

LEARNING TOGETHER: ¡COLABORACIÓN ARTÍSTICA!



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While on holidays in Cuba, Marie-Louise Pépin and Ernesto Miguel Blanco Sanciprián, two visual-arts teachers/artists, met by chance at the Guardalavaca market near a kiosk selling “paintings for tourists”. Marie-Louise teaches in Arts and Letters at Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne; Ernesto Miguel teaches at Academia El Alba, in Holguin, Cuba. Both teach students of the same age who are taking professional training in the arts.

The two teachers soon realized that they shared a common conception and philosophy on teaching art. As a result, three years ago they began organizing an annual project on a common theme that their students carry out in their respective colleges.

LE PROJECT

The project got underway in 2005 with the assignment of creating a work of postal art, that is, a work produced using material sent through the mail which possesses recognizable characteristics of art. This approach facilitated the exchange of works between Cuba and Quebec and some twenty works were produced in either country. Thus, the envelope became an artistic experiment, transformed into a personalized form of communication. The following year, the teachers proposed the theme of paying tribute to a well-known poetic figure from the other country's culture.

Quebec students created and illustrated works based on the literary works of Jose Marti (1853-1895), a journalist and

Cuban revolutionary, while the Cuban students found their inspiration in the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), a contemporary of Jose Marti¹.

THE PROCESS

As soon as one group has completed its work, the teacher sends photos of the works to the other teacher. While viewing the works of their peers, students are invited to ask questions and comment on them. These exchanges take place via the intermediary of the two teachers who communicate through email since there is only one computer for emails at Academia El Alba and it is in the Director's office. Cuban students do not have computers at home. In each college, the teachers and students then organize a formal exhibition of the works created by both student groups, which is an opportunity for their respective communities to find out more about the project, the context and the meaning of the works.

What do the students working in this unusual context of international exchanges learn? At Bois-de-Boulogne, these activities are included in courses relating to the two competencies of the Arts and Letters program: *to illustrate languages in the art field*, whereby the students explore various visual languages, and *to comment on cultural and civilization elements which are present in projects from the field of arts and letters*, whereby the students identify cultural and civilization elements in the works and relate them to their own society.

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This exchange project with Cuba for a session assignment introduces Quebec students to a different reality: that of Holguin College, well-known for teaching art to students selected on the basis of an impressive portfolio. These art students aim to develop their competencies in order to pursue university studies (which have very strict quotas) and possibly to seek a career in the arts. Our students were very impressed by the determination of the Cuban students and their dedication to perfecting their projects. They were astounded by the scarcity of technical means in Cuba and the quality of the works produced, given the difficult economic conditions facing both Cuban students and teachers. However, they realize that, thanks to their strong work ethics, these young Cubans manage to express their dreams, their emotions and their visions of the world in spite of their meagre technical means. This leads our students to reflect on their own motivation to study and the meaning they should give to their projects. They are able to open up to Cuban culture, rich in music, poetry and dance, and come to realize that this culture encourages the aspiring artists who are their peers and these artists

¹ Rimbaud's poetry was more accessible to Cuban students than that of Quebec poets, since the works of Rimbaud are part of the literary corpus studied at Academia El Alba.



in return strive to enrich their culture. Beyond the universal elements of youth culture, Quebec students generally admire Cuban culture, and especially the role it plays in building the identity of its people.

Traditionally speaking, the teaching of art in Quebec has focused essentially on European art. Therefore this contact with Cuban artists and Latino-American artistic trends opens up a whole new perspective on the history of art. Through history courses, Quebec students have learned about the enslavement forced upon new-world colonies by the West. Through the major works of Mexican and Cuban muralists however, they discover the strength of their revolt and an affirmation of their values.

When the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts announced it would be presenting a major retrospective on Cuban art in collaboration with the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Havane, the art teacher at Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne submitted a project entitled *i Colaboración artística! Bois-de-Boulogne–El Alba* to the museum's education department. On the strength of this teacher's determination, the museum agreed to hold a parallel exhibition of about a hundred works produced by students from the two colleges.

i Cuba! Art et histoire de 1868 à nos jours was presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts until June 8, 2008. The exhibition by Quebec and Cuban students was also presented until June 8 in StudiO of the Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Admission was free.

TESTIMONIAL OF MARIE-LOUISE PÉPIN

A modest idea that seemed a little 'crazy' at first grew to unexpected proportions. In truth, I had been mulling over this project for a long time. During my first trip to Cuba in the eighties, a period characterized by a shortage of many products, I became fascinated by the number of works of art on display everywhere and the deeply rooted tradition of mural painters, but mostly by the quality and intensity of their work. Meeting Ernesto Blanco was a determining factor. It allowed me to introduce my students to a whole new world: a society where culture and art are valued regardless of the form they take, but especially where teaching art is done in a concrete, relevant and extremely rigorous manner. These exchanges promote the direct implementation of concepts and components of visual language as seen in class. But it goes further than that: we base our approach on the principle of internal need so dear to Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944).

The first time we received Cuban works, we were astonished by the quality, intensity and energy of works that were created with very simple, not to say rudimentary means. It was also surprising to find, during analysis of the works, that some Quebec and Cuban projects were similar, either in terms of the structural composition, the texture used, the integration of text, or else in terms of the influence of an artistic trend. These similarities helped us become aware of the universality of students and their creative passion.

We also became aware of the abundance that surrounds us. Some of my students collected funds in order to provide Cuban students with quality materials. Later,

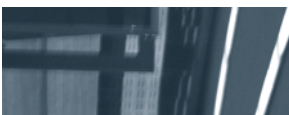
when we reorganized our computer lab, we were able to send them a few MAC computers.

It should be noted that these types of exchanges involve a few problems related to communication, to various controls and to the transportation of the art works. In Cuba, each student's work is considered to be part of the country's cultural assets and all works must be registered with the authorities. Parcels must also be light and easy to transport by plane. During their vacations, some friends helped out by transporting works, mail, art magazines, etc.

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As for our exhibition at StudiO in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, it was the result of an extraordinary coincidence and an unbelievable stroke of luck. Mrs. Nathalie Bondil, Museum Director, and Mr. Stéphane Aquin, Curator, had already been working with the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Havane* for the past three years on a major exhibition of Cuban art collections reflecting cubanidad, that is to say the Cuban identity. Unlike artists from the Soviet Union, Cuban artists have not developed a realistic socialist art, but rather a radiating collective art whereby all styles and trends are allowed.

In accepting to exhibit our exchange project, the museum recognized the value of our approach: *A project with this much passion and commitment is certainly worth taking a look at².*



Imagine how proud students from the Academia El Alba were to have an exhibition in Montréal! The icing on the cake came when *Granma*, the official Cuban newspaper, published an article entitled *Jóvenes artistas plásticos cubanos exponen en Canadá* in its January 31, 2008 issue.

In addition to being part of our respective courses, these exchanges become out-of-the-ordinary experiences for Quebec and Cuban students alike, enabling them to deepen their cultural and artistic knowledge while also allowing them to create, analyze and comment on works from a different culture.

TESTIMONIAL OF ERNESTO MIGUEL BLANCO SANCIPRIÁN²

My course is a workshop in experimental creation where students resolve issues relating to art in a creative manner by using elements from other courses in painting, sculpture, engraving and photography. In this project, the students were expected to refer to a course entitled *La littérature dans la plastique* (Literature in plastic arts). It was very motivating for them to deepen their knowledge of Rimbaud, a young author they had already studied briefly. They selected different Rimbaud poems, discussed the content, shared their interpretation of the texts and mutually enriched their understanding of Rimbaud's ideas and imagery. Then, individually, they transferred their understanding of the poet into their own plastic language. For Cuban students, confronting a totally different college environment such as a Quebec CEGEP, was a defining experience.

¡COLABORACIÓN ARTÍSTICA!

COLLÈGE DE BOIS-DE-BOULOGNE, MONTRÉAL AND THE ACADEMIA EL ALBA D'HOLGUÍN

Quebec work



Pour un Cuba libre

Samantha Aoudé (mixed techniques)

Cuban work



¡ Veo como se levanta el fuego!

Ernesto Lapinet González (mixta)

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Since graduating in visual arts and the history of art at Université du Québec in Montréal, Marie-Louise PÉPIN has worked for a number of years as a teacher at Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne. Over time, she has developed a passion for studying and creating illumination art inspired by the early Irish Middle Ages. She has participated in several postal art events as well as other exhibitions, both individual and collective.

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² NADEAU, H., *Revue du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, January 2008, p. 28.

³ Translation of Denyse Lemay.