



Fig. 1. Pierre-Noël Levasseur, retable of the Ursuline Chapel, Quebec (Photo: Léopold Désy).



Fig. 1. (See p. 15) Emmanuel Hahn, reverse of 1935 Canadian Silver Dollar (Photo: The Royal Canadian Mint).

PIERRE-NOEL LEVASSEUR: A LETTER

Amongst the vast holdings of the Archives Nationales du Québec, District de Montréal, is a simple document of timeless appeal: a letter from Pierre-Noël Levasseur,¹ prominent member of a leading woodcarving family of eighteenth century Quebec, to François Filiau Dubois,² of Montreal. The letter, which was first published by E.-Z. Massicotte in 1931,³ is dated July 15, 1745, and concerns the apprenticeship of Levasseur's son, René-Michel, to the Montreal sculptor, Dubois.

A rare human document, Levasseur's letter reveals most clearly and poignantly the strained relationship which existed at the time between father and son. In addition, it gives evidence of certain aspects of the apprenticeship system as it was practiced in Quebec. One may assume that it was not uncommon for a young member of a woodcarving family to be apprenticed to a master in another studio or workshop; and one may also discern that the relationship of master to apprentice was an extremely personal one. Although Pierre-Noël was deeply resentful of his son's leave-taking, he movingly requested (and seemingly expected) of Dubois, to watch over the conduct of René-Michel like a father: "as though he belonged to you".

To those who have been familiar with this letter, its engaging quality as a personal and social document has undoubtedly been recognized. Interest in it, however, must surely increase with the recent findings of Jean Trudel, and the subsequent release of hitherto unpublished material concerning the career of Pierre-Noël Levasseur.⁴

Prior to the 1972 publication of the Trudel monograph on the Ursuline Chapel, Quebec, it had generally been accepted that Noël Levasseur (older cousin of Pierre-Noël), working possibly in conjunction with his sons, was responsible for the splendid retable.⁵ Trudel has established with certainty, however, that Pierre-Noël Levasseur was the artist responsible for the renowned work. Trudel includes in his monograph a copy of the contract, dated June 13, 1730,⁶ made between the Ursuline Sisters and Pierre-Noël Levasseur, and explains in his text that the contract had not been notarized, and for this reason has only just recently come to light (Fig. 1).⁷

The creative stature of Pierre-Noël increases substantially with the recognition that he was responsible for the Ursuline altar wall. To many,

the retable of the beautiful Chapel is not only the outstanding creation of the art of French Canada prior to 1759, but is furthermore one of the supreme masterpieces of Canadian art. A personal document of Pierre-Noël's, such as the letter of 1745 which follows,⁸ must therefore assume added significance.

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To Monsieur François Filiau Dubois Esq. Joiner, Montreal.

Quebec, July 15th, 1745

Sir:

I have the honour of replying to this (letter), which you gave me pleasure in writing (and) by which you inform me that my son is with you. I thank you for the kind welcome that you have given him for our sake. My wish is that he be firm in his will to learn woodworking with you. I give my consent that he be employed by you according to the conditions stated in your letter which I am returning, and which you will show to (him), the one who will carry out the aforementioned employment; and that you will treat him and support him as a good head of a family. I leave to your discretion to give him his keep or thirty pounds a year. I trust that you will give him some moments to read, write and draw, and that you will watch over his behaviour as though he belonged to you, in order that he goes often to the Churches and (takes part in) the sacraments, and does not associate with drunkards and libertines. If he needs paper to write and draw, I will send it to him as soon as I know that he will be staying with you and that you will give me good evidence of his diligence. I beg you to put yourself in my place in this instance, to speak to him as a father, to make him aware of the right that I have to forget him in order to punish him for the displeasure he has given me up to the present time. He is leaving me at a time when I am alone and when I need help. He

could learn with me all he could learn elsewhere, and some things more. He has never wanted to profit from my advice nor from that of his mother. I hope that God will grant him the grace to be wiser in the future, and that he will profit from your (advice) and that of your wife to whom I take the liberty of entrusting him. I beg of you to hide from him the affections which I still have for him, and let him know only the resentment (I harbour) for his bad behaviour towards me. I await news from you upon the first occasion and remain respectfully yours.

Sir,

Your very humble servant, Levasseur,
Sculptor

Notes:

¹ The letter is signed "Levaffeur sculpteur". For information concerning Pierre-Noël Levasseur see: Gérard Morisset, "Pierre-Noël Levasseur (1690-1770)," *la Patrie*, Novembre 9, 1952. Morisset confirms that René-Michel is the son of Pierre-Noël and gives reasons for confusion concerning identity of the latter in connection with certain documents. The birth certificate of Pierre-Noël drawn up in Quebec November 28, 1690, bears the name of Noël (the name also of Pierre-Noël's older cousin); and Morisset adds that on occasion the artist signed as Louis-Noël, as well as more commonly Pierre-Noël. It is noted also that in church accounts the sculptors of the Levasseur dynasty were recorded frequently in the imprecise way as "des Vasseurs". In this article Morisset prophetically poses the question: "Retrouverons-nous d'autres ouvrages de Pierre-Noël Levasseur?"

² The letter is addressed to "François Filiau Dubois", but in the contract drawn up by Simmonet (see n. 3) Dubois signs as "françois filiau dubois". Concerning this woodworker Ramsay Traquair, *The Old Architecture of Quebec*, Toronto, The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1947, p. 299, states: "This was probably François Filiau who carved an Easter Candlestick for Longue Pointe Church (M) in 1788". In the same note Traquair states: "In 1745 François Noël Levasseur apprenticed his son René Michel, then twenty-two years old, to François Filiau Dubois for four years for the purpose of learning "la menuiserie". François-Noël is the son of Noël (1680-1740).

³ E.-Z. Massicotte, "Le Sculpteur Levasseur et sa Famille," *Le Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 8, August, 1931, pp. 496-499. Both the letter of Levasseur to Dubois and the subsequent contract that was drawn up by the notary Simmonet, dated September 8, 1745, and signed by Dubois and René-Michel, were published by Massicotte. In the contract of apprenticeship (Archives du district de Montréal) one reads, "René Michel Le Vaffeur, fils de Sr Noel Levaffeur", (see n. 1).

⁴ Jean Trudel, *Un Chef-d'Oeuvre de l'Art Ancien du Québec: La Chapelle des Ursulines*, Quebec, Les Presses de l'Université de Laval, 1972.

⁵ An early example: E. R. Adair, "French Canadian Art," *The Canadian Historical Association*, 1929, p. 95, states (with reference to Noël Levasseur, b. 1680): "But Noël Levasseur's masterpiece is the great altar and retable of the Ursulines at Quebec which he, assisted by his sons, carved in the years 1732-1736".

⁶ Jean Trudel, *Un Chef-d'Oeuvre de l'Art Ancien du Québec: La Chapelle des Ursulines*, p. 100 (Annexe 3): "Marché entre les dames Ursulines et Pierre-Noël Levasseur".

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸ The translation is from a photostat copy of the original document which was written in French. Additional punctuation has been included for the sake of clarity.

THE 1935 CANADIAN SILVER DOLLAR

In Canadian numismatic history, the 1935 silver dollar design is the watershed between colonial and Canadian imagery. The unprecedented inclusion of a dominant Canadian theme was, however, neither sudden nor unexpected in light of the Canadian temper of the 30's — a period of increasing national realization. The year 1935 marked the silver jubilee of George V's reign, and the Canadian silver dollar commemorates that event. The design for the reverse of the coin was executed by Emmanuel Hahn, the Toronto sculptor. Because of the popularity of the Hahn design, it continues to appear on the silver dollar. Until the issue of this coin, Canadian coins bore only the traditional features: the bust of the monarch, a descriptive inscription in Latin *GEORGIVS V DEI GRATIA REX ET IND: IMP*, the name of the country, a wreath of leaves,¹ the date and of course, the value of the token. Such iconography reflected the Imperial colonial ties of the Canadian nation; coins from other British colonies followed the same pattern.²

The 1935 silver dollar obverse retains the traditional bust of the King, however the reverse is uniquely Canadian: a voyageur, an Indian, a canoe laden with provisions, an islet with trees, the Northern Lights. The well clad voyageur contrasts vividly with the muscular torso of the Indian but there is no conflict. They travel in an idyllic calm; only gentle waves ripple the water. The men do not battle the elements of nature; they do not wrestle with the indomitable forces of a tempestuous sea. They are in harmony with the landscape and thus contribute to the compositional balance and stability of the coin. Strong vertical and horizontal divisions, pivoted about the central tree, give the coin a structural tranquility. The figures too belong to a timeless, stable world; these are not specific characters en route to a particular locale (Fig. 1).

The classical vision of man in an ordered world is promised by the stability and balance of the composition but this promise is not fulfilled in the individual elements which depict a magnificent and awful nature. The trees are bent dramatically by stormy winds; the Northern Lights flicker in the sky overhead. The eclectic nature of the elements is obvious. The windblown tree implies a violent storm with rough waves and an overcast sky; certainly there should be no visible aurora. Hahn selected and abstracted from nature to produce a universal image of exploration, travel and trade that is Canadian in character and setting.

Emmanuel Hahn (1881-1957), R.C.A. was, for many years, associated with the Ontario College of Art as were many members of the Group of Seven. Hahn shared with them a love for the northern country; he even spent his honeymoon there in 1926. Elements of the coin design suggest the specific influence of the Group, not only in subject but also in style. Witness the windblown tree in the central background; it is reminiscent of trees painted by the Group (c.f. *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay* (1920) by Frederick Varley). Hahn has presented the tree in a low relief with broad plain areas and little minor detail.³ It would appear that the Group of Seven had been recognized as a new Canadian school as early as the 1920's. In 1925, Newton Mactavish comments:

It is held by some observers that there is, even now, a Canadian School of Art and that its centre is the Group of Seven.⁴

Hahn's subject and style are not only consistent with his personal interests but are also in the current Canadian tradition.

The 1935 silver dollar proved to be an auspicious beginning for Canadian coin design. Redesigned pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and fifty cent pieces followed, presenting a new range of images: the beaver, maple leaf, schooner, caribou and Canadian coat of arms.

The appearance of these images in the 1930's is indicative of a growing Canadian ethos. Many national institutions that are now an integral part of Canada's social, economic and cultural identity were established during that decade. By 1931 British control of the Mint had been relinquished and the Royal Canadian Mint became a branch of the Department of Finance. In 1934, the Bank of Canada was created and given exclusive responsibility for issuing paper money.⁵ The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had been established in 1932 and in the same year the Earl of Bessborough organized the Dominion Drama Festival. The Governor General's Literary Awards began in 1936 and in 1939 the National Film Board was established.

The era saw a growing pride in things Canadian. The literature and painting of the time reflected the national preoccupation with social and economic values.

Poets and prose writers alike turned away from the techni-

cal experimentation of the twenties towards the exploration of social and economic themes.⁶

Russell Harper writes that the artists:

. . . began to observe their own immediate environment.⁷

The continuing emphasis on Canadianism during the Depression is also found in the popular media i.e. the radio and the newspapers. The C.B.C. sponsored lectures on Canadian literature and frequently broadcast readings of Canadian poems and stories. Such programs as *Yukon King* conveyed the Canadian idiom into the home on a more popular level. *Yukon King*, the strongest lead dog of the North West, roamed the Canadian frontier, a land of howling winds peopled by noble mounties who battled for freedom, justice and the Crown.

James Llewellyn Frise, a cartoonist for the *Star Weekly* gave the nation *Birdseye Centre* inhabited by Old Archie, Pigskin Peters, the giant Jack and Archie's pet moose. Many saw in *Birdseye Centre*, a familiar small Canadian town, drawn only a little larger than life.

Such was the atmosphere of the 30's but the design for the silver dollar was more than a simple reflection of current attitudes. Traditionally, the function of images on currency is to set forth in visual symbolic form a statement of the convictions of the state. The symbol functions as a guarantee of the value of the token and should therefore be a valid image. Although governments and legislation may change radically, coinage need not record these surface changes. Only the fundamental shifts in ideology are stated.

It is generally found that monetary change follows some time after political revolution. People cannot immediately forego the coinage they are used to and even when this has no longer a *raison d'être*, it is still continued or is imitated as nearly as possible.⁸

New symbols placed on coins often lack the authority of the older images. Historically, two images, one old and one new, presented simultaneously have been used to indicate symbolically the support of the old order for the new.⁹ Clearly the 1935 silver dollar is such a

statement. On the reverse is an image of Canada; on the obverse the conventional symbol of Royal Authority which stands in silent support of Canadian nationalism.¹⁰ The Emmanuel Hahn design was created in a climate of active social, economic, political and artistic ferment out of which came a new awareness of the Canadian identity. The coin is a statement of that identity.

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Notes:

¹ The exceptions are the 1920 design for the penny and the 1922 design for the nickel in which individual maple leaves were used.

² The 1923 one half anna coin from India is similar to the Canadian coins from the same period. Even the wreath of leaves surrounding the value and the date would pass for the maple leaves on the Canadian version.

³ This is a sharp contrast with the Early Canadian designs which feature high relief and much minor detail.

⁴ Newton Mactavish, *Fine Arts in Canada* (Toronto, 1925), p. 154.

⁵ It, of course, gave opportunity for a standardized issue of coinage and bills that was Canadian in design. However, it didn't become a reality until the 1950's when the bills issued by the chartered banks were withdrawn from circulation.

⁶ Desmond Pacey, "The Writer and his Public," *Literary History of Canada*, ed., D. F. Klinck (Toronto, 1965), p. 487.

⁷ J. Russell Harper, *Painting In Canada* (Toronto, 1966), p. 325.

⁸ C. F. Keary, "The Coinage of Christian Europe," *Coins and Medals in History and Art*, ed., S. Lane Poole (Chicago, 1968), p. 39.

⁹ The Ostrogoths and Vandals continued to issue coins in the Roman traditions but incorporated monograms of their own devise.

¹⁰ Only in the recent issues of the ten (1971) and five (1972) dollar bill have the dominant statements of monarchical power been removed in the lower denominations.