



fig.1 Unknown artist, **Jeanne Leber at Work**, 1935, charcoal, Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Montreal. (Photo: Léo-Paul Desrosiers, *Dans le nid de l'aiglon la Colombe*, Montreal: Fides, 1963)

JEANNE LEBER

Recluse and Embroideress (1662-1714)

She was assisted in all her work only by the Angels, with whom she conversed and who doubtless greatly enjoyed her company.¹

In the late afternoon of August 5, 1695, Montreal witnessed a ceremony unique in the religious history of New France. Jeanne Leber, the thirty-three year-old daughter of the prosperous merchant Jacques Leber, joined the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame as a recluse (fig.1). The previous day, a notarized contract had been signed, setting out the parties' commitments: in exchange for a dowry that would finance the completion and furnishings of the convent's new chapel, the nuns would allow Jeanne to live in a cell built behind the altar. Thus, after vespers on the feast day of Our Lady of the Snow, a clerical procession escorted the young woman, accompanied by her father, from the family home on Saint-Paul Street to the Congregation's chapel. There, the Grand Vicar Dollier de Casson, Superior of Montreal's Saint-Sulpice Seminary, pronounced a blessing and having exhorted Jeanne to persevere, led her to the cell where she shut herself away. This public act took place against the strains of the litanies of the Blessed Virgin sung by an assembly of Montreal clergy, Sisters of the Congregation, and "other persons from outside." Jacques Leber alone was absent from this final ceremony as he was too distressed to see his only daughter become a recluse. The next day, August 6 – the Feast of the Transfiguration – the new chapel was blessed and a solemn mass was sung, accompanied "by all the symphony that Canada could muster." In attendance were "a great many People," now including Jacques Leber "who, though unable to attend the Entrance ceremony, due to a surfeit of emotion, came the following day to attest that, despite his Overwhelming fatherly love, he was willingly consecrating to God...his very dear daughter."²

When she died on October 3, 1714 at age fifty-two, Jeanne Leber had spent thirty-four years secluded from the world: fifteen in her father's home and nineteen in her cell. From adolescence to death, she had immersed herself in a ceaseless dialogue with God. Her increasingly demanding regime led to total abnegation, self-effacement and denial of the body, in yielding to spirituality and mysticism. This extreme asceticism coincided with a troubled time in the history of Montreal, where the survival of Catholicism was under constant

threat, requiring for grand deeds, heroes and sacrifice, and the Leber family and the Montreal community supported the recluse in her calling. Under her inspiration, Montreal became a centre for intense spirituality, an anchor and point of reference for a land to be settled and made sacred.

Like all contemplatives, Jeanne Leber divided her day between prayer and manual tasks. Her handiwork, dedicated to God and charity, helped to express and intensify her mysticism. She worked as a seamstress, spinner, lacemaker and embroideress to serve Montreal's poor and to decorate the chapels and churches of the neighbouring parishes. No source that truly quantifies or verifies her production has yet been found, but a collection of her liturgical ornaments was exhibited in 1995 at the Maison Saint-Gabriel, giving Montrealers their first opportunity to get to know the reclusive Jeanne Leber and her embroidered legacy.³ This event prompted new research and analysis, and the results presented here will attempt to shed new light on the greatest embroiderer working in Montreal around the turn of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the movement for Leber's canonization, led by the Montreal Congregation of Notre-Dame, demonstrates her ongoing relevance and the historical importance of her embroidered work.

Historiography and Sources

Jeanne Leber left no writings about her life and spiritual journey; neither did her confessor, Abbot François Séguenot, the Sulpician priest who attended her nineteen years of seclusion, nor her cousin Anne Barrois, known as Sister Saint Charles in the Congregation of Notre-Dame, who brought meals to her cell. This study is based on the first posthumous biography of Leber, written between 1715 and 1722 by the Sulpician, François Vachon de Belmont.⁴ In his preface de Belmont disclaims all panegyric intent; he reconstructed her life from facts "that have been seen by eyewitnesses, and Words that their ears have Heard." He used first-hand accounts by the mother superiors of Hôtel-Dieu in Montreal and the Ursulines in Quebec City, and from a report by two of Jeanne's friends, one of whom attended the Ursuline boarding school with her. Although he does not quote him, the Sulpician undoubtedly drew on the confidences of Abbot François Séguenot,⁵ the recluse's spiritual advisor, who was still alive in 1722. De Belmont's manuscript inspired two further Sulpician biographies, one by Étienne Montgolfier,⁶ written in 1768, and the other by Étienne Faillon,⁷ published in 1860. These writings, based on oral accounts gathered by de Belmont after Jeanne Leber's death, are of questionable reliability. Despite their stated aim of historical authenticity, the authors took a hagiographic approach to the subject. Their accounts are constructed as a series of facts and counter-facts designed to enhance Leber's exceptional personality and actions in order to convince the reader of her holiness.⁸ In their hands she becomes a fanatical Sulpician

heroine. Her embroidery work is used to bolster this image: she embroidered quickly, she embroidered well and she embroidered in the service of God. Such perfection could be explained only by the intercession of divine power manifested through the presence of the angels that assisted her every effort.

New studies and biographies of Leber have appeared since the nineteenth century. The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame painstakingly gathered all the available documents that chronicle her life, and in 1988, when she was re-interred at Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery, the community led by Sister Hélène Tremblay undertook to authenticate her remains.⁹ In 2000, Françoise Deroy-Pineau¹⁰ provided a minutely detailed analysis of her family and religious connections, thus completing the methodical task begun by the historian Léo-Paul Desrosiers in 1963.¹¹ These two authors rejected the hagiographic approach in favour of a new reading of the sources, which include notarized documents, and they examine her life in the context of recluses of the Middle Ages and those of contemporary mystics.

The ethnologist Marius Barbeau was the first to bring Jeanne Leber's skills as an embroideress to public notice.¹² In the course of his fieldwork on the collections of Quebec religious communities, he gathered oral accounts and secular attributions of objects associated with persons or historical events of significance to each community. (For the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame, there was and still is, no question as to the attribution of Jeanne Leber's ornaments.) Barbeau focused on the relationship between her work and pieces done by the Quebec City Ursulines, and identified the French influence in the models and techniques employed by the embroiderers of New France. In 1947, he described a dozen pieces stitched by the recluse, explaining the paucity of objects by the major fires that destroyed the Congregation buildings in 1768 and 1893, and the destruction, relocation and demolition of parish churches in Montreal. Since then, no in-depth inventory and analysis has been made to complete his research. A systematic survey and examination of the embroidered ornaments still preserved in church sacristies – including those of Notre-Dame Basilica and the chapels of Montreal's oldest religious communities – would significantly further our knowledge of Jeanne Leber's production and its history.

A Family of Wealth and Distinction

Jeanne was the descendent of two Montreal merchant families: the Lebers and the Lemoynes. Her mother, Jeanne, sailed from Dieppe for New France in 1657 to join her brother, Charles Lemoyne who had enlisted in 1641, at the age of fifteen, to help found a new city on the island of Montreal. Jacques Leber, a native of Pîtres, near Rouen in Normandy, was sixteen when he left the banks of the Seine for the shores of the Saint-Lawrence in 1649.¹³ Jacques Leber swiftly and skilfully laid the foundations of his considerable fortune, and his signature

is found on all manner of notarized acts. He was everywhere; conducting business, trading with the Natives, buying land and making a name for himself in political, military and religious circles.¹⁴ An inventory of his assets and goods beginning in 1693 establishes him as a member of the colonial elite that was loyal to European traditions but deeply influenced by the American experience. He was one of the few merchants in Montreal to hire a black manservant, a native of Guinea.¹⁵

Vachon de Belmont notes that “Jacques Leber, for his personal Merit and for the services he rendered to the nascent colony of Montreal, was deemed by the King worthy of Letters of Nobility.... Through his skill in commerce, which the King permitted the Nobility to practice in Canada, he acquired immense wealth.”¹⁶ Leber’s flourishing fortune was based chiefly on two pursuits: transporting merchandise upriver to Montreal from Quebec City, the last port of call for ships from France, and sending enormous quantities of fur to Europe. Besides his brother-in-law Charles Lemoyne, he was the only merchant to own interests outside of Montreal, investing in cod fishing and outfitting ships that plied the routes between France, Canada, Acadia and the Antilles.

According to the historian Louise Dechêne, textiles topped the list of products sold by Montreal merchants.¹⁷ Between 1680 and 1720, woollens, linens and other dry goods accounted for forty percent of the value of the stock on hand in shops, not counting French-and colonial-made blankets and garments (thirteen per cent). Leber kept lengths of red and blue material woven from local wool for trading with the Natives. However, colonial production accounted for only five per cent of the textiles sold in Montreal. Half of all retail sales were European goods that included coarse hemp cloth, but also fine materials from Rouen, Morlaix, Paris, Laval and the Netherlands. The wealthiest colonists bought stylish, refined fabrics – bombazine, damask, taffeta, brocade, muslin, cotton, calico and silk that were stocked by elite merchants to satisfy demanding tastes. These merchants also sold fine notions – braid, ribbons, buttons, gold and silver thread, laces, and embroidery threads, which were required for making both lay attire and church ornaments. Jeanne Leber had ready access to fabrics and models for her embroidery in her father’s shop, that occupied the ground floor of the family home.

Alongside textile products, Leber sold other articles for the general public and for religious communities, including devotional objects used in preaching to the Natives.¹⁸ His on-hand inventory lists “forty-two paper prints...[and] nine other very small illuminated prints.”¹⁹ They were produced by important families of engravers on Boulevard Saint-Jacques in Paris and used by missionaries as visual aids in explaining the mysteries of Christianity.²⁰ Easily carried, rolled around a wooden dowel or slipped between the pages of a missal, they were essential teaching tools. They also served to introduce religious iconography and Baroque art to New France, providing inspiration for architects, painters,

sculptors, gilders and embroiderers. Of the four Leber sons, Pierre was no doubt closest to his sister in terms of taste and personal commitment. In 1688, he and François Charon de la Barre co-founded the Hôpital-Général de Montréal to provide care for the needy such as beggars, orphans and the disabled, as well as employment in carpentry, ironwork and other workshop skills.²¹ The inventory of Pierre Leber's estate, drawn up by the notary Raimbault in 1707, indicates that three rooms on the third floor of the building were reserved for his painting and teaching, and lists his materials:

8 drawers full of all Sorts of Colours and two full of brushes and painting Knives, another drawer full of gum arabic...one Marble for Grinding Colours...yellow ochre...lead white...smoke black...walnut oil...one painter's easel...4 primed Canvases for painting, 2 on their stretchers...four paintings representing the Holy Virgin and Saint Theresa and Saint Paul.²²

His studio was put to notable use during the construction of the Hôpital-Général's house of worship, which was largely financed and decorated by Pierre Leber. Begun in 1695, this "very pretty church" dedicated to Saint Anne, with its tiny Sacred Heart chapel, was completed in 1704. The sanctuary tabernacle was covered with "seven pieces of painted canvas [and the] altar frontal is of gilded leather. [On] the sculpted altar retable, two paintings in golden frames, one representing an Ecce Homo and the other a Holy Virgin...and in the background a large painting representing Saint Joseph holding the Christ Child in his arms...[and] above the retable a Christ on a wooden cross."²³ Twenty-seven paintings in gilt frames adorned the walls of the nave. At the back of the chapel, the sacristy was furnished with eight cupboards for liturgical ornaments, gilded wood statues, sacred vessels and wooden candlesticks.

Both pious and both artists, Pierre and Jeanne Leber chose to lead a religious life without joining orders. They shared their lifelong wealth with Montreal's religious communities, and used their talent to appoint and decorate many of the city's chapels and churches, thus helping to establish the Tridentine liturgy in New France.

Marie Leber, Jacques Leber's sister, was instrumental in her niece's training and destiny. In 1664, after the death of her mother, Colette Cavelier, Marie left the village of Pîtres at the age of twenty-four to join her brother in New France. In October 1668, she was admitted to the Ursuline novitiate in Quebec City by its founder, Marie de l'Incarnation, then Mistress of the Novices.²⁴ The newcomer was one of the "very good subjects capable of helping us bear the weight of our duties, which grow from day to day."²⁵ In fact Marie Leber, who became Marie de l'Annonciation, held a number of positions in the Ursuline convent. Over the years, she was in charge of supplies, accounting and linens, "difficult, arduous tasks" that required business sense and management skills.²⁶ In carrying out her duties, she likely made use of her ties with the Leber-Lemoyne family.

Marie saw the convent destroyed by fire in a matter of hours on 20 October 1686, its second such disaster. She was there through its rebuilding and enlargement, and for the inception of the Ursulines' grand artistic project of the eighteenth century: the construction of a new chapel.²⁷ Marie's presence at the convent ensured a special relationship between the Leber family and the Quebec City Ursulines for forty-six years; the ties were spiritual, religious and affective, but also material and artistic. For example, her nephew Pierre commissioned the Ursulines to gild the tabernacle for the Saint Anne chapel he built at the Hôpital-Général de Montréal.²⁸

Training and Influences

In 1674, knowing Marie would be nearby, Jacques Leber and Jeanne Lemoyne entrusted their twelve-year-old daughter to the Ursulines, who ran the only boarding school for girls in New France.²⁹ Jeanne was to complete her education and prepare for her first communion in Quebec City. The register of arrivals for 21 April 1674, indicates that "the young lady Jeanne Leber of Montreal has become a boarder at our convent." For his daughter's upkeep, Jacques Leber paid two hundred pounds a year, eighty pounds more than the normal fee, "in consideration that she be better treated than the other boarders...and the little Leber girl's linen is to be washed [here] in the house."³⁰ The merchant had already given the nuns a deposit, paying in kind with forty bushels of wheat. Jeanne was accorded special status because her father was wealthy and she was far from home. Like most of her companions, she spent just over a year as a boarder before leaving the Ursulines on 25 July 1675.³¹ During that time, she was privately tutored in selected subjects that complemented her home schooling.³²

The 1674 roster of boarders included one Métis girl, five Native and thirty-six Canadian girls. Most of them were from the Quebec City or Trois-Rivières area; only two were from Montreal: Marie Martin dit Larivière and Jeanne Leber. The convent personnel included nineteen choir sisters and six lay sisters.³³ Three years after the death of Madame de la Peltrie³⁴ and two years after that of Marie de l'Incarnation, the founders' spirit continued to guide the convent. Their original companions Mother Sainte-Croix and Mother Saint-Ignace were still alive, and life in the community continued to be ruled by the governing charter written in 1647, to which Marie de l'Incarnation had contributed.³⁵

But with a growing number of nuns arriving from Paris or from convents allied with the Paris mother house, the Quebec City Ursulines were gradually abandoning the conversion of young Native girls in favour of the educational mission prescribed by their fourth vow.³⁶ The convent's educational orientation is clearly set out in the 1635 *Constitutions des Ursulines de Paris*. The Mother in charge of schooling "shall not be obligated to have her students taught the

Catechism, only reading and writing, and she must also see to it that they learn some manual tasks, this being applicable to young ladies, to protect them from idleness, mother of all vices, as well as to the others, to ease their life of poverty.”³⁷ *Constitutions des Ursulines de Paris*, expanded and reissued in 1652 and in 1673, contains a educational code governing courses, daily schedules and the life of boarders and day students, as well as extensive chapters on handiwork and the necessary aptitudes of the handiwork mistress:

She shall teach them with patience and attention, showing fondness and encouraging them to learn well; she shall inspect their work frequently and, as needed, work in front of them, having them undo that which they have done badly, showing them how to redo it properly & how to work neatly, tightly tying off their thread, wool or silk, & to handle the fabrics with care. She shall usually have someone close to her for this subject, taking them one after the other and not having more than two or three at a time, if possible, so as to better apply herself.³⁸

The little girls first learned easy, basic work such as sewing proper seams and hems, drawing patterns on canvas and linen and doing counted-stitch work. The more skilled pupils worked embroidered flowers, gold and silver thread embroidery, bobbin lace, French stitch, English stitch and “other handiwork used in this country & which their parents want them to know.”³⁹

In her history of the Ursulines, written in 1788, Marie de Chantal Gueudré evokes the atmosphere of these monastic workshops:

Coloured cartoons guided the young workers in their tapestry, or petit point embroidery, now called needle painting. For this latter work, they used the most varied tones of silk, harmonizing the nuances; fruits and flowers intermingled with diverse foliage stood out in remarkable relief. Cornucopias, baskets and other decorative elements joined them. The motifs were at times edged with silver or gold thread. The faces of the subjects dominating the paintings called for special talent and were thus entrusted to the best artists for execution.⁴⁰

All of these decorative motifs – fruits, flowers, foliage, cornucopias, baskets of flowers – are to be found in the embroidered ornaments preserved by the Quebec City Ursulines and in those attributed to Jeanne Leber.

When Leber became a boarder, French artistic traditions were already well entrenched at the Quebec City convent. Since its founding in 1639, the school had enjoyed the talents of Marie de l’Incarnation and her artistic gifts were lauded in a circular letter announcing her death on 30 April 1672: “She was highly industrious at all sorts of handiwork and knew everything that one could hope for in a person of her gender, both about embroidery, which she did to perfection, and about gilding and painting.”⁴¹ (fig.2) Mindful of the status of a convent where “the ceremonies to which prominent observers attributed majesty



fig.2 Anonymous or possibly Hughes Pommier, **Portrait of the Venerable Marie de l'Incarnation**, 1672, oil on canvas, 86 x 65 cm, Musée des Ursulines de Québec, Quebec. (Photo: Musée des Ursulines de Québec)

equal to that of the best directed choirs of France,⁷⁴² Marie de l'Incarnation aided the community and through it the Church in Canada. She was among those responsible for introducing Counter-Reformation art in New France. The movement's liturgical pomp is consistent with Tridentine tradition, which calls for the exhibition of sculpted, gilded, painted or embroidered art objects to serve the glory of God and the salvation of souls, but also supports the evangelical work of missionaries.

In 1656, Marie de l'Incarnation undertook the largest of all her construction projects: Madame de la Peltrie's church. This structure comprised a choir, a chancel, an exterior church, four altars, three chapels and two sacristies. The construction took ten years and cost the community 10,050 Tours pounds. An inventory of the sacristy drawn up in 1682 reports twenty-four altar frontals in addition to the loveliest ones stored "in an armoire at the end of the large dormitory."⁷⁴³ It was in this church that Jeanne Leber, like all the other boarders, came to pray, attend "Roman-style" services and, under the guidance of her mistresses, assist with embellishments and ornamentation.



fig.3 Workshop of the Quebec Ursulines, **Altar frontal** know as "Dove of the Holy Ghost," c.1700, 98 x 264 cm, Musée des Ursulines de Québec, Québec. (Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)

When Marie de l'Incarnation died, her authority passed to Marie Lemaire-des-Anges. Born into a well-to-do bourgeois family of Parisian merchants, Marie Lemaire was baptized in 1641 in the parish of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, where many embroiderers had their workshops.⁴⁴ At the age of fifteen she entered the Ursuline convent on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques. After taking her vows, she sailed to New France and was welcomed by Marie de l'Incarnation, who saw in her an eventual successor "filled with the same zeal that she possessed."⁴⁵

Marie Lemaire-des-Anges took charge of the convent's artistic production. The account books reveal numerous purchases of gold leaf, gamboge and rabbitskin glue for gilding work, as well as fabrics, skeins of silk, and gold and silver thread for embroidery. In 1686 a list of gifts received from the family of Mother Lemaire-des-Anges, noted "gold and silver thread, braid, twisted cannetille used in embroideries, thread and beads for the beautiful embroidered altar frontal and for the handsome chasuble, for the sum of 400 pounds."⁴⁶

In 1712, five years before the death of Mother Lemaire-des-Anges, she was described by the convent historian: "She liked to work for the decoration of the temples of the Lord and scarcely no Church in New France was without these works. The most beautiful ornaments in our sacristy are the fruit of her skills with those of our young Sisters that she has in part taught and trained in Embroidery."⁴⁷ (fig.3) Evidence that Marie Lemaire-des-Anges and her young nuns instructed Jeanne Leber in handiwork is found in the iconographic and technical correspondences between the pieces attributed to Leber and objects in the collection of the Quebec City Ursulines. These were reported in 1768 by Monsignor Montgolfier, then Superior of the Saint-Sulpice Seminary in Montreal. He noted the emphasis on artistic activities in the daily life of the Ursulines and their pupils, and the effectiveness of their teaching method based on demonstration and example:

Their reputation had already spread throughout the country; they especially excelled in spiritual matters, in Christian education, and for lay activities, in the embroidery work that they used extensively, in particular for church ornaments.... Seeing them always busy with embroidery or gilding for the decoration of altars, the young Jeanne Leber took such a liking to these tasks that she later rivalled her mistresses, because she worked at them without respite during her evenings and free time.⁴⁸

Returning home to Montreal in 1675, Jeanne Leber applied the knowledge she had acquired as a boarder: manual tasks, primarily embroidery, along with a marked inclination for solitude and prayer. The decor of the convent chapel had imbued her with the artistic legacy of Marie de l'Incarnation, and she had been taught by Marie Lemaire-des-Anges, to whom the finest of the extant ornaments are attributed. The Ursulines had effectively transferred their artistic skills to her, and she in turn would introduce them to Montreal.

A Life of Solitude

Jeanne Leber first sought seclusion in her large family home and continued to follow the boarding school regime. She initially constrained herself to fifteen-minute periods of prayer every day. Then, "from this first quarter-hour that she gave to God without respite, one day it was observed that she no longer kept anything for herself and was giving all her hours to her Divine master." Moreover, "although she fulfilled all the duties of Decorum most pleasantly, She constantly felt Disgust for worldly things."⁴⁹

Both her social and private life changed: she ate only of necessity, spurned stylishness, and dressed in robes of coarse cloth; she adopted strict habits of prayer, worship and mortification and, of course, would not marry. Her biographers have speculated about whether she was imitating the great Italian mystic Saint Catherine of Siena, who also lived as a recluse in her father's home and whose

life story Jeanne may have read.⁵⁰ Had she also read the life of Marie de l'Incarnation written by the latter's son and published in Paris in early 1677, copies of which appeared in New France the same year?⁵¹ This text quotes the Ursuline nun as saying: "I was only twenty years old and my son was not yet a year old. My father bade me return to his home, which favoured my seclusion; I lived on the upper floor of the house, where, doing peaceful work, with my spirit pursuing its inner occupation, my heart spoke ceaselessly to God."⁵²

Like Jeanne Leber, Marie de l'Incarnation experienced the difficulty of finding solitude in a house alive with the sounds of family life and a business: "When I was obliged to appear in public...I made myself read, because it was a pious occupation, and because, in front of people, when I was unable to do handiwork to busy my outer self, I preferred to engross myself in a book rather than to reveal that I was praying, or to suffer from not praying."⁵³ Marie de l'Incarnation used reading and handiwork to isolate herself from the world, to appear composed, and to mask her inner feelings and her prayers.⁵⁴ Despite the parallels between the two women, Jeanne Leber left no autobiography or personal letters dating or documenting her decision to become a recluse. However, since she was young and a layperson, neither sanctioned nor protected by the rules of any order or community, her parents and the Montreal Church authorities clearly felt that her case called for guidance and a structure.

The prudent Sulpicians required that Jeanne, who was only seventeen, complete five years of noviciate, during which she was to respect a vow of chastity and of seclusion in her father's home. Her commitment would be renewed at age twenty-two by a vow of perpetual seclusion. She was placed under the spiritual guidance of Abbot François Séguenot, who developed a schedule for her.⁵⁵ Her biographer, de Belmont, wrote: "All her activities had to be ordered and integrated into a daily routine, this routine occupying every hour of the day with her manual tasks, she finally resolved to model herself after Saint Catherine of Siena and to live in her father's house, alone, shut away in a room, thus renouncing all outside visits."⁵⁶ For Séguenot, manual work was a desirable activity, strongly encouraged by religious community founders and spiritual directors. It is relevant to recall Saint Theresa of Avila's warning to her charges: "You shall do some manual work or handiwork so that the Devil finds you always busy and can never use your idleness to enter your souls."⁵⁷ The needle arts offered every virtue, including that of allowing the stitcher to pray while working; to be productive while contemplating.

The handiwork done in religious communities generated considerable income. In certain critical periods of their history, many groups survived only through the determined efforts of the most skilled nuns. This income was so important that *Constitutions des Ursulines de Paris* gives it an entire chapter. The aim was to have internal production benefit the convent without making it appear mercantile:

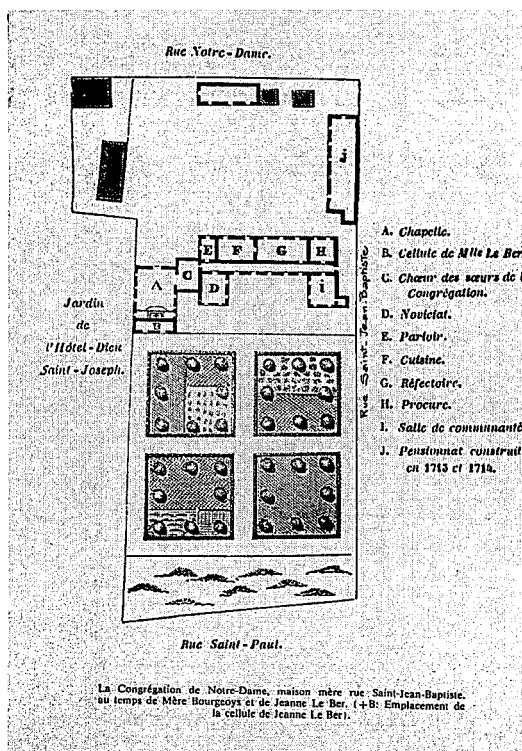


fig.4 Location of Jeanne Leber's cell installed behind the altar of the Chapel of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame. (Photo: Léo-Paul Desrosiers, *Dans le nid de l'aiglon la Colombe*, Montreal: Fides, 1963)

The Sisters shall be allowed to work for people outside & receive a salary.... The convent shall never provide in any manner for the work that they do, so that it does not appear that we wish to deal in merchandise. Payment for the work shall be...shared & shall not be proposed nor asked except very charitably & amiably, not exactingly & dearly.... The Sisters who do the work shall not be named, nor shall the Sisters be told for whom the work is done & they shall work for the common good following the principle of Saint Augustine.⁵⁸

The collective and anonymous work of the nuns was dedicated to God. Their gift was all the more noble because the artists relinquished any recognition of their talents.

After fifteen years as a recluse in her father's house, Jeanne Leber entered her cell in the chapel of the Congrégation of Notre-Dame (fig.4). As members of a non-cloistered community, the sisters attended services in chapels and churches located near the convent. In 1693, led by their founder Marguerite Bourgeoys,⁵⁹ they had constructed their own chapel adjoining the main building.⁶⁰ Two years later, Jeanne Leber, along with her father and brother, would provide four thousand pounds for the building of the chapel and "for the decoration, ornaments and vestments." These included the tabernacle, the ciborium, the

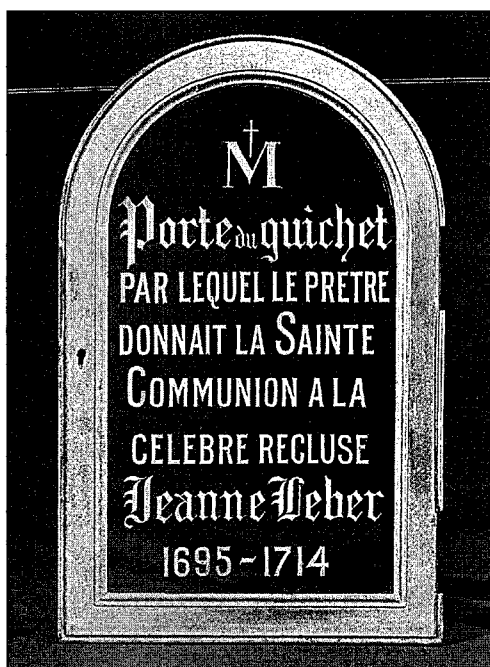


fig. 5 Wicket through which Jeanne Leber received Holy Communion, wood and glass, Collection Maison Saint-Gabriel, Montreal. (Photo: Alain Comtois)

monstrance, the sanctuary lamp, the censer, one chalice, two cruets and one silver plate. In return, Jeanne would have “a small apartment behind the said chapel serving as her retreat and living quarters” and the nuns would provide her “the necessary wood for her heating and her other needs both in sickness and in health.”⁶¹

Jeanne Leber was thus purchasing the ideal conditions for her seclusion and a mystic life. Her three-level cell was separated from the chapel by a simple “partition of timber studs and mortar,”⁶² and “adjoining that of the Holy Virgin, where the Word was made incarnate, which was conveyed by the angels to Loreto.”⁶³ Worship of Our Lady of Loreto had been introduced in New France in 1639 with the arrival of Father Chaumonot, who later modeled the chapel of the Lorette Huron mission, near Quebec City, after the Holy House of Loreto in Italy (believed to be the cottage in which the Virgin was visited by God). It is likely that Jeanne’s builder used the Huron chapel as a model for her own cell. It occupied the width of the church (8 meters) and was about three metres deep. Half of the ground floor served as a sacristy, having “two armoires, one for Linens and the Other for ornaments, a painting of the Visitation and everything normally found in such a place.” Leber had the floor behind the altar slightly lowered, so that when she lay “on the hard,” she would be “but four inches away from the Holy Sacrament.” She also installed a grate with a wicket opening on to the sanctuary for making confession and taking communion (fig.5). A

door across from the grate led to the Congregation garden and was used by her cousin Sister Saint Charles to bring her meals.

The second floor consisted of a bedroom reached by a small stairway. Leber's cell had a window, from which "she never allowed herself to look" and all of the walls were "the natural colour of pine wood...never having been painted." The third floor served as a workshop where "she did on Earth, day and night, that which the angels do in Heaven and worked to embellish the altars."⁶⁴ As part of her contract with the Congregation of Notre-Dame, she had the benefit of an annual annuity of five hundred pounds and reserved "the right to order and purchase each year seventy-five French pounds worth of wool, silk and other things she may need."⁶⁵ Her arrangement with the convent was thus mutually beneficial as she possessed skills that were much sought after, for according to the records of the Congregation of Notre-Dame and Hôtel-Dieu, no embroidery workshop then in Montreal could rival her work.⁶⁶

Jeanne Leber's reputation as an embroiderer transcended the convent walls as she filled outside commissions, including one for a:

Recollet priest who was asked to help her embroider a sumptuous chalice veil; after having her do a bit of work in front of him and telling her to notify him in a month, believing that this time would barely suffice to do the Work that he had left her, [he] was very surprised when, eight days later, she sent for him and he saw this work effectively completed; she answered him simply that she had met with difficulty but that her good angel had helped her to work with facility.⁶⁷

Although Vachon de Belmont lauds Leber's speed and dexterity, his biography provides only a vague notion of the quantity of ornaments she produced: "She has furnished all the parishes from north to south of this government with chasubles, altar frontals, bouquets and other ornaments." Such generalizations are frequent in the obituaries of artist-nuns and are to be taken with a grain of salt. However, Françoise Deroy-Pineau counted fifteen parishes in the Montreal area in 1695, when Jeanne Leber went into seclusion, and twenty-two in 1714, at the time of her death.⁶⁸ When a parish was created, the church decorations and furnishings were usually commissioned from religious communities according to their specific artistic skills. Leber most likely helped to ornament the new churches, as well as the Congregation's chapel.

Decorating a chapel entailed substantial investment and many hours of meticulous and skilled painting, sculpting, gilding, embroidery and lacemaking. In 1694, the Quebec City Ursulines noted: "The residents of our Sainte-Croix land having built a small church at their own cost and expense, they expect us to contribute...and to provide the things needed to ornament said chapel."⁶⁹ At a meeting of their chapter, the nuns decided to furnish one painting, one altar ledge, one gilded Virgin, one altar frontal, one chasuble with alb, amice and

cincture, one chalice veil, one bourse, one corporal, one purificator, one hand basin and one altar cloth. These ornaments were typical of the orders Leber received in her cell. Needlework clearly occupied a good deal of her life, as evidenced by the coroner's report issued in 1991 at the time her remains were moved: he detected "pronounced, specific wear of the two upper and lower centre teeth consistent with a craft [using] sewing needles or thread."⁷⁰

From Quebec City to Montreal: At the Crossroads of Influences

Five pieces from Jeanne Leber's textile production have been selected for this article. Each is described by its place of use, iconography, techniques and connections with pieces in the Ursulines' collection or with works preserved in France.⁷¹ They were chosen on the basis of plausible and reasonably well-documented attributions, and are the five liturgical objects cited in the de Belmont biography: "almost all of the ornaments that are presently in the chapel of the Congregation have been worked by her hands. One rightly admires the altar frontal chasuble dalmatic and cope of silk Embroidery done with most outstanding precision, skill, magnificence." The presence of these ornaments is also noted several times, though with regrettably few details, in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century archives of Notre-Dame parish, where the altar frontal, chasuble and two dalmatics are still held.⁷² In 1860, Abbot Faillon also mentioned this ensemble: "Even now, today, you can see at the parish church of Ville-Marie a complete ornament, with a glacé silver ground, composed of the altar frontal, the chasuble, the dalmatics and the cope, all embroidered entirely by Sister Leber." When the Notre-Dame Basilica museum was installed in 1982, the ornaments were restored and were still labelled as being by Jeanne Leber. The cope was not restored, as it had been previously deposited in the collection of the Maison Saint-Gabriel.

Owing to the lack of documents written by Leber, to the posthumous attribution of these embroideries by her historiographers and to recent reservations by art historians and textile specialists concerning the consistency of the corpus and the Canadian origin of certain pieces, the ensemble still remains shrouded in mystery. To offset the lack of documentation, the objects themselves are used as archives for this study. The attributed embroidered ornaments replace her correspondence, confidences, first-hand accounts by her contemporaries, and other traces of her existence and her deeds; by default, objects are substituted for the written word. Leber is reconstructed through her decisions as artist and artisan: models, patterns, colours, motifs, techniques, mistakes, triumphs, fatigue and inspiration. Technical and iconographic details that provide evidence of the homogeneity of these objects have been carefully inventoried.

Analyses of the pieces constantly led back to the artisan, as if the functions of embroiderer and recluse are intimately connected and cannot be explained independently. To understand the corpus required an understanding of the context.

The five ornaments are compared to a number of contemporary pieces embroidered or painted by the Ursulines to determine the extent to which the works stitched in the confines of Leber's cell represent a crossroads of influences, between Quebec City and Montreal, between France and New France.

Altar Frontal: The Centrepiece⁷³

This ornament fronted the original high altar of the old Notre-Dame parish church in Montreal, built by the Sulpicians beginning in 1672 (fig.6). When the church acquired a larger high altar, sculpted around 1810 by Louis Quévillon (1749-1823), the frontal was widened, with embroidered bands sewn on at either side.⁷⁴ The altar was preserved when the church was demolished in 1830 and was eventually reinstalled in the new Notre-Dame Basilica. It was no doubt around that time that the worn areas in the centre and upper part of the ornament were rather clumsily re-embroidered, since the records show that on 12 July 1894, the parish council paid for repairs to "one altar frontal embroidered by Mlle Leber," the repairs having been ordered by Benjamin-Victor Rousselot, the priest who administered the parish from 1866 to 1882.

Dedicated to the Holy Spirit, this altar frontal evokes the Incarnation of Christ, the third member of the Trinity and considered at the time as important as the Father or the Son. The central area features a dove in a medallion surrounded by four series of rays forming a Maltese cross (fig.7); this is symmetrically flanked by large floral decorations. The lightly padded dove is embroidered with silver purl couched on a canvas-backed satin ground;⁷⁵ its wings and tail are worked with silver sequins highlighted with gold purl. The dove is appliquéed on a needle-painted ground of polychrome silk thread. Its slightly raised medallion frame is embellished with couched Japan gold and gold purls as well as basket stitch in Japan gold threads, and stylized motifs are set in silver sequins. The rays of the Holy Spirit are worked in raised gold and silver purls. When this piece was restored in 1982, other metallic-thread embroidery was discovered under the rays. These underlying threads may have been reworked to better match the dove (which was also touched up) and to heighten the overall relief. It should be remembered that the new church was of monumental proportions and the altar frontal played a didactic role, and therefore had to be visible from a distance.

Between the metallic rays, Leber worked a design of flowers stitched in silk threads (fig.8). On either side of the Maltese cross, an abundant bouquet spills from a basket supported by four decorative feet, while a flowered stem twines up each side of the piece. Two garlands of flowers and fruits overhang the baskets, creating a decoration at once natural and structured. The principal stitches used are needle-painting, straight stitch, stem stitch, French knots and bullion knots. Some of the flower petals are outlined in buttonhole stitch to emphasize



fig.6 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Altar frontal**, c.1700, 82 x 279 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)

the nuances. Roses, peonies, carnations, tulips, lilies and irises stand out against a background of Japan silver couched to form waves. Silk thread holds the metallic thread in staggered rows that follow the curves of the floral motifs. The Japan silver thread is tarnished by time and, in some spots, signs of wear reveal the silk core.

The fully embroidered surface of the frontal represents a long and painstaking task, but one that was feasible for a single person. Relatively few embroidery techniques have been used, the principal work being in needle-painting and couched Japan silver. There are no raised metallic embroidery appliqués, and thus the slow, delicate process of drawing, shaping, mounting and attaching the padding has been avoided. Only the embroidered medallion is subtly embossed. De Belmont's reference to "a Recollet priest who was asked to help her embroider a sumptuous chalice veil" (i.e., with gold and silver thread) suggests that Leber needed further training in this type of embroidery in order to fill the order. More expertly couched Japan silver work is found in ornaments made by the Ursulines, notably the altar frontal *Nativity* in their museum, and on the Jesuit chasuble at the Musée des Augustines de l'Hôtel-Dieu, also in Quebec City. The beauty of Jeanne Leber's altar frontal lies in the delicate, harmonious tones



fig.7 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Altar frontal** (detail), c.1700, 82 x 279 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)



fig.8 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Altar frontal** (detail, back of the frontal), c.1700, 82 x 279 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)

of the refined silk embroidery, and in the abundance and diversity of the lifelike needle-painted flowers. It is an ornament of great quality, designed for such solemn feast days as Whitsunday. The use of silk and silver makes it ceremonial, typical of Counter-Reformation art, and such lavishness was appropriate to the place where it was used: the parish church of Montreal, a centre for religious conversion in a new land.

The same arrangement (baskets and garlands of flowers at either side of a Maltese cross) is found in three of the Ursulines' altar frontals: *Sacred Heart* (fig.9), *Immaculate Conception* (fig.10) and *Dove of the Holy Spirit* (fig.3). This motif is also found in French collections: Louis de Farcy described a bouquet-embroidered frontal preserved in Angers,⁷⁶ and a frontal embroidered with gold thread by the Carmelites of Blois during the latter half of the seventeenth century was exhibited at the Château de Chambord in 1993.⁷⁷ Closer to home, the painted altar frontal attributed to Jeanne Leber's brother Pierre, now at the Maison Saint-Gabriel, is also noteworthy (fig.11). Evocative of an embroidery cartoon, this decorative oil on wood also features a flowered Maltese cross flanked by floral bouquets in Medici-style gadrooned vases set on tables. It has many similarities to three painted works in the Ursuline collection: the altar frontals *Holy Family* and *Saint Mary Magdalene Penitent*, and a tempera representation of a bouquet of flowers in a vase, dated 1695. Around the bouquets, the artist has introduced butterflies and birds carrying clusters of fruit in their beaks, two decorative motifs also found in the Ursulines' work. This comparison confirms the artistic links between the Leber family and the Ursulines, and between Quebec City and Montreal. Such commonality of models and influences was not limited to New France. The flowers embroidered by Jeanne Leber recall the then-prevalent taste for exotic plants and flowers, the popularity of the flower books known as *florileges* and the talent of seventeenth-century artist-botanists like Crispin de Passe, Nicolas Robert and Maria Sibylla Merian. Similarly, the butterflies and birds of Pierre Leber and the Ursulines are reminiscent of Flemish still lifes.

Although the pattern of the altar frontal attributed to Jeanne Leber is found in the three made by the Ursulines, there are certain differences. The *Sacred Heart* and *Immaculate Conception* frontals are small, having been designed for the convent's early chapels. The needle painting is done in wool thread on a woven wool ground, giving the two ornaments a rustic, almost naïve appearance. Silk thread has been used for finishing, to add sparkle to the matte quality of the wool and accentuate delicate details such as the Virgin's features and the mass of flower petals. The medallion frames and the Maltese cross rays are worked in yellow wool highlighted with silk imitating gold thread; the floral embroidery features bright colours, in predominant tones of red and rose. This brings to mind a request by the Jesuit missionary Father Garnier, who in 1645 wrote from the Huron mission at Teanaustayae to a Carmelite monk: "I also wanted to ask for



fig.9 Workshop of the Quebec Ursulines, **Altar frontal** known as "Sacred-Heart," c.1700, 85 x 221 cm, Musée des Ursulines de Québec, Québec.
(Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)

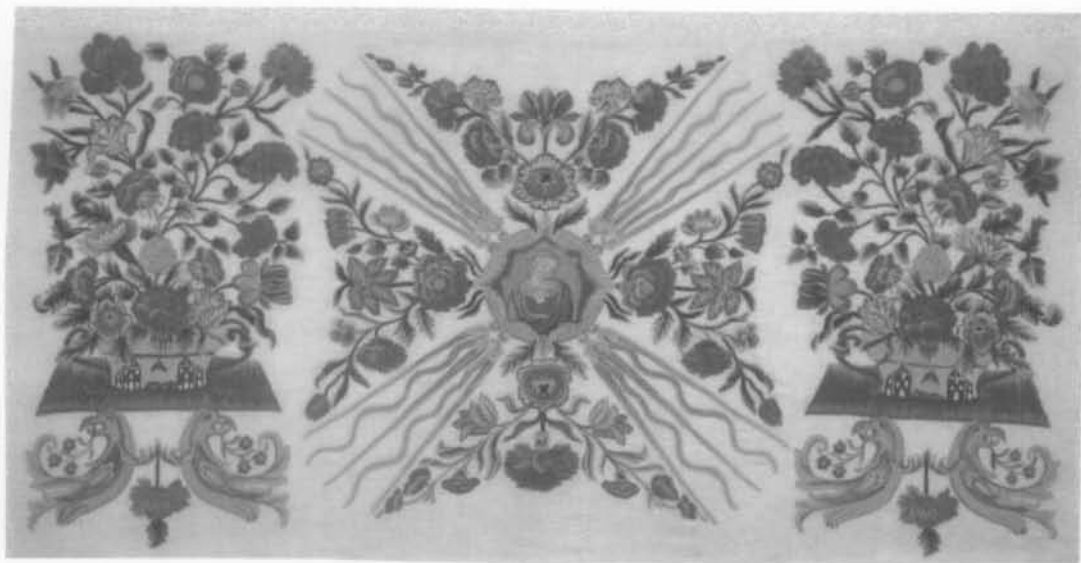


fig.10 Workshop of the Quebec Ursulines, **Altar frontal** know as "Immaculate Conception," c.1700, 95 x 184 cm, Musée des Ursulines de Québec, Québec.
(Photo: Patrick Altman, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec)



fig.11 Pierre Leber (attr.), **Altar frontal**, before 1707, painting on wood, 94 x 164 x 73 cm, Collection Maison Saint-Gabriel, Montreal.
(Photo: Alain Comtois)

alms to buy some bright-coloured material to adorn The Altar, not of silk but of Wool or even Drugget or the like, the main thing being that the Colours be bright.⁷⁷⁸ In decorating the mission chapel, Garnier adapted the liturgical colours to the tastes of his neophyte converts, who preferred brilliant hues. The Ursulines, who were close to the Jesuits, used the same strategies with their Native boarders. Of their own altar frontals, *Holy Spirit* most closely resembles the one attributed to Jeanne Leber in terms of size, iconography, structure and the refinement of the embroidered flowers. It is a large piece, dominated by the bouquets spilling from two blue monochrome griffon-footed vases. The ground is also of couched threads, but here the thread is silk.

Chasuble and Dalmatics: An Ensemble Reworked⁷⁹

Like the altar frontal, the chasuble is part of the iconographic program designed to honour the Virgin, patron saint of the parish (fig.12). In the medallion, a needle painting celebrates the Inner Life of Mary.⁸⁰ (fig.13) Evoking the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin hovers in clouds, eyes raised to the sky, her hands crossed on her breast from which emerges the Dove of the Holy Spirit. The image is modeled on *Vie intérieure de Marie*, an engraving by Jean Boulanger after a drawing by Charles Lebrun (1619-1690). This theme, important to both Tridentine and Sulpician spirituality, is found in French embroidered ornaments such as the altar frontal preserved by the Association d'art sacré de Seine Maritime⁸¹ in Normandy, where the central medallion is also modeled on Boulanger's print (fig.14). Once more, the similarities serve as a reminder that such models circulated amongst the religious communities in France and New France and that Jeanne Leber had access to them through her father, the Congregation sisters and the Ursulines.

The Notre-Dame chasuble's Japan gold medallion frame is couched in raised metal threadwork and basket stitch in the same pattern as the altar frontal (fig.15). Arabesque foliage, also worked in raised Japan gold, frames a polychrome-silk needle-painting of a rose, a carnation, a peony, a tulip and an iris. Smaller lifelike blossoms are scattered on either side of the foliage, while others rise out of the frame on stems. The floral motifs and the medallion float in shimmering waves of couched Japan silver, a technique also found in the altar frontal. While the embroidery of the vividly coloured flowers is less subtle than in the frontal, the needle-painted image of the Virgin points to one of the stitcher's special skills: the ability to render facial features and expressions in silk thread and to make the embroidery appear three-dimensional. Jeanne Leber may have learned this technique from the Ursulines, whose ornaments include numerous embroidered figures, particularly in altar frontal medallions.

The orphreys (back cross and front column) embroidered on silk have been remounted on white damask, and a new lining with gilt braid hides the remounting. Re-embroidered areas are apparent around the central medallion and on the twining vines on the both sides of the chasuble. As on the altar frontal, the original metallic embroidery, although visible in the neck band, has been re-covered with raised Japan gold threads. The purpose of this restoration may have been to match the chasuble and the frontal, to mask signs of wear or to heighten the ornament's lustre and three-dimensional aspect.⁸² Whatever the case, these changes make it extremely difficult to read and understand the chasuble's story. It would appear that the original ornament was cut up and that only the best-preserved parts were kept, remounted in a new chasuble, with the braid serving to mask the line between the old and the new. A more thorough analysis would require study of the edges of the orphreys hidden by the gilt braid.

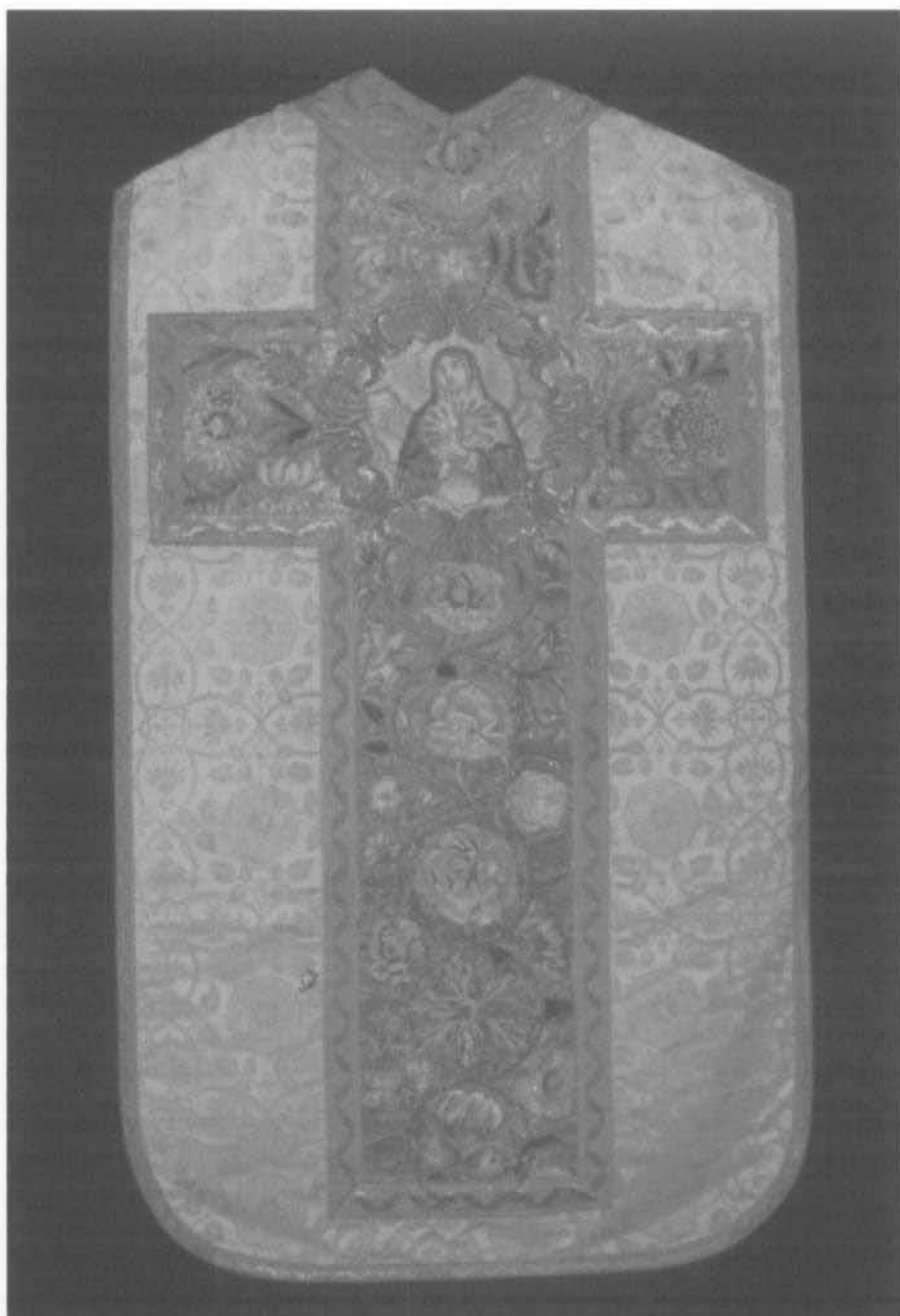


fig.12 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Chasuble** (back view), c.1700, 121 x 65 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Michel Élie, Centre de conservation du Québec)



fig.13 Jeanne
Leber (attr.),
Chasuble (detail),
c.1700, 121 x 65 cm,
Notre-Dame
Basilica, Montreal.
(Photo: Michel Élie,
Centre de
conservation
du Québec)



fig.14
Anonymous, **Altar
frontal** (detail),
second half of the
18th century,
Association d'art
sacré de Seine
Maritime, France.
(Photo: Jacqueline
Guilloit)



fig.15 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Chasuble** (front view), c.1700, 121 x 65 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Michel Élie, Centre de conservation du Québec)



fig.16 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Dalmatic**, c.1700, 96 x 116 cm, Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal. (Photo: Michel Élie, Centre de conservation du Québec)

The dalmatics that accompany the chasuble are loose tunics with wide sleeves worn by deacons during services (fig.16). The embroidered orphreys, two in front and two in back, are edged with gilt braid and mounted on the same white damask used for the chasuble. The floral motifs of polychrome silk are worked in needle-painting, straight stitch, stem stitch and French knots on a laid ground of Japan silver. Lifelike flowers dot the twining stems that complete the decoration. These dalmatics have neither embroidered likenesses nor gold thread work, reminders that the iconography, the ornamentation and the complexity of the production of liturgical vestments all reflect the hierarchal status of the celebrants who wear them.

Like the chasuble, the two dalmatics have undergone significant changes that complicate their analysis. And like the chasuble, the labels they bore at the time of restoration in 1982 attributed them to Jeanne Leber. They certainly appear to be part of an ensemble, with the same floral motifs, the same couched Japan silver, the same brilliant-hued, predominantly red blossoms and the same uneven execution. The same person may well have made the chasuble and the dalmatics, but they would have taken months to complete. This could explain the embroidery's lack of consistency, since the stitcher's skills, and thus the quality of her work would reflect her physical condition, which might have varied over such a long period.

The Cope: Contested Attribution⁸³

The cope is composed of a semi-circular panel made of three lengths of eighteenth-century silk lampas with a satin ground, plus a hood and an orphrey of silk brocade on a silver lamé ground typical of fabric produced by nineteenth-century silk makers in Lyon. The body panel is edged with gilt braid, while the hood is edged in gold bullion fringe with twisted check purl. Seams that bind the three lengths of lampas together are hidden by the all-over embroidery. The original design of the lampas, a rich, symmetrical array of multicoloured flowers standing out against a cream satin ground, is still visible under the hood. Sumptuous stylized floral motifs include pineapple and artichoke flowers, peonies, and other small, realistic blooms framed by foliage (fig.17). This profusion of colour and movement lends the cope an Oriental air. The embroiderer enhanced the entire fabric with silk-thread embroidery, systematically leaving the centre of certain motifs exposed and creating a combination of low relief (unembroidered areas) and raised relief (embroidered areas). Original colours have been respected except for the cream satin ground, that has been covered in couched Japan silver using the same technique found in the other pieces, to give the cope similar lustre and opulence. Stitches are varied – straight stitch, needle-painting, stem stitch, satin stitch and French knots – and embellished with sequins and purls.



fig.17 Jeanne Leber (attr.), **Cope** (detail), first quarter of the 18th century, 133 x 222 cm, Maison Saint-Gabriel, Montreal. (Photo: Kathryn Borel)

Unlike the other ornaments studied here, which continued to be used at the Notre-Dame Basilica, the cope was in use in the Congregation chapel in the 1950s before being transferred to the Maison Saint-Gabriel.⁸⁴ This piece also stands apart from its four companions in terms of technique (embroidery of woven motifs), materials (twisted silk thread as opposed to the flat silk used in the altar frontal) and pattern (stylized decorative motifs rather than natural flowers). However, the pieces share one feature: the couched silver thread used for the ground and around the embroidered motifs. Is this similarity sufficient to deduce that the entire ensemble is by the same embroiderer and that it is indeed the body of work described by de Belmont?

Resolving the provenance of the cope may hinge on dating the ground fabric. According to various textile experts, the large palm-like foliage that punctuates the floral motifs of the lampas resembles Jacquard silks produced in France between 1710 and 1730, shortly before or after Jeanne Leber's death. However, the symmetrical artichoke and pineapple motifs are frequently seen in

seventeenth-century silks. Finding the original drawing used for the production of the lampas could confirm or refute the current attribution to Leber. Meanwhile, it can be assumed that if the cope really is her work, it was done in her final years since the fabric shows closer ties to the 1700s than to the previous century. Dating of two of the oldest copes belonging to the Quebec City Ursulines, those known as *Anne of Austria* and *Madame de la Peltrie*, poses the same problem.

The two parts of *Anne of Austria* are from different periods: the silk velvet hood and orphrey embroidered in silver and gold are typical of the seventeenth century, while the body of silk brocade patterned with festoons and hunting trophies dates to the eighteenth. This refutes the long-held belief that Marie de l'Incarnation was given the brocade by Anne of Austria before sailing for the New World from Dieppe in 1639. However, it is possible that the hood and the orphrey were embroidered around that time and remounted on another material in the eighteenth century. The Jacquard silk of *Madame de la Peltrie* is very similar to the lampas of the cope attributed to Jeanne Leber. This would date it to the eighteenth century, disputing the traditional belief that it was the bed canopy of Madame de la Peltrie, the convent's lay benefactress, who died in 1671. The cope attributed to Jeanne Leber, as well as the two Ursuline copes, illustrate the problem of attributions based on the oral history of religious communities, and the importance of searching convent archives for more reliable documentation.

Attribution aside, this cope is the only liturgical vestment or ornament found in Quebec collections that has silk brocade embroidered to accentuate the woven motifs. The technique, by which the Jacquard fabric served as both ground and embroidery pattern, was fairly common in France at the time of Louis XIV. It offered the dual advantage of eliminating the need to transfer or copy the pattern and motifs to the ground, while permitting the stitcher to work alone, independent of a workshop or other embroiderers. This economy of means and functions would have been well-suited to a solitary stitcher like Jeanne Leber and could explain her process. Masking the ground fabric with embroidery also allowed the embroideress to enhance an ornament using her time, meticulousness, mastery of technical difficulties and inspiration. As she worked, the machine-made material disappeared beneath a new surface, becoming a human creation and a labour of love.

Conclusion

Jeanne Leber's production is intimately tied to her life as a recluse. These ornaments stitched in solitude and close proximity to the sanctuary recall the similarities between the serenity of embroidering and that of inner worship, contemplation and prayer. Embroidery required little physical effort and was well suited to a woman committed to fasting, long hours without sleep, and mortification. It was a manual task that supported the contemplative life. Leber was at one with her confined quarters, and she closely identified with the Virgin Mary. For Leber, embroidery was a gift to God, to whom she had given her life. It was an act of devotion, of contemplation, with the perfection of the needle leading to mystic grace. Her body and actions faded away to be reborn in the form of a vestment for Christ through the agency of the priest who wore it. Leber's cell was an unusual workplace, extremely different from the large, well-lit communal rooms where nuns and their pupils worked in small groups and as a team.⁸⁵ She worked alone, without the company and support of other embroiderers with whom the work could be shared according to individual skills as was the practice in the Ursuline workshop. The embroideries attributed to her have no large, structured medallions, no raised-relief cornucopias, no great variety of stitches and techniques requiring patterns, extensive equipment and diverse skills. In other words, they could be done without the support of other embroiderers and by the one same person.

Out of Leber's solitary confinement came a body of work that attests to an awareness of fashion, of the colonial market and of the skills exchanged by religious communities. The pieces studied here exemplify the consistency of an art practiced by utilizing techniques and patterns: copying was the rule and creativity lay in rearranging existing motifs. Leber's ornaments reflect their time; they are consistent with conventional iconography and fashionable styles, and are made with materials from France, using the skills learned from her Ursuline instructors. Bearers of Tridentine and Sulpician messages, the embroidered objects had to be recognized and understood by Christians on both sides of the Atlantic, and therefore resemble embroideries done in all convents of the time.

Beyond the passion and the ideals, her ornaments remain a fragile corpus for textile historians. The pieces attributed to Leber have been ill-treated by history, time, wear, irreversible remounting, and reworking. This has given the ensemble a disparate, fragmented appearance that challenges understanding and intimidates even the most intrepid experts. New restoration procedures accompanied by detailed photographic documentation and in-depth technical analysis of the linings, backings, selvages, remountings and additions, would be an indispensable complement to this study, given the significance of the collection in the history of textiles in Quebec. Indeed the embroidered ornaments attributed to Jeanne Leber constitute one of Montreal's rare examples of

liturgical embroidery inspired by French techniques and patterns introduced to New France by religious communities, first in Quebec City and then in Montreal, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Notes

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1 Juchereau de la FERTÉ, Jeanne-Françoise de SAINTE-IGNACE and Marie-Andrée DUPLESSIS DE SAINTE-HÉLÈNE, *Les Annales de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, 1636-1716* (Quebec/Montreal: Albert Jamet, 1939), 409. Sister Juchereau dates Jeanne Leber's death to 1714 based on the eulogy delivered by de Belmont.

2 François VACHON DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes mortes en odeur de sainteté à Montréal en Canada envoyé à l'abbé de Saint-Albin à Paris en 1722," in *Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec 1929-1930* (Quebec: Rédempti Paradis Imprimeur De Sa Majesté Le Roy, 1930), 153.

3 Nicole LEMAY, "Jeanne Leber, artiste et mystique," exhibition text (Montreal: Maison Saint-Gabriel, 1995).

4 François Vachon de Belmont (Grenoble 1645-Montreal 1732), was the Superior of the Saint-Sulpice Seminary in Montreal and Grand Vicar of the Quebec City Diocese from 1701 until his death. In 1701, he wrote "Abrégé de la vie de la sœur Leber," which he used in delivering Jeanne Leber's eulogy and subsequently included in his "Éloges de quelques personnes," 144-189.

5 François Séguenot, P.S.S., priest of the new Pointe-aux-Trembles parish, was born in Rouvray, France and died in Montreal, 1727. Nothing written by him about Jeanne Leber's spiritual conduct is known to exist.

6 Étienne Montgolfier, P.S.S., born near Lyon in 1712, arrived in Montreal in 1751 and died in 1791. His 1768 biography of Jeanne Leber reproduces de Belmont's text in its near entirety. MS 1216, Archives de Saint-Sulpice, Paris.

7 Étienne FAILLON, P.S.S., *L'héroïne chrétienne du Canada* (Ville-Marie: Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1860).

8 Interesting comparisons of the Jesuit hagiographies of Kateri Tekakwitha, an Iroquois deceased in 1680 and beatified in 1980, and the Sulpician biographies of Jeanne Leber can be found in Nancy SHOEMAKER, "Kateri Tekakwitha's Tortuous Path to Sainthood," in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, ed., Nancy SHOEMAKER (New York: Routledge, 1995), 49-71, and Allan GREER, "Savage/Saint: The Lives of Kateri Tekakwitha," in *Habitants et marchands: Twenty Years Later*, ed., Sylvie DÉPATIE (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998). Like Jeanne Leber, Kateri Tekakwitha craved solitude, prayer and mortification; she lived with her father, refused to marry and had a certain talent for handiwork. The Jesuits' heroine recalls the Sulpicians' heroine, the former supporting the work of the Jesuit missionaries with the Amerindians, the latter providing inspiration for French Catholics settling in Montreal.

9 Hélène TREMBLAY, "Jeanne Leber, la Recluse de Ville-Marie, et l'inédite histoire de ses restes," *Pierres Vivantes* (annual bulletin of the Comité des fondateurs de l'Église du Canada), 1993.

10 Françoise DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber, la Recluse au cœur des combats: 1662-1714* (Montreal: Bellarmin, 2000).

- 11 Léo-Paul DESROSIER, "Le milieu où naît Jeanne Le Ber," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* XVI, no. 2 (September 1962): 155-77; and his *Dans le nid d'aiglon, la Colombe* (Montreal: Fides, 1963).
- 12 Marius BARBEAU, *Saintes Artisanes I. Les Brodeuses, Cahiers d'art ARCA 2* (Montreal: Fides, 1944); *Saintes Artisanes II. Mille petites adresses, Cahiers d'art ARCA 3* (Montreal: Fides, 1946); *Quebec, Where Ancient France Lingers* (Librairie Garneau: Quebec City, 1936); "Fils d'or et fils d'argent," *Le Soleil*, 3 June 1945; "Jeanne Leber, Sainte Artisanne," *L'Événement*, 29 July 1945.
- 13 DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber*, 27-28.
- 14 FAILLON, *L'héroïne chrétienne*; see also Louise DECHÊNE, "Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII^e siècle," in *Civilisations et mentalités*, ed., Philippe ARIÈS and Robert MANDROU (Montreal: Plon, 1974) for a comparison of Jacques Leber's rise to success with that of other Montreal merchants.
- 15 DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber*, 103.
- 16 DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes," 147.
- 17 DECHÊNE, "Habitants et marchands," 151-55; Robert S. DUPLESSIS, "Circulation des textiles et des valeurs dans la Nouvelle-France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles," in *Échanges et cultures textiles dans l'Europe Pré-industrielle*, ed., Jacques BOTTIN and Nicole PELLEGRIN, *Revue du Nord*, special issue (no. 12, 1996): 73-88.
- 18 François-Marc GAGNON, *La conversion par l'image : un aspect de la mission des Jésuites auprès des Indiens du Canada au 17^e century* (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1975).
- 19 "Inventaire de Jacques Leber," records of Notary Begnine Basset, 1 Dec. 1693. Montreal, Archives nationales du Québec. The full inventory of Leber's assets, begun in late 1693, took nine months to complete.
- 20 Denis MARTIN, "L'estampe importée en Nouvelle-France," Ph.D. diss., University of Laval, 1990.
- 21 Nicole CLOUTIER and François-Marc GAGNON, *Premiers peintres de la Nouvelle-France*, Vol. 1, *Civilisation du Québec* series (Quebec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1976), 137.
- 22 Ibid., 138-39.
- 23 Louis-Claude DANRÉ DE BLANZY, "Inventaire des biens meubles et immeubles des Frères Hospitaliers de Saint-Joseph de la Croix (dits Frères Charron) de l'hôpital général de Montréal, 4 septembre 1747," quoted in Robert LAHAISE, *Les édifices conventuels du Vieux Montréal*, *Cahiers du Québec* series (Ville de Lasalle: Hurtubise HMH, 1980).
- 24 Why did Marie Leber choose the Ursulines in Quebec City rather than a Montreal community? Had she been schooled by the Ursulines in Rouen? We know that the Quebec City convent maintained ties with the Rouen Ursulines, because on 9 Aug. 1668, the year Marie Leber entered the order, Marie de l'Incarnation wrote to her son: "We were hoping that this voyage would bring us my dear Mother Cécile de Reuville de l'Enfant-Jésus from Rouen, and I was prepared to teach her the Algonquin language, certain that she would be able and determined to learn it." Dom Guy-Marie OURY, O.S.B., *Marie de l'Incarnation, Correspondance 1599-1672* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe; Solesmes/Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971), letter CCXXXV, 9 Aug. 1668, 800-01.
- 25 Ibid., letter CCXLIII, 16 Oct. 1668, 827.
- 26 Adèle CIMON, *Les Ursulines de Québec depuis leur établissement jusqu'à nos jours* (Quebec: Darveau 1863-1866), 288.
- 27 Dom Guy-Marie OURY, O.S.B., *Les Ursulines de Québec 1639-1953* (Sillery: Septentrion, 1999), 143-52.

- 28 Information furnished by Nicole Cloutier.
- 29 The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame opened their school four years later, in 1678.
- 30 "Registre des entrées et sorties des petites filles Françaises et Sauvages de 1641 à 1720," MS, fol. 52r, Archives des Ursulines de Québec, Quebec City.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Claire GOURDEAU, *Les Délices de nos cœurs, Marie de l'Incarnation et ses pensionnaires amérindiennes, 1639-1672*, Nouveaux cahiers du CÉLAT series (Sillery: Septentrion, 1994).
- 33 Marcel TRUDEL, *Les écolières des Ursulines de Québec, 1639-1686 : Amérindiennes et canadiennes* (Ville de Lasalle: Hurtubise HMH, 1999). Of the 514 boarders recorded between 1642 and 1686, 451 were from Quebec City, 46 from Trois-Rivières and only 14 from the Montreal area.
- 34 Madeleine de Chauvigny, daughter of the president of the Alençon town council in Normandy, was married at the age of nineteen to Charles de Gruel de la Peltrie, a nobleman and officer of the king. Upon his death, she inherited a considerable fortune. In 1636, the publication of Father Lejeune's *Relation* stirred high feelings among the French devout. Madame de la Peltrie heeded the Jesuit's call and sailed to Canada to build an Ursuline convent and a school to instruct Amerindian girls in Christianity.
- 35 Charter written by the Reverend Father Jérôme Lalemant, Jesuit Superior in Quebec City and adapted for the Ursulines in 1647. MS, Archives des Ursulines de Québec, Quebec City.
- 36 GOURDEAU, *Les Délices*, 42-46.
- 37 "De l'office de la Mère Pref. des Classes," in *Les Constitutions de l'Institut & Compagnie des Religieuses de sainte Ursule* (Paris: Georges Josse, 1635), 6-7.
- 38 *Règlements pour les Religieuses de Sainte Ursule de la Congrégation de Paris* (Paris: Gilles Blaisot, 1652), 95.
- 39 Ibid., 96.
- 40 Marie de Chantal GUEUDRÉ, *Histoire de l'Ordre de Sainte-Ursule en France*, vol. II (Paris: Édition Saint-Paul, 1960), 570-71.
- 41 OURY, *Marie de l'Incarnation*, letter CCXXIII, 30 Apr. 1672, 767.
- 42 Ibid., letter CXLII, 1 Sept. 1652, 477.
- 43 CIMON, *Les Ursulines de Québec*, 398. These ornaments were lost in the fire that destroyed the convent on 20 Oct. 1686.
- 44 Danièle VÉRON-DENISE, "Quelques aspects de la broderie en France aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles : milieux et modèles," in *Livres en broderie Reliures françaises du Moyen-ge à nos jours*, ed., Sabine CARON and Martine LEFÈVRE (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1995), 35.
- 45 Dom Claude MARTIN, *La vie de la Vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1981), 1013. (Facsimile edition; originally published in 1677 by Louis Billaine, Paris).
- 46 "Régistre des bienfaiteurs." MS, Archives des Ursulines de Québec, Quebec City.
- 47 "Annales des Ursulines de Québec, 1639 to 1822." MS, Archives des Ursulines de Québec, Quebec City.

48 CIMON, *Les Ursulines de Québec*, 339. The Ursulines confided to Montgolfier that Jeanne, more than her companions, was drawn to solitude, silence and prayer and despised excess and vanity. Their account coincides with this anecdote by de Belmont:

A Lady who had been urged by Mademoiselle Leber's parents to see to her Every Need, sent her a little lace-making cushion, embellished with Ribbons and small favours. She received it, with much chagrin, and at first wanted to strip it of its baubles. Her mistresses opposed this so as not to hurt the Lady's feelings...but the young lady told them that she could not work on something that exuded Worldliness, that all this was vain, and she cried so bitterly that her mistresses allowed her to remove the things she found offensive...no sooner had she been given permission than she ripped them all off with such haste and Holy Rage that, had her young companions not interceded by taking them away, all those little Ribbons would have been thrown into the Fire on the spot.

49 DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes," 150.

50 GREER, "Savage/Saint", 148-149, and SHOEMAKER, "Kateri Tekakwitha," demonstrate how the Jesuits present the life of Kateri Tekakwitha in the image of Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380); the Sulpicians adopted the same approach for Jeanne Leber.

51 DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber*, 70.

52 MARTIN, *La vie de la Vénérable Mère*, 505-06.

53 Ibid., 119.

54 Marie SEYNAEVE, "Mystique et broderie dans la vie de Marie de l'Incarnation," in *Marie Guyard de l'Incarnation, un destin transocéanique*, ed., François DEROY-PINEAU (Paris and Montreal: L'Harmattan, 2000), 112-13.

55 DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes," 151.

56 Ibid.

57 Nicole PELLEGRIN, "Les vertus de l'Ouvrage. Recherches sur la féminisation des travaux d'aiguille (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (October 1999): 747-69.

58 "De l'ouvrage & travail des mains," in *Règlements pour les Religieuses*, 154-58.

59 Patricia SIMPSON, *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montreal, 1640-1665* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

60 LAHAISE, *Les édifices conventuels du Vieux Montréal*, 123-26.

61 Records of Notary Bégnine Basset, 4 Aug. 1695; DESROSIERS, "Le milieu où naît," 67-68.

62 LAHAISE, *Les édifices conventuels du Vieux Montréal*, 124-25.

63 DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes," 152.

64 Jeanne Leber's biographers relate her talent for embroidery to the intercession of angels, her special form of devotion. The aid of angels in embroidering is also evoked by Marie de l'Incarnation: "Thinking of the nuns' cells as Heavens and that Angels live there, we sink into deep meditation...but without leaving off our work." MARTIN, *La vie de la Vénérable Mère*, 214.

65 Contract between Jeanne Leber and the Congregation of Notre-Dame signed before Notary Bégnine Basset, 4 Aug. 1695, quoted in DESROSIERS, "Le milieu où naît," 68-69.

66 Jeanne Leber directly and indirectly encouraged needlecraft in Montreal. On 9 Sept. 1714, shortly before her death, she set up a fund from which the income would serve to maintain a boarding school for poor girls where they would learn, among other things, "to read

and to pursue their own needlework, to care for their linen, their rags, and to mend, spin, knit and wash their garments." The Sisters of the Congregation consider the women's group L'Œuvre des Tabernacles, which embroidered vestments for parish churches, as part of Jeanne Leber's legacy.

67 DE BELMONT, "Éloges de quelques personnes," 159.

68 DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber*, 135-36.

69 "Annales des Ursulines de Québec."

70 DEROY-PINEAU, *Jeanne Leber*, 158.

71 I want to thank Kathryn Borel for her comments as a professional embroideress, on the five ornaments discussed here. My thanks also go to Christine Aribaud, Reader in Art History at Université de Toulouse Le Mirail and a specialist in liturgical ornaments of southwestern France.

72 From an inventory of the assets of Notre-Dame Church: 1737, "one altar frontal of embroidered white satin;" 1742, "1 chasuble and two dalmatics of flowered damask. one altar frontal in embroidered white satin;" 1792, "one high altar frontal embroidered in silver, one chasuble and two white dalmatics with embroidered silver crosses and bands;" 1894, "bill for repairs to an altar frontal embroidered by Mlle Leber." Montreal, Notre-Dame Basilica. I would like to thank Monique Lanthier, curator at the Notre-Dame Basilica, for bringing this inventory to my attention.

73 Jeanne Leber (attributed to), altar frontal, c.1700. Montreal, Fabrique de la paroisse Notre-Dame. Height: before restoration, 78.34 cm; after restoration, 82 cm; width: before restoration, 274 cm; after restoration, 276 cm. The modified dimensions are due to the removal of the embroidered bands to restore the original appearance. At the time it was restored in 1982, this piece was labelled "Altar frontal embroidered by Jeanne Leber, 1695-1714." As is customary, the embroidered cloth was stretched on a wood frame; after restoration, it was mounted on a wood panel.

74 These additions are visible in a photo taken prior to restoration and published in BARBEAU, *Les Saintes Artisanes I*.

75 This type of embroidery is done with fine gold thread on vellum or linen, the metallic strands couched with silk in tight, smooth rows; only the gold is visible on the upper side. For a discussion of the technique, see Charles GERMAIN DE SAINT-AUBIN, Designer to Louis XIX, *Art of the Embroiderer (L'Art du Brodeur)*, 1770, trans. Nikki Scheuer, facsimile edition (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, 1983), 36-38.

76 Louis DE FARCY, *La broderie du XI^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours* (Angers: Belhomme, 1890).

77 *Fil de foi, chemins de soie*, exhib. cat. (Chambord: Château de Chambord, 1993), 173.

78 GAGNON, *La conversion par l'image*, 42-44.

79 Jeanne Leber (attributed to), chasuble, c.1700. Montreal, Fabrique de la paroisse Notre-Dame. Height: 121cm; width: 65 cm. Jeanne Leber (attributed to), two dalmatics, c.1700, Montreal, Fabrique de la paroisse Notre-Dame. Heights: 99 cm and 100 cm; widths: 65 cm and 62 cm. At the time they were restored in 1982, the chasuble and the two dalmatics were labelled "Embroidered by Jeanne Leber, 1695-1714."

80 Jean SIMARD, *Une iconographie du clergé français au XVII^e siècle* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1976), 141-42.

81 I am indebted to Jacqueline Guilloit, member of the Association d'art sacré de Seine-Maritime for bringing this altar frontal, which may have been embroidered by Ursulines, to my attention.

82 These ornaments were used in a parish church, not in a convent chapel, where such objects were meticulously cared for by sacristy sisters and could last for centuries in remarkable condition.

83 Jeanne Leber (attributed to), cope, first half of the eighteenth century and mid-nineteenth century. Montreal, Maison Saint-Gabriel. Height: 133 cm; width: 222 cm. As the cope could not be removed from its showcase, it was impossible to inspect the lining and the reverse side of the re-embroidered fabric. The semi-circular panel does not require significant restoration; the hood and the orphrey have been damaged by rubbing and wear and will require more extensive repair to reattach the loose threads to the ground.

84 This information was provided by Sister Madeleine Juneau, Director of the Maison Saint-Gabriel in Montreal. How the cope, which Faillon places at the Basilica in 1860, came to be used a century later at the Congregation of Notre-Dame chapel, has yet to be determined.

85 Elizabeth RAPLEY, *Les dévotes : les femmes et l'Église en France au XVII^e siècle*, trans. Charlotte Melançon (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1990). Rapley discusses the importance the religious communities placed on lighting in the rooms where the girls did handiwork. At the Ursuline Convent in Quebec City, the communal room is one of the best-lit areas, boasting a row of windows on either side.

JEANNE LEBER

Recluse et Brodeuse (1662-1714)

Les Ursulines de Québec et la Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal possèdent plusieurs ornements liturgiques peints et brodés qui présentent de fortes ressemblances à la fois techniques, stylistiques et iconographiques. La production de ces ornements correspond à la période des activités artistiques de Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) et de Marie Lemaire-des-Anges (1641-1717), ursulines de Québec, et de celle de Jeanne Leber (1662-1714), fille du riche marchand montréalais Jacques Leber (1633-1706) et sœur du peintre connu Pierre Leber (1669-1707). Le destin de Jeanne sera à l'image de son illustre famille; après avoir été pensionnaire au monastère de Québec dans les années 1674-1675, elle s'adonna aux arts de l'aiguille dans sa cellule de recluse à la Chapelle de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame à Montréal.

À sa mort, survenue le 3 octobre 1714, à l'âge de cinquante-deux ans, Jeanne Leber aura passé trente-quatre années de son existence retirée du monde; quinze ans dans la maison de son père et dix-neuf ans dans le récluse. De l'adolescence à la mort, elle s'ensevelit dans un dialogue constant avec Dieu. Sa vie rythmée sur un calendrier de plus en plus exigeant conduit à l'abnégation totale, à la disparition du soi, à l'assèchement du corps, à la perte lente des énergies vitales. Le corps maîtrisé disparaît pour laisser place aux fonctions de l'âme, aux exigences de la spiritualité et du mysticisme. Cette tension excessive correspond à une période troublée de l'histoire de Montréal où le catholicisme sans cesse menacé doit se renouveler par des hauts faits, des héros, des sacrifices. Malgré le risque de voir une vie s'éteindre entre quatre murs, la famille Leber et la communauté montréalaise soutiennent Jeanne Leber dans son choix de réclusion. N'offre-t-elle pas à la population une manière de s'enraciner, de défier par une histoire pieuse et pure cette immensité incontrôlée et sauvage qui l'encercle et l'inquiète?

Comme tous les contemplatifs, Jeanne Leber partage sa journée entre la prière et le travail manuel. Ses ouvrages, mis au service de Dieu et de la charité, contribuent à exprimer et à épanouir son mysticisme. Elle est tour à tour couturière, fileuse, dentellière et brodeuse pour servir les pauvres de Montréal et orner les chapelles et les églises des paroisses environnantes. De cette production, qu'aucune source à ce jour n'a permis réellement de quantifier ni d'identifier, subsiste un corpus d'ornements liturgiques brodés que l'ethnologue, Marius Barbeau a été le premier à révéler au grand public. Dans le cadre de ses enquêtes

de terrain sur les collections des communautés religieuses du Québec, il est le confident de la tradition orale et d'attributions séculaires attachées à certains objets associés à un personnage particulièrement représentatif du charisme de la communauté. En 1947, il recense une douzaine de pièces brodées par Jeanne Leber et explique la faiblesse du corpus par les incendies majeurs qui détruisirent les bâtiments des sœurs de la Congrégation en 1768 et 1893, et des destructions, des déménagements, des démolitions subis par les églises paroissiales de Montréal.

Jeanne Leber n'a laissé aucun écrit sur sa vie et son cheminement spirituel, ni son confesseur, l'abbé François Séguenot, prêtre de Saint-Sulpice, qui l'a suivie pendant ses 19 années de réclusion, ni sa cousine, Anne Barrois, devenue sœur Saint Charles à la Congrégation de Notre-Dame, qui lui apporta ses repas dans sa cellule. Cette étude est fondée sur la première biographie posthume de Jeanne Leber écrite, entre 1715 et 1722, par le sulpicien François Vachon de Belmont. Pour reconstituer la vie de la Recluse, Monsieur de Belmont, qui se défend dans sa préface d'être un panégyriste, s'est appuyé sur des faits «qui ont paru aux yeux des témoins oculaires, et Les paroles, que leurs oreilles ont Entenduës». Il utilise les témoignages des supérieures de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal et des Ursulines de Québec et le rapport de deux amies de Jeanne Leber dont l'une était pensionnaire en même temps qu'elle chez les Ursulines. Sans le citer, le Sulpicien s'est probablement servi des confidences de l'abbé François Séguenot, encore vivant en 1722. Du manuscrit de Belmont, découlent les biographies de Montgolfier, écrite en 1768, puis de Faillon, publiée en 1860, tous deux prêtres de Saint-Sulpice.

Pour compléter ses sources écrites, nous avons choisi d'analyser les pièces dont l'attribution nous semblait la plus plausible et la mieux documentée. Il s'agit de cinq ornements liturgiques énumérés dans la biographie de Vachon de Belmont : «presque tous les ornemens qui sont presentement a la chapelle de la congregation sont l'ouvrages de ses mains, On admire avec justice le devant d'autel chasuble dalmatique et chape de Broderie de soye fait avec une propreté une adresse une magnificence toute particuliere». L'existence de ces pièces est confirmée à plusieurs reprises aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles, sans beaucoup de détails malheureusement, dans les archives de la fabrique de la Paroisse Notre-Dame où sont conservés le parement d'autel, la chasuble et les deux dalmatiques. En 1860, l'abbé Faillon atteste lui aussi la présence du corpus : «On voit encore, aujourd'hui, à l'Église paroissiale de Ville-Marie, un ornement complet, à fond glacé d'argent, composé du devant d'autel, de la chasuble, des dalmatiques et de la chape, dont toutes les broderies sont de la main de la Sœur Leber». Au moment de leur restauration en 1982, à l'occasion de l'aménagement du Musée de la Basilique de Notre-Dame, les ornements portaient une étiquette les attribuant à Jeanne Leber. La chape, quant à elle, est restée longtemps en usage à la Chapelle de la Congrégation avant d'être exposée à la Maison Saint-Gabriel. Elle n'a donc pas été restaurée avec les autres ornements.

L'absence de sources écrites par Jeanne Leber, l'attribution posthume de ces broderies par ses historiographes, les réserves récentes émises par plusieurs historiens de l'art et spécialistes du textile, à la fois sur la cohérence du corpus et l'origine canadienne de certaines pièces, entourent de mystère cet ensemble. Pour pallier les lacunes documentaires, les objets sont devenus nos archives. Les ornements brodés attribués à la Recluse ont remplacé sa correspondance, ses confidences, les témoignages de ses contemporains, les traces de son existence et de sa matérialité; l'objet a été substitué, par défaut, à l'écrit. Nous avons reconstitué Jeanne Leber à travers ses choix d'artiste et d'artisane : les modèles, les patrons, les coloris, les motifs, les techniques, les maladresses, les réussites, la fatigue ou l'inspiration. Nous avons recensé minutieusement tout détail technique ou iconographique qui pouvait renforcer l'homogénéité de ce corpus comme la présence de cette couchure au fil d'argent commune aux cinq ornements.

Inversement, l'analyse des pièces nous a constamment ramené vers l'artisane, comme si les fonctions de brodeuse et de recluse étaient intimement liées et qu'elles ne pouvaient s'expliquer l'une sans l'autre. Pour comprendre ce corpus, il fallait le replacer dans son contexte de production. Nous avons choisi d'analyser l'œuvre de Jeanne Leber à travers ses origines familiales, son éducation, sa formation artistique, son parcours personnel. De cet environnement socio-culturel nous avons reconstitué un réseau, un cadre de vie, une expérience, une logique qui expliquent, presque naturellement, la production artistique de Jeanne Leber. Enfin, nous avons mis en perspective les cinq ornements du corpus avec certaines pièces contemporaines brodées ou peintes par les Ursulines pour découvrir combien ces œuvres brodées dans l'intimité close d'un récluse se situent au carrefour d'influences, de Québec à Montréal, de la France à la Nouvelle-France.

La production de Jeanne Leber est étroitement liée à sa vie de recluse. Ces ornements brodés dans la solitude et la proximité du sanctuaire rappellent les liens étroits qui existent entre cette activité paisible qu'est la broderie et l'exercice de la prière, de la contemplation et de l'oraison. C'est une occupation peu physique qui convient à une femme soumise au jeûne, aux longues veilles et à la mortification. La broderie est une activité manuelle qui sert de support à la vie contemplative. En symbiose avec le lieu qu'elle habite, la Recluse s'identifie à la Vierge à la fois mère et épouse. La broderie apparaît comme une offrande de Jeanne Leber à son Dieu auquel elle a donné sa vie; un acte de dévotion, un geste de contemplation où la perfection de l'aiguille amène à la grâce mystique, où le corps et les gestes de la brodeuse disparaissent pour renaître sous la forme d'un vêtement destiné au Christ par l'intermédiaire du prêtre qui le porte.

Le récluse est un lieu de production particulier, différent des grandes salles communautaires bien éclairées où religieuses et élèves travaillent par petits groupes et en équipe. Jeanne Leber brode sans la complémentarité d'autres brodeuses qui peuvent lui offrir le support d'une division du travail correspondant aux habiletés de chacune, comme c'est le cas pour l'atelier des Ursulines. Les

broderies attribuées à la Recluse ne présentent pas de grands médaillons architecturés, de cornes d'abondance en haut-relief ou une grande diversité de points et de techniques qui, pour être réalisés, demandent des modèles, beaucoup de matériel, des métiers, bref tout un support logistique qui ne peut être animé que par plusieurs brodeuses travaillant en même temps. Il s'agit d'ornements issus d'un travail long et minutieux dont la qualité technique est parfois inégale, mais réalisable par une seule personne.

De la claustration de Jeanne Leber émane une production sensible aux modes, aux offres du commerce colonial, aux échanges d'expertise entre communautés religieuses. Le corpus étudié montre la conformité d'un art dont les règles sont l'application de techniques et de modèles, où la copie règne en maître, où la créativité repose sur l'agencement différent de motifs et la qualité de l'exécution, liée à l'adresse, l'inspiration, l'énergie du moment, la finalité qui l'accompagne. L'œuvre brodée de Jeanne Leber est déterminée par les matériaux, les modèles, les commandes qu'elle reçoit et non par le désir de création personnelle. Produits dans l'intimité close du récluse, à l'abri normalement de toutes influences, ces ornements sont pourtant à l'image de leur temps, conformes à l'iconographie conventionnelle, aux modèles à la mode, fabriqués avec des matériaux venus de France, fidèles aux savoir-faire transmis par les maîtresses ursulines.

Au-delà de la passion et des idéaux, les ornements de Jeanne Leber restent pour l'historien du textile un corpus fragile. Les ornements attribués à Jeanne Leber ont été malmenés par l'histoire, le temps, l'usure, les remontages irréversibles, les rebroderies. Ces bouleversements donnent un aspect disparate, éclaté à l'ensemble, qui gêne sa compréhension et intimide le plus téméraire des spécialistes. Une nouvelle démarche de restauration accompagnée d'une prise de photographies et d'une analyse technique approfondie, notamment des doublures, des envers, des lisières, des remontages, des ajouts, serait le complément indispensable à cette étude compte tenu de l'intérêt de cette collection pour l'histoire des textiles du Québec. En effet, au-delà du problème de l'attribution, les ornements brodés attribués à Jeanne Leber constituent un des rares témoignages à Montréal de cette broderie liturgique inspirée des techniques et des modèles français introduits en Nouvelle-France par le biais des communautés religieuses, à Québec, puis à Montréal, aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles.

Enfin, cette recherche nous a permis de dégager les liens intimes presque mystérieux qui lient l'art de la broderie avec la pratique de la prière, de l'ascèse et de la solitude. Œuvres non signées et parfois contestées, les ornements liturgiques brodés attribués à Jeanne Leber portent encore de nos jours le sceau de la Recluse comme si ces merveilles d'or, d'argent et de soie ne pouvaient naître, dans notre imaginaire, que dans le clair obscur, le calme et le secret d'une cellule.

(Christine Turgeon)