have a general sense that it is at least language-like, if not explicitly linguistic. Yet there can be little doubt, as both Clarke-Hazlett and McCracken acknowledge, that we read these meanings from artifacts, and that they have in some measure a message that we perceive.

Putting It Out: Public Display and Material Culture Analysis

When artifacts are displayed in the context of a public institution, their messages become inescapably commingled with that of the institution itself. The kind of valorized, highly concentrated showing practised by museums, reinforced by strong visual cues given with lighting and display techniques, almost invariably equates display with possession, not only of the physical thing but also of its meaning. Clarke-Hazlett discusses a recent trend in museum work to try and break down the museum's authoritative interpretive voice, and replace it with the creation of a space in which a number of (sometimes conflicting) interpretations can be sustained, of which the institution's own is but one. In this way, some of what the audience brings to the experience can be incorporated into the cultural narrative that is created out of the museum/visitor transaction. However, he says, "the notion that this type of reciprocity is possible rests on the belief

that object meanings are not fixed, but instead change as society changes."[7]

In order to examine more closely the action of material culture meaning, it is useful to turn again to language and specifically to literary theory. It is now a commonplace in literary studies to acknowledge that the author of a text has a less-direct relationship with the work's readers than was previously supposed. For example, we read a work by Dickens (established as a historical fact of authorship), but we do not read Dickens's work (insofar as we are not him, and engage the text as a reader, not a writer). Recent analysis of literary works has moved away from a project that was essentially archaeological — recovering the author's meaning from the text, founded on the assumption that there was a single, privileged meaning, much as if we were mining for precious metal — to one that is fundamentally artistic and psychological — exploring how we as readers actualize the text in a discrete and unique way each time it is read, erecting a universe of individual readings that in their totality, along with the author's own, make up the work.

Authors write for themselves a text that readers then create anew. Without such a universe of potential meanings, there would be no criticism, no interpretive flux and certainly no enduring texts, for their meanings would have long ago been utterly fixed and their appeal greatly diminished. The reader, therefore, is as important a part of the literary transaction as the author.

It is not difficult to see the relevance of this transaction between author and reader, mediated by the text, to the transaction between museum and visitor, mediated by the artifact. When an artifact is displayed in a museum another voice is added to the discourse. To each artifact's "author," its original maker, is added the much stronger message of the museum as its current "author." The visual and symbolic power of the museum context often eclipses the artifact's maker so that for visitors, it is the museum that speaks about the things on display, conflating a meta-narrative from the artifact's original and sometimes hidden stories. It is very easy for the museum's voice to become not *another* but rather *the* voice of the artifact.

To return to Clarke-Hazlett's comment about changing artifact meanings, it is important to understand exactly how artifact meanings change. It is not a case of discrete seriality, since artifact meanings change much more quickly than whole societies. An artifact's meanings are plural, nearly inexhaustible and unforseeable, and no given time, place or culture can ever entirely circumscribe them, just as no museum's interpretation of a thing can ever completely anticipate the latent range of meanings a visitor brings to it. There is a combinatory logic of exponential proportions at work here: a large number of variables are ceaselessly re-combined to create new meanings when an object is displayed for visitors.

These meanings are all immanent and potential within and without the objects themselves, and, needless to say, none are "right" and none are "wrong," though there is a range of relevant meanings outside of which it would be hard to have a discussion as opposed to a purely personal opinion. A particular museum visitor's reading of a thing against the palimpsest of their own life will actualize for them a particular combination of meanings in a unique and ephemeral transaction. Artifacts don't speak and visitors don't listen, but viewers do read meanings from artifacts as they perceive them, and it is their active participation that actualizes artifact meanings. It is for this reason that there will always be a uniquely personal space around the museum visitor, even in the most public of institutions.

The factuality of a thing — its material, construction, function and provenance — forms a framework and a text that is read anew and differently by each of those who comes in contact with it and ultimately creates its social and economic value. The circumstances and meanings of its original creation and creator will be to some measure residual, but this authorial intention cannot be recovered intact, for we lack the grammar and the syntax to read those meanings — those unique circumstances perished with the maker. The originating meanings ascribed to and in the artifact by its creator take their place within the range of potential meanings of the thing, and become present to greater and lesser extents for subsequent viewers. They are always latent, and shimmer rather than appear directly, because we know they are there but cannot hold them. The knowledge that these original intentions lie within things accounts in part for the power of artifacts to move us, but we can erect at best an understanding parallel to that of the maker's.

Depending upon the exegetical skill of the perceiver, and the sensitivity of the reading, proportionately more of the originating meaning may be recovered. Experimental archaeologists, for instance, by controlling for variables and scrupulously monitoring their tools, materials and techniques, are able to

generate use-experiences out of artifacts, though these are of necessity still perceived through modern eyes and hands. But in the end what is recovered, however scrupulous the experiment, will always be a version.

What therefore is the role of material culture analysis within this universe of potential meanings? It is critical, in the best sense of the word. Material culture analysis should elucidate through scholarship the fundamental constituents of an artifact's existence — its material, function, construction and provenance, and then use these to iterate a value, always with the recognition that a given value will be situational, contingent and singular, and should not be presented in such a way as to exclude others, particularly when presented in an institutional context. Such an artifact reading should endeavour to the fullest extent possible to make plain what has grounded and informed it so that its profound particularity is not inadvertently transformed by imposing display into a universal truth. By using the material culture method to make it clear that we all must of necessity read things to constitute our lives, museums and other cultural institutions can engage their visitors in the process by which they come to know, as well as showing the end products of this knowing that they have more traditionally displayed.

To those preferring a more straightforward ascription of meaning, this might seem to be simply a descent into relativism and a retreat from the truth. It is more profitable, however, to view this stance as a candid recognition of the infinite complexity of the material world, and a means by which those of us who work in institutions can specify the meanings and values that things hold for us without presuming to have told all of the stories that lie within them. Once the imperialist (and futile) urge to closure of signification is forsaken, we can see items of material culture for what they truly are: artifacts on which and through which we write our lives in a wide variety of ways.

In a previous article, I outlined some of the ways in which material culture methodology could be applied to historic watercraft, and some of the insights that it could yield.[8] That research explored the techniques used to build canoes, and showed how changes in their construction technology were driven by conditions of use, economics and the social dimensions of the sport. Watercraft meet all of the criteria for material culture objects, being fashioned in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. They are richly meaningful cultural objects that can shed light on the lives, ways, and values of their users. When it comes to historic small craft, the issues raised in the earlier part of the article about how artifact meaning is understood and interpreted are particularly pertinent. In this study, I would like to shift attention from the creation of watercraft, which I considered earlier, to explore what happened to them after they left the builder's shop. To do so, I will examine in detail a particular watercraft form: the St Lawrence skiff, which flourished in the Thousand Islands region of the St Lawrence River primarily from the 1860s to the early years of the twentieth century. This study will draw out some of the skiff's many meanings and relate them to its producers and consumers to outline the ways that the boats function within a culture.

Origins and Construction: The Creation of the St Lawrence Skiff

If there is one thing that discussions of the origins of the St Lawrence skiff make clear, it is that there was no single, originating moment, no "invention." It is wise to be suspicious of all such claims, dates ascribed by the patent by the patent office notwithstanding, for the creation of a technological artifact is invariably a coming-together of many influences.[9]

Some theories of origin can be readily discounted. Andrew Steever, for instance, traces the skiff's form to aboriginal bark canoes.[10] To see a bark canoe in the skiff is to be seduced by the sharp-sterned shape to the exclusion of all other considerations.[11] Structurally, the skiff bears no resemblance whatsoever to any of the indigenous North American watercraft forms: the dugout, the bark canoe and the kayak.[12] The dugout was created by a wasting process from a single monolithic construction material; the bark canoe is a skin-first construction; and the kayak is a skin-on-frame construction. The skiff, by comparison, is profoundly northern European in its building techniques, and its lapstrake planking, clench nails, rivets and sharp-forefooted shape have more to do with Viking vessels than North American aboriginal watercraft, a fact that Steever acknowledges when discussing the shape of the keel.[13] This is not to suggest for a moment that the skiff's builders had Viking vessels in mind, or that the type entered the country at L'Anse aux Meadows, but simply that the skiff is not rooted in a North American tradition.

A particular watercraft form is always an amalgam of several strains of influence, includ-

ing, at a minimum, the origin of its builder (region, nation, training, tradition); the conditions of its use (prevailing winds, waves, currents, shorelines, cargoes); and locally available materials (species, condition, size, price, seasonality). The distillation of these influences into a watercraft design is situational and affected by evolutionary forces.[14] Vary one set of conditions, and an entirely different design may result. Vary another, and two similar designs with a family resemblance may evolve without necessarily being connected by a direct influence or route of transmission. For instance, similar conditions of available natural materials, geography and national origin of builders existed in the Adirondack region of upstate New York. One key use factor was different, however, for the Adirondack guideboat had to be capable of being portaged along chains of lakes and rivers, unlike the St Lawrence skiff. The two traditions therefore produced boats with many similarities and one essential difference, as the need for light weight and portability drove all of the guideboat's design considerations before it.[15]

For the St Lawrence skiff, one of the most important determinants of its design was the St Lawrence River itself. It is a substantial body of water, very different from the inland lakes and rivers of the Adirondacks or from the saltwater coasts. A boat to be used on it had to be seaworthy, at least insofar as any small open boat can be so considered.[16] In the region where the skiff was created, the river is filled with islands that played their part in its form, for it is a boat for local use, between islands and the mainland. Unlike other watercraft forms shaped by use on rivers, such as the batteau and the Durham boat, which carried freight and passengers on long journeys, the skiff evolved for short trips and for passengers, not primarily for freight.

By the early 1780s, United Empire Loyalists had arrived in the Great Lakes region in significant numbers, and they had brought with them, if not the St Lawrence skiff in its final form, at least the boats that would later be refined into it. A contemporary watercolour of a loyalist encampment shows small, lapstrake boats with two rowing thwarts. By the 1820s, diarists and writers were referring to rowing skiffs being used for pleasure and fishing trips. By this time, the design appears to have become fixed in its basic features.[17]

The term "skiff" conceals more than it reveals. Nearly every watercraft-using region in North America has a local boat type called a skiff. These vary tremendously in size, shape, use and sophistication. The adjective "St Lawrence" may originally have meant the area where a relatively common form of skiff was used, but by the middle of the nineteenth century it referred to a specific set of design characteristics. The salient features of the St Lawrence skiff can all be clearly seen in a boat built circa 1890 by the shop of Moses Sauvé Jr in Brockville, Ontario (Fig. 1).[18]

As with any watercraft type, there were many small variations of construction and material among the work of individual builders. Differences also existed between boats from the U.S. and Canadian sides of the river. The following description focuses on the features most characteristic of the type, those that would have caused a contemporary observer to identify the boat as a St Lawrence skiff.[19] This is not intended to be a conclusive discussion of the St Lawrence skiff in all of its aspects. Indeed, that study, which might parallel Durant's seminal work on the Adirondack guideboat,

Fig. 1
Sauvé skiff as restored, 1994

remains to be written.[20] There will invariably be exceptions found to almost every one of the points made below, but it is nonetheless important for our purposes here to draw out the basic features of the boat.

The St Lawrence skiff is relatively long and narrow, with a length to beam ratio typically in the range of 5 or 6:1 for 18′ to 20′ (5.5 m to 6 m) boats and 4.5 to 4.8:1 for 15′ to 16′ (4.6 m to 4.9 m) examples. The ratio for the Sauvé skiff in Figure 1 is 5.5:1.

The boat is sharp-sterned, and the body aft is typically finer and less buoyant than forward. Skiffs were most often planked with six to seven strakes of eastern white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*). The wide plank keel was typically hardwood, most often white oak (*Quercus alba*). Planking could be either conventional lapstrake or a smooth-skin construction made by bevelling both upper and lower plank laps. The degree of exterior smoothness depended on how much the laps were bevelled, and some American skiffs were smooth below the waterline and had protruding laps above.

The boats had steam-bent white oak or rock elm (*Ulmus thomasii*) frames of rectangular, trapezoidal or rounded section, typically on 5″ to 6″ (13 cm to 15 cm) centres. Gunwales were finished with inwales and outwales (known locally as the "banding" and the "binding," respectively) and could incorporate narrow side decks. Floorboards were invariably fitted, and could extend all the way up to the gunwales. In this case they were known locally as the "lining."

Long bow and stern decks of mahogany (any number of species of the genus *Swietana*), Spanish cedar (*Cedrela mexicana*) or butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) and occasionally sycamore (*Platamus occidentalis*), with a strongly curved inner edge covered either end of the boat and were jointed into the gunwale structure. These typically had bent coamings around the curved inner edges, which also ran into the gunwales, and were supported on two deckbeams. A thin deck cap, sometimes in contrasting wood, covered the centreline seam on the decks. The inner deckbeams at either end of the boat could be decoratively sawn on their lower edges, and the curves picked up by the beams below the fan-shaped seats at the bow and stern. Canadian builders were more likely to use this kind of scrollwork.

The St Lawrence skiff was primarily constructed for recreational fishing and guiding, and its interior arrangements reflect those uses. Skiffs had two wide thwarts, also known on the river as "seats," and fan-shaped seats assembled from narrow longitudinal boards in the bow and stern. A visitor to the region would most often experience the boat in the company of a guide. The oarsman sat forward of midships, and the paying passenger, known locally as the "sport," far aft in the stern. The passenger would be accommodated in a "skiff chair," a cane-backed and seated chair whose arms and back were supported by turned spindles. This would be placed in the stern, facing forward. Larger skiffs could carry a second skiff chair on the aft rowing thwart, facing aft.

When the boat was rowed solo, it could be turned end for end and rowed stern first, with the oarsman taking the other thwart, but using the same set of oarlocks, which were located roughly equidistant between the two seats. Some boats utilized a removable filler piece of the same stock as the thwart, inserted for solo rowing, which allowed better positioning. Forward of the sport's seat in the stern could be holders for two fishing rods, which were held over opposite sides at right angles to the boat. An opening spring clip on the gunwale held the rod itself, while the butt was set into a wooden plate screwed to the ribs on the opposite side, occasionally ornamented with a thin metal horseshoe or shield. One or both rowing thwarts could also have a fish box, typically a tin bottom wrapped around wooden sides, which matched the shape of the boat's interior and slid under the thwart on the floorboards.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the skiff, also derived from its use for recreational fishing, was its non-feathering oars. The boat's relatively narrow beam meant that the oars typically overlapped at the centreline by the width of their handles. This necessitated a cross-handed rowing style. The tholepins on which the oars pivoted were formed from metal pins set in wooden blocks screwed to the gunwales, their tops protected against chafe by leather pads. The gunwale fitting could also be a metal casting, in which case only the oars were leathered. A variety of fixed and folding metal outriggers were also used, which extended the span and permitted longer oars to be used. The characteristic skiff oars were square in section from the end of the handles to just outside the gunwales, and oval from there to the blade. A hole drilled in the square section of the loom was mortised back at a forty-five degree angle top and bottom, and fitted with leathers.

The non-feathering oars were an advantage for fishermen, allowing the oarsman to look after his catch by dropping them in a hurry to

boat a fish without fear of losing them overboard. The square section of the loom also acted as a counterbalance to the outboard weight of the oar, and made for a very light touch on the handles. Professional guides rowed with a light, quick stroke, their backs almost straight and this meant that they could efficiently cover long distances day after day.

Enthusiasts and Advertisers: The Consumption of the St Lawrence Skiff

Over a period of fifty to sixty years, the St Lawrence skiff evolved from a tool to a product that was consumed in both image and actuality. These patterns of consumption generated a range of secondary and tertiary meanings as the skiff was gradually commodified. An analysis of only some of the large number of images of the St Lawrence skiff suggests that its meanings can be grouped into at least six categories: Artifactual, Genealogical, Social, Commercial, Competitive and Interpretive.

An original set of users' requirements and natural conditions gave rise to the St Lawrence skiff as a distinct watercraft form. These artifactual meanings are carried by the physical presence of the thing itself as shown in Fig. 1. The graphical representation of the skiff in its lines plan and the accompanying numerical reduction of those lines into a table of offsets capture the essence of the design: its three-dimensional shape. The further detailing and arrangement of this shape can be captured through photography and through the measurement and documentation of the materials and construction of extant examples.[21] Along with a knowledge of tools, materials and processes appropriate to the time and place, this information is sufficient to reproduce the thing. Assuming that the work is well-carried out, a boat so produced would be recognized by a contemporary user of the original artifact as embodying a unique set of characteristics that in their totality enable its identification as a St Lawrence skiff.

Running parallel to this artifactual meaning is a genealogical one. Although the St Lawrence skiff's type may be a unique response to a particular set of conditions, the essence of its construction methods was evolved thousands of miles and years away, and it is part of a long tradition of watercraft development and use. On a regional level, there is the family of the skiff itself. During the period when the skiff was flourishing, detailed lines and construction plans such as we now know were virtually unknown, particularly for the scale of shop and kind of builder where skiffs were most often produced. Nineteenth-century small craft were frequently "modelled" by the carving of a half-model from a solid block of wood. For an experienced builder, such a model, combined with his customary construction practices, carried all the information that was needed to produce another boat.

From the half-model, or measurements taken from an existing boat, the builder would produce a set of moulds.[22] Set up on a strongback composed of two parallel timbers on edge, they required the addition of a keel, stem and sternpost to form the skeleton of a new boat. A customer who desired a longer or shorter boat could be accommodated by moving the moulds in or out along the strongback. The builder could also make a six-plank skiff instead of a seven-plank one, or the lower edge of the mould could be added to in order to produce a deeper boat. The humble appearance of these moulds

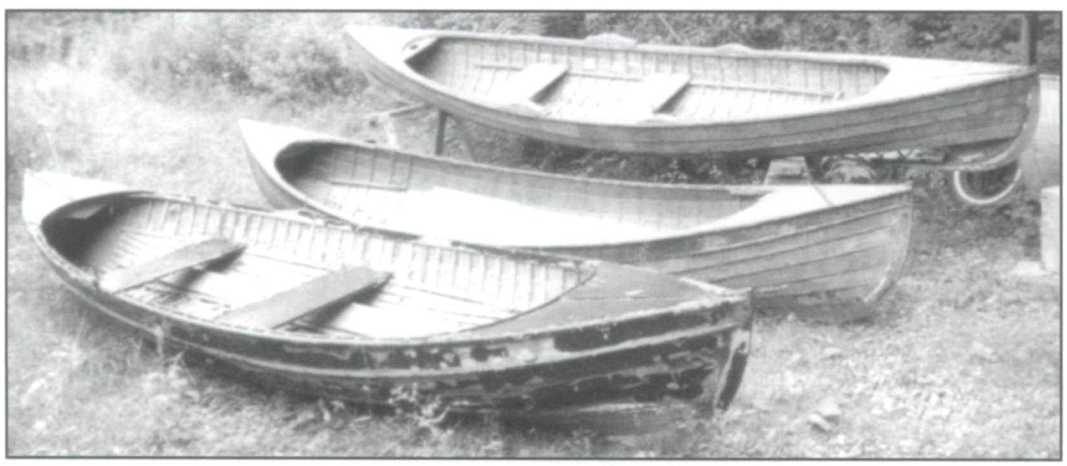

Fig. 2
Gananoque-area St Lawrence skiffs, early to mid twentieth century

and of their builder's day job as a farmer belies their importance — they were the carriers of the essence of the skiff, and their generative capacity ensured its survival from builder to user to builder to user.

The design repertoire from which a skiff builder drew was composed of knowledge of other boats in the area, such as the skiffs shown in Figure 2, leavened by the builder's own sensibilities and preferences. Within a particular town or region, an individual's boats would be well-known. Each builder had hallmarks in the shape of a hull, the curve of a stem or the treatment of a particular detail. In their aggregate, these differentiated expressions of the same basic requirements represented a tremendous reservoir of knowledge. A builder who had grown up in that area would have absorbed, both consciously and unconsciously, this "family tree." It would be next to impossible for some of this knowledge not to be represented in the boats they constructed. Watercraft evolution was, from time immemorial until recreational boats became fully subsumed into consumer culture in the early twentieth century (whereupon evolution became driven by advertising, and not by the user's needs), an essentially conservative process.

Once the skiff left the builder's shop and went into use, additional meanings took hold. In fact, they were operative before the skiff was constructed, for it was in the social realm that demand for the boat was created. Within two decades of the skiff's solidification as a distinct regional watercraft type, a further set of requirements and conditions came into play, which caused this locally developed watercraft form to attain a much wider significance: the rise of the vacation.[23] The construction of railways, which provided access into hitherto remote areas, was combined with increasing concern about the unhealthiness of city life and a growing literature about the salubrious effects of a stay in the wilderness.

Through the vacation, and in particular the fishing trip, the skiff achieved national and international recognition. For many of the hundreds of thousands who visited the Thousand Islands region in the mid and late nineteenth

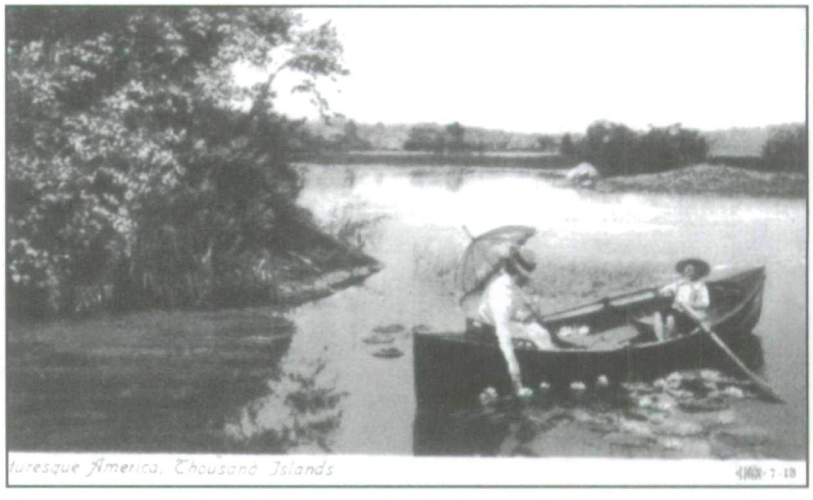

Fig. 3
The skiff as the embodiment of arcadian sentimentality: a late nineteenth-century colour postcard (collection of the author)

Fig. 4
A professional guide plies his trade as a "sport" looks on in admiration. (Frank H. Taylor, "Muskie Fishing on the St Lawrence," 1880. Collection of the Antique Boat Museum, Clayton, New York, accession # 83.035)


THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER SKIFF.

FROM "GLIMPSES OF ST. LAWRENCE SUMMER LIFE."

FRANK H. TAYLOR.

EVERY visitor to the Thousand Islands, who is at all *au fait* in the matter of sailing, must admire the grace, speed and capabilities of the St. Lawrence River Skiff, and no less the skill and daring with which it is handled upon the breezy

Fig. 5
The steadfast guide and his faithful skiff (St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company, 1893 catalogue. Reprinted by the Antique Boat Museum, Clayton, New York.)

century, their experience took place in a highly structured world quite removed from the "nature" to which they were supposedly being introduced: they arrived on a train, stayed in a hotel with electric lights and running water and were shepherded on the water by a professional guide whose duties ranged from rowing the boat to baiting the hook to cooking lunch. It was nonetheless nature that they were pursuing, and the skiff was their vehicle.

The wide distribution of images such as the colour postcard in Figure 3 played upon key late nineteenth century themes to create a demand for the skiff and the experience of the Thousand Islands. The scene evokes both pastorality and filial piety, for not only is the woman in the skiff chair able to recline amid healthful and beautiful natural surroundings, and literally stop and smell the flowers, but she is carried there by her young son in a powerful image of idealized family life.

A less-recumbent but equally compelling image is made by Philadelphia artist Frank H. Taylor's 1880 painting "Muskie Fishing on the St Lawrence" (Fig. 4). This shows the skiff in its natural habitat — in pursuit of the legendary muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy*), revered among sport anglers for its craftiness and vigour. The setting is the same kind of sylvan inlet as in the postcard, but here the climactic moment approaches as the guide reaches out with a gaff to boat the fish. The guide and the skiff were inseparable parts of the Thousand Island experience. As St Lawrence skiffs became renowned for their good qualities, so did their guides. An 1889 advertisement for the Hubbard House Hotel in Clayton, New York, promised "Experienced and trusty oarsmen, with the best of boats and tackle, always in readiness for fishing and pleasure parties."[24] Taylor, a frequent observer of the Thousand Islands scene and a summer resident at his cottage on Round Island, described the guides as: "good fellows, being temperate, honest, and capable, full of dry wit, and having a rich fund of experience worth the hearing. They think for themselves, and cling to the traditions of their toilsome calling with tenacity. There is nothing of the hackman about them. They can give their patrons far more than their money's worth upon any summer day."[25]

The skiff was apostrophized in equally positive terms: "All of the boats in these waters are excellent. Such a thing as a snub-nosed, cranky, or gayly painted but disreputable and unsafe punt is unknown here, and any amphibious native who should dare to show one around the wharves of Clayton or "the Bay" would lose all claims to the respect of his neighbours."[26] Henry Eckford was similarly struck by the boat's good qualities: "At the Thousand Islands there is an indigenous boat for fishing and rowing, remarkable for the methods by which it is managed under sail... Holding five or six persons easily, it is of strong, yet light build, and in its lines probably the most beautiful rowboat afloat."[27]

These widely distributed images and written descriptions created a considerable demand for both the skiff itself and the experiences that it represented. The skiff's transformation from a tool into a commodity placed additional commercial meanings onto the boat.

While many skiffs were constructed in relatively small-scale shops, larger enterprises were also created. The most widely known was the St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company of Clayton, New York. It began when a dentist named Bain, a summer visitor to the area, persuaded other wealthy visitors to invest and form a company around Xavier Colon, an established local builder. They capitalized A. Bain and Company, expanded Colon's shop and equipment, and turned him from a proprietor into an employee and in their turn eventually became the St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company.[28] They placed great stock in their skiff's origins in Colon's earlier designs, and their advertising seldom failed to make the debatable claim that they were selling "The Famous St Lawrence Skiffs, of which we are the original designers and builders."[29]

The company's production soon rose dramatically as the establishment expanded. And

who was buying all of these skiffs? It was not the professional guides, for they often built their own boats, and in any case did not buy a new boat for each season. A whole new market had been created. It was at visitors to the area that the company's marketing efforts were now directed, for they were increasingly rowing and owning their own skiffs.

The St Lawrence skiff was acquiring all of the trappings of a commodity in a consumer society, including paid advertising, published catalogues, booths at trade fairs and breathless testimonial letters. The experience of being in a skiff, and to an even greater extent the purchase of one, had become the means to a whole new end. As Grant McCracken says, "objects tell us not who we are, but who we wish we were" and "consumer goods were fascinating for consumers of the nineteenth century because they were increasingly the residence of social meaning and new opportunities for defining self and the world."[30] The experience of a boat that had once required personal interaction with a local boatbuilder could now be had by mail order, from a printed catalogue that listed the current year's models. By 1890, skiffs were being shipped from the St Lawrence area as far away as Galveston, Texas.

This trend perhaps reached its apotheosis when the St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company built *Genie* in 1890. Described at the time by a boosterish local paper as "the finest skiff ever built," she was ordered by R. M. Jones of Penn's Charter School in Philadelphia. When completed, she was placed on exhibition in John Wanamaker's department store in the same city.[31] The transformation from the workboat of guides and farmers to commodified consumer good was complete — skiffs could now be found out just in the Thousand Islands but down aisle three, across from the vacuum cleaners.[32]

In 1886, a correspondent from *The American Canoeist*, the house organ of the American Canoe Association (A.C.A.), paid a visit to the Brockville establishment of the Sauvé brothers. He found a busy shop, although it is likely hyperbole to say, as he did, that one might see upwards of five hundred skiffs on the water off Brockville of a summer's evening.[33]

The skiffs he describes differ somewhat from those with which the fishing guides made their living. These Brockville boats were mainly smooth skinned. They had spoon-bladed feathering oars, replacing the earlier square-loomed ones that used gunwale-mounted thole pins. They were without fish boxes, but were fitted with rudders and two-masted canoe sailing rigs. Something had clearly caused these St Lawrence skiffs to evolve into a variant of the original type. The difference may be accounted for in part by the distance between the American and Canadian sides of the river, where the boats had always varied slightly in form and characteristics. But a much stronger force was also at work, for the Sauvé shop was best known for its racing skiffs.

Sitting astride the artifactual, genealogical, social and commercial meanings already explored is competition. When competition appears it at once subsumes and changes the other meanings, for when technologies and artifacts are used in competition, it quickly becomes the driving force in their development. Design changes induced by competition then eventually filter back to the mainstream, often in a denatured or de-tuned version that retains the outward characteristics of the high-performance model. Such was the case for the Sauvé shop, where two competitive influences were driving the evolution of their skiff designs. The first was the local success of *Yukwa*, *Freyja*, *Choctaw* and other of their racing sailing skiffs.[34] The second was the appropriation of the racing sailing skiff by canoeists from the American Canoe Association, which had been holding its annual meet in the area for some time.

These canoeists came to the skiff with a strong competitive background. Many had been and were racing yachtsmen of some repute. The A.C.A.'s hotly-contested races and trophies encouraged rapid design and rig development within general rules governing length and beam. When these canoeists saw the skiff they were undoubtedly attracted by both its sharp-sterned shape and the challenge of sailing it, a challenge not unlike that of keeping their own racing canoes, typically 16′ (4.9 m) in length and but 30″ (76 cm) in beam, upright and going fast.[35]

To the skiff's slim hull they added phenomenally large rigs, sometimes carrying as much as 650 ft^2 (60 m^2) of sail in two masts on a skiff with a waterline of 24′ (7.3 m), as was the case with *Leprechaun*, owned by F. X. Laque and skippered by William O. Shea, which sailed out of Gananoque with a crew of five or six in 1893.[36] These racing skiffs were unquestionably pushing the limits of sailing performance with the available technology. After noting pointedly that "A high rate of speed is essential to modern civilization," Vaux said, "There is a class of boats on the St Lawrence River called skiffs which carry more sail in proportion to their displacement than any other boats in the

world...and which can outsail not only all other boats of their size, but very much larger craft as well."[37]

The skiff's fortunes rose dramatically as the Thousand Islands became a tourist destination in the later nineteenth century, and fell just as dramatically in the early twentieth. That is not to suggest that small boats were no longer used on the river, or that skiffs died out entirely. A new motive power was replacing the sturdy guide of the earlier years as various kinds of motors began to democritize boating. Beginning with the naphtha launch, which did not require a licensed engineer like earlier steam powerplants, and moving to inboard and eventually outboard motors, the recreational boating experience became much more widely available. No longer did prospective fishermen have to hire a guide to take them out, or even know how to row. As Vaux's late nineteenth century comment so accurately presaged, life was beginning to speed up, even on vacation.

These technological changes caused hull forms to evolve. For instance, the outboard motor required a very different boat than the rowing guide. The weight of the motor demanded more buoyancy in the aft sections to support it, and the transom had to be relatively broad to enable the boat to use the outboard's greater power and get up on a plane. The river hadn't changed, and neither had the fish, but the expectations and technologies of the users had. The rowing skiff began to pass from prominence, and the boat shops began to produce motorized craft. This was a gradual process, and social changes also affected the skiff, as bicycles and automobiles began to compete for peoples' leisure time. Such rowing skiffs as were in existence were preserved, and some new ones were built, but not in anything like the numbers they once had been. Except for those who lived in the immediate region, the skiff then passed into the realm of memory and recollection.

Once out of widespread and regular use, the skiffs became artifacts. Some have been preserved to this day, often within the same family for generations. Others were left for lost in fields and along the shore, and gradually returned their constituent materials to the water and soil. Still others were acquired for public collections, and so a whole layer of interpretive meaning was added to the skiff's signification as they were displayed in a museum setting.

The largest collection of skiffs on public display is at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton, New York. The display is very spare, and for the most part, the boats are just set out on the floor of the building. Labelling is sparse and erratic, and some boats are not identified at all. Some bear worn, original finishes. Others are suspiciously shiny, and may look better than they ever did when in use on the river. It is a striking experience to see a whole building full of these boats, not unlike reading about the vast flocks of passenger pigeons that once darkened North America's skies but now are seen no more. It is as if a large wave had crested down the river, picked the boats up bodily and deposited them in the museum, leaving few or none behind on the river itself. But they once were outside the museum's walls, as ubiquitous on the river as fibreglass runabouts are today.

The Brockville Museum has a single Sauvé skiff in its collection. Displayed on a low cradle in front of a photomural showing a river scene, the skiff could embody an entire era, when Brockville boats were once the talk of the river, and the Sauvé shop bustled with new orders. The museum's files have information about the Sauvé family and its history, provided by a granddaughter of one of the boatbuilders' sisters, but none of it is used to interpret the boat. It sits serenely in the gallery, its smooth curves and high craftsmanship only hinting at the skill and culture that gave rise to it.

For all of the skiffs on display on both sides of the river, potential meanings abound. For those with first-hand experience, they can spark recollections of boy and girlhoods on the water, of bright summer days and long rows in the twilight. But if the display consists only of boats shown as boats and largely uninterpreted, these images will work only for those visitors with personal experience. For them, the boats will trigger memories. Is there a way that they could also again create memories? What of all the other visitors, who come from somewhere else to the Thousand Islands to learn where they are, and what the place is and has been? Can that story really be told without including the skiff, and would it not be ever so much richer for it? It is possible to tap the pent-up experiences, the knowledge and the meanings of these artifacts, and re-integrate them into the context from which they came?

These small craft on display inside buildings demonstrate clearly the inherent contradictions of preserving boats in museums. Through saving a tangible, concrete object, we seek to preserve intangible experiences. Through static display, we seek to evoke life and motion. Through display of an end product, we seek to interpret a process. To capture the experience

of a thing born, and borne, on the water, we hold it on land. To understand the life lived, we look at the mortal remains.

The real challenge for the material culture of watercraft lies not in how we carry out scholarship and research, and in what meanings we uncover. It lies rather in how we hold those meanings in relation, and what interpretive structures we devise to carry them to the public through exhibitions, the logical end result of material culture research. The display of these skiffs provides a case in point. Yes, we all have the artifacts in our collections. But have we truly worked with them to rehabilitate their full range of meanings? I have shown how watercraft can be reservoirs of meaning, and the starting point for any number of personal experiences. Unless we devote ourselves to creating a space in which this can happen, however, they will remain mute and cryptic things, objects to be wondered at but not understood.

What would a watercraft exhibit look like that would truly fulfill the objectives of material culture research? A good start has been made with an exhibit at the Adirondack Museum, which holds one of the richest small craft collections in North America. Called "Boats and Boating in the Adirondacks," it is complemented by a comprehensive catalogue of the same name. It replaced a long-standing exhibit that treated the boats much like insects in the old entomology displays, sorting them by shape and colour and setting them out in pleasing patterns but not really interpreting them. This new exhibit builds a context around the boats, showing how they were built, and used, and what they meant to the economic and social life of the region. Personalities are also introduced, and linked with particular boats.

This exhibit points the way, but much more could be done, particularly with a boat as rich in social history as the St Lawrence skiff. The tools and techniques of its builders, the voices and recollections of its users, the boats themselves and the whole phenomenon of the tourist industry in the Thousand Islands region could all be brought together in an interpretive framework that would fully interpret the artifacts using the tools of material culture analysis. In this way, some of the depth and range of meanings present in these deceptively simple artifacts could be brought to life for museum visitors, and their experience of them greatly enriched.

NOTES

1. Christopher Clarke-Hazlett, "Interpreting Environmental History Through Material Culture," *Material History Review* 46 (Fall 1997): 6.
2. In earlier works on design, such as Owen Jones's *A Grammar of Ornament*; in architecture, such as Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*; and most notably in anthropological and literary structuralism. With the exception of Jones's nineteenth century work, these approaches are almost invariably based on the work Swiss linguist and pioneering structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure.
3. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 66.
6. Ibid., 68.
7. Clarke-Hazlett, "Interpreting Environmental History," 7.
8. John Summers, "Toward a Material History of Watercraft," *Material History Review* 40 (Autumn 1994): 6–18.
9. John Keats, *The Skiff and the River* (Nantucket, Mass.: The Herrick Collection, 1988), 10. Even so pivotal and often-studied a technology as the steamship is surrounded by disagreement about its true inventor. See for instance Thomas James Flexner, *Steamboats Come True* (New York: The Viking Press, 1944; reprint Boston, Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1978).
10. Andrew Steever, "Native to the Thousand Islands," parts one and two, *WoodenBoat* 20 (January/February 1978): 48–51; *WoodenBoat* 21 (March/April 1978): 26–29.
11. The term "sharp-sterned" is preferred over the more commonly used "double-ended," as strictly speaking a double-ended boat is symmetrical fore and aft, and most skiffs are not. John Gardner, "The Saint Lawrence River Skiff," *Building Classic Small Craft* 2: 156–157.
12. "There is nothing about the Indian Canoe in the structure of the skiff," Keats, *Skiff and the River*, 10.
13. Steever, "Native to the Thousand Islands," part two, 26.
14. Speaking of small craft on Chesapeake Bay, Reuel B. Parker explains the Darwinian model thus: "Builders became known for their styles — subtle design and construction improvements through trial and error. Inferior boats vanished; successful boats improved." "On the Trail of a Unicorn: Reviving the Extinct Eastern Shore Stick-up," *WoodenBoat* 140 (January/February, 1998): 37.
15. Keats, *Skiff and the River*, 10.
16. Ibid., 7–8; Gardner, *Building Classic Small Craft*, 156.
17. The fullest treatment of the origins and evolution of the rowing skiff can be found in Phillip Gillesse, "Developments of the Rowing Skiff," *Museum Small Craft Association Transactions* 2 (1995): 83–84.

18. Dating is attributed on the basis of the skiff's construction, its similarity to examples of Sauvé boats in public collections and known dates of operation for the Sauvé establishment. This boat was purchased in 1979 in near-derelict condition and subsequently restored to the state shown in Fig. 1.
19. The largest institutional collection of St Lawrence skiffs is held at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton, New York. There are several at Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut, and in private collections in the Thousand Islands region. Both the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York, and the Brockville Museum in Brockville, Ontario, have Sauvé skiffs. The following general description of the St Lawrence skiff at the height of its popularity is drawn from an examination of boats in these collections and selected references, including: Keats; Gardner; and the 1893 catalogue of the St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company of Clayton, New York (reprinted 1983 by the Antique Boat Museum).
20. Kenneth and Helen Durant, *The Adirondack Guide-Boat* (Blue Mountain Lake, New York. Adirondack Museum, 1980).
21. See for example the techniques outlined in Paul Lipke, Peter Spectre, Benjamin A. G. Fuller, eds., *Boats: A Manual for Their Documentation* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History and the Museum Small Craft Association, 1993).
22. Nathan Cranker began building boats with his father George when he was still in school, working in a loft over the pig shed on the family farm. Though a farmer by trade in later life, he continued to build boats. The family was of United Empire Loyalist stock, and so his skiffs were in some manner in a line of descent from those depicted in the watercolour of the first Loyalist encampments in the early 1780s. (See note 17). R. H. MacGregor, communication with the author, September 1997.
23. Adrian G. Ten Cate, ed., *Pictorial History of the Thousand Islands of the St Lawrence River* (Brockville, Ont.: Besancourt Publishers, 1982), 119, 122–123, 142.
24. *American Canoe Association Yearbook*, 1889, p. xxv. The cover of the 1893 edition of *Estes Standard Guide to the Thousand Islands* featured a Frank H. Taylor sketch of a lean and rustic guide with smoking pipe looking astern at his corpulent citified passenger as their St Lawrence skiff rested on shore.
25. Frank H. Taylor, "Grindstone Island and Its Surroundings," *Outing* 4, no. 1 (April 1884): 31.
26. Taylor, "Grindstone Island," 30.
27. Henry Eckford, "Camp Grindstone," *The Century Magazine: Midsummer Holiday Number* (August 1885), cited in Gardner, *Building Classic Small Craft*, 151.
28. Keats, *Skiff and the River*, 71–75.
29. St Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Co. 1893 catalogue, p. 4.
30. McCracken, *Culture*, 24, 117.
31. "St Lawrence Skiff Co. Report," in *On the St. Lawrence*, Clayton, New York, 21 March 1890.
32. McCracken, *Culture*, 25, identifies the fundamental importance of the emergence of the department store for the creation of modern consumer culture. The skiff *Genie* is in the collection of the Antique Boat Museum (accession # 77.033).
33. Anon, "The Brockville (St Lawrence) Racing Skiff," *The American Canoeist* 5, no. 5, (May 1886): 66–68.
34. "Brockville Boats to the Fore," *The Brockville Recorder*, 8 September 1890, n.p.
35. C. Bowyer Vaux, a leading canoeist of the day, put it bluntly: "The racing skiff of 1891 is exactly like a canoe — is, in fact, a big canoe." "The St Lawrence Skiff," *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 20 (April–September 1892): 326. And further, "A sailing skiff is a canoe in every sense of the word, and the racing skiffs on the St Lawrence have adopted all the canoeing devices," C. B. Vaux, *Canoeing, Spalding's Athletic Library* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1894), 30.
36. *A.C.A. Yearbook*, 1894, p. 57.
37. Vaux, "Skiff Racing on the St Lawrence," *Harper's Weekly* (18 September 1899): 713.