

Zen-like level of contemplation while chopping was delighted to let the machine mince onions... I held out against owning a food processor for years; I really enjoy the task of chopping and mincing with a good knife...Eventually the smell of my old blender motor's overheating in its valiant effort to turn chick peas and sesame paste into hummus drove me to it. I have had to admit that, even with all its parts elbowing the dishes out of the way in the dishwasher, it's a valued ally.

What we take away from this book, finally, is that McFeely herself probably can bake a delicious cherry pie, has had predominantly positive experiences in the kitchen, and was possibly inspired to write in praise of domestic satisfaction as a result of the pleasure derived in

this way. I suppose it's as good a reason as any to write a book, but the self-referentiality of a good portion of the argument suggests a degree of circular reasoning, unfortunately at some cost to the book's credibility as a serious research vehicle. Once the impulse to write was generated, it might well have been better to step back and let more distanced evidence drive the defense of the thesis.

North American eating practices offer a point of departure, exemplified in these two books, to a large variety of cultural traits and practices. The refrigerator door is now open, as it were, to further research and analysis centred on what can be inferred through such investigation. There is, indeed, much food for thought that remains to be profitably explored.

Donald Blake Webster, *Rococo to Rustique: Early French-Canadian Furniture in the Royal Ontario Museum*

EDWARD S. COOKE, JR

Webster, Donald Blake. *Rococo to Rustique: Early French-Canadian Furniture in the Royal Ontario Museum*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2000. 238 pp.; many colour illus., bib., cloth, \$70, ISBN 0-88854-426-X; paper, \$45, ISBN 0-88854-425-1.

Over the past seventy years, and especially in the period 1963 to 1978, the Royal Ontario Museum has assembled through gift and purchase one of the most comprehensive institutional collections of Quebec furniture. Therefore the publication of a catalogue of its most prominent examples has been eagerly awaited. Donald Webster's *Rococo to Rustique* makes this significant collection accessible through a well-illustrated discussion of the 158 most important works of furniture and architectural trim.

Following an introduction that seeks to provide the wider regional and historical context in which the furniture was produced and used and brief overviews on style and materials, the author devotes the bulk of the volume to the catalogue of the collection. Each object from the collection is illustrated with a large colour plate, the majority of which are sized larger than a half page. For each of these objects Webster provides provenance and acquisition information, addresses stylistic issues, and links the ROM object to other published examples.

While Webster's volume certainly showcases a number of important examples of Quebec furniture, the volume is seriously flawed in terms of its scholarly aspirations and in its presentation. At a time when furniture scholarship has reached new analytical and interpretive levels in the United States and Britain, Webster has taken a rather conservative approach.¹ His introductory essays, which have no footnotes, provide merely a soft background to the collection. There is little attempt to work the furniture and its specific context. For example he notes that church commissions are the foundation of artisanal activity, yet never examines the woodworking traditions at any of the churches and fails to extend the dynamics of transmission to the domestic realm. In England and the United States, Anthony Wells-Coles, Christopher Gilbert, Bill Cotton, Robert Trent, and Robert St George have used church woodwork as an effective way to unlock regional artifactual dialects and recover shop traditions. No such effort is evident in *Rococo to Rustique*. Such field work would have helped Webster pin down the origins of more of the collection.

The emphasis on form and style overwhelms other avenues of analysis. I wanted to know more about some of the cabinetmakers such as Jean Baillargé, Jean LeVasseur, and Louis-Amable Quévillon: the structure of their shops, the type of

work they undertook, their influence, etc. Even in the introduction there was little specifically on the craftsmen and their world. What was the role of the joiner and turner in the New France economy? Was it different from that of Anglo-American craftsmen? There is a wealth of comparative scholarship that would be useful to this discussion. Similarly I found the discussion of wood and construction perfunctory. Microanalysis of wood is now standard for collection catalogues yet this volume relies on risky visual recognition. Distinguishing between different types of wood and finding specific secondary woods could have helped group or regionalize different examples. The general discussion of construction in the introduction was not followed up effectively or interpretively in the catalogue entries. Webster notes the distinct French-Canadian tradition of a slotted six-board chest on page 103, but this is an exception. The author never discusses drawer construction of the case furniture even though American scholars for the past thirty-five years have employed such analysis to address shop traditions and regional approaches. There are also missed opportunities for analysis such as the double-pinned stretchers of a number of chairs (79, 81, 82, and 84). Was this characteristic of a certain region or shop tradition within Quebec?

I raise these questions because the genre of furniture collection publications in the United States has clearly advanced considerably further. Comparison with an excellent recent catalogue, such as Gerald W. R. Ward's *American Case Furniture in the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1988), reveals the shortcomings of Webster's catalogue. For each of the examples in the Yale catalogue, Ward provides a thorough description of form and construction,

records inscriptions, comments on condition and repairs, lists the woods identified through micro-analysis, gives measurements, compiles the bibliography and provenance for that example, and then writes an interpretive discussion of that example, complete with footnotes. I mention the Yale catalogue as an exemplar because I sense that Webster produced this volume in a vacuum, without regard to the developing American scholarship.

The publication of Webster's *Rococo to Rustique* and John Fleming's *The Painted Furniture of French Canada 1700-1840* (1994) suggests that the most prominent strand of recent Canadian furniture scholarship has not followed up on the pioneering work of Jean Palardy, whose *The Early Furniture of French Canada* was first published in 1963. Palardy's research into period documents and anthropological bent were in keeping with furniture scholarship at that time, but the Webster and Fleming volumes seem anachronistic. These well-illustrated volumes produced by prestigious museums are geared towards a popular market and investigate neither the intentions of the maker nor the aspirations of the user. They do not build upon Palardy but merely use that pioneering volume to reference objects that look similar. It is unfortunate that the museums did not charge their authors to undertake original research and to write scholarly and attractive catalogues that would bring more sophisticated scholarship to bear on a remarkable and expressive body of surviving furniture. There are several current examples of innovative scholarship on Canadian furniture, Walter Peddle and Janet Cook come to mind here, and this type of rigorous research should be applied to the objects illustrated by Fleming and Webster.² Certainly the surviving Quebec furniture deserves such analysis.

NOTES

1. A good example of the vitality and interests of American furniture history is *American Furniture*, published annually since 1993 by the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
2. See Walter Peddle, *Routes: Exploring the British Origins of Newfoundland Outport Furniture Design*

(St John's: Newfoundland Museum, 1994) and Janet Cook, *Coalescence of Styles: The Ethnic Heritage of St. John River Valley Regional Furniture, 1763-1851* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).