



The Musée de la nature et des sciences de Sherbrooke turns 130 A unique institution that continues to evolve

Let's imagine how Sherbrooke looked some 130 years ago: an industrial city of about 6000 inhabitants, a court house, a prison, churches, a bank, a train station, a few businesses and an educational institution Saint-Charles-Borromée Seminary, today the Sherbrooke Seminary. Like elsewhere in Canada, education at the time was a church-run thing, reserved for the most "talented". Science teaching revolved around mathematics and the natural sciences. It was in this context that the museum was founded in 1879.

The first collection of objects and specimens supported teaching, in the same way as books from the library. The world in which we live in today has also changed a great deal since 1879: instruction has become more democratic, sources of knowledge have multiplied at the same pace as technology, and the range of products and activities offered to the public shows unprecedented growth. The museum has had no choice but to add the creation of amazing activities and the generation of interest to its long standing mission of conserving, studying and teaching. During these 130 years, it has made considerable headway.

Men of Passion

The evolution and survival of the museum rests in large part with a few men of passion, determined to pursue the work of their predecessors. Pierre Girard, the seminary's principal at the time, was the first pioneer to venture into this direction. His research of objects, useful for teaching purposes, led him to acquire specimens of museological interest and value. The first pieces acquired were samples of asbestos from the mine at Dudswell, in the Eastern Townships of Quebec and several mineral samples graciously offered by the Canadian Land surveying office.



Canon Léon Marcotte (centre) and members of the Société d'histoire naturelle du Séminaire Saint-Charles-Borromée, around 1900



The museum tower, around 1950.

The real send-off, however, was provided by Pierre-Achille Bégin who, in 1883, created the Société d'histoire naturelle du Séminaire Saint-Charles-Borromée, whose objectives sought to "[...] propagate and vulgarize the study of the natural sciences and at the same time increase the size of the museum of the alma mater."

The museum experienced considerable growth between 1900 and 1969 under the management of canon Léon Marcotte, who devoted a considerable part of his life to it. He acquired various collection pieces and patiently described them, enriching the collection by several thousand objects and specimens in the process. On Sunday afternoons, he would greet visitors from outside with whom he energetically shared his passion.

In 1964, Léon Marcotte was overcome by illness and the museum slowed its activities. In tribute to all those who had devoted so much time and energy into building the museum, the Canon left these few words : "Cordial fellowship from the entourage, patience and length of time, sustained enthusiasm [...] there it is, what you have given to our house for the greatest honour of Sherbrooke!" "The Saint-Charles museum therefore played its "rightful role" in the glory of the Eastern Townships!"

Curator's Notes



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In 1969, the museum closed its doors following the Canon's death. It was re-launched in 1973 by Mgr Georges Cloutier, both rector of the seminary and conservator of the museum. He created the Corporation du Musée du Séminaire de Sherbrooke inc. and to this day, the activities of the museum are administered by virtue of this same charter.

An Impressive Collection

Throughout its 130-year history and in addition to edifying its main natural sciences collection, the museum recovered and safe-guarded numerous collections coming from fellow museums and institutions which were closing their doors or changing their orientation. It goes without saying, therefore that the entirety of the collections bear witness not only to the history of the museum itself, but also to the history of scientific museology in America.

Each object and specimen has a history. The story of stones, described as "Phoenician", is certainly the one that has caused the most ink to flow. The window featuring naturalized birds coming from the first museum in North America, the Peale's Museum in Philadelphia which closed its doors in 1850, merits particular attention. It remains in perfect condition to this day. Closer to home, the "Péroglyphes de Brompton" bear witness to the passage of the North American Indian tribes and travelers who embarked on the waterways of the St. Francis River during the last millennium. Some of the collection pieces are sadly famous, such as the naturalized passenger pigeon which reminds us that this species once existed. From the information they contain, these pieces together make up a collection that is undeniably rich in historic and scientific value.

The Canadian Heritage ministry understood this, and in 1972, committed itself to support the creation of a national directory of collections. In 1992, the museum became a pilot museum and began to index its collections. At the present time, more than 11,000 of the estimated 65,000 objects and specimens have been classified in the computerized database of the museum and over 650 of these are featured on databases of Artefact Canada and Info-Muse. In partnership with two other Canadian establishments, the museum also became one of the first in Canada to carry out a virtual exhibition, housed by the Virtual Museum of Canada's web site.



The "Phoenician stones"

The Museum Takes Off

During the 1970s, Mgr Georges Cloutier began to envision a museum with a regional vocation, a facility to which the entire population could come and experience themed exhibitions. In 1976, the Centre Léon-Marcotte opened its doors on nearby Wellington Street in the heart of town. It housed a temporary exhibition room and served as a branch of the Musée du Séminaire de Sherbrooke. At the end of 1978, the exhibition room found its rightful place inside the seminary itself. Parallel to this desire for expansion, the idea was born to produce in-house products for display.

"Le temps qui passe", produced in 1976, was the museum's first temporary exhibition. It was made up of old clocks, cleverly displayed in the room. Between 1976 and 1980, the museum planned and produced 11 small-scale exhibitions. It also introduced its first educational kits, a totally new innovation with the products targeting teachers. While the first steps were somewhat modest, they indicated the directions for what would become the true vocation for the museum: scientific popularization backed by attractive products. In 1980, a first permanent workshop was built to produce exhibition products and two exhibitions by the museum were presented outside its walls.

In 1993, the museum sailed across the Atlantic with its "Entre terre et eau" exhibition presented by the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de Bourges, in France. The efficiency and flair of Charles Farrar, the General Manager at that time, was certainly no stranger to the opening of new frontiers. In 1998, the museum partnered with l'Espace des sciences de Rennes and la Ligue pour la protection des oiseaux de France, for the production of "Les ailes de l'Atlantique – Wings over the Atlantic", an exhibition about marine birds.

In 1998, the exhibition entitled "À tire-d'aile – Flurry of Feathers" made a first breakthrough in the United States. At the moment these lines are being written, an exhibition about digital imagery is being presented at the Cité des télécoms, in France, and the museum team is working on the final preparations for the arrival of the "Petits vampires – Attack of the Bloodsuckers" exhibition, created by the Environmental Exhibit Collaborative (EEC) of which the museum has been a part since 2006, along with three institutions from New England.

The more the museum expanded and opened itself to the world, the more the need for new space became critical. In fact, the desire to provide the region with a new more modern museum was kept alive for over 25 years before finally emerging. The tireless support for the museum by Mayor Jean Perrault of the City of Sherbrooke, is in large part responsible for this achievement. In 1999, several grants were announced for the construction of a new museum in the former Julius Kayser Co. textile plant.

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The former Julius Kayser Co. textile plant./The renovated museum building, just before construction ended.

The conversion of an industrial building dating back to 1919 into a museum presented numerous architectural challenges. Creating spaces that best responded to the needs and expectations of the public and the conservation of collections was both a concern and a bit of a challenge at the same time. There was also the issue of setting up an exhibition production centre that would offer other museums or other institutions the unique expertise acquired by the Museum's team of professionals in the area of exhibit creation, design and fabrication.

The construction began in 2000. The museum team completely designed and fabricated the Museum's current permanent exhibition entitled "Au fil des saisons – The Cycle of the Seasons" as well as the different educational programs associated with it. The great care shown to preserve the integrity of the industrial building and the architectural quality earned the museum two prestigious awards: the 2003 regional prize of the Association des Amis et propriétaires de maisons anciennes du Québec (association of friends and supporters of old Quebec buildings) (APMAQ), and the 2003 Award of Excellence of the Canadian Association of Museums in the "design and refurbishing of installations" category.



Animation during the "Au fil des saisons - The Cycle of the Seasons" exhibition



Moving the collections during the summer of 2002

The museum moved to its new location and was able to set up its operations in 2002. The highlight of this relocation process undoubtedly was the actual moving of a large moose, which could not go through either of the doors or windows, and certainly not down the elevator of the old museum. A major operation then took place in which the ceiling had to be opened and the animal suspended in mid air using a crane which gently lowered it through the required six floors to its new home.

The Musée de la nature et des sciences de Sherbrooke

The Musée de la nature et des sciences de Sherbrooke officially opened its doors on October 8, 2002. In 2004, it was awarded a golden laureate in Tourisme Québec's grand prix in the "tourist attraction" category, for less than 50,000 visitors. This recognition helped the museum to become better known, not only as a cultural establishment but also as a tourist attraction. In addition to its modern facilities, the success of the new museum is due in large part to the off-the-wall fantasy style of its activities. The team created no less than 12 new animation programs. The animators have become characters in themselves and the visit takes the form of a living history in which kids participate. In fact, the products offered to the general public and to families are very diversified: field trips, children's celebrations, nature counter and so on.

The VIP visits feature behind-the-scenes exploration of the museum. The conferences deal with surprising and fascinating aspects of nature and sparks critical reflection. The team also focuses on the quality of the services offered and the museum has become the first institution

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of its kind in Quebec to be certified "Qualité tourisme" by the ministère du Tourisme du Québec.

The museum team builds on its successes and always wants to step up its services a notch for its visitors. Everyone pitches in with a special skill to help develop activities and renew the public spaces. They take advantage of school break periods to offer programming that is full of special activities for children. It has also associated itself with regional partners to transform the museum into a true science exhibition venue, centered on its visitors.



Mr. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., speaker

The success of the museum is also due in large part to the partnerships it has established with numerous institutions to carry out traveling exhibitions. At the present time, more than 100 exhibitions have been produced or co-produced by the museum, and some 50 or so of those have travelled to other cities across Canada, the United States or in Europe. Each year, more than one million visitors view the travelling exhibitions that have been produced or co-produced by the museum. After seven years of development at the Frontenac street site, the museum continues to work on several projects including the renewal of its interactive show. This new and highly technological product will feature the Magog river gorge, which flows through the narrows immediately behind the museum. The museum would also like to produce a unique virtual exhibition which would allow internet users to visit its reserve vaults and conservation rooms. The conservation department continues to intensify its research and development activities, notably in the area of lyophilization, or freeze-drying, a method that helps preserve certain specimens that, until today, could only be conserved in formalin or alcohol. This service is also offered to other institutions that need to conserve specimens.

To summarize, over a period of 130 years the museum has gone on from being a simple science teaching tool, supported by an educational establishment, to an independent, multifaceted cultural, scientific and tourism organization. From this transition period, expectations on the museum have grown tremendously. Its unique productions must always attract countless visitors and stimulate them to live through an enriching and surprising experience. The challenges for the team require creativity in both programming and financial management. To that end, the Museum relies on public financing from ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine, the City of Sherbrooke and the Canadian Heritage ministry, three essential partners. The museum also realize turn-key exhibitions, including research, design, production and tour management. The museum also rents its multi-functional room and manages a souvenir boutique. Thanks to its new market development strategy, it also seeks corporate private sponsorships from large multinational corporations to help finance some of its traveling exhibitions. The team of dedicated professionals working at the museum continues to surpass itself, just as their predecessors did, because they also dream of a museum that lives in its time.



The Musée de la nature et des sciences de Sherbrooke team

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