

## Sculpting a Ship

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When researching artists and works from previous centuries, it is often a process full of contradiction or missing information, and the search for the sculptor for the Quebec-built French naval ship, the frigate l'Abénaquise (launched 1756), is one such case. There are several likely candidates: Noël Levasseur, a master sculptor and originally credited with the sculptural decoration of the Ursuline convent chapel at Quebec City, a father and son of the same name, Pierre-Noël Levasseur, cousins to Noël, and also master sculptors, the senior to whom the Ursuline chapel is now attributed, and Francois-Noël Levasseur, son of Noël, who often worked with his younger brother, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine, a collaboration sometimes known as “Les Vasseurs”<sup>i</sup>.

Noël must be eliminated from the discussion, due to his death more than a decade prior to the ship's construction. Pierre-Noël, the younger, is the most likely candidate due to his training as he was sent to Rochefort, France to learn proper naval ornamentation so his work would be acceptable to the Royal Navy. The problem comes down to records that state that after a brief visit to Quebec in 1743, Pierre-Noël returned to Rochefort and then never left France again<sup>ii</sup>, so while he may have supplied designs on paper, he would not have carried out the actual work. This leaves Francois-Noël and his brother, Les Vasseurs, because one thing we are fairly certain of is the family name of the sculptor, Levasseur, which is the same, but unrelated to the head of construction of the vessel, Rene-Nicolas Levasseur. There is also evidence of their work on an earlier royal vessel, where a Noël Levasseur and a Jean Baptiste Levasseur were paid for their sculptural work of specific pieces, in 1746<sup>iii</sup>, but not with regard to l'Abénaquise.



Ursuline chapel decoration at Québec – Pierre-Noël Levasseur, Sr. (photo: Jean Bélisle)

In Quebec, there have been two major sculptural traditions: the oldest was religious, for the purpose of decorating and inspiring faith, in the many Catholic run facilities, from parish churches to monasteries, and the other, which really began in the period surrounding l'Abénaquise's construction, was naval, for the purpose of demonstrating the glory of France, and intimidating its rivals. To see the kind of work was likely produced for this vessel, it is necessary to look at what still remains from the period, and fortunately there are two examples from the family that still exist, though neither are actual ship decoration. Pierre-Noël, the father, now has the attribution for the Ursuline chapel of Quebec City (started in 1736), and the son has the courtyard of the Bourse de Commerce in LaRochelle, France (contract signed Sept. 30, 1763)<sup>iv</sup>.



Ursuline chapel decoration at Québec – Pierre-Noël Levasseur, Sr. (photo: Jean Bélisle)

The sculptural decoration of the chapel, executed before his journey to France, is no longer in its original location, but is still accessible. It demonstrates the understanding these carvers had for the human form in the round, the flow of drapery, and the need to sculpt with a particular viewpoint in mind. While the spectator of the vessel, whether on the dock or from another ship, would have a different point of view than the person attending mass in the chapel, such a skill would have been an asset though it would have had to be retuned. What the chapel does not prepare the sculptor for, is the need to work primarily in bas-relief, to reduce detail to the bare minimum, to avoid places where water can gather, and to be even more extreme in the distortion of the figures to allow for the appropriate emphasis from the



different view points.



Bourse de Commerce, LaRochelle – Pierre-Noël Levasseur, Jr. (photo: Jean Bélisle)

The Bourse decoration shows a stronger understanding of bas-relief, with many intricate nautical details, including miniature ship sterns protruding from the stone walls. Since much of this decoration was meant to be seen from much closer than is possible with a ship, the level of detail used in this instance is much higher than it would have been on l'Abénaquise. The difference in material, stone vs. wood, and the location of the decoration, a courtyard rather than a ship, make for a difference in emphasis on detail, complexity and rendering of what might have been similar imagery.



Bourse de Commerce, La Rochelle – Pierre-Noël Levasseur, Jr. (photo: Jean Bélisle)

### Sources

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Levasseur (1717-1775), levasseur.org, 01/10 2011

<<http://www.levasseur.org/en/Biographies/Ancients>>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Belisle. "Un Lavasseur à Rochefort." *VIE DES ARTS* XXIX.115 (Juin-Août) (1984): 47. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> *Library and Archives Canada*. Vol. 85, f 426v, 20 Octobre 1746. Historical document archive ed.Web.

<sup>iv</sup> Belisle: 46.