

FRANÇOIS RANVOYZÉ, SILVERSMITH: PATRONAGE FROM THE CHURCH AT L'ISLET-SUR-MER

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Fig.1

The treasure of L'Islet-sur-Mer (Fig. 1) is the most famous of all those hidden in the churches of the Saint Lawrence River Valley, in part because of the fascination that it has generated over the past seventy-five years. Certainly there are larger or more sumptuous treasures. But as its nucleus was constituted at the initiative of a priest - Father Jacques Panet, who commissioned

silver almost exclusively from François Ranvoyzé, and who moreover willed to the church three liturgical vessels in solid gold that he had commissioned for himself. This ignited Marius Barbeau's imagination and he made it subject of his novels. *Le curé Panet et son orfèvre* is among several titles under which Barbeau published his story during the 1930's and the following dec-

ade.¹ In 1940, Ramsay Traquair took up the subject of the treasure in a study that since has become a classic.² Beginning in 1941,³ Gérard Morisset carried on the work with a systematic inventory of all the objects, publishing them with commentary. In addition, the large number of venues in which these gold vessels have been exhibited has contributed to making the silver of the church of Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours known to a large audience. Since 1974 thanks to another enlightened clergyman, Mgr Léon Bélanger, the objects have been transferred to the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec as much for their protection as to give them the importance they deserve.

Father Jacques Panet is a unique figure in the history of art in Quebec. Son of a notary, Jean-Claude Panet and his wife Marie-Louise Barolet, he was born in Quebec City in 1754 and grew up in a cultivated and well-to-do family. His older brothers distinguished themselves: Jean-Antoine was also a notary and later became the first president of the Assembly of Lower Canada, while Bernard-Claude found his vocation in the church, becoming archbishop of Quebec City. Jacques likewise was

drawn to the priesthood: ordained by Mgr Jean-Olivier Briand on May 29, 1779. He was named vicar of the Notre-Dame-de Bonsecours parish in October of the same year, remaining there until his retirement in 1829. He continued to reside in the parish until his death in 1834.⁴ Upon his arrival in the parish, Father Panet found a rather plain church of fairly recent construction, the only decoration being a 50-year-old tabernacle on the main altar, surmounted by a new painting of the patron saint of the parish, together with the silver vessels necessary for the celebration of mass.⁵ During the half-century of his pastorate, Panet undertook the ornamentation and enrichment of his church with exceptional zeal, understandably using the church's funds initially, but also contributing from his own pocket on numerous occasions, all the while vilifying clergymen who preferred to buy fine cas-



Fig.2 Father Panet's record book



socks and gold snuffboxes rather than using their revenues for embellishment of their churches.⁶



Shortly after taking up his post, Panet ordered for his church a rich chasuble in silver cloth with its accessories, reimbursing it promptly from his own purse. By his admission he wished thereby to silence some critics who considered these expenses to be excessive⁷. Nevertheless, it appears that the majority of his parishioners approved his initiatives of embellishment because as of 1782 the church contracted for a magnificent altar screen, extending over the entire sanctuary⁸. This was soon followed by other orders to various sculptors, ornamentists and painters. It is in this context that

over the period 1779 to 1816 successive orders were placed with François Ranvoyzé for silver objects. This patronage is documented, mainly because the account ledgers of the church have survived, but also by an unusual source: Father Panet kept a sort of record book (Fig. 2) from 1809 to 1834 in which he entered tithing payments, thereby creating a census of the parish, but also more importantly an annotated inventory of all the holy vessels and priestly adornments. Despite its imprecision this information is invaluable in many respects.

These manuscripts allow us to establish that before ordering from the embroiderer or the sculptor, Father Panet turned to the silversmith. Shortly upon his arrival in the parish in the autumn of 1779, he thus commissioned François Ranvoyzé - who dominated the scene in Quebec for ecclesiastical silver at the time⁹ - to make a large sanctuary lamp, the oldest one surviving from this artist. (Fig.3, 4, 5, 6) The lamp is shaped like a large, generously curved circular basin. An arrangement of friezes of classical ornaments accentuates the fullness of its form. The contour of the opening is stamped all around at regular intervals with stylized fleur-de-lys. The upper portion is divided into three fields of



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

similar width - a plain band separating two broad friezes of lively repoussé representations of acanthus leaves on a matte background. The same rhythmic alternation is found in the decoration of the lower portion. Here a polished molding that marks the transition between the two portions of the lamp precedes a swelling whose presence is accentuated by narrow parallel gadroons. A plain band then an-

nounces an area where the acanthus leaf motif recurs. After the last molding, which bears oval pierced decoration, we see more acanthus leaves on a final protuberance to which a suspension ring is attached that serves to lower and raise the lamp after it is refilled. This sanctuary lamp is an excellent example of the silversmith's earliest decorative style.

This object was at the centre of a crucial conflict in the mid-twentieth century, which main consequence was the classification of many churches as historical monuments all over the Prov-

ince of Quebec in the following decade. To make a long story short, in January 1956, the vicar Charles-Eugène Raymond sold the sanctuary lamp to an antiques dealer without consent of the wardens. The lamp eventually found its way into the collection of Henry G. Birks. Gérard Morisset, then secretary of the Commission on Historical Monuments, got wind of the misdeed the following May and sounded the alarm.

Long negotiations ensued, and the lamp was returned to the church sanctuary in October 1958¹⁰.



Fig. 7

Father Panet indicates that he had a ciborium made about 1781. At that time the church seemingly owned only one. Historical context would indicate that Ranvoyzé made it, but the object no longer exists, as it was melted down in 1838 when a new one was ordered from Laurent Amiot¹¹. However Ranvoyzé definitely made the pyx dated 1797. In keeping with French tradition, the silversmith favored a miniaturized ciborium format. We note that the cover is hinged. The decoration enhances the shape: two rows of beading accentuate the molding of the pedestal base, while a third row borders the circumference of the cover whose dome defines a field embellished by floral motifs. Today the object has all-over gilding, though only the interior was gilt originally.

Twenty years passed before another order was placed for silver. This long interval can be explained by the fact that considerable sums were needed to pay for the main altar screen followed by those for the chapels. Finally, in 1804,(Fig. 7) Ranvoyzé was commissioned to make a pair of cruets with under plate, a set designated for celebrating mass. The small pear-shaped ewers bear a restrained ornamentation of narrow, flat gadroons on their pedestal bases. Their modern look stems

from the presence of handles - exceptional for the time, a characteristic noted when the first installment was paid¹². The rim of the accompanying oval under plate is ornamented by a rich frieze of symmetrically arranged chased foliate and floral motifs, bordered with beading, all perfectly consistent with the silversmith's style at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1937 Ramsay Traquair pointed out the existence of this set,¹³ publishing a photograph of it in 1940. The publication attracted the interest of researchers, but was interpreted by certain merchants as a catalogue of items available for purchase. At some point the cruets left the church and at the end of November 1944 were bought by the collector Paul Gouin from a Montreal dealer¹⁴. From 1946 to 1968 they were displayed on many occasions at Quebec art retrospectives. The Museum acquired them in 1956, among its first acquisitions of antique silver.



Fig. 9

church dating to 1701-1702 by Gilles Gouel (before 1694-1754) was to be the model for the chalice. (Fig. 9) With its base adorned with acanthus leaves, its knob ornamented with cherub heads and its cup undecorated, the latter recast at a later date, this new chalice was a reinterpretation of the French vessel, extending the spirit of the Ancien Régime beyond the beginning of the nineteenth century. No rigid framework was imposed on the silversmith in designing

the stoup, thereby allowing us to appreciate yet another facet of his art. Indeed, this vessel of conventional form exhibits a contour of the body which is fluid in nature, with subtle transition from its curve to its counter-curve. The upper part of the stoup is enhanced by a frieze of laurel leaf swags, while the bottom of the body features two lengths of ribbing in rhythmic alternation. The molding of the base is made more vigorous by the presence of straight gadroons in tight formation. Here we observe a similarity in form and decoration with the productions of Laurent Amiot, upon whose work Ranvoyzé began to draw beginning in 1788. The stoup of L'Isler-sur-Mer is a valuable witness to the sharing of ideas between Quebec silversmiths at the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Fig. 10)

In 1814 the church wardens acquired a case for holy oils from Ranvoyzé. (Fig. 11) Oval in shape, the miniature box has a domed cover. A play of moldings where the body and the cover come together animates the surface and echoes the molding that encircles the lower portion. The small applied ornament at the centre opens the case and closes the cover. This form derives from French eight-



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

eenth century objects and was used by Ranvoyzé throughout his career.

Two years later, in 1816, the church placed its final order with Ranvoyzé: a censer that esthetically resembles the stoup, originally with matching incense boat since disappeared. The formal relationship between this object and several censers by Amiot is

evident at first glance. While the censer by Ranvoyzé has a body with a more prominent shoulder than the one by Amiot in the same church's treasure, the silhouettes of the vessels are similar. Ranvoyzé's decorative vocabulary is largely inspired by the works of Amiot. Thus the openings at the top of the chimney are enclosed between two gadrooned friezes. The body has laurel leaf swags on the first level and ribbing on the second, while the molding of the base is encircled with straight gadroons. The master's personality can be seen in his choice of open-work motifs for the chimney. The upper portion has three massive fleur-de-lys, attached to the body of the object by thin stems, evoking the artist's early style. The openings that are found between the three inverted brackets are embellished with crossed palm leaves and flower buds, recalling the silversmith's second style. The overall treatment of the chasing is another factor allowing us to recognize the hand of Ranvoyzé. Where Amiot gives relief to his frieze of laurel leaves, Ranvoyzé prefers a linear surface treatment handled vigorously. Possibly the last censer made by Ranvoyzé, this object contributes to our understanding of the complexity of the interplay of influ-

ences in the evolution of the decorative arts. Because we find here expression of all three of the artist's decorative styles, this censer constitutes an exceptional synthesis of his work.

The treasure of the church of L'Islet exists in our collective imagination mainly as the gold chalice and paten, the ciborium and the monstrance. (Fig.12) These objects were commissioned by Father Panet and made at the beginning of the nineteenth century: chalice, paten and ciborium were delivered in 1810 and the monstrance in 1812. Personal property of

the vicar, they were offered to God through a bequest to the church at the time of his death in 1834. Their creation has left unequivocal traces in the archives. As we have seen, a chalice and stoup came into the church's treasure in 1810. Closely involved in submitting this order, Father Panet seems to have used the occasion to come to a personal understanding with the silversmith to make a gold chalice that he wished to be richly decorated and have a calix. Over a long period of time Father Panet had held on to the wish to have vessels made of gold. In fact he left a blank page when he made an inven-



Fig.12



tory of church property with the avowed purpose to list on it the gold vessels that would be added some day. To this end he accumulated gold coins over time; these seem not to have been difficult to find, because in 1809 the church warden settled various expenses with solid gold. Is it possible that Father Panet used the occasion to effect a substitution and enrich his own supply? We note that an American gold coin dated 1800 was used without modification to

make one of the collar knobs of the ciborium. Ranvoyzé experienced technical difficulties in making the chalice that he produced first. (Fig.13) Never before having worked in gold, he had to make onerous preparations before beginning the project. Critical examination reveals that the silversmith used high purity gold to allow easy manipulation of the metal. Moreover to give body to the vessel, he compensated the near absence of alloy with unusual thickness of the metal. This approach increased costs, causing Father Panet to complain. In the end their good relationship continued, and the vicar rapidly entrusted him with an order for the two other vessels.

The shapes and decoration of the three vessels spring from a common source: French objects in the Louis XIV style. Made in the same year, the chalice and ciborium are similar in their arrangement of elements. We observe in each a calculated ascending progression, the undecorated zone of the bases generating an upward movement, the unusual form of the knobs recalling that of the cup. The eye is thus drawn toward the upper portion, the cup that encloses the Eucharist wafer. Made two years later, the monstrance is structured differently, though reflecting a similar vi-

sion. To confer visual solidity to the oval form of the base, it is abundantly decorated with rich ornamentation. Four winged heads establish the rhythm. Between them are deployed a multiplicity of foliate motifs, freely rendered, that catch the light. Punctuated by a succession of horizontal elements, the centrally placed stem supports the radiating rays of the lunette, their surfaces stamped and polished to a mirror finish. Light is thereby vividly projected, magnifying the presence of the host offered to the faithful for veneration.

The calix of the chalice is remarkable. In designing it François Ranvoyzé was inspired by the structure of the knop, arranging three winged heads at equal distance apart, in alternation with three rose buds. Given the space to fill, the silversmith gives more fullness to these motifs than to those on the knop, the presence of a matte background also reinforcing their impact. In an unusual manner he has arranged a frieze of laurel leaves above the main field. Together with the gadroons forming the bottom of the calix it evokes the art of Laurent Amiot. An examination of the ciborium (Fig. 14) reveals a concern with uniformity, yet more freedom. Here the artist has decorated the calix with winged heads



Fig. 14

alternating with double grape clusters, the latter motif strictly his own creation. In a spirit of consistency he repeats the same arrangement on the lid, alternating the motif with full-blown flowers. The use of gadroons on the base of the calix and on the top of the lid contributes to an impression of order and relates the ciborium even more closely to the chalice.

This exceptional triple commission reveals the profound values of Jacques Panet who found it “*shameful to see that neither in the*

two Canadas, nor in Rome, nor in the whole of Europe and I dare say even in all the universe can we find three such gold vessels (...) gold from which no vessel should be made other than those which are for His holy temple,"¹⁵ to use his own words. The unshakeable convictions that drove Panet made it possible for François Ranvoyzé not only to practice his art but also to create masterpieces.

Thanks to the generosity of a descendant of the silversmith, a large oil portrait of François Ranvoyzé and one of his wife Vénéradé Pellerin, came into the Museum's collection in 1998. The painter presents his model in frontal fashion with a somewhat solemn expression, not neglecting the slightest details of his clothing. These portraits were almost lost to us when their owner took them to Colorado at the end of the nineteenth century. The foresight of the last owner's father inspired him to return them to Quebec circa 1931¹⁶.

Endnotes:

1. Marius Barbeau, « Anciens orfèvres du Québec », *Mémoires de la Société royale du Canada*, 3e série, section I, tome XXIX (1935), p. 113-115.
2. Ramsay Traquair, *The Old Silver of Quebec*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1940, planches V et IX.
3. Gérard Morisset, *Coup d'œil sur les arts en Nouvelle-France*, Québec, [Charier & Dugal], 1941, p. 98-99.
4. Serge Gagnon, « Panet, Jacques », *Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, vol. IV, Québec, PUL, 19XX, p. XXXX
5. Madeleine Gobeil-Trudeau, « Église Notre-Dame de Bonsecours », *Les chemins de la mémoire*, tome I, Québec, Commission des biens culturels, 1990, p. 388-389.
6. L'Islet-sur-Mer, Archives de la fabrique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, *Manuscrit de l'abbé Jacques Panet*, feuillet 119.
7. L'Islet-sur-Mer, Archives de la fabrique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, *Manuscrit de l'abbé Jacques Panet*, feuillet 115.
8. René Villeneuve, « Oeuvres d'art de l'église de Notre-Dame de Bonsecours: sculptures », *Les chemins de la mémoire*, tome III, Québec, Commission des biens culturels, 1999, p. 99-100.
9. René Villeneuve, *Ofeverie quebécoise de la collection du Musée des*

beaux arts du Canada, Ottawa, Musée des beaux arts du Canada, 1998, p.57-59

10. Luc Noppen et Lucie K. Morisset, *Les églises du Québec : un patrimoine à réinventer*, Québec, Presses de l' université du Québec, 2005, p. 163-168.

11. L' Islet-sur-Mer, Archives de la fabrique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, Livre de comptes, vol. III (1816-1885), 1 juillet 1838.

12. L' Islet-sur-Mer, Archives de la fabrique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, Livre de comptes, vol. II (1798-1815), 22 août 1804.

13. Montréal, Université McGill, Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art, Fonds Ramsay-Traquair, négatif no 102723.

14. Québec, Inventaire des biens culturels, fonds Inventaire des œuvres d' art, classeur Westmount, collection Gouin, Paul,

15. L' Ilet-sur-Mer, Archives de la fabrique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, *Manuscrit de l'abbé Jacques Panet*, feuillet 119.

16. Entrevue de l' auteur avec Louis Zéphirin Rousseau réalisée à Québec , 14 février 1986.

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