

UNTITLED (1966), Claude Théberge

This is the third stop on the Public Art, Public Memory tour.

Originally commissioned in 1966 for the Bank of Montreal headquarters at 1550 De Maisonneuve Boulevard, Claude Théberge's *Untitled* is a striking remnant of the 1960s modernism that changed the face of the city. If you look closer at the sculpture, underneath the clock you will notice the original "Bank of Montreal" sign embedded into the artwork, which has been painted with enamel to blend into the work's surface.

Théberge was educated in Paris at the École nationale supérieur des beaux-arts from 1954 to 1960. In addition to his study of plastic arts, Théberge studied music and architecture, and later worked as a graphic designer for UNESCO. After a trip to Finland in the late 1950s, he became invested in what he called the "link between art and its social actualization." For Théberge, melding art and architecture was a way to democratize and socialize access to art. Upon his return to Montreal in 1963, he founded Atelier Claude Théberge, bringing together many colleagues to work on public art projects that fused art and architecture.

There are some formal echoes between Théberge's work and the McGee lintels. On a technical level, the lintels were made with a subtractive sculpture process, whereas Théberge's sculpture was made through an additive one. In other words, the McGee lintels were made of a raw element. On the other hand, Théberge's sculpture was made by casting Styrofoam in cement using a Schokbeton casting process and then clad with limestone pebbles — the same material used to create the original façade of the 1550 De Maisonneuve Boulevard building, which has since been reclad.

In this sense, we might also consider Théberge's work as architectural ornament. This work was specifically commissioned to disguise an air vent for the Guy-Concordia metro station below, also constructed in 1966 as part of Expo '67. If you can look at the edge of the sculpture, you can see or imagine a cement gradient where the sculpture's surface blends with a more practical element: the air vent encasing.

During this same period, Atelier Claude Théberge worked on several other public artworks as part of the metro expansion, including a large work inside the Georges-Vanier metro station. Théberge's modernist abstraction and social consciousness in his approach to public art was at once a challenge to traditional aesthetic norms and an embodiment of the Quebec cultural moment, which was then in the midst of the Quiet Revolution. It was only a decade and a half earlier that Paul-Émile Borduas was shunned for his *Refus Global* manifesto, ushering in a unique Quebec modernism that this work inherits.

Théberge also had an established painting practice that diverged from his public sculptures' aesthetic. The paintings are representational, sometimes surrealist, and quite colourful. In fact, at first glance the two modes of practice may seem like the work of two entirely different artists. Even without the paintings in front of us, we might consider how this variation in

aesthetic approach might reveal Théberge's thoughts on public art. In his historical moment, why might Théberge have chosen abstraction as the language of his public works?

This artwork has gone through various alterations and indignities in its public life. For many years, rather than cleaning the delicate stonework, the work was covered in white paint. In addition, the clock embedded on the left side of the sculpture is not the original one — in fact, the original clock was stolen, and the spot remained empty for many years. Under the care of Concordia's Public Art Lead, the work has been carefully restored and is now maintained regularly.

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