

# L'ANCIEN RÉGIME ET L'ART CONTEMPORAIN

## John Fleming *and the Decorative Arts*

Jennifer Franks

*Above*  
Frontispiece and opening  
page of Nicolas Bricaire  
de La Dixmerie's *Toni*  
*et Clairette*, vol. 1  
(Paris: Chez Didot l'aîné,  
libraire & impr., 1773).  
Photo: Google Scholar

HONORÉ DE BALZAC ONCE TIMELESSLY OBSERVED: “An unfulfilled vocation drains the colour from a man's entire existence;” this can never be said of John Fleming, whose career has significantly contributed to the study of French literature and Canadian decorative arts.

We all have stories about what may have led us to our current place and time, and objects, through their human interpreters, are excellent vehicles to explain these journeys. Professor Fleming, founding editor of *Ornamentum* and member of the Canadian Society of Decorative Arts/ Cercle canadien des arts décoratifs (CSDA/CCAD) seems to agree with this viewpoint. I asked if he could share a few personal object stories, which might reveal more about his career path. He described an eighteenth-century leather binding that caught his eye while he was still a student at the University of Montpellier.

Fleming's bookstore find of *Toni et Clairette*, a celebrated French novel from 1773, was not composed in its usual form. Much to his surprise, the book's first half was literary criticism and not just the familiar love story.<sup>1</sup> Fleming found the intellectual value of this volume equal to its aesthetically pleasing cover, so he brought the book home, starting a love affair of his own. The volume is now a treasured member of his extensive antiquarian book collection. From about 1960, Fleming has been a collector of French books and Quebecois furniture, mostly dating from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. *Toni et Clairette* is by no means the rarest work in his collection, but it survives as a precious reminder of his first steps on the road to becoming a published scholar and collector.

Fleming obtained a Master of Arts at the University of Toronto and his PhD at Harvard University. His work in comparative European literature, while Associate Professor at the University of Toronto, focused heavily on French writings, which he credits cementing his passion for the decorative arts. John has written and lectured widely on French and Canadian material culture, but his most memorable publication is *Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700-1840*. Fleming wrote this book in French and English editions, with James Chambers, a well-respected photographer at the

Right

Cover of *The Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700-1840* by John A. Fleming with photographs by James A. Chambers (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994).

Below

John Fleming's library  
Photo: Jennifer Franks

Opposite page

Armoire,  
detail of front panel  
Mid-18th century  
Pine, white overpaint removed to  
original blue-green with decoration.  
Restoration to cornice and feet.  
212 x 137 x 54 cm  
Photo: James A. Chambers

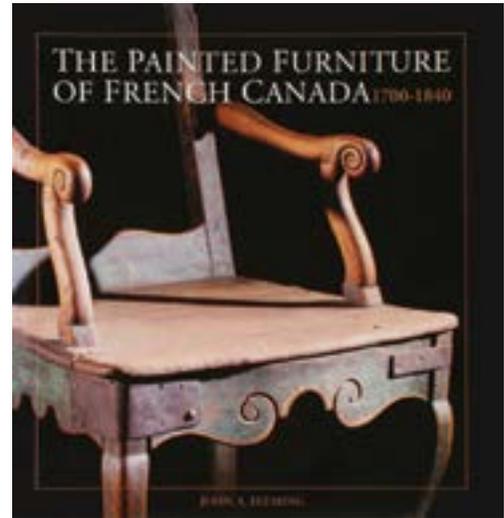
Inset

Armoire  
Mid-18th century  
Pine, white overpaint removed to  
original blue-green with decoration.  
Restoration to cornice and feet.  
212 x 137 x 54 cm  
Photo: James A. Chambers

Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum, and other leading art institutions in Canada. Fleming notes the book took approximately seven years to realize; it was published in 1994 by the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History). Just as *Toni et Clairette* acts as a small window through which to see Fleming's early career, the objects he carefully chose to portray in *Painted Furniture* reflect his evolved interests and most cherished adventure with Chambers.

Fleming and his friend and colleague Chambers, whom Fleming delightfully describes as a "rock-and-roll eccentric," travelled through the Quebecois countryside in search of locally-made painted furniture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On their journey they met with pickers, dealers, and collectors of every conceivable sort, in hope of "giving life" to these painted objects.

Fleming's expressed purpose was to animate armoires, chests, and chairs in a manner that previous traditional surveys had not. He was uninterested in viewing and understanding



objects from an art historical perspective that viewed furniture as peripheral. His task was to comprehend and to give these objects a voice. Chambers photographed each work after hours of careful consideration on how to successfully communicate its message through shape, form, and colour. The authors' mission was to deeply engage audiences with each examined object. Fleming brought to this exercise his knowledge of French language and literature of the ancien régime, while Chambers contributed the eye of a trained object photographer and painter. It is worth noting that during this time, the formal study or field of material culture was a relatively new and novel horizon. Most historians of decorative arts were asking questions of "what," attempting to identify artists, regions, and materials; Fleming and Chambers, however, were more concerned with "why" questions, specifically the deeper psychological traits or motives of their furniture subjects. This approach was avant-garde and more aligned with today's parameters, in which traditional lines between decorative and fine art are often blurred.

I asked Fleming to name one of the objects he believes best communicates his experience in making the book. As the topic of colour dominates his publication, Fleming pointed to a mesmerizing, blue armoire from about 1740. He explained that the paint on this piece, like others he illustrated, is original. The armoire's blue-green colour changes, depending on the level of light or its position in a room. This fluctuating visual state, he noted, produces a feeling of the sublime in its viewers, something missed by those quick to strip painted furniture due to changing fashion.







Armchair  
Eastern Townships,  
last quarter of the  
18th century  
Maple frame, pine seat,  
original blue paint  
102 x 58 x 51 cm  
Collection: Royal  
Ontario Museum  
Photo: James A. Chambers

His examination of emotional responses to colour on furniture, a common narrative in modern and contemporary fine art, was at this time a progressive way of understanding decorative arts. With the same reverence for paint on canvas, he emphatically urges readers to stop removing decorative, period paint from Quebecois furniture; he explains this was a key goal of the book. Fleming's argument in favour of the decorative, which he recalls was perceived as "feminine" in a climate of more "masculine" minimalism, parallels the Pattern and Decoration movement in New York in the 1980s, during which artists consciously crossed gender-defined boundaries between fine and decorative art, understanding the natural dichotomy of decoration and art celebrated outside the Western world. Whether purposefully or not, John's work was in step with this rebellion against the stylistic austerity dominant since the 1950s.

As Fleming spoke more about the evolving nature and terminology of the decorative arts, it became clear his most significant

contribution to the field is that his book served as a catalyst in preserving the painted finishes of early Quebecois furniture; this outcome alone is significant to the history of Canadian decorative art. As art historians re-evaluate the discipline and the meaning of decorative art in the Postmodern era, his book seems strikingly contemporary. The book's historical objects are graceful in their balanced forms and favorable to present-day eyes.

It is no secret that before such efforts most academics and universities did not take seriously the decorative arts. Why had he chosen to follow an undefined path? Fleming noted that he has lived a life similar to the objects he studies, one with a unique voice and purpose to be shared with others. He has always believed that the study of material culture is significant to understanding our world. It is no coincidence, then, that he helped to establish the Canadian Society of Decorative Arts and direct its publication of *Ornamentum*. The journal is part of his effort to broaden the Society's reach and message and to create a community of specialists, enthusiasts, collectors, artists, and designers: those willing to hear the "voices" of decorative arts. With a healthy sense of humour, Fleming playfully refers to his contributions as the *ancien régime*, but what is old seems new again. The Western world of contemporary fine art has "discovered" applied arts such as ceramics, while the study of things decorative, historically tied to women, is making its appearance in art history departments. As he had envisioned, today many art professionals seek to engage a wider public with the decorative arts. His *raison d'être* is not grounded in the *ancien régime*, but in *l'art contemporain*. **O**

<sup>1</sup> Bricaire de La Dixmerie, Nicolas, "Discours sur l'origine, les progrès et le genre des romans," *Toni et Clairette*, vol. 1 (Paris: Chez Didot l'aîné, libraire & impr, 1773), v-lxxvi.

*Jennifer Franks is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto. She holds a MA in decorative arts (Parsons, NYC), and has worked as Art Specialist, Museum Curator, and Director: <https://www.lifeofvertu.com/about>.*