

Arthur-Villeneuve House: a Testimony to an Artist's Life and Work

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Arthur Villeneuve's home in its original location in Chicoutimi, in 1964. Still frame taken from a documentary on the artist produced by the NFB.

Visitors to the *Musée de la Pulperie de Saguenay* are undoubtedly surprised to see painter Arthur Villeneuve's home displayed inside the museum like some piece of artwork. The residence, originally a museum within a house, is filled with pieces by local barber and painter Arthur Villeneuve. The residence-*cum*-museum was the object of many heated discussions before being established as a remarkable artistic statement. Considered naïve art, or perhaps art in its most basic form, Villeneuve's pieces may at first glance seem traditional or picturesque in origin, but they sometimes reveal a hint of surrealism. The artist's home, recognised as a national heritage asset by the Canadian government in 1993, has since come to hold a special place in the history of 20th century Quebec art.

[Article disponible en français : Maison Arthur-Villeneuve : témoignage d'une vie et d'une œuvre](#)

Arthur Villeneuve: the Man and His Work



Arthur Villeneuve, à l'œuvre dans sa maison. © Succession Arthur Villeneuve. Arthur Villeneuve at work in his home. © The estate of Arthur Villeneuve

Arthur Villeneuve was born on January 4th, 1910 in Chicoutimi (now Saguenay). **(NOTE1)** A down-to-earth soul residing in a middle-class neighbourhood in his home town, at first glance, he may not seem particularly special. He had little education and worked as a barber and certainly didn't seem destined to become well-known outside of his immediate surroundings, much less renowned in the wider world.

Arthur Villeneuve's fate took an unexpected turn in April of 1957, when, after having had a mystical experience in which he receiving a sort of calling, he began covering the walls of his home with paintings and frescoes done in oil-based paint. The exterior of his home soon suffered the same fate. Villeneuve worked up to 100 hours every week on the project. Then, in 1959, when his house was finally **painted from top to bottom** in a most original fashion, he opened it to the public. Through his artwork, which is filled with both realistic depictions, as well as strange, often surprising figures, both human and animal, visitors were given a glimpse into the artist's soul.

Villeneuve's work was quickly met with somewhat contradicting reactions. **(NOTE2)** His closest neighbours in particular were particularly unimpressed with his project. Villeneuve was even the target of public condemnation by some Chicoutimi residents, who took offense to the house and its artwork. It is worth pointing out that in the early 1960s, within the context of the Quiet Revolution, so-called "naive art" such as Villeneuve's was seen as being somewhat of counter-current. The region's elite had a more positive opinion of Villeneuve's work, seeing it as having touristic and heritage potential. This was especially true of Father Victor Tremblay (1892-1979), president and founder of the Société Historique du Saguenay. He encouraged Villeneuve to include elements of the region's history in his paintings. Nevertheless Villeneuve remained misunderstood in his immediate surroundings, even if he was slowly making a name for himself outside the Saguenay. In 1964, he was the subject of a **short film** produced by the National Film Board of Canada, **(NOTE3)** a film that earned him nationwide recognition and acceptance from the artistic community.



Sacred Heart Church and lower Chicoutimi, as painted by Villeneuve in 1957. This piece is part of the painting displayed in his barber shop.

Throughout his life, Villeneuve and his work remained controversial. As an artist, he is hard to categorize; some see his art as naive, a label which is rejected by others, who admire the cleverness of his style and the obvious temerity of the themes evoked in his paintings. The truth is that Arthur Villeneuve is a somewhat disturbing artist and his works raise many questions. Nonetheless, Villeneuve was named to the **Order of Canada** on April 11th, 1973. His work was shown in Montreal's Waddington Gallery in 1963 and was featured in prestigious exhibitions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the *Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec* [Quebec National Museum of Fine Arts]. Exhibitions of his pieces were held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1972 and at the Sir Wilfrid-Laurier Museum in 1990. In 1976, he illustrated a special deluxe edition of Quebec author Jacques Godbout's novel *Salut Galarneau!*

Arthur Villeneuve passed away in Chicoutimi on May 24th, 1990. Shortly after his death, his home was recognised as a Quebec cultural heritage asset. After many discussions on the subject, the house was moved in 1994 to the **Chicoutimi pulp mill**, where an eponymous museum was opened in 2002. From that moment on, Arthur-Villeneuve House became an important museum exhibit item.

In the Kingdom of Saguenay: Arthur Villeneuve's Work at the Junction of Two Realities



The Saguenay Fjord, 2007 © Photo: Steve Fraser

Arthur Villeneuve hailed from a region that French explorer **Jacques Cartier** described as the "**Kingdom of Saguenay**," although the explorer never set foot there. The moniker stuck nonetheless, and the Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company, as well as the Canada Steamship Lines, used the romantically descriptive name as a backdrop for their famous "Saguenay trips" from the mid-19th century to 1965. A major tourist attraction in the region, the **Saguenay Fjord** impresses cruise ship passengers and inspires the creativity of artists. Marius Barbeau's *The Kingdom of Saguenay*,^(NOTE4) a book published in 1936 as a companion to a cruise on the Saguenay, contains historic facts and legends on the Saguenay region and was illustrated chiefly by artists A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974) and Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), otherwise known as **Group of Seven**. And so, the book contains a colourful, artistic interpretation of the history of the Saguenay - one that supports the image of the region as a sort of glorious kingdom whose emblematic feature is its relative isolation.

The Saguenay was also the scene of significant industrial development, particularly due to the forest industry. This was largely due to the **William Price Company**, which began operations in 1842, shortly after the Kingdom of Saguenay was open to settlers. Logging the Saguenay was immortalised in local author **Félix-Antoine Savard**'s epic novel *Menaud, maître-draveur*^(NOTE5) - a novel that also depicts the tension between the French-speaking working-class population and the English-speaking owners of the company who exploited them. This conflict is particularly exemplified in struggle to the establish trade unions in the Saguenay in the early 20th century. So not only is there a picturesque and romanticized Saguenay, but there is also a working-class Saguenay that is firmly anchored in the realities of contemporary society and Quebec's labour struggles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Pulp manufacturing in Chicoutimi. The building on the left is the pulp mill that later became a museum and now houses Arthur-Villeneuve's home. © BAnQ

The context in which Arthur Villeneuve lived and created his artwork is situated at the exact point where the romantic and industrial Saguenays converge. Villeneuve's perspective is obviously from the standpoint of an artist's wonder at a unique, spectacular natural landscape, but it is also influenced by a working-class point of view. This perspective allows the artist to contextualise an artistic representation that would almost be too typical by transposing it into a more realistic social environment - an environment which constantly alternates between two extremes: the romantic and the real Saguenay. The dichotomy between the picturesque Saguenay and the industrial Saguenay is often at the heart of those who discuss Villeneuve's work. Interpreting his art therefore becomes a little easier in light of this particular historical framework; it is a traditional as well as a freshnew perspective, being both isolated and open to the world, picturesque and industrial. This paradox is not only typical of the Saguenay, but also of the modern world; a fact that makes Villeneuve's works truly universal.

A Unique Creative Spirit



The artist's palette (muffin tin). Musée de la pulperie collection. © Éditions JCL - Photo: Jean Cimon

Arthur Villeneuve's work has met with mixed criticism over the years. His paintings, to which very few are indifferent, were initially misunderstood by those in his immediate surroundings, but were soon met with full recognition in major exhibitions in museums and art galleries. Villeneuve's work can range from shocking to pleasant - and it is very difficult to fit his unique creative works into the usual **artistic categories**.



The door to Villeneuve's barber shop, as painted by the artist in 1957

Although Arthur Villeneuve cannot accurately be labelled as a folk artist, given the significance of his work and reputation, he really cannot be considered an academic painter either, since he never actually studied art. One art historian prefers to describe his work as "art in its most basic form," rather than "naïve art."^(NOTE6) But even these concepts fail to do justice to an artistic phenomenon the likes of which Quebec had never seen before.

Perhaps Arthur Villeneuve was simply a popular artist, as incomprehensible and problematic that such a designation might prove to be. It is for this reason that, for the artistic elite who originally were his firm supporters in the 1970s, he remained a difficult subject to classify for the elite, and as a result, they ended up abandoning him (particularly in the 1990s and 2000s) for other newer artistic trends. Similarly, the working-class milieu from which he originated considered his works to be an exaggerated representation of their day-to-day life, which was a perspective that they deemed insufficiently interesting and even entirely unacceptable for what they conceived of as art. And so, the people's artist (and his artworks) ended up stuck in a sort of "art genre limbo" that existed somewhere between his working-class roots and an art world that is only open to trends and conventions that never really had anything to do with Villeneuve's own artistic journey. Today, Arthur Villeneuve's nearly unclassifiable art is largely remembered due to the present efforts to preserve his now-famous home.

From Museum-Within-a-House to House-Within-a-Museum

Just whose idea was it to put a house inside a museum? Arthur Villeneuve's house had become a heritage object in and of itself. For in addition to being a significant and expressive work of art, the house also enabled Villeneuve to give a tangible shape to both his own personal story, as well as that of the region. As a result, the house no longer really belongs to him, since it expresses a reality that goes far beyond its creator's original goals. But the evolution from heritage asset to it being put in a museum is a surprising development nonetheless.



Villeneuve's home being moved in November 1994.

Since Arthur Villeneuve's home was a heritage asset and a painted work of art, it naturally became a sort of museum-within-a-house. Villeneuve and his wife welcomed visitors from 1959 until the artist's death in 1990. At that moment, deprived of its creator, the house became much more difficult to interpret. There were two possible courses of action: turn the house into a permanent museum piece or let it slowly deteriorate. The question of how to preserve the house (which many people saw as being significant only in its original context, environment and location) was not an easy one to answer. A solution nonetheless presented itself: transform Arthur Villeneuve's museum-within-a-house into a house-within-a-museum.

It was a delicate, yet bold operation.^(NOTE 7) It was also a costly undertaking, and as a consequence, it was considered to be a controversial endeavour.^(NOTE 8) Nonetheless, the end result was greater than the artist himself would ever have dared imagine: his house/museum was preserved for posterity in a permanent museum exhibit which immortalises it as a true work of art—a fact that is obviously intriguing and stunning for art enthusiasts and museum goers. Where else but in the inimitable Kingdom of Saguenay could such a thing have occurred? Arthur Villeneuve's stunning work is undoubtedly one of a kind.

Captivity and Radiance



Arthur Villeneuve's home inside the museum in 2002.

Has **Arthur-Villeneuve's House**, uprooted from its original street and neighbourhood, been taken into a sort of captivity? Does it still have the same artistic impact in its current preserved, yet artificial state, a state that might very well be the

antithesis of its origins? A quick glance at the daring initiative reveals that even deprived of the street, the house has a profound, universal impact.

Inside the museum, the house has a completely different radiance. While it is no longer in touch with the day-to-day context or the street on which it was built, it has taken on an aura of perpetuity. The latest artistic trends, crazes or developments are no longer the issue, but rather something eternal-something that leaves an impression in the mind of the viewer, long after it has been given a passing glance. In its original location, Arthur-Villeneuve's house blended into the background and would have eventually faded away into decrepitude and oblivion. Sitting in a museum, however, it speaks to the present and future. In fact, its walls continue to tell us about Arthur Villeneuve, an exceptional artist who lives on through his home-cum-museum piece.

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NOTES

Note 1. For more on the life and work of Arthur Villeneuve, see Michaël La Chance (dir.), *L'imaginaire du territoire dans l'art d'Arthur Villeneuve*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007. See also Nathalie Boudreault and Micheline Marion, *Villeneuve : un homme et sa maison*, Chicoutimi, Les Éditions JCL, 2002.

Note 2. The following account, given by Monique de la Mauricie, one of the first visitors to the house, is a good example of the mixed reactions visitors had upon viewing the home:

I visited the house long before Mr. Villeneuve and his naive art became famous. It was 1959, and I was 18, but it was such a unique experience that I remember it as though it were yesterday. Mrs. Villeneuve welcomed guests at the door, charging 75 cents per person, but Mr. Villeneuve himself gave the tour. At a time when everything was shiny and chrome-plated, we wondered how they managed to live in a house where the walls were covered with little figures.

Available online [French only] from the **Virtual Museum of Canada**. Are texts on the subject can be found on the **Musée de la Pulperie de Saguenay** website.

Note 3. National Film Board of Canada. *Villeneuve, peintre-barbier*. Director: Marcel Carrière, 1964, 16 min 12 sec.

Note 4. Marius Barbeau, *The Kingdom of Saguenay*, Toronto, MacMillan, 1936.

Note 5. Félix-Antoine Savard, *Menaud, maître-draveur*, Québec, Éditions Garneau, 1937. Barbeau's novel was widely circulated, and several new editions were published by Éditions Fides.

Note 6. François-Marc Gagnon, "La place de Villeneuve dans l'art contemporain. Art naïf ou art brut?," in Michaël La Chance (dir.), *L'imaginaire du territoire dans l'art d'Arthur Villeneuve*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007, p. 25-33.

Note 7. See Gaston Gagnon, "Le défi Villeneuve. Dix ans de conservation d'un patrimoine atypique," dans Michaël La Chance (dir.), *L'imaginaire du territoire dans l'art d'Arthur Villeneuve*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007, p. 57- 67.

Note 8. According to Gaston Gagnon, public officials spent nearly 10 million dollars on the project. (*op.cit.*, p. 66).

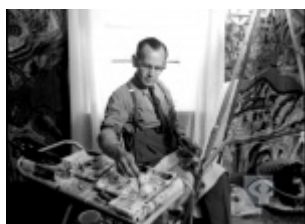
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