

# Silver Society visit to the Laurent Amiot

## Exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada 2018

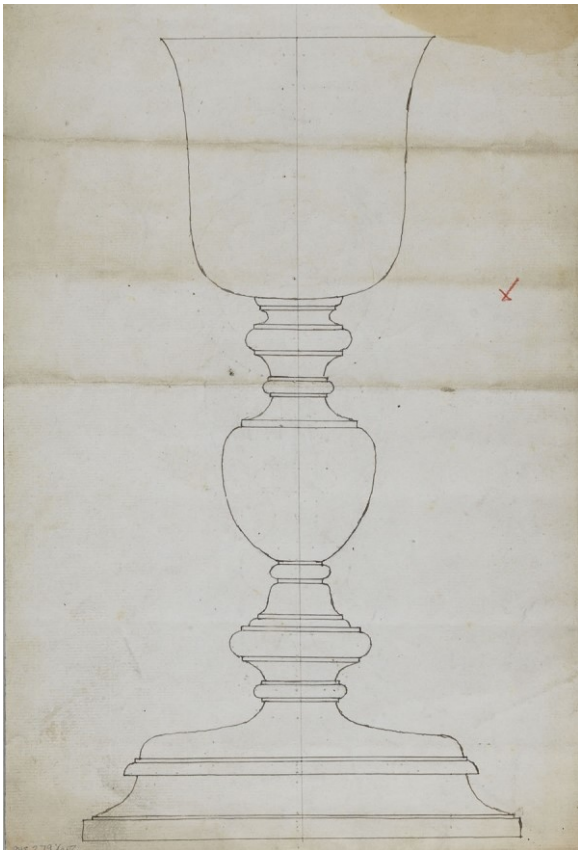
by Anne Thackray

The

exhibition *Laurent Amiot: Master Silversmith of Canada* at the National Gallery of Canada is the first monographic exhibition assessing Amiot's contribution to the development of Canadian art. It is also the first exhibition this century on Canadian silversmithing. The exhibition, which began May 11, will run until September 23, 2018.

René Villeneuve, the Gallery's Curator of Early Canadian Art, curated the exhibition, and wrote the accompanying book, which doubles as a monograph and exhibition catalogue. René was a member of the Silver Society right from the beginning. One of our earliest events was our visit to Stratford to see an exhibition of Canadian silver, curated by René.

When he invited members of the Silver Society to Ottawa to see his Amiot exhibition, we enthusiastically accepted and visited in late May. René welcomed us at opening hour and kindly took us through the exhibition. The exhibition is wonderfully arranged in several rooms in the Prints and Drawings Gallery, on the lower level of the NGC. Much thought went into the display; the sanctuary lamps seem to float in their cases. One of the most interesting aspects of our tour was hearing the curator explain how the display was realized. Amiot's major silver works are of course given pride of place, while other silver is thematically grouped. One room



Laurent Amiot design drawing

Photo: © National Gallery of Canada

is dedicated to design drawings and printed design books, lent to the National Gallery from London's Victoria & Albert Museum, and from the ROM in Toronto.

The Amiot exhibition presents almost a hundred of the silversmith's works, most exhibited for the first time. Thematically, the exhibition goes beyond a simple recitation of the basic facts of Amiot's life, presenting his art in its social, artistic and historic context. To this end, René Villeneuve has chosen to exhibit Amiot's silver alongside his preparatory drawings, printed design sources of the type Amiot might have used, related objects made by others, and paintings of the people who commissioned or received Amiot silver.

Thanks to its extensive Amiot holdings (notably, the 1979 donation of the Henry Birks Collection), the National Gallery is the obvious venue for such an exhibition. During the past thirty years, curator René Villeneuve has acquired eleven further Amiot pieces, including several major works of art. Indeed, all the NGC's directors have supported Villeneuve's understanding of Amiot's significance, recognizing major Amiot silver as important artistic acquisitions.

Even with such a strong foundational core of Amiot material already at the Gallery, however, the exhibition was only possible thanks to the generosity of institutional and private lenders, as Villeneuve explained. Because Amiot was the primary silversmith for the Roman Catholic diocese of Québec, much of his silver is still in regular liturgical use. The curator was therefore particularly grateful for the Church's generous consent to loan requests.

Laurent Amiot's superb technical skills and his artist's eye are evident throughout the exhibition. Born in Québec in 1764, he probably studied initially with his older brother, a silversmith, but was sent to Paris in 1782 by the *Séminaire de Québec*. The Seminary had previously sent the Québec sculptor François Baillairgé – already known to the Amiot family – to train in Paris. From the age of 18, Amiot trained with an as-yet-unidentified Paris master silversmith, under the supervision of the Abbé François Sorbier de Villars. He reported on the young man's progress to colleagues at the Québec Seminary.

Amiot came back from Paris to Québec in 1787, shortly before the French Revolution. He had trained as a generalist silversmith, capable of producing every kind of silver for which there was likely to be a market at Québec - rather than as a specialist making only a limited range of products (like many London silversmiths). Significantly, his Paris training had equipped Amiot with a finer theoretical and technical education than any other silversmith in the city, including up-to-date knowledge of contemporary fashions in French silver. (These were tending towards neoclassicism just before the Revolution, thanks to renewed contact with the material culture of the antique world). Above all, Amiot brought home from Paris a well-trained eye, brain and hand capable of intuitively creating form from thought.

By the time of his return, the worst upheavals of the British conquest were over in Québec. The city had regained political stability and economic prosperity. It could now support the creation of a Canadian intellectual, commercial and religious elite – and a stronger local demand for silver goods.

As René Villeneuve explained, Amiot's fifty-year career was, above all, indebted to his strong links with the local Catholic clergy. Amiot brought home with him a letter of recommendation from the Abbé Villars in Paris to the superior of the Seminary of Québec, seeking Church protection for the young silversmith. This brought

Amiot important commissions of religious silver in that very year - including a large sanctuary lamp ordered in 1787 by the *Fabrique de la Purification-de-la-Bienheureuse-Vierge-Marie*, Repentigny (cat. 3).

Mr. Villeneuve discussed the religious silver on display, and the senior Catholic clergy who commissioned and collected it, both for themselves and for the church. Their portraits are included in the exhibition. During his career, Amiot received most of the religious silver commissions in the city – and many from far beyond. Between 1800 and 1825, he was effectively the official silversmith for the vast Catholic diocese of Québec.

Included in the exhibition are silver objects from parishes in the greater Montréal area, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. As Villeneuve explained, Amiot silver may yet surface from parts of Canada well outside his native city - perhaps as far away as Newfoundland. The inclusion in the exhibition of silver normally located far from Ottawa made it possible for necessary conservation and restoration treatments to be carried out in the laboratory of the National Gallery – which in turn brought insights into the construction and condition of these objects. And some surprises: the Repentigny sanctuary lamp contained a long-dead bat.

The curator also explained the significance of Amiot’s choice of workshop/boutique location. In 1790, Amiot bought a building and established his business premises – his shop and atelier - in Québec’s Lower Town. Now long gone, the building was strategically located: on Côte de la Montagne, among the stores of Québec’s rich merchants in a luxury shopping area. The street was also the main thoroughfare for pedestrians passing between the Upper and Lower Towns.

Amiot clearly understood the importance of being seen. Though still a bachelor under 30, in 1790 Amiot began renting the most prominent pew in Notre-Dame Cathedral, one adjoining the Governor’s pew. His 1793 wedding took place in the Cathedral and was performed by the director of the Seminary of Québec. Amiot was soon prominently involved in the community. He became a member of the Québec Fire Society – understandably, given that he worked with fire – and signed a petition to the Governor asking him to establish a university in Québec.



Laurent Amiot, censer and incense boat of Saint-Joachim, 1788

(Cat. 1)

Photo: © National Gallery of Canada



Detail of Laurent Amiot's chalice of Saint-Ambroise-de-la-  
Jeune-Lorette, 1811 (Cat. 29)

Photo: ©National Gallery of Canada

Despite his commercial acuity, Amiot's approach to silversmithing was fundamentally aesthetic rather than primarily commercial. His combination of repoussé and pierced work on a 1791 chalice, the first time these two techniques were combined on a single silver item, must have been a revelation to the local silversmiths. Even François Ranvozyé (1739-1819), the leading Québec silversmith, was still producing Baroque-style decoration in the mid-1780s.<sup>1</sup>

A striking feature of Amiot's silver is the way in which the silversmith met technical challenges without sacrificing artistic quality. The curator discussed Amiot's superb Processional Cross of Sainte-Marie (cat. 34) of c. 1815, from Church Point in Nova Scotia. Made in sections, its design insures that construction joins are hidden when the cross is fully assembled. Mr. Villeneuve explained how the creation of such a cross would have required the participation of a wood-turner to produce the shaft. Amiot also hired the skills of other local artisans. Their contributions to his work are represented in the exhibition, too, including carrying-cases made for Amiot silver, like the chalice case of c. 1810, which is made of copper, iron, leather and cloth (cat. 81).

Among the most impressive religious silver on display are the three great urns for holy oils (cat. 32). Dated 1814 and decorated with the arms of the diocese of Québec, they are still used in liturgy at Notre-Dame Cathedral, so their loan was particularly appreciated. The urns are exhibited along with their related silver funnels and the silver spatula used to make the oils. In appearance, these urns are very plain. Resembling oversized table cruets for oil and vinegar, all three feature domed covers, each one topped by a plain cross. Being made of very thick silver (7.5 kilos in total), the urns are technically remarkable. They were commissioned by Mgr Joseph Octave Plessis, who was Catholic bishop of Québec from 1806 (and from 1819, the Catholic archbishop).

<sup>1</sup> See René Villeneuve, *Laurent Amiot: maître-orfèvre canadien*, pp. 101-02

Monsignor Plessis visited Europe in 1820, returning with precious relics of St. Charles Borromeo, a leading Catholic Counter-Reformation saint. As Borromeo is a patron saint of priests, Plessis gave a fragment of the relic to the Seminary at Québec. Amiot's reliquary for the Seminary's relic is still missing, but his magnificent reliquary-monstrance of St. Charles Borromeo is included in the exhibition (cat. 52). Made in 1823 for the parish of Charlesbourg, it reflects Amiot's studies in late-eighteenth-century Paris. The relic is contained in a glass cylinder mounted on a stem and adorned with waving palm fronds of silver. An enlarged photographic reproduction of a detail of these fronds features on the front cover of Villeneuve's *Laurent Amiot* monograph/catalogue. It is also used, in larger reproduction, on the ceiling of the staircase leading to the exhibition, located in the Prints and Drawings galleries on the lower floor of the National Gallery.

In 1814, Mgr Joseph Signay became curé at Nôtre-Dame Cathedral. That same year, Amiot became head churchwarden there. Amiot's name appears annually thereafter in the records of the cathedral *Fabrique*, as he was receiving multiple commissions from the Cathedral for religious silver. In the 1820s, he supplied a silver sanctuary lamp for the Cathedral's nave, and another for its chapel of St. Anne (where Amiot now lies buried).

The sanctuary lamp from Nôtre-Dame (cat. 65), 152.5 centimetres high, weighs some 7.68 kilos and must have required a lot of silver – not then mined in Québec. As usual, Amiot had to melt down existing silver items, combining and refining silver from different sources to make ingots containing silver of uniform quality. He then made silver sheets from these, from which he raised his silver objects – a highly-skilled process in which a single blow might ruin an entire piece. To provide Amiot with the silver for this lamp, the Cathedral clergy gave him an older lamp – possibly the seventeenth-century one still hanging before the high altar there in 1775 – as well as a silver cross and silver coins, to a total of 200 ounces of silver.



Reliquary-Monstrance of Saint Charles Borromeo, c. 1823, (Cat. 52) Photo: © National Gallery of Canada



Detail of hanging lamp for Notre Dame (Cat. 65)

Photo: © National Gallery of Canada



Laurent Amiot soup tureen of the Hertel de Rouville family, (Cat.7), Photo:© Waddington's Toronto



Laurent Amiot teapot with a Sybil, c.1820 (Cat. 41)

Photo:© National Gallery of Canada

Archbishop Signaÿ's portrait by Antoine Plamondon is included in the exhibition (cat. 90). The archbishop was one of the first silver collectors in Québec, acquiring Amiot pieces as well as French and English silver. He commissioned multiple portraits of himself, as well as major Amiot silver, including a chalice for his own personal use. Made in 1837, the chalice (exhibited here as cat. 73) is still in exceptional condition, its original mercury gilding well preserved. Its elegant curving lines suggest that, even in his seventies, Amiot was still producing innovative designs. Signaÿ mentioned the chalice in his will, along with a covered ewer (cat. 5) made c. 1790 by Amiot, which Signaÿ owned. A similar covered ewer made by Amiot in about the same date (cat. 4, from the Henry Birks Collection) appears, too, in the exhibition (cat. 4). Comparing these two ewers shows how Amiot handled multiple commissions for similar objects. Rather than repeating a design exactly, he took advantage of the opportunity to fine-tune forms and decorative elements.

Other Amiot works on show reflect the cultural cross-currents circulating in Québec during his career. The tureen of the Hertel de Rouville family (cat. 7) is displayed along with the oil portrait of *Jean-Baptiste Melchior Hertel de Rouville*, c. 1810, by William Berczy (cat. 82). Made in 1793-94, the Hertel tureen combines French and British traditions in its form and decoration. Four claw feet inspired by British Rococo furniture support a body with traditional tureen elements, still current in Paris at the time that Amiot trained there. Festooned with laurel leaves, the tureen was acquired by the NGC as recently as 2015. One of Amiot's most admired works, it is similar to two other tureens he made: a 1795 tureen in the Montreal Museum of Fine Art, and a c. 1790 silver tureen with wooden handles, in the Royal Ontario Museum.

A single display case containing three very different silver teapots demonstrates Amiot's ability to keep abreast of changing fashions. He learned about new shapes for silver tea wares from ceramic tea sets like

the one exhibited nearby: a Flight, Barr & Barr porcelain tea service (cat. 83), acquired by John Neilson, a founder of the *Quebec Gazette*, whose own portrait by John James is included in the exhibition (cat. 85).

The person who commissioned Amiot's Regency teapot (cat. 61) of c. 1825 is unknown. This teapot, a masterpiece of gilding, shows Amiot's superb eye and technical finesse. An oval opening in the spout improves its pouring function, while the insulators in the teapot handle are concealed in its interior, preserving its smooth lines.

A star of the exhibition is undoubtedly Amiot's Taylor Presentation Cup, the most important piece of commemorative silver made in Canada in 1800-50 (cat. 64). Commissioned by Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General in Chief of Upper and Lower Canada, the cup was presented to George Taylor, the owner of a Québec shipyard, to commemorate the 1827 launching of the brig *Kingfisher*. Such important silver pieces were usually imported from Britain, so the grant of this commission to a Canadian silversmith was significant. It suggests that Dalhousie recognized Amiot's abilities and wanted to encourage him. The unicorn on top of the cup's cover refers to the unicorn heraldic crest of the Dalhousie family, and to the unicorn figurehead of the *Kingfisher*.

Mr. Villeneuve explained that Amiot would have needed a professional engraver for the inscription of the cup: the engraving is attributed to George Smillie. A nearby Amiot drawing (cat. 59) shows a cup of similar design.

The Taylor Presentation Cup features prominently in the Samuel Palmer portrait of the recipient (cat. 91): *George Taylor, Master Naval Carpenter* (1843). Such juxtapositions re-occur throughout the exhibition, visually expressing the curator's contextual approach to Amiot's art.

The show includes a room of Amiot's design drawings. Some of these bear prices on them, perhaps a means of making clear to customers how much a silver item would eventually cost – avoiding unpleasant surprises and keeping his clients happy. Also exhibited is a typical example of another kind of design resource that Amiot may have consulted: a printed volume of *Modèles de bordures* (c. 1800) (cat. 80). Everyone



Laurent Amiot Cup presented to George Taylor , (Cat. 64)

Photo: © National Gallery of Canada



Catalogue cover, René Villeneuve: Laurent Amiot Canadian Master Silversmith



Laurent Amiot stamp

from architects to interior designers, furniture makers and silversmiths could have used such a publication as a source of design ideas.

René Villeneuve has also written the splendid Amiot monograph accompanying the exhibition. This beautifully-illustrated, exceptionally well-researched hardcover was published by the National Gallery in collaboration with Figure 1 Publishing of Vancouver. It is available in English or French versions: as *Laurent Amiot: Master Silversmith of Canada*, or *Laurent Amiot: Maître-Orfèvre Canadien*. Both versions are available for a very reasonable price from the National Gallery, in its bookstore or online at ShopNGC.ca.

When Amiot took on Pierre Lesperance as his last apprentice in 1836, the now-elderly silversmith took the trouble to amend the standard wording in the contract of apprenticeship. He rejected the status of craft for silversmithing, and the status of craftsman for himself. Instead, he explicitly described himself as a 'Master and Artist in the Art of Silver-smithing' ('*Maître ès Art Orfèvre*'), replacing the word 'craft' ('*métier*') by the term 'Art' ('*Art d'Orfèvrerie*').<sup>2</sup> Villeneuve's book and exhibition present Laurent Amiot in this spirit, recognizing Amiot as the major Canadian artist that he is. The project reflects the curator's years of original research in Canadian and international archives, his extensive experience studying Canadian silver, and his exceptional visual acuity. As Villeneuve helps us understand, Amiot silver was both useful and aesthetic. His work serving functional purposes in an evolving society. Simultaneously, Amiot silver delights the eye as silver sculpture, to this day.

Even after the exhibition ends, René Villeneuve's *Laurent Amiot: Master Silversmith of Canada* will encourage a wider public to appreciate Amiot's art. The silversmith's career and key works are discussed in the main text of Villeneuve's book, along with the history of Amiot appreciation and scholarship, and the lasting recognition which the silversmith enjoys.

Following the main text and endnotes, and photographs of the various maker's marks used by Amiot during his career, the book includes a concise exhibition catalogue section, index, and bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The

<sup>2</sup> Villeneuve, Laurent Amiot: maître-orfèvre canadien, p.69



curator has consulted an astonishing number of manuscripts in many archives and libraries, in Canada, the U.S.A., Britain and France.

The photographs in *Laurent Amiot* are beautifully composed and superbly reproduced. They are the work of various photographers, but the National Gallery of Canada photographer Clive Cretney is responsible for the majority of them. His work is quite simply outstanding. The book's only flaw is its Caecilia font: stylish but tiring on the eyes when read for long. The thorough research, perceptive text, fine photographs and beautiful production of Villeneuve's *Laurent Amiot* make this book a landmark in Canadian art history. Hopefully, it may inspire publications of a similar high standard on other Canadian artists working in what used to be called decorative arts.

For those unable to visit Ottawa or Vancouver, the National Gallery of Canada website offers a taste of the exhibition, including YouTube encounters with René Villeneuve himself. The curator handles and discusses some of Amiot's finest pieces on camera. These films also play on a large screen at the entrance to the exhibition itself: an engaging introduction to the exhibition. The NGC website also carries an essay by Valérie Mandia, a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa, focuses on the coffeepot Amiot made c. 1796 for the Lemoine family: the first silver one made in Canada.

At the National Gallery itself, there are summer activities for children and adults to accompany the exhibition. Visitors can design their own teapot or cup and attend a September 15 workshop on the care and preservation of silver.

Given the interest of Mr. Villeneuve's talk, which brought the world of Amiot vividly to life, it would have been nice to have an audiotape tour available for visitors to the exhibition. The exhibition banner, hanging upstairs in the Scotiabank Great Hall, might also have featured more than just the silversmith's last name – probably unfamiliar to most visitors to the Gallery. (The delightful silver unicorn on the Taylor Presentation Cup might have been a nice addition). To help visitors realize just Amiot's outstanding skill, perhaps a filmed demonstration showing a contemporary Canadian silversmith raising a hollowware object from a sheet of silver would have been an asset. But all exhibitions have budget limitations.

Members of the Silver Society are most grateful to Mr. Villeneuve for the splendid tour of the exhibition, for answering questions throughout – and for signing all our newly-bought *Laurent Amiot* catalogues.

For silver enthusiasts, the exhibition is an unqualified must-see. For those to whom Amiot is still unknown, it is a revelation. The collectors and dealers among us can still dream of finding some of the still-missing Amiot silver – his 1792 silver tea urn, perhaps? René Villeneuve has helpfully featured Amiot's maker's mark on the back cover of *Laurent Amiot: Master Silversmith of Canada*.

**Dr. Anne Thackray** holds a doctorate in history of art from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where she researched Paris silversmiths. A graduate of Sotheby's decorative arts and Christie's silver history courses, she was formerly a junior curator at the National Portrait Gallery, and curatorial research fellow at the National Gallery in London. Now an independent art historian, she worked in the education department at the National Gallery of Canada, where she was research fellow in European art. She is the author of publications on European art.