PAINTING IN MONTREAL, 1915-1930

The Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel and their contemporaries

GALERIE DE L'UQAM – MUSÉE DU QUÉBEC

ND
247
M65P5
1996

Painting in Montreal, 1915-1930. The Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel
was curated by Laurier Lacroix with the assistance of Estelle Piquette-Gareau.

The exhibition was mounted by the Galerie de l'UQAM,
with the financial support from the Museums Assistance Program, Department of Canadian Heritage
and with the collaboration of the Musée du Québec.

This English translation of the catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition presented
at the Musée du Québec, Quebec City, from January 24 to May 5, 1996;
at Bishop's University Artists' Centre, Lennoxville, from June 6 to July 12, 1996;
at the Galerie de l'UQAM, Montreal, from August 16 to October 5, 1996;
at the Musée de Charlevoix, La Malbaie, from October 20 1996 to January 15, 1997;
and at the Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, from February 1 to May 18, 1997.

Galerie de l'UQAM
Interim Director: Chantal Bouthat
Technical Assistants: Christian Ekemberg, Pierre Leclerc
Administrative Secretary: Rosine Lessard

Musée du Québec
Director: John. R. Porter
Head Curator: Didier Prioul
Assistant Head Curator: Yves Lacasse
Deputy Director: Gaétan Chouinard
Human Ressources Director: Denis Turner
Communications Director: Suzanne Leblanc
Development Director: Hélène Riverin

Publication of this catalogue was co-ordinated by the Musée du Québec.
A production of the Publications Service, Department of Communications
Pierre Murgia, Louis Gauvin and Nancy Trépanier

Translation: Catherine Sermat and Donald McGrath

ISBN: Musée du Québec, 2-551-17075-3 – Galerie de l'UQAM, 2-89276-152-2

Legal Deposit, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 1996
National Library of Canada

© Galerie de l'UQAM and Musée du Québec, 1996

Printed in Québec, Canada

The Musée du Québec is a Crown Corporation subsidized by the ministère de la Culture et des Communications.

Table of Contents

Montreal, 1914-1929. A Changing City, p. 7
Paul-André Linteau, History Department, UQAM

Chronology, p. 13

Painting in Montreal between 1915 and 1930, p. 28
Laurier Lacroix, Art History Department, UQAM

On the Trail of the Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel, p. 42
Estelle Piquette-Gareau in conversation with Odette Legendre

Artistic Concerns in Montreal:
Critical Writings in the Montreal Press from 1915 to 1930, p. 45
Esther Trépanier, Art History Department, UQAM

Intellectualism and Artistic Thought in Quebec, 1915 to 1930, p. 54
Hélène Boily, graduate student, Art History Department, UQAM

Note to the Reader

This publication brings together the textspublished in the catalogue
Peindre à Montréal, 1915-1930.
Les peintres de la Montée Saint-Michel et leurs contemporains
(Galerie de l'UQAM, Musée du Québec 1996).

Due to publication costs,
we are compelled to publish the English version of these texts without illustrations.
To view the reproductions of works included in the show
or otherwise relevant to the texts,
readers are asked to refer to the French edition.

This catalogue is a joint undertaking of the
Galerie de l'UQAM and the Musée du Québec,
and was funded by the Museums Assistance Program, Department Canadian Heritage.
We sincerely wish to thank them along with the lenders
and all the contributors who worked so hard to make this show possible.

Laurier Lacroix
Curator

MONTREAL, 1914-1929. A CHANGING CITY

Paul-André Linteau

In the history of Montreal, the years between the First World War and the Depression are not easy to define. The period seems to be one of gradual change and transition. To get a clearer picture, we must first identify the characteristics of the urban environment as it was in 1914 and then describe some facets of the socio-cultural world in which Montrealers lived.

The Urban Environment

In 1914, one of the most remarkable periods of growth in Montreal's history was coming to an end. For just over fifteen years, Montrealers had experienced a pace of almost continuous expansion that transformed the physical features of their city.[1]

The settlement of the Canadian West and the influx of three million immigrants were primary forces behind an economic growth that also benefited from increased railway construction, natural resource development and urbanization. To meet this demand, many factories were expanded, while new ones mushroomed in different parts of town. A new harbour was built—it was to fascinate many artists—to handle the huge quantities of Prairie wheat bound for Britain as well as a wide array of manufactured goods. The expansion of financial institutions made Saint James Street the mainspring of Canadian capitalism.

The bustling activity of Montreal drew newcomers like a magnet. Its population, which had reached one quarter million in 1891, exceeded one half million twenty years later. The English, crossing the Atlantic in droves in response to the demand for skilled workers, became more numerous than the Irish. Other immigrants came from Eastern Europe: Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, mostly Jews, who settled along Saint Lawrence Boulevard and formed the largest allophone community. Among Southern European immigrants were several thousand Italians, whose community was beginning to take shape and the first groups of Greeks. In the wake of a massive rural exodus, francophones strengthened their position and formed 63% of the population.

Such demographic growth obviously changed the shape of the city, as the urbanized zones expanded significantly. New municipalities sprang up in the suburbs, but Montreal soon annexed most of them and in so doing, increased its territory five-fold. These new neighbourhoods, each with its specific character, population and activities, transformed the mental cityscape of Montrealers. Saint-Henri, Maisonneuve, Saint-Louis and Rosemont evoke distinct images of neighbourhoods with their ethnic and cultural characteristics. They were linked by an electric streetcar system that had been expanding continuously since 1892. Streetcars carried commuters to and from increasingly specialized areas that formed the mosaic of Montreal.

Old Montreal was no longer just the heart of the import-export trade and the city government. As major corporations expanded, it became an administrative and financial centre employing thousands of people and began to spread beyond the traditional confines of the old town. In earlier years, numerous buildings as tall as ten storeys had been built. This change in scale had visual repercussions: the towers of Notre-Dame Cathedral and the dome of the Bonsecours Market no longer dominated the Montreal skyline as they had done for more than fifty years. At the end of the century, the retail trade gravitated towards Sainte-Catherine Street, which became a lively artery of social activity with its rows of department stores.

In residential neighbourhoods, the Montreal duplex, which had risen to predominance in the 1860s, remained popular but was increasingly supplanted by the triplex as the model of choice in the new areas to the east and north of the city. Beautification projects were the subject of much discussion, but very few were ever carried out, with the exception of the highly ambitious one launched in the town of Maisonneuve in 1910.

For some Montrealers, growth was synonymous with prosperity, as can be seen by the magnificent homes of the anglophone upper class in the Square Mile and those of their francophone counterparts along Sherbrooke Street East and around Saint-Louis Square. The

majority, however, were working class and their lifestyle, something else again. Living conditions were appalling and daily survival was the prime concern, even though some of the amenities of city life—a streetcar ride or a movie—were becoming slightly more accessible.

In 1914, however, growth was already losing steam, and the outbreak of war disturbed the normal course of events. Although military demand stimulated industrial production, urban development came to a standstill. Thousands of young men, especially anglophones, enlisted in the army, and as a result, increasing numbers of women joined the work force. The question of involvement in the war fuelled acrimonious debate and revived ethnic tensions that peaked in 1917 with the adoption of conscription.

Adjustment to the end of the war brought problems that led to a depression in the early 1920s, but once the shock subsided, Montreal again entered a growth phase. While not as extensive as that of the beginning of the century, it was nonetheless substantial and ended with a wave of speculation that only intensified the rude awakening brought on by the Crash. On the demographic level, migration from the countryside and immigration boosted the population of greater Montreal to one million in the 1931 census.

The urbanization of the territory resumed its brisk pace, and residential construction was particularly strong in the large neighbourhoods of Villeray and Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Among the suburbs, Outremont was growing, while new urban models were established in Hampstead and the Town of Mount Royal. As a result of annexations earlier in the century, the City of Montreal still contained numerous rural zones, as did the suburbs. Marc-Aurèle Fortin's landscapes of the north end of Hochelaga and the area painted by the artists of the Montée Saint-Michel captured this phenomenon on canvas. Downtown acquired four new skyscrapers—Sun Life (1914-18; 1923-25), Royal Bank (1927-28), Bell Telephone (1927-29) and Aldred (1929)—that were to dominate the skyline for three decades.

In the social realm, the 1920s saw the rise of a middle class of managers, accountants and insurance agents who, along with lawyers, notaries, doctors and local merchants, played an important role in the numerous volunteer organizations. There was also a significant increase in the number of office employees, store clerks and other service-sector workers whose lifestyle and aspirations differed from those of the working class. The latter was still a fundamental component of the social structure, and for at least some of them, living conditions improved. Public health measures brought a decline in mortality rates. Electricity, telephones and, later, radio were becoming increasingly accessible, while commercialized leisure activities were more prevalent.[2]

In this changing social and urban landscape, cultural activities were thriving and cultural institutions were coloured by the distinctive characteristics of the linguistic group.

The Francophone World

The French-speaking cultural world was defined by both language and religion. The Catholic Church was a major force on the cultural scene. It had a stranglehold on the educational system, through its many private schools and collèges classiques, its strong voice on the public Catholic School Board and its administration of the University. It also developed an extensive network of volunteer organizations. The Church frequently played an active role in founding these institutions and provided them with chaplains whose views carried considerable weight. It had a large labour force, drawn from both the secular clergy and the religious communities. Some of its members were key participants in the debates that shook French-Canadian society in the 1920s. The Jesuit priest Joseph-Papin Archambault, director of the École sociale populaire, and Abbé Lionel Groulx, editor of *L'Action française*, were prime examples. The Church's grip was, however, showing signs of weakening after the First World War. Montreal's cultural life was stimulated by diverse sources, and it was becoming impossible to exert control over the flow of ideas, fashions, cultural products and entertainment in an increasingly cosmopolitan city.[3]

A particularly notable phenomenon was the rise of new lay elites, which had originated in the previous decades and took on a new dimension in the 1920s. The importance of the francophone business class cannot be overlooked. While it was a minority compared to the powerful anglophone business community, it became a vital component of the French-Canadian social fabric. For a number of years, it had been pushing for change and modernization in the educational system. Although its resources were limited compared to those of the anglophones, it helped fund cultural institutions like the Université de Montréal. The liberal professions were the nucleus of the elite network, and their members played a key role in community life. Saint-Joseph Boulevard in Montreal and the southern part of Outremont, where some of them lived, bear witness to their comfortable lifestyle.

One of the most influential figures of the period was the intellectual. Until the First World War, francophone lay intellectuals had had to earn their living as journal-

ists, as federal civil servants (Errol Bouchette, for example), or in one of the liberal professions. Now, the educational milieu, notably at the University and the state-run schools, became their main centre of activity. The full-time university professor was a novelty. Before, practising lawyers, notaries and doctors taught occasional courses at the law and medicine faculties.[4] The widening scope of disciplines led to the hiring of specialists in literature, history and the social and physical sciences. The economist Édouard Montpetit typified this new lay intellectual. He was sent to Europe to further his studies so that he could assume a chair at the École des hautes études commerciales. He was also a professor at the Université de Montréal and became its secretary general in 1920. He took part in the debate on the future of the French-Canadian people, published prolifically and was a key participant in Montreal's intellectual and cultural life.

Founded in 1876, the Université Laval à Montréal had been housed in cramped quarters on Saint-Denis Street since 1895. In 1920, it finally broke free of its parent organization in Quebec City and became the Université de Montréal. This newly acquired autonomy facilitated its development. New faculties were created (arts, sciences, philosophy), along with the École des sciences sociales, économiques et politiques. It launched a major public subscription campaign and by 1922, plans were under way for a new building on the side of Mount Royal. Construction did not begin until 1928 and soon came to a halt with the Depression. During the 1920s, it was from the building on Saint-Denis, twice damaged by fire, that the Université de Montréal and its professors attempted, with their all too modest resources, to stimulate intellectual and scientific life in Montreal's francophone community.[5] Located nearby since 1895, the École Polytechnique (1873) trained engineers and, from 1906 to 1922, architects.[6]

The École des hautes études commerciales (HEC) too, was nearby. It was established in 1907 and opened its doors at the corner of Viger and Saint-Hubert streets three years later. It quickly became one of the main centres of inquiry into the economy and society of Quebec.[7] This concentration of three francophone institutes of higher learning in close proximity made the Latin Quarter a lively facet of Montreal life. The HEC was a manifestation of a new phenomenon: the growth of state-run schools. In 1907, the Quebec government also created the École technique de Montréal, which began offering courses in 1911. The École technique in turn spawned the École du meuble in 1935. This network expanded in 1923 with the École des Beaux-Arts, which had considerable impact on the training of francophone artists. It also took over the teaching of architecture from the École Polytechnique. The older École normale Jacques-Cartier, founded in 1846, was crucial in training lay teachers for the Catholic School Board of Montreal.

Despite the growth of specialized schools and institutes of higher learning, the *collèges classiques* still held a predominant position in the education of the francophone elite. Their numbers increased in the late 1920s to meet the demands of a growing population. The most reputed by far was the Jesuit-run Collège Sainte-Marie. The Jesuits also founded the Collèges Saint-Ignace and Jean de Brébeuf. The Sulpicians had their venerable Collège de Montréal, to which they added the André-Grasset classical day school. The Fathers of the Holy Cross, already involved in operating the Collège de Saint-Laurent, also built the Sainte-Croix. Boys were privileged in the area of education. The only *collège classique* available for girls was Marguerite-Bourgeoys, run by the sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame. It was not until the 1930s that girls began to gain access to other institutions.[8]

In addition to the educational system, two new institutions made an important contribution to intellectual life in Montreal. The Bibliothèque Saint-Sulpice (1915) located in the heart of the Latin Quarter, was the successor of the parish reading room of the previous century.[9] The Montreal Municipal Library (1917), the creation and site of which was the subject of interminable debate by the City Council, was finally built on Sherbrooke Street.

The francophone intellectual community of the 1920s was still torn between respect for tradition and openness to modern influences. In the face of a worldview steeped in Catholic philosophy and theology, and legal principles, a mode of thinking based on reason and science attempted to assert itself. The phenomenon was particularly significant for it gave rise to a true scientific movement, spearheaded by Brother Marie-Victorin, that spawned a new generation of lay scientists.[10] Nonetheless, nationalism permeated every aspect of their thought. The objective was to enable the French-Canadian people to flourish, but the means of attaining this goal—loyalty to tradition and heritage or openness to the modern world—differed.

Since Quebec institutions were for the most part underdeveloped, one of the avenues of progress led abroad, and France headed the list of destinations. Travelling to the motherland to study was not a new phenomenon, but it gained popularity after the war. Advances in navigation and the greater prosperity of elite francophone families certainly helped. The Prix d'Europe awarded by the Quebec government allowed increasing numbers of bursary recipients to study abroad, especially in France. The phenomenon affected many artists and architects, as well as doctors and scientists. Professors and directors for the institutes of higher learning were recruited in France and Belgium. Prestigious French lecturers were also sought after; and to fulfil this objective, the Institut scientifique franco-canadien was created in 1926, with support from the French and Quebec governments.

It was traditional and Catholic France—resistant to secularism and modern ideas—that primarily attracted the Montreal elite, so trips to France did not always result in new ways of thinking. Still, students who spent time in Paris discovered an intellectual and cultural community that was decidedly more diversified than theirs, and some of them would become important agents of change upon their return home.

The francophile leanings of many intellectuals drew nationalist reactions. For example, Marie-Victorin, founder of the Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences (1923), felt that scientific development should come first from Quebeckers and bitterly criticized the Institut.[11] The French presence also clashed with a new trend: greater openness towards the United States, especially in medical and scientific circles. Under the influence of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Université de Montréal modelled itself increasingly on the American university during the 1920s.[12]

Americanization was making even greater inroads into popular culture. The most important of the media, the daily mass-circulation newspaper, had long been influenced by its neighbours to the south, and the appearance of advertising after the war intensified this trend. Film, which in its early years had been influenced strongly by France, was now dominated by American motion pictures, and only the arrival of the "talkies" in the late 1920s would enable French productions to regain some of their lost ground. The fledgling medium of radio imported much of its programming from the United States, and burlesque, an increasingly popular form of entertainment, also came from beyond Quebec's borders.

The francophone cultural community was in transition during the postwar years. It was growing with new institutions and subject to various influences, but the direction it would take was not yet clearly defined.

The Anglophones and Allophones

At the outset of the war, the anglophone population of Montreal was still primarily of British origin (English, Scottish and Irish). Some were recent immigrants, which explains why they responded more enthusiastically to the call to arms than their francophone counterparts. Thousands died on the battlefield, and thousands of others came home maimed physically and mentally. One author has postulated that this was the main cause of the English Protestant elite's decline in Montreal, but this remains to be proved.[13]

Even if its demographic weight was somewhat reduced, the population of British origin continued to increase. New British immigrants arrived throughout the 1920s. There was also an influx of young English Canadians from the rural areas and small towns of Quebec and the other provinces, who came in search of work in the country's metropolis. But the community was beginning to leave the City of Montreal for the suburbs of the West Island, where over one quarter of them now lived.

The social makeup of the anglophone community differed from that of the francophones. Its businessmen were more numerous, wealthier and more powerful, and formed an important segment of the Canadian capitalist class. Moreover, the phenomenon of middle-class and white-collar expansion was much more significant. Anglophones were far better represented among skilled workers, whose living conditions were markedly better than those of unskilled labourers.

The English-speaking population had its own well-developed network of institutions. Those of the primarily Catholic Irish were shared in part with the francophones, while Protestant institutions were completely separate. These were particularly well endowed since they were the almost exclusive beneficiaries of English Protestant philanthropists. In Montreal, the social redistribution implemented by bourgeois philanthropic efforts contributed to exacerbating rather than reducing the gulf between the classes.

Montreal's anglophone cultural community was distinct from that of the francophones. The jewel in its crown was McGill University, which was already nearing its hundredth anniversary. Well equipped with buildings, libraries, laboratories and museums thanks to generous donations from wealthy businessmen like McGill, Redpath, Macdonald and McCord, it had long had a permanent teaching faculty and offered a wide selection of programs. Its influence extended far beyond the Montreal area.[14] The English Protestant and Catholic high school system ensured that the recruitment of students was broader and more democratic than that for the *collèges classiques*.

The English-speaking community also had its libraries, such as the Fraser Institute, and it had access to the Municipal Library, although it was far from its main turf. In 1860, it established the Art Association of Montreal (today the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts). The Association moved into its new building on Sherbrooke Street in 1912. It was the most important institution in Montreal's artistic life and one of the principal centres for training in the visual arts. French-speaking artists had access to the association, but they were clearly in the minority. The anglophone community had a large number of volunteer social and cultural organizations.

The history of anglophone intellectual life in Montreal has yet to be written. During the 1920s, it was still very much influenced by ties with Great Britain, which were probably stronger than those linking francophone intellectuals to France. McGill professors, for instance, were recruited principally in the British Isles. They brought with them the values of the British Empire. But the Empire's sun was setting, and Montreal anglophones were beginning to feel the influence of a powerful new force: the United States. In the wake of the war, there was a renewal of Canadian nationalism among anglophone intellectuals, and Toronto's Group of Seven provided powerful visual symbols for this movement. Anglophones were also influenced by the social, moral and religious concerns that had been expressed by the Social Gospel movement since the end of the nineteenth century.

Approximately 13% of Montrealers were neither French nor British in origin. Most of them were recent immigrants and still spoke their mother tongue. A diverse group, their degree of organization and integration varied. The largest of these communities settled in certain neighbourhoods and had their own religious, social and cultural organizations.

The most important of these groups were the Ashkenazy Jews from Eastern Europe, who made up about one half of the allophone population. Their community life was intense, although it was subject to numerous conflicts based on religious, political and social factions. They frequently had long-standing urban roots and placed great value on education. Jewish intellectuals were numerous, and their substantial cultural production drew upon a rich tradition. The Jewish Library (1914) played a pivotal role in this area.[15] The Yiddish language dominated, but a major change was taking place as children were systematically anglicized at school. The Jewish poets of the 1920s still wrote in Yiddish; their successors would soon express themselves in English.

Conclusion

Montreal society in the years 1914-1929 appeared highly compartmentalized with its institutions based on ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions. This compartmentalization was by no means hermetic, however. Some institutions were open to all. People came into contact with each other in the business and art worlds, the workplace and public forums; they were exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences and interacted in innumerable ways. The metropolis was a crossroads of people, things, and ideas that gave specific characteristics to the whole. There was, for example, a Montreal way of being French Canadian that differed from that of the rest of Quebec. The arts community reflected this distinct context.

The changes resulting from this intermingling met some resistance. In each group, some favoured tradition, be it the rural and Roman Catholic character, the British link or the Yiddish culture. Others craved new things and wanted to be in step with the times.

The period, then, is one of transition between a society and values inherited from the nineteenth century and a new world that would not come into its own until the Second World War. Modernism already pervaded daily life, but modern cultural ideas had not yet conquered minds, even if they had made some inroads. The period between the unbridled growth of the early century and the shock of the Depression in the 1930s is one of slow change rather than rapid transformation but it is essential to an understanding of twentieth-century Montreal.

Notes

1. On the beginning of the century, see Paul-André Linteau, *Histoire de Montréal depuis la Confédération* (Montreal: Boréal, 1992), pp. 139-277.

2. On the changes that took place in Montreal between 1914-1929, see *ibid.*, pp. 279-411.

3. Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois. Le xxe siècle*, vol. 1, 1898-1940 (Montreal: Boréal, 1984), 504 pp.; Lucia Ferretti, *Entre voisins, La société paroissiale en milieu urbain. Saint-Pierre-Apôtre de Montréal, 1848-1930* (Montreal: Boréal, 1992), pp. 179-188.

4. Pierre Trépanier, "La Société canadienne d'économie sociale de Montréal (1888-1911) et les conditions de la vie intellectuelle au Québec," in Jean-Rémi Brault, ed., *Montréal au xxe siècle* (Montreal: Leméac, 1990), p. 91.

5. Hélène-Andrée Bizier, *L'Université de Montréal. La quête du savoir* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 1993), pp. 80-125.

6. Robert Gagnon, *Histoire de l'École Polytechnique de Montréal, 1873-1990. La montée des ingénieurs francophones* (Montreal: Boréal, 1991), 528 pp.

7. Pierre Harvey, *Histoire de l'École des hautes études commerciales de Montréal*, vol. 1: 1887-1926 (Montreal: Québec-Amérique/Presses HEC, 1994), 382 pp.

8. Claude Galarneau, *Les collèges classiques au Canada français (1620-1970)* (Montreal: Fides, 1978), 278 pp.

9. Jean-René Lassonde, *La bibliothèque Saint-Sulpice, 1910-1931* (Montreal: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 1986), 359 pp.

10. Luc Chartrand, Raymond Duchesne and Yves Gingras, *Histoire des sciences au Québec* (Montreal: Boréal, 1987), pp. 239-272; Raymond Duchesne, "D'intérêt public et d'intérêt privé: l'institutionnalisation de l'enseignement et de la recherche scientifiques au Québec (1920-1940)," in Yvan Lamonde and Esther Trépanier, eds., *L'avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec* (Quebec City: IQRC, 1986), pp. 189-224; Marcel Fournier, "Le frère Marie-Victorin et les 'petites sciences'" in Marcel Fournier, *L'entrée dans la modernité. Science, culture et société au Québec* (Montreal: Saint-Martin, 1986), pp. 75-104.

11. Chartrand et al., *Histoire des sciences au Québec*, pp. 254-257.

12. Bizier, *L'Université de Montréal*, pp. 110, 120-123.

13. Margaret W. Westley, *Remembrance and Grandeur: the Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal, 1900-1950* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 1990).

14. Stanley Brice Frost, *McGill University for the Advancement of Learning*, vol. 2: 1895-1971 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984) pp. 3-185.

15. Jacques Langlais and David Rome, *Jews and French Quebeckers: Two Hundred Years of Shared History*, translated by Barbara Young (originally published in French as *Juifs et Québécois français, 200 ans d'histoire commune*) (Waterloo, Ontario: Sir Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991) pp. 47-89; Irving Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1990), pp. 73-125.