

Compte rendu d'exposition

Once in French America / Il était une fois en Amérique française

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Once in French America/Il était une fois en Amérique française

Venue: Gallery C, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec

Curators and Historians: Jean-Pierre Hardy, Chief Project Curator and Quebec Historian; Jean-Pierre Chrestien, Curator of Quebec Archaeology; Jean-François Blanchette, Curator of Canadian Material Culture; John Willis, Historian, Canadian Postal Museum

Designer: Design+ Communication Inc., Montreal
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Accompanying publication: Georges-Hébert Germain, *Les coureurs des bois : la saga des Indiens blancs* (Outremont, Quebec: Libre expression, 2003), ISBN 2764800606 / *Adventurers in the New World: The Saga of the Coureurs des Bois* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003), ISBN 0660190753; 160 pp., maps, portraits, over 300 colour photographs and illustrations, including original illustrations by Francis Back, CDN\$39.95

Five years in the making, the major exhibit *Once in French America/Il était une fois en Amérique française* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization marks the 400th anniversary of *permanent French settlement* in North America. As such, it recalls Samuel de Champlain's 1604 founding of Port-Royal on the Fundy shore and coincides with a plethora of quadricentennial events in Quebec and the Maritimes. As is often the case with commemorations, the date of 1604 is surrounded by a minor tempest of crosscutting historical perceptions regarding the true date and place of the first French colony. Some will point out that, before building Port-Royal, Champlain overwintered at Sainte-Croix Island. This speck of soil on the Maine border happens to fall in the United States, where it is duly commemorated as the *birthplace* of French America. Others will maintain that the founding of Quebec in 1608 supercedes both Port-Royal and Sainte-Croix Island

in that the city remains the oldest permanent French settlement in the New World. In all fairness, however, 1604 has become an iconic date, rising like a giant bookend partway along the shelf of Canadian history along with its counterpart of 1759, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. These bookends frame the cultural nexus that was New France, a paradoxical font of pride, chagrin and envy that continues to well up, centuries later, as one of the most distinctive and powerful aspects of the Canadian identity. The exhibit covers the period 1604–1759 and, while magnificently unveiling the uniqueness and cultural richness of New France, it also stumbles under the weight of political meanings that New France has acquired. As a result, the exhibit is hard to encapsulate. Immensely satisfying for its thorough curatorship and once-in-a-generation artifact content, its formalized discourse is somewhat leaden. One must transcend this discursive subtext in order to appreciate the exhibit's many strengths.

New France as a Political Museum Subject

The minor debate over the true beginning of French colonization — in 1603, 1604 or 1608 — is significant because it is part of a greater struggle to appropriate New France for political ends. From an academic perspective, the three dates are historically inseparable and to commemorate one while minimizing the others is to introduce a bias. However, if everyone took such a detached view of history, history itself would soon become irrelevant! Museums, in their role as an interface between academia and the public, politicize history. The political subtext of this exhibit, as exemplified by the date debate, downgrades or combats the two great threats to Canadian sovereignty: the United States and Quebec.

By commemorating the founding of Port-Royal in 1604 instead of Champlain's over-wintering at Sainte-Croix Island in 1603, the exhibit takes issue with American claims to a French heritage that

many Canadians consider as properly theirs, directly or indirectly. On a more complex level, the exhibit also rejects an American style “melting pot” vision of history from the outset. A few geographic and demographic facts provide the historical framework of New France. A map shows the territory at its greatest extent, straddling a third of the continent from Cape Breton Island to the Great Lakes to Louisiana. The map shows pockets of French colonists numbering 85 000 souls in 1759, mostly in Canada and Acadia. We read that the English colonies outnumbered the French by a factor of nine to one, a comparison that highlights New France’s heroic struggle for survival. What is excluded here? The Native population of this vast territory, the French seasonal fishermen, the Caribbean with its Black slaves, and the Northwest where Métis traders and voyageurs predominated. Too little treatment is given to these peoples despite their loyalty, which doubled the territory, tripled the population and exponentially increased the cultural complexity of New France. Short shrift is given to scholarship by Bruce White, Gilles Havard and others that attribute New France’s originality to a unique ability to nourish cultural, trading and diplomatic links with Natives and found a pluralistic society, or “middle ground,” in the heart of the continent. Instead, the exhibit focusses on ties to France, biological genealogy, French-made artifacts and themes such as urbanization, military science, fashions and many more that cleave to mid-eighteenth century French models. By focusing on the most French elements of New France, the exhibit also fits the twentieth-century Canadian myth of the ethnic mosaic.

The debate between Port-Royal in 1604 or Quebec in 1608 as the foundation of New France has other political connotations. Not only is the Port-Royal foundation commemorated, but the exhibit also elaborates on the Acadian experience, complete with the deportation that effectively anglicized Port-Royal, and glosses over the more politically contentious Quebec experience where French culture has remained intact over four centuries. Notably, the exhibit concludes on an Acadian note with a video of the deportation and Marie-Jo Thériault at Grand-Pré singing *Évangeline*, the Acadian anthem, with wrenching emotion. This moment is indeed powerful and relevant, but it is nonetheless hard to understand why the exhibit pays no heed to the ways in which Quebecers have kept French culture alive and meaningful. Would it really have been politically incorrect to show Gilles Vigneault incanting *Gens du pays* on the Plains of Abraham? All exhibits contain difficult choices, but these choices are also discursive and fit into a larger discourse. Commemorating Port-Royal has led to an

emphasis on the deportation and the present cultural revival in Acadia and, in so doing, the exhibit turns a blind eye to modern Quebec in a way that is sadly institutionalised by the federal government today.

New France as Cultural Dialectic

Within the exhibit, the visitor passes from one thematic module to another. The list of themes is long: family, hygiene and medicine, foodways, religion and education, communications, transport, work, agriculture, clothing and fashion, war, justice, commerce, cartography, navigation... Sometimes, one senses that design and space decisions have separated themes that were meant to be contiguous. Inexplicably, the first space has large empty areas while the last is densely packed, and major text panels are placed at odd junctures. As a result, overall thematic organization is not clear, even though individual objects are well displayed. In contrast, the curatorship is impressive. Many objects have been loaned from institutions in Quebec, the United States and the Fortress of Louisbourg. As well, over the last thirty years, the work of the principal curator, Jean-Pierre Hardy, has enabled the Canadian Museum of Civilization to acquire a broad collection of traditional tools from the St Lawrence Valley that are displayed especially in the work, transport and family modules. Archaeological objects, especially ceramics, show up in the foodways, medicine and navigation sections, reflecting the interest of accompanying curator Jean-Pierre Chrestien. Many evocative texts are cited or reproduced, signifying the contribution of the third member of the curatorial team, Jean-François Blanchette. This depth of expertise at the CMC has produced a rare chance to see so many fine objects in an exhibit of such impressive scope and scholarship. Unfortunately, there is no catalogue that will remain after the exhibit closes and the objects disperse again.

Given the thematic approach, most artifact types are displayed in only one example and there is no attempt to explore any functional, stylistic or chronological variations. As a result, the 155-year period covered by the exhibit — a period longer than the history of Canada since Confederation — seems culturally static at first sight. On closer examination, the exhibit discretely comes to grips with a cultural dialectic that spurred historical change in New France. Of the many characterizations of this dialectic, one of the most graphic belongs to linguist John Leavitt who saw it as a tension between the Rabelaisian world of entitlement and “infinite possibilities” that blossomed in New France, and the Enlightenment’s rationalism and “tyranny of elegance.”

The essence of rustic, Rabelaisian hopefulness in New France is captured by a large plough and the module dedicated to colonial agriculture. In Acadia and the St Lawrence Valley, despite the medieval allure of the seigneurial system, agriculture had in fact largely shed European feudal constraints by allowing farmers to own land, sell their surpluses, accumulate and inherit property, buy out their neighbours and, in short, aspire to the heretofore bourgeois prerogatives of capital gain and social ascension. Sharecroppers from France became freeholders in New France. The plough was a powerful symbol of this rural emancipation. It implied ownership of draught animals, out-buildings and surplus wheat. It distanced the owner from European subsistence farmers who turned the soil by hand with forks and hoes. The plough announced that the colonial family was on the road to prosperity and affirmed the status of *habitant*, pillar of the rural polity.

In New France, infinite landholding possibilities reinforced the rural family as a social and economic unit, resulting in greater wealth accumulation from one generation to the next, a longer life expectancy, a higher birth rate and a faster population growth than in France. This demographic portrait reveals New France as a land of optimism for rural families.

Colonial originality and inventiveness comes through as well in the modules on travel and men's fashions. A snowshoe type for each kind of terrain, and a boat made of birchbark that could be hoisted onto one's shoulders for portaging around rapids, opened roads inland and were the homemade keys to economic independence for a *coureur de bois*. A sense of personal cultural entitlement appears in the ornate clothing and hair styles that were part of the New France frontier identity.

On an institutional level as well, for the church and the missionary orders, the dream of a Christian continent fueled titanic efforts of exploration, translation, evangelization and education. Decorated books, altar cloths and other artistic creations by Native girls schooled by Ursuline sisters in artistic expression evoke this Catholic dream. With Rabelaisian enthusiasm, the clerical hierarchy — and not only emancipated habitants and *coureurs des bois* — participated in the construction of New France, especially during the seventeenth century.

Against this backdrop of popular entitlement and cultural boyancy, Enlightenment rationalism arrived from the metropolis in waves of increasing intensity. The clearest example is the module on eighteenth-century penmanship, illustrated by exquisite archival examples, pristine instruments and plates from Diderot and d'Alembert, that illustrate the art of writing. Penmanship symbolized the

authority of the written word, law and government in Enlightenment France. Its ordered elegance was tyrannical in its suppression of the sixteenth century's self-proclaimed freedom to say anything and everything, and in any order, mixing classics, politics and wit with only a passing regard for set grammar, standard spelling or legible handwriting. If everything was still possible in sixteenth-century composition, the Enlightenment imposed a sense of order, refinement and education. The Enlightenment defined the dissertation, the academic proceeding, the *mémoire*, the personal letter and the subjects that could be consigned to paper, and even the humblest scribe wrote for posterity.

Examples of Enlightenment achievements abound in the second part of the exhibit. A fine example is the medicinal cabinet with pre-labelled fayence jars, pewter syringes and other ingenious instruments. In the same spirit, many themes are accompanied by accurate maps that are also veritable works of art. A ship model illustrates the science of naval architecture that in the eighteenth century moved rapidly toward a modern understanding of hydrostatics and hydrodynamics. Women's dresses, men's wigs, as well as salon pieces and musical instruments speak of an increased refinement in taste and a new "francisation" of New France.

In the mid-eighteenth century, order and elegance were the hallmarks of a rising merchant class and a cohort of administrators and military officers recruited within the French bourgeoisie, for whom the colony became a fast track to social advancement. Schooled in dance and swordsmanship as well as writing, music and the natural sciences, these ambitious and confident men and women brazenly set a social standard in the towns, military posts and parish halls of New France. Their status climbed during the English wars of the 1740s and 1750s, and the abundant appurtenances of their social position — scientific and musical instruments, fashions, books, weapons, diet, domestic furniture, utensils and tableware — brought new levels of personal consumption to the colony.

Probably due in part to the curators' individual interests, the exhibit achieves a fairly balanced synthesis of this cultural dialectic of rustic optimism and refined order. The Conquest prevented this colonial culture from achieving its natural synthesis, capping it before it reached maturity and inundating it with an English material culture that, in the late eighteenth century, was already advancing toward a more austere industrial paradigm. Perhaps for this reason the aesthetic sensibility of New France material culture seems frozen in time and distant, even as it seduces with the refinement of its organic shapes. Wooden ships, brass-inlaid

clocks, pewter porringers, gowns and pantaloons, cursive writing, embroidered altar cloths, flintlocks and clay pitchers were all composed of geometric curves and arcs, intricately laced together according to precise formulae, a scientific ordering of nature. This remarkable synthesis of technique and aesthetic draws as much on Rabelaisian naturalness and creativity as on the Enlightenment sense of order and rationalism. The exhibit is worth seeing for its visual synthesis of New France material culture and the quality of the artifacts on display.

New France as a Subject of Museum Discourse

Two actors circulate in the more open area of the exhibit, portraying New France immigrants and telling their story to braver visitors. One actor portrays a character with a minor noble name, which unrolls like a family tree when it is pronounced. She talks of her marriage and how many children she has borne. The idea that is developed here is related to that which occurs at the outset of the exhibit, where the demographic growth of New France colonists is detailed, and at the end, where a computer station allows visitors to search family names and link to genealogical Web sites. One home page shows the original family manor in Normandy and another advertises, tongue only slightly in cheek, that the virtual visitor can use the site to rebuild the components of their DNA. The message of biological links to France reinforces the material culture links that the exhibit emphasizes.

In another area of the exhibit, museum volunteers demonstrate period arts and sciences. One of the subjects is handwriting; another involves medical instruments. Volunteers talk of the knowledge, inventions and achievements that emanated from the

salons and cabinets of New France. Surrounding them are artifacts and references from the Enlightenment, that phase of French history whose distinctive "image" exercises an enduring fascination. The social value of knowledge and its material expressions is developed here in the midst of the very historical context that spawned it. Many of the objects explained by the volunteers are also found, as collectibles or imitations, in today's salons and dens: wooden ships, maps with hatched contours, brass navigational and medical instruments, examples of cursive handwriting and Louis XV furniture. Despite its period look, the Enlightenment remains accessible to the modern visitor because of its middle-class social basis, its ever-popular design and its association with the golden age of empires, discoveries and nation states.

These messages then, the family tree and the age of empire and reason, form the exhibit's packaging. For many visitors, the appeal of New France is probably bound up in these ideas. However, historical perceptions of New France are evolving and new approaches to colonial culture are constantly enriching our understanding of this period and bringing out aspects that are relevant to our times. New research does surface overtly in the exhibit, for example in the displays of tableware and urbanization where historical trends are shown and explained. On the other hand, when themes are represented by single examples, or are not articulated within a conceptual whole, the risk of falling into the antiquarian trap increases. The risk is accentuated when text explaining curatorial thought is insufficient, or when theme and design are discordant. Finally, when subtexts of commemoration and packaging spill into an exhibit, even the strongest material and curatorship can be diluted in their potential impact.