

ARTISTIC COLLABORATION AND TEACHING IN CUBA... QUITE AN EXPERIENCE!

“¡ Patria es humanidad ” My country is humanity!
José Martí (1853-1895), poet, politician and national hero in Cuba.

The artistic collaboration between the Cuban *Academia El Alba Holguín* and *Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne* in Montreal came into being by pure luck more than five years ago when I met Ernesto Blanco Sanciprián, a renowned artist and teacher at *El Alba*, during a trip to Holguín. Since then, students from our two establishments have been creating works on common themes within the framework of their courses and these bodies of work have then been exhibited in their respective countries. Our project, “Tribute to José Martí / Tribute to Arthur Rimbaud”, was presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from January to June 2008 as part of a major exhibition *i Cuba! Art and History from 1868 to Today* and it was a success. Furthermore, a second major project entitled *Insularité / Insularidad* was presented in May 2009 at *Romerías de mayo* in Holguín at the invitation of Alexis Triana, the Minister of Culture for this province. The exhibition, which included close to one hundred Cuban and Quebec works, was also presented last October at *Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne*. This artistic collaboration has made it possible for our students and those from the *Academia El Alba* to find out about each other’s cultures, to discuss and inquire about the works of their counterparts and, finally, to be part of an exhibition in the other country. For Quebec students, the benefits are immense:

Traditionally, the teaching of the arts in Quebec has generally focused on European art; the contact with Cuban artists and Latin-American artistic trends opens up a whole new area of art history. Through their history courses, students have learned about the enslavement that the West imposed on the colonies of the New World; through the large Mexican and Cuban mural works, they discover the strength of the Cuban revolt and the affirmation of their values¹.

¹ PÉPIN, M. L. and D. LEMAY, “Apprendre ensemble: Colaboracion artistica”, *Pédagogie collégiale*, Vol. 21, n° 4, 2008.



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THE TEACHING PROJECT IN CUBA (NOVEMBER 15 TO 29, 2009)

The submission of a “*mobilité enseignante*” request to *Cégep international* last fall was the next logical step in this collaboration with Ernesto Blanco Sanciprián from the *Academia El Alba*. The project had three distinct objectives:

1. To teach and give lectures in courses or seminars for students at the *Academia El Alba* in Cuba.
2. To take specialized art courses on site to expand my own expertise;
3. To initiate a discussion with my Cuban counterparts on competency-based evaluation with the goal of harmonizing the selection criteria for common projects.

In spite of the major economic difficulties that Cubans face, the quality of the works they produce is exceptional and they are highly charged emotionally. The works are bold, they come straight from the heart and most are made with few resources. Contrary to what one might believe, there is also a strong affinity for contemporary art in this country: installations, digital prints, art videos and animated films are an integral part of the body of work. This was a revelation during the Cuban exhibition presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2008: members of the public were familiar enough with traditional Cuban art but they were astonished by the works of contemporary artists who are pushing the boundaries of art. Moreover, this aspect is well-represented at the celebrated Havana Biennial Art Exhibition.

As for the training in the arts at *Academia El Alba*, it is a four-year program. Students are between 15 and 19 years of age. In order to be admitted, they must submit a portfolio and only the best are selected. There are no tuition fees, students are also provided with food and lodging (for those who do not live in Holguín) and art materials are supplied. After these four years, the most successful students carry on at the art institute in Havana for an additional four years. Similar training is also offered in each Cuban province in the fields of dance and music. The artistic training is intense, extremely rigorous, of very high quality and it includes a list of courses that are highly relevant and interesting, including a few general education courses such as literature, English and mathematics. The formula is reminiscent of our former *École*



des beaux-arts here in Quebec (1922-1967), and the famous Bauhaus School in Germany (1919-1933).

Teaching at the *Academia El Alba* is also inspired by the concept of Total Art, an aesthetic that originated in nineteenth-century German romanticism. This form of art is characterized by the simultaneous use of different artistic techniques and disciplines, while associating itself with symbolic and philosophical thinking. By proceeding in this manner, students develop relevant thinking and discourse regarding their own artistic production.

ON THE GROUND

This intensified training created a major challenge: what courses to offer Cuban students, given that at first glance they seemed to excel in all areas? I decided to focus on my training in the history of art and in visual arts in order to offer them some specialized exercises and techniques that they had not been taught (such as uncial calligraphy of the eighth century, that is to say a type of writing developed during the Christian era, particularly adapted to the angle of the quill and still in use today in many monasteries) or simply to revisit certain themes or concepts already covered (for example, colour harmonies and contrasts, *trompe l'œil*, the expressionist self-portrait, etc.) but this time adding a touch that is personal and North-American.

I had already been to the *Academia El Alba* a few times and I was aware that these students have some things in common with our students. They are driven by the same passion for learning, the same creative folly and... they too adore the *mangas*, a popular style of Japanese cartoon strips which are very popular as much for the way they are drawn as for the clothing style... I put a lot of time into preparing the necessary pedagogical material: art supplies not available in Cuba, course notes in Spanish, suitable slides. In short, in November 2009 I left for a two-week trip to Holguín with three very full suitcases.

This experience of “*mobilité enseignante*” helped me to improve as an artist, to enrich my teaching in an exceptional way and also to deepen my disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. Because of the different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, I was also forced to position myself rapidly as a pedagogue. During these two weeks of teaching, I often had the impression that the bar was high and that I was giving the best of my experience, my capacity to adapt and the knowledge I had accumulated over the years. So, the content of the courses that had been offered during the presentation of the

project had to be modified on site since certain exercises that I had prepared earlier now seemed to be repetitive. I had to adjust very quickly, by observing what was being done in workshops, because it had been impossible for me to have access to the course syllabus. My teaching experience allowed me to move quickly to the essentials, faced as I was with a group of students who were thirsty for knowledge.

All the workshop courses were supported by slides relating to the selected exercises. The teaching was demanding but everything went beautifully. The students were rigorous, curious but also very funny and engaging. The main difficulty, apart from the heat to which we were not very accustomed, was the language. In order to teach in Spanish, it is necessary to master the language perfectly; therefore I gave my courses in English with my colleague Ernesto Blanco serving as translator.

It is extremely interesting to teach in socio-economic, political and cultural contexts that differ from our own and this leads to comical anecdotes. For example, when I present the famous painting by Jan van Eyck, the *Arnolfini Portrait*, painted in London in 1434, Quebec students immediately recognize one of the symbols of the couple's wealth: the orange resting on the window sill. For Cuban students, oranges are a very common everyday fruit: no one even mentions it. During the final week, the fourth-year students presented their end-of-term projects. These presentations are similar to the ones presented during our Integration course in the last term of our Arts and Letters Program and which aim essentially to have students integrate the competencies acquired over the last two years of studies into a complex multi-disciplinary piece of work while presenting it to a group of students and teachers from the program. For their part, the Cuban students individually present an original artistic project in front of a jury comprised of seven teachers who are all seasoned artists in their respective fields.

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In this piece of work, they were required to resolve issues related to art by making creative use of what they had learned, elements that they had studied in other courses. Afterwards, the jury questioned the students and commented on their work in order to assess the process they had used. Some works moved me deeply, in particular *Campešina*, an installation created by a young female Cuban student. This very mature



work re-created and imagined functional furniture, made using materials found in the countryside and inspired by the “*periodo especial*” of the nineteen eighties.

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POSITIVE REPERCUSSIONS

In addition to allowing me to experience emotions as an artist, my time at the *Academia* also gave me the incredible opportunity to take several specialized art courses: painting, academic drawing, engraving, art history. All the teachers I met were extremely generous in sharing their time and their knowledge. I have been able not only to put this new learning directly into practice in my teaching, but also to benefit my students and colleagues with the many photographs I brought back. In fact, several exercises done at the *Academia El Alba* can be used in one way or another with our students. Furthermore, the Cuban view on teaching art also leads me and several of my colleagues to question and review some of our ways of doing things.

With regard to the aspect of evaluation, the terms we use here are different from those in Cuba, but the spirit and basic criteria remain the same. We manage to smooth out the pedagogical differences by speaking the same artistic language, and, along these lines, it would be realistic to implement a “*mobilité étudiante*” in the near future.

LOOKING BACK

“*Mobilité enseignante*” is an extraordinary experience, although it requires a lot of work. In addition to preparing and adapting courses for the chosen country, the course content at our own college has to be reworked in order to avoid overloading our colleagues.

Teaching in Cuba is not necessarily easy: obtaining a work visa takes some time and the country lacks everything. However, once we become aware of the importance of education and culture in this dignified and courageous society, we cannot help diving into this experience with passion and enthusiasm.

The artistic collaboration developed over the years with Ernesto Blanco and the *Academia El Alba*, including this

experience of “*mobilité enseignante*” has become important for our Arts and Letters Program. For students at *Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne*, working together with the students at *El Alba* enables them above all to get to know a different reality, one that is in sharp contrast to their own. It is not a matter of passing judgment on societal choices, but of opening oneself up to a different way of seeing things. Here, we over-consume, while over there they lack everything. However there is a point that we have in common: art that transcends borders.

In the different courses that make up our Arts and Letters Program, the international dimension is constantly addressed. Our students come from over forty different ethnicities, so being open to others is essential. When my students examine the quality of Cuban works, they are blown away. This becomes a powerful generator of motivation, questioning and artistic research. This context gives them the desire to excel. The works they produce on the same themes as students from the *Academia* allow our students to experience opening themselves up to the world in a creative, original and unusual manner. More than a hundred of our students (five cohorts) have collaborated on this type of exchange up until now, the same for students from the *Academia El Alba*.

In May 2010, Cuban students will produce a work on the theme of Cuban flora with a glance at Quebec flora. The students at *Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne* will create the opposite, inspired by the Cuban travels of Brother Marie-Victorin (1885-1944) whose favourite region was *Sierra de Nipe*, near Holguín.

These projects of artistic collaboration have become a grand and rich human adventure which thoroughly transforms both students and teachers. ●

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