

Claude Payer (MAC 1982), Sculpture Conservator, Centre de conservation du Québec (CCQ, Quebec Centre for Conservation),

Interviewed by Anne-Marie Guérin (MAC 2016)

Claude Payer is best known for his work on the history and conservation of religious furniture and polychrome sculpture. Graduating from Queen's University with a Master's of Art Conservation in 1982, Claude followed a two-year internship at the Institut royal du patrimoine artistique (IRPA) in Brussels where he worked in a lab specializing in the conservation of polychrome sculpture. Later, Claude was involved in major conservation projects in the province of Quebec, including the conservation of the interior of the Ursuline Chapel, one of the oldest church interiors in the province, as well as many polychrome sculptures of Québécois origin and manufacture. Currently part of the sculpture conservation team at the Centre de conservation du Québec (CCQ), Claude has made an important contribution to our current knowledge of the history, manufacture, and conservation of these objects. He has published widely in journals such as the *Canadian Journal of Art History* and *Continuité* a magazine about Quebec heritage, as well as having several books published by, among others, the International Institute for the Conservation of Historical and Artistic Works (IIC) and the Getty Conservation Institute. Claude is currently focusing his efforts on another important publication concerning specifically 17th- and 18th-century tabernacles in the province of Quebec.

Q Tell me about your career path, how did you get where you are today?

A I loved making sculptures as a child. I loved the format, the subject matter, and the materials - wood in particular. After having worked for several years in the Canadian Armed Forces, I decided to go back to school and I signed up for art history classes at Laval University. I wanted to settle in Quebec City. I met someone at one of the orientation events who told me "I am doing a degree in art history to one day work in art conservation." It suddenly hit me that this is what I had been preparing for for some time. Within five seconds I changed my career path and replied: "Me too, art conservation is what I want to do." Since that moment I have never steered away from that path. I wanted to conserve sculptures; that is what interested me.

At Laval University, I had the opportunity to have professors such as John Porter, who taught us fabulous things about sculpture in Québec. This experience inspired me and confirmed my interest in early Québécois sculpture. Since I had already completed an undergraduate degree, I only needed two years of art history at Laval before applying for the Art Conservation Program in Kingston. I applied with the intention of joining the artifact stream but was encouraged to pursue painting conservation instead. My project was very precise; I was able to convince professors at Queen's and entered the program the first time I applied. I was also able to obtain a scholarship to subsequently pursue my studies at a highly reputed conservation lab at IRPA in Brussels, which specialized in polychrome sculpture. I spent two wonderful years as an intern in Brussels with my girlfriend, who was able to join me there.

Upon my return from Brussels, I applied for work at the Centre de conservation du Québec (Quebec Conservation Centre, CCQ) where I had already completed two internships. Quebec City had a certain appeal, partly because my girlfriend lived there. Also, I could see myself working for the CCQ, conserving sculptures in an institution where expansion, for example the development of a department specializing in sculpture, was possible. So on returning from Brussels in '84, right away I was busy working, helping the Musée de Québec to prepare for an exhibition called *Le Grand Héritage* (The Great

Legacy), due to open in September 1984 and highlighting Pope John Paul II's visit to Quebec. My work hasn't stopped since and I focused increasingly on religious sculptures. This included plaster and other materials but was mostly wood and gilding. My experience in Brussels was clearly very useful in this respect.

The day I decided to pursue art conservation, I developed a plan of action for the next few years. I planned that my studies would take five to six years and that is exactly how long it took me; two years in art history at Laval, two years in Kingston, and two years in Europe.

Q You are known in the conservation community for your work with religious and polychrome sculpture. What encouraged you to take up that line of inquiry?

A It is a very vast subject which takes time to get to know, and still holds many secrets. It presented numerous opportunities to learn. Moreover the subject itself is vast and, unlike what was originally thought, one does not need to be religious to conserve religious works of art.

Q How has the conservation of polychrome sculpture changed since you began your career as a conservator?

A The CCQ has certainly been exemplary in the knowledge we have disseminated and the advice we have given to individuals, museums, parishes, etc. and I think this communication has been very fruitful. As part of our mandate, we chose not only to conserve but also to offer advice, particularly concerning preventative conservation. I think this attitude is now the norm in North America and has also been adopted by institutions such as the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). Europe has now caught up to North America on this path..

At the beginning of my career, about thirty years ago, there was a general feeling that conservators disrupted the work of other professionals. We have worked hard to reassure people that conservators are not obstacles but colleagues, there to help institutions reach their goals, whether they be museums, parishes, or cities. On the other hand, it is evident that, in view of our particular set of tools and knowledge of materials, we are better equipped than artisans or others who work without documentation. People are increasingly aware that conservation involves technical skill but also in-depth knowledge, constant learning, and documentation. This is a fundamental difference between the conservation profession and the work of an artisan. An artisan does not always take notes, but a conservator takes notes, documents, and takes photos before, during, and after treatment. This simple difference allows us to understand and preserve material heritage.

I would say in thirty years, there has been a fair amount of evolution. I think we have come to a level of maturity on the national and international scale. And of course, with social media, we can now see what others are doing, show what we are doing and learn from each other. It helps a lot.

Q Can you discuss a project that you are particularly proud of ?

A I would say that the project I am currently working on is my favourite. I think I always prefer what I am working on when I am working on it. However, I am pretty proud of having had the initiative for the project of the interior of the Ursuline chapel in Quebec City, which took place from 1991 to 1995. The stars were aligned for it to happen; I arrived with this project in the right place at the right time.

That being said I was also incredibly lucky. The chapel contains two of the last three 18th-century altarpieces in Quebec. The third is at the General Hospital. The building of the chapel dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, but the interior is from the 18th century. Of course tabernacles, altarpieces, altars, and paintings are interesting but church interiors are absolutely extraordinary. They are one-of-a-kind. We were able to examine, document, photograph, measure, draw, use dendrochronology, conduct surveys, and discover underlying paint layers, all to understand how the interior had changed with time. It was an unbelievable opportunity. I am very happy about that, and the documentation for the project is publicly available now.

More recently, I have concentrated my efforts on tabernacles of the 17th and 18th centuries. In several months this should culminate in an important publication where there will be many novel things, many surprising things, which will, I hope, increase awareness and appreciation of this subject. Maybe it will inspire others and encourage stewards and owners of these objects to consider conserving them. We cannot love what we don't understand. To love, we must know. So if we tell people "What you have here is extraordinary, it is one-of-a-kind", we are already giving them a hand. It is often the gaze of others which allows us to appreciate what we have. In certain cases, not all, some may be neglectful or forgetful of what they have. So every time I meet new people in parishes or elsewhere, I make sure to encourage them by telling them that their heritage is extremely interesting. I think this publication can do the same and give people a little encouragement. It is a long-term project on which I started working thirty years ago, developing an idea that came to me when I was working on the Ursuline Chapel so, in the 1990s. It has been a constant effort.

Q How has Queen's University prepared you for your career?

A Of course, I learned a great deal of technical information, knowledge of materials and material identification, how to see materials and how to look at them. Differentiating materials takes a certain amount of vocabulary. Also of course I learned conservation techniques, materials and tools. All of this was an essential foundation which would not otherwise have been available to me and which was fundamental to my professional development. However, since there was no specialization in polychrome sculpture, there had to be further study after the program. Professors would tell us so; Ian Hodkinson told me I had to continue studying. I had even thought, for a few days or weeks, that I should go to Europe before starting the Queen's program. But I quickly understood that I had to go to Queen's first and later do a longer internship abroad. I really learned the basics at Queen's and I am very grateful for that.

For the record, another aspect for which I am grateful is that we worked extremely hard. Afterwards, the internship in Europe seemed like a vacation.

Q What are your favourite memories of Queen's?

A Friendship, human contact, the quality and elegance of the professors I think, of Ian Hodkinson and Henry Hodges. They were people of class, with vast cultural and patrimonial knowledge as well as a sense of humour. That means a lot; it's important. Also, the focus on technique and materials was very good. It was pretty new to me. Contact with my peers also; other conservation students with whom I developed long term friendships. Sandra Webster for example who is currently at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario), I have known her since that time. Also, the general attitude towards me, as a Québécois and Francophone was very respectful and welcoming, I really liked that. The openness of the program; the opportunity to go to student conferences in the United States, to push myself to express myself in

English not only in reports and essays but also in presentations and in everyday communication. It created habits and connections which, later, when meeting old colleagues or new colleagues at conferences or elsewhere, means that we share a common experience and a common way of doing things. However I think my best memory is of the quality of the teachers, in particular Ian Hodkinson and Henry Hodges, who were both really fabulous people. Ron Irvine too, the photography professor, for whom I have particular affection. He came to Quebec to visit my girlfriend and me and we both have fond memories of him. Also there was Penny, the secretary at the time. We used to call the hallway on the second floor "Penny Lane".

Q Is there someone in the field, or a group of people, that was particularly inspirational?

A The Queen's professors as I mentioned. Also, the head of the sculpture lab in Brussels, Myriam Serck-Dewaide, who is a woman with incredible leadership qualities, and impressive knowledge, and who is a real bulldozer in the best sense of the word. She is currently the director of IRPA. She was a real inspiration. Equally, before conservation, John Porter and the many Québécois researchers in cultural heritage were very inspirational.

Q Is there an idea that you think is especially important to remember, while you are working in the field?

A I think one must be sensitive, curious, and tenacious. Looking back on my thirty years of experience, the major concepts I have learned are, first to have continuity and constance in your efforts; one cannot jump frivolously from one subject to another. To perfect something or reach a deeper meaning, one must concentrate. Some people need constant change and are curious about everything. In my case, novelty comes in the form of the new pieces I see day by day, year by year, but the subject itself remains the same. I apply the same methodology and the same sense of curiosity to take notes and make observations. I continued using the note-taking habits I learned in Kingston. I remember, as a student, every day we would jot down what we did : observations, treatments, etc. My reports are dated, each observation is dated. One year I might think something and five years later contradict myself. This is also useful to someone who might be interested in consulting my research and would be better able to understand my thought process. So, demonstrate constant effort, never give up, and be tenacious.

The second thing is rigor, one must be rigorous in their thought process. One must seek truth, not success. Thirdly, is the sharing of knowledge. The notes I take and the observations I make are to be shared. I exchange a lot with others. I hope to inspire them. I receive knowledge from them and I don't hesitate to communicate things to them. This is crucial. If we keep information to ourselves, on the one hand it is not generous, and on the other it is not very productive because we can learn much more and make things advance much faster when we share information. There has to be synergy, It is not a matter of addition but multiplication.

Q What do you like the most about your job?

A Novelty, learning new things, human contact as well. Every time I visit a new place, it is stimulating to meet new people. I am given permission to dedicate a few hours of my day to do research which I appreciate enormously. If I had worked in the private sector, I would not have had this luxury. Of course I must have a certain level of productivity. However, because I was able to convince the institution of the utility and importance of research, the directors have allowed me some free time to do

some research of my own. I have always assured my colleagues and employers that what I was doing was not futile, that it brought something back to the institution. I was talking about the Ursuline Chapel earlier, well, this project did not happen on its own. I went to the institution in 1989 with the purpose of conducting a condition survey of the decor and the nuns accepted. Later I returned with specific recommendations and treatment propositions. These were not possible at the time, the nuns had other priorities. However the next year, by chance, some money became available and the CCQ was ready to begin the conservation project. By seeing slightly further than the present we can prepare for these projects and when the time is right, they happen. Other long term projects have resulted from this type of initiative at the CCQ.

I think everyone at the CCQ makes a profit from the same things that make the institution grow. The CCQ established a mandate 36 years ago now to preserve and increase public appreciation of Québécois heritage. Conservation is one thing, preservation is another, but appreciation, interpretation, comprehension, and understanding are also important. That conservators take up an increasing amount of space in the field of research is not so difficult to understand. It seems there are fewer resources available elsewhere for this kind of work. To understand our heritage, we have to pick it apart and analyze it technically without solely relying on written sources whether primary, secondary, or tertiary. We must analyze these objects as physical material along with these sources. It's an amalgamation. Conservators are well placed to provide this kind of research.

I focus on sculpture but the same thing is applicable to archaeology, ethnography, and material culture in general. The Elizabeth and Mary for example, is an incredible find and a stroke of luck in any conservator's career. To discover such as gold mine, a treasure trove of such diverse objects, from military to commercial and domestic sectors, a veritable time capsule from the 1690s, is an unbelievable opportunity. We explore this find, little by little, when we remove the concretions that cover the objects and by continuing the research that was started many years ago when the treasure was found.

So, what I like is the research, the investigation and analysis, the "puzzle" side of the job, which allows us to make connections. A few days ago I was looking at an element from a tabernacle with Stéphane Doyon. The tabernacle is called the St-Grégoire de Récolet but it is in the town of Bécancour. It was originally sculpted by a Frenchman, Charles Chabouillet, in 1702. It has a particular iconography; the four figures of the tetramorph, that is to say, the four symbols of the evangelists: St. Mark, St. Matthew, St. Luke and St. John. Each evangelist is identified by a figure; St. John's is the eagle. It's pretty rare to see the tetramorph in a tabernacle. It is the only one of its kind in Quebec. In the eagle's beak there are two cords at which are hung, on one side of the beak, a small stubby box, and on the other an oblong case. I asked myself what this could be. Finally, while researching, we realized that this is particular way of representing Saint John's eagle in which the eagle carries a pen and ink. This is not commonly seen in sculptures; however it has been seen in various forms in medieval churches in France. Recently, I came across the painting of the 16th-century artist Quentin Metsys entitled *The Moneylender and His Wife*. The painting consists of a man counting money and behind him is hung a pen and ink box on a hook. I saw the same thing on an Italian painting the same day. It is a constant joy to discover such things. And we find because we are searching. If we don't search, we don't find.

Q What advice would you give to students or new graduates?

A Certainly, one must face reality, be concise in one's decisions, and not have one's head in the clouds. However, I think people who choose to study and work in conservation are not people with their heads in the clouds. Students who choose this profession are generally serious people. That being said,

it is important to try to find something that you like to do, something that almost gives you the urge to run to the office in the morning. When we have a passion it makes all the difference in life. Of course there are other aspects of life, but in professional life, it is a great privilege to be able to do things that we love. Things that make us happy, that make us smile, so that work is not a burden. You must choose carefully and let yourself be guided by your intuition.