

Hands-on History: an experiential process in the classroom

Author: Jessa Alston-O'Connor

In order to teach Art History students about the history of art and architecture, Dr. Jean Bélisle has always preferred to take classroom learning far beyond the books, and has made experiential learning a key aspect for many of his classes. For this graduate course he focused on ship building and sculpture in New France, and he sought to create a unique environment where students worked collaboratively as they researched the construction and figurehead sculpture of the frigate *Abénaquise*, a French warship that was built in Quebec in 1753. Often Art History students work independently on assignments and projects, but not in this course. As Bélisle explains, “after university, working together is an essential skill. Therefore, in this class it is important, at least once in a student’s university career, to interact and learn to work smoothly in collaboration. It’s a different way of learning.”ⁱ

His goals for this course were to move beyond a reliance on reading books, and to focus on the hands-on experience with primary research material and real experience with the ship building process. In order to begin to piece together the history of this ship and the design of her figurehead, students conducted primary research of national archives in Canada and England in search of the limited number of original documents that make reference to the *Abénaquise* ship. In a class trip to Odanak, the reserve of the Abenaki Nation near Trois Rivières, Quebec, students met with elders and learned about the history of the Odanak museum. The class was then challenged to build on the primary research and oral history they had gathered, and to incorporate their own ideas of what the figurehead may have looked like. The resulting figurehead was a “3D life sized hypothesis” combining collective research and ideas of these studentsⁱⁱ.

For this course, the process was key. Each stage of the learning process built on previous class experiences. The course began with a basic overview of marine architecture and terminology, and students were then given copies of only original plans of the ship. This line drawing of the hull at 1:48 scale was created by the English after the ship’s captured a few years later. The English set out to study the ship’s design in an attempt to better understand her remarkable speed. These line drawings are the only ones in existence from a ship built in Québec.ⁱⁱⁱ Students were presented with the task of using these plans to trace each rib on boards, then to cut and assemble a model of the frigate.

A class camping trip at the beginning of the course allowed students to work together to create a 1:4 scale rib of the ship, using these same original plans of the *Abénaquise*. This early stage of the course served as an important retreat from city life where students could bond in a way not possible in the classroom. In working together to create a pattern from the plans, and then to cut, smooth, sand, and assemble each wooden piece to create a single rib, students were given their first taste of just how large and how difficult it was to build a ship in real life. Most works discussed in typical art history classes are small, and students often work with only images of original works. In this class Bélisle sought to bring students a real life, tactile experience with such large structures from the past.

The research and design process of the class’s figurehead intentionally echoed the historical process of ship design and construction: sketches, approval, model,

approval, and full scale creation. Individually, students sketched historic and contemporary ideas for the figurehead, then presented their designs to their colleagues. Collaboratively, favourite design elements were agreed upon and these initial thirteen designs were narrowed down to four variations. In four groups, small 3D models were sculpted out of sculpting clay, and brought before the group for approval. The final design was again a combination of key elements from each model, combining photographs of each to create a final digital design that was then projected and traced onto a life sized block of Styrofoam to be carved. Bélisle brought the class to the professional working studio of a local sculptor to carve and sand the figurehead. Over several weeks, plaster and paint was then applied to create the finished work. At the end of the course, the figurehead was unveiled as part of a one day symposium open to the public and the process was captured in a miniature exhibition in the department, and on this website.

Ultimately, this graduate seminar offered a learning experience where students were given the opportunity to gain a full sensory experience of ship building in New France. They were met with the challenges of primary research, connected with the Abenaki Nation of today, and had the chance to “see and do”^{iv} rather than simply read and write about a ship that was built in Montreal but whose story is not fully known. Bélisle’s collaborative approach to the course created a contemporary ship building experience anchored on the methods and history of the past.

Notes

i Interview Dec 13 2010.

ii Ibid.

iii Class lecture notes Sept 13 2010.

iv Interview with Dr. Jean Belisle Dec 13 2010