

Part 1 — The development of painting in Canada

Human life in what is now Canada probably goes back 25 000 years to the first migrations across the frozen Bering Sea from northeastern Asia. Although it is likely that images have been made in this part of the world ever since, we are only now beginning to understand what has survived of this first Canadian painting, let alone the meaning of the imagery of the pictographs and hide or bark paintings that can be found across the country. What is clear is that, with the first settlement of Europeans, an entirely different visual language was introduced, unrelated to the aboriginal forms.

Devotional works

Painting in the western European tradition, the foundation of virtually all that has been produced in Canada since, was introduced with the arrival at Quebec in September 1654 of the first resident painter, Abbé Hugues Pommier (1637-86). Pommier, a priest who happened to paint, stayed five years before returning to France. Although two or three paintings have been attributed to him, we know of no work that is surely from his hand, and this uncertainty extends to our knowledge of the whole period of New France.

In the *Monastère des Ursulines* at Quebec there is a canvas grandly titled *France Bringing the Faith to the Hurons of New France* that is a mysterious and beautiful symbol of the place of art in the French colonial period. One of the few seventeenth century paintings to survive the many fires, it depicts a humble native on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, his naked body cloaked in the lilies of France, kneeling in respectful awe before a regal female, the figure of France, who instructs him in the Christian faith. She displays a painting of the Trinity surrounded by the Holy Family, and, as if to stress that it is but an image, she points to the heavens where we can see the Holy Family itself. To the left of the Indian are two rude chapels, and to the right of the figure of France lies the ship that brought her across the ocean.

We do not know the painting's author, although it is usually attributed to Frère Luc, the only artist to work in New France who is firmly linked to the mainstream of French painting. Commissioned in 1666 for the Jesuit church at Quebec by the Hurons who had settled nearby, its figure of France is a likeness of Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV, who exercised the prerogatives of the crown in place of her son from 1643 to 1660 — precisely that time