

Culture Québec, A culture that travels the world

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A culture that travels the world

With its population of about 7.5 million inhabitants, the tiny nation of Québec has nourished artists as varied as Céline Dion, Leonard Cohen, Diane Dufresne, Oscar Peterson, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Denys Arcand, André Laplante, Robert Lepage, Neil Bissoondath, Marie Laberge, Margie Gillis, Édouard Lock, Michel Tremblay, Marie Chouinard, and Marc-André Hamelin, as well as institutions such as Cirque du Soleil. Very few countries of Québec's size have such an international presence.

Every culture must be open to the universal and yet solidly anchored, in other words to have both wings and roots. In this sense, Québec is a special case. A land of immigrants richly endowed by its aboriginal history, and then by its French and British influences, it benefits still, more than any other culture on the continent, from the strong ties it has maintained with the two great civilizations that helped shape it: Europe and America. At the same time, as the only majority French-speaking society in North America, Québec has a fierce and deeply felt attachment to its own culture, the symbol of its identity.

Québec society: a unique path in the Americas

Québec takes its name from an indigenous Huron word. From the earliest days of colonization and despite inevitable frictions, the French formed strong bonds with the aboriginal people, commercial ties as well as the bonds of friendship. The alliance between the two peoples also produced offspring, so that a good number of today's six million or so French-speaking inhabitants of Québec have "a drop of Indian blood" in the family. A million English speakers have also put down their roots in this land. Men and women of every origin have brought with them the riches of their own cultures.

Out of all this, the Québec identity has become what it is today, and continues to evolve in its own, unique way. Québec is a new land. One of the distinguishing features of its history, strikingly original in itself, is the succession of terms by which Quebecers have called themselves over the four centuries of their existence.

From "Français"...

The first European settlers were of French origin. The New France era (1608–1760) is still considered a heroic age by many historians today. Nothing seemed to deter this little colony from growing, developing, and accomplishing the extraordinary feat of settling the land and exploring the immense territory: not the scarcity of the population, not the rigors of the climate, not the relative disinterest of France, not wars, not the hostility of the English powers. It was a period whose energy, audacity, and courage were to nourish the values and ideas of generations to come. Already during this era, a distinction had arisen between those who came for a time and then left, and those who stayed: the French went home, the *Canadiens* stayed.

... to “French Canadian”...

In 1763, after the Seven Years’ War and the ceding of New France under the Treaty of Paris, the great “French dream” in the New World came to an end. North America was now entirely in British hands. What chance did the 60,000 settlers have, scattered along the St. Lawrence River, of retaining their language, their faith, and their culture? Alfred de Vigny, one of the few French nineteenth century writers to take an interest in their fate, would still comment around 1850 that they were “a dying nationality.” Nevertheless, the miracle of survival took place. In an environment that was increasingly English and Protestant, this little people did not disappear at all. Clinging tenaciously to their roots and stunning the world with a prodigious birth rate, they undertook to preserve their French Catholic character in a battle that was ongoing, patient, firm and peaceful. Finding themselves now a minority, they took a path that was quite different from that of the rest of Canada and the continent. They were a homogenous population, close-knit, poor, agricultural, with little education, and which throughout the nineteenth century developed a particularly rich folklore and oral tradition. Over 20,000 orally transmitted stories have been collected in French-speaking America.

In this context of surviving against all odds, or *survivance* as the era is called, Québec still took inspiration from the great movements of European culture. The first novel by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, *L’influence d’un livre*, appeared in the 1830s and showed the influence of the English Romantics, while the first poets were inspired by the great French Romantics. In the mid-1800s, the first historian of the Québec nation, François-Xavier Garneau, was also an intellectual heir of the Romantics; he combined science with historical memory and patriotic fervor. In his wake, nineteenth century poets and novelists exalted the heroes and exploits of our history. Some even met with success beyond our borders: Emma Albani, a nineteenth century star, sung her way across the great stages of Europe, and even performed privately before Queen Victoria herself.

These people, who had proudly called themselves *Canadiens* to distinguish themselves from the British, gradually came to be known now as “French Canadians,” as the British

and others who came to settle here were also calling themselves Canadians. Québec gradually gained confidence through the twentieth century, and opened itself up to modernity. The great literary and artistic movements in Europe found an echo and a new life and impact on this side of the Atlantic. Many Québec artists spent time in France or elsewhere. In Paris of the 1920s and 30s the works of Alfred Pellan were being shown alongside those of Léger, Picasso, and Ernst. Alain Grandbois published his first poems in China. In the 1950s, Félix Leclerc, known as the *Canadien*, sang in Paris and then went on to tour France and other parts of Europe and the Near East.

Québec took part in two great wars in Europe, and thus encountered ideas in other parts of the world. World War II, paradoxically, contributed to the emancipation of Québec. With the situation that prevailed in France in 1940, many intellectuals and writers came to stay in America. The publishing world was one beneficiary; between 1940 and 1947, 21 million books were printed in French in Québec. The winds of dissent were starting to blow. The 1948 manifesto *Refus global*, written by the painter Paul-Émile Borduas and co-signed by other literary and artistic personalities such as Jean-Paul Riopelle, was a violent rejection of the rural Catholic archetype, a demand for creative freedom, and a call for universal revolution.

...to “Québécois”

Profound forces for renewal were brewing, and burst forth in the 1960s, a period marked by such great change that it would henceforth be known as the “Quiet Revolution.” Without doubt the most important decade in Québec’s modern history, this was when the word “Québécois” came into being to designate Québec’s inhabitants—a word of place more than of language. Nonetheless, in its beginnings and in its essence, the Quiet Revolution was for the French-speaking majority a powerful movement of self-affirmation. From then on Québec developed its own political, economic, educational, and social institutions that were strong and modern, including a Department of Cultural Affairs in 1961.

The world of arts and culture was also in ferment. Artistic groups proliferated and culture found new outlets everywhere. Québec artists each expressed in their own way the profound metamorphosis that Québec was experiencing. These changes revolutionized artistic forms and renewed discussion about Québec society and identity. Some writers became famous outside Québec: Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais, Réjean Ducharme, Gaston Miron, Jacques Godbout. Songwriters, riding the wave, became the standard-bearers of Québec's soul. There was Claude Léveillée (who appeared at first alongside Édith Piaf), Gilles Vigneault, Jean-Pierre Ferland, Robert Charlebois, the group Beau Dommage, and Michel Pagliaro. In 1968, Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles-Soeurs*, now translated into 22 languages, marked Québec literature and theater by bringing Québec's urban dialect for the first time ever to center stage. The play launched a vigorous debate between the promoters of a more standard French and the proponents of a truly Québec language, then known as *joual* (a local pronunciation of the word *cheval*, or horse.) This affirmation of the French fact in Québec led, in the 1970s, to French being proclaimed the official language and to the adoption, in 1977, of the French Language Charter, a centerpiece of this cultural revival.

This openness, felt particularly in Montréal where the majority of new immigrants settle, inspired author and filmmaker Jacques Godbout to comment in the *Globe and Mail* of November 6, 1989, that Montreal is home to "a population that has come from all over the world, that accepts French as a natural fact, English as a convenient means of communications, and that will create a diversified culture grafted on a French-speaking tree."

The past 40 years have at the same time created a Québec that is more and more cosmopolitan, outward-looking, and receptive to other cultures.

Québec is still a land of welcome. Thousands of men and women continue to arrive every year, bringing with them their traditions, their habits, their cultures. Thus pop music has become more and more of a cultural blend, and writers such as Dany Laferrière and Ying Chen and playwrights such as Wajdi Mouawad have emerged, enriching Québec literature

and theater with a cultural heritage from elsewhere. Aboriginal cultures have also participated in this movement, both through returning to their own roots and through a very contemporary spirit of innovation. Robert Lepage's outstanding *Dragon Trilogy*, which he wrote in the mid-1980s and which met with acclaim in a number of countries, was one of the first plays to illustrate this strong intercultural trend, by representing Québec society in interaction with its Chinese component and with English-speaking culture.

This is Québec today, a vast land of water, snow, and forest, enriched by people from everywhere in the world, solidly rooted in the soil of America, faithful to its French and European origins, open towards every horizon.

A few figures

Nearly 7.5 million people live in Québec, on a land mass 1.7 million km² in size (three times the size of France or five times that of Japan). Eighty per cent of the population is concentrated along the St. Lawrence River, one of North America's principal points of entry. The great urban metropolis of Montréal accounts for nearly half of Québec's population while Québec City, the capital of the Québec nation, has a population of about 700,000.

French is the language spoken at home by 83% of Quebecers, while 11% speak English and 6% another language. Half of Québec's active population speaks both French and English, and 16% speak a third language fluently too, mostly Italian, Spanish, or Greek. The eleven aboriginal First Nations living in Québec (about 1% of the population) use either English or French, but mostly speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue.

A rich and varied output

As Québec City's designation as a World Heritage City demonstrates, modern Québec still proudly bears the marks of its history. But whether drawing from its French roots or its

popular culture, its new cultural blends or its most cutting edge artistic disciplines, the result is an unusual cultural vitality that has touched all five continents in myriad ways.

Many Québec artists have made their mark on the international scene. Some have enjoyed immense popular success, such as superstar Céline Dion, whose songs in French and English have topped the world charts. Luc Plamondon's musicals, first *Starmania* and more recently *Notre Dame de Paris*, have been smash hits in London and Paris. Many other Québec singers have also pursued transatlantic careers. With their talents, they have ensured that the voice of Québec reverberates throughout the French-speaking world.

Original musical groups have captivated audiences abroad. *La Bottine Souriante* with its nouveau-traditional music has charmed Europe and America, and the instrumental rock group, Godspeed You Black Emperor, plays to full houses at Royal Albert Hall.

Québec artists are also celebrated in the performing arts, notably for their innovatively staged shows. The productions of Robert Lepage play in many world capitals. Cirque du Soleil tours the world with its colorful reinvention of the art of the circus. The dance troupe La La La Human Steps and choreographer Édouard Lock regularly perform their avant-garde works in Europe and Japan. Filmmakers like Denys Arcand, François Girard, Alanis O'Bomsawin, Léa Pool, and Denis Villeneuve show us the world through fresh eyes.

Even when rooted in a realism typical of Québec, our artists' creations strike a cord elsewhere. Playwright Michel Tremblay's theater, for example, whose characters hail from a Montréal working class neighborhood, has become a cultural reference point for Scottish society, which has rediscovered a taste for its own stories on stage.

Other names have contributed to the cultural reach of Québec. Among the many compelling examples are visual artists Betty Goodwin, Geneviève Cadieux, Dominique Blain, and Marcel Marois; writers Trevor Ferguson, Bernard Assiniwi, Sergio Kokis, and Gaétan Soucy; choreographers Ginette Laurin, José Navas, Dominique Porte, Marie Chouinard, and Jean-Pierre Perreault; directors Gilles Maheu and Denis Marleau;

musicians Louis Lortie, Marc-André Hamelin, and Chantal Juillet; the musicians of the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal and Les Violons du Roy; soprano Karina Gauvin; numerous children's authors and theater troupes; even DJs Ramachandra Borcar a.k.a. DJ Ram and Misstress Barbara.

Homegrown TV

The communications sector plays an active role in the vitality of Québec culture and its distinctive character. More than 40% of Canada's telecommunications activities are based in Montréal, where thousands of workers are involved in building the equipment and creating content. In the world of radio, TV, advertising, and even new media forms, the public looks first and foremost for Québec content.

The advent of TV in the 1950s with Radio-Canada changed the face of Québec society and culture. Québec successfully developed its own distinct TV genre, considered one of the best in the world. The appeal of its homegrown TV is reflected in the TV habits of Quebecers—nearly all the most popular programs are local productions by Montréal-based networks: TVA, Télévision Quatre-Saisons, Radio-Canada, and Télé-Québec. In addition to this local success, some TV series have enjoyed success abroad, such as *Un gars, une fille*, a concept that has been taken up in France, Sweden, Greece, Portugal, and Great Britain.

Recognized skills and know-how

Québec talent in the arts and culture is not confined to what happens on-stage. It is also becoming internationally renowned for its highly varied technical and technological expertise. Québec museums are part of major international networks. The Canadian Centre for Architecture offers original resources, and the Musée de la civilisation has developed an accessible and refreshing museological approach.

Québec enterprises such as Solotech and Scéno Plus export their know-how on a massive scale in scenic technology, scenography, and lighting. In the area of advertising and film, the entire world delights in the special effects made possible by Softimage and Discreet Logic, companies that contributed to the success of such films as *Jurassic Park* and *Titanic*. And these were not the first breakthroughs: IMAX, a technology that has revolutionized the world of the big screen, originated in Québec.

Children also merit special attention. Companies such as Carrousel, Théâtre des Deux Mondes and Théâtre du Gros Mécano have captured the hearts of audiences across Europe and America with the quality of their productions, which have been widely distributed and translated. Children's films, such as the series *Contes pour tous* by producer Rock Demers, as well as children's literature, marked by the international success of publisher La courte échelle, have also charmed and delighted the audiences of tomorrow.

Québec is on the cutting edge of multimedia, which carries with it attractive tax benefits. The development of specialized expertise in the field of computer games has created thousands of jobs, and Québec's unique linguistic situation has permitted companies such as Alis Technologies to lead the field in translation software, thanks to the large pool of multilingual workers.

The quality of training offered by many schools financed by the Québec government attracts students from across Canada and abroad. Specific areas of specialty, such as that of the Centre de conservation du Québec, a state institution with experts and state-of-the-art equipment in fields like archeology, conservation, and heritage restoration, are internationally recognized.

Culture : an economic force

The value Quebecers place on culture is clear from the essential role culture plays in the Québec economy. Culture and communications account for some 177,000 direct and indirect jobs and contribute some \$13.6 billion to

the economy (about 8.4% of the GDP). In absolute terms, culture is as important to Québec's economy as agriculture, forestry, mines, and fisheries put together. In order to better promote this "natural resource" and give expression to a policy that defines culture as a necessity and a right of every citizen, the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications invests over \$530 million in culture every year.

The chief instruments through which the Québec government acts on its commitment to culture are the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, which is responsible for Québec's cultural policies as a whole, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, which awards grants to artists and cultural organizations, and the Société de développement des entreprises culturelles, a unique organization that works to develop the commercial (and even industrial) potential of Québec's artistic life. Other Quebec government granting agencies also add their contributions.

Numerous cultural activities are also supported by joint initiatives between government and the private sector, such as the Fonds d'investissement de la culture et des communications and the Financière des entreprises culturelles, one of whose initiators was the Fonds de solidarité de la Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, one of the biggest venture capital funds in Québec. The private sector, too, contributes to Québec's cultural vibrancy by sponsoring cultural events or through such important examples of artistic patronage as the Daniel Langlois Foundation.

Québec welcomes the world

Québec's broad expertise and talent in cultural fields are also evidenced by a profusion of festivals and events that showcase the best of Québec and the world. Every artistic discipline is represented in the numerous festivals that take place all over Québec, particularly during the summer.

The Montreal International Jazz Festival, the Québec City Summer Festival, Les FrancoFolies de Montréal, the Just for Laughs Festival, the Festival international de nouvelle danse, the Festival de théâtre des Amériques, the Carrefour international de théâtre, the Semaine mondiale de la marionnette, Les Nuits d’Afrique, the World Film Festival, the Mondial des Cultures de Drummondville, the Montreal International Festival of New Cinema and New Media, and the Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival are just a few examples of Québec’s numerous international gatherings that attract tourists by the thousands and offer a worldwide window on the enterprising spirit of Quebecers.

Behind-the-scenes expertise at these great international festivals is also making strides, along with technical know-how and the number of centers devoted to artistic creation and production. In addition to large centers like Montréal and Québec City, regional centers are also equipped with high caliber cultural facilities. Complexes such as Montréal’s Place des Arts and Québec City’s Grand Théâtre can host full-scale orchestras, operas, and dance or variety shows, as can numerous other halls and performing arts centers throughout Québec.

Québec also boasts production and broadcast facilities unlike those found anywhere else. Québec City’s Méduse complex, for example, consists of a dozen arts organizations and studios within one architectural block. Their experimental approach blends new media with the visual and performing arts. Montréal is home to Ex Centris, where new cinema meets new media at the cutting edge of technology; the facility was designed and financed by arts patron Daniel Langlois, the founder of Softimage, a company that specializes in the creation of special effects for movies.

A collective culture

Artistic facilities demonstrate an interesting aspect of Québec’s cultural life: the tendency to congregate, to gather strengths together, to pool resources. This has certainly been influenced by the fashion for collective art that distinguishes the Montréal dance scene and Québec theater. The work of artist Robert Lepage and his colleagues at Ex Machina—

another unusual production center located in Québec City's Caserne Dalhousie—is an eloquent case in point. Montréal's Cité des arts du Cirque, where both the Cirque du Soleil headquarters and the École nationale de cirque are located, is another example of the pooling of resources and talents in the field of Québec culture.

New technologies follow the same pattern, such as Montréal's Cité du multimédia and E-Commerce Place, as well as Québec's City's Centre national des nouvelles technologies and the various information technology development centers and new economy incubators in Québec. Their proliferation has made Montréal North America's 4th biggest creator of high tech jobs.

Other peoples are encouraged to participate in this collective spirit so typical of Québec culture through international artists' residencies, regular co-productions with troupes and artists from all over the world, and initiatives designed to pool technical know-how. These partnerships are undertaken by Québec in a spirit of openness to diversity, the same spirit it defends by continuing to promote the uniqueness of its own identity.

New ways of traveling

Every year the Québec government invests over \$20 million in support of Québec artists abroad. Rain or shine, this support enables some 200 cultural organizations, aided by advisers and cultural attachés at Québec delegations abroad, to put on tours, prepare co-productions, or explore new markets.

In addition to these ongoing efforts, Québec launched a new concept in 1998: its "cultural seasons," cultural events on a grand scale presented to date in Italy, Catalonia, France, and Great Britain, and most recently in New York in autumn 2001. These great gatherings are ideal for establishing dialog and forcefully demonstrating Québec's contribution to world cultural diversity.

Québec Cultural Missions Abroad

ARGENTINA

Délégation du Québec à Buenos Aires
Tucuman 1321, 12th Floor
Plaza Los Tribunales
C1050AAA Capital Federal
Buenos Aires, Argentina
Tel.: 54 11 4371 6003
Fax: 54 11 4371 6007
E-mail: qc.buenosaires@mri.gouv.qc.ca

BELGIUM

Délégation générale du Québec à Bruxelles
Avenue des Arts 46, 7th Floor
1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel.: 32 2 512 00 36
Fax: 32 2 514 26 41
E-mail: qc.bruxelles@mri.gouv.qc.ca

CHINA

Bureau du Québec à Beijing
Embassy of Canada
19 Dongzhi Menwai Dajie
Chaoyang District
Beijing 100600
China
Tel.: 86-10 6532 3536
Fax: 86-10 6532 1304
E-mail: qc.beijing@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Bureau du Québec à Shanghai
Consulate General of Canada
American International Center
Shanghai Center
West Tower, Suite 604
1376 Nanjing Xi Lu
Shanghai 200040
China
Tel.: 86 21 6279 8400
Fax: 86 21 6279 8401
E-mail: qc.shanghai@mri.gouv.qc.ca

FRANCE

Délégation générale du Québec à Paris
66, rue Pergolèse
75116 Paris
France
Tel.: 33 1 40 67 85 00
Fax: 33 1 40 67 85 09
E-mail: qc.paris@mri.gouv.qc.ca

GERMANY

Bureau du Québec à Munich
Dienerstrasse 20
D-80331 Munich, Germany
Tel.: 49 89 24 20 87-0
Fax: 49 89 24 20 87-37
E-mail: qc.munich@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Agence culturelle du Québec à Berlin
Friedrichstrasse 108-109
10117 Berlin, Germany
Tel.: 49 30 3087 6571
Fax: 49 30 3087 6575
E-mail: qc.berlin@mri.gouv.qc.ca

ITALY

Agence culturelle du Québec en Italie
Via Nomentana 201, Interno 2
00161 Rome, Italy
Tel.: 39 06 4425 2130
Fax: 39 06 4411 7385
E-mail: qc.rome@mri.gouv.qc.ca

JAPAN

Délégation générale du Québec à Tokyo
Nissei Hanzomon Building, 5th Floor
1-3 Kojimachi, Chiyoda-ku
Tokyo 102-0083, Japan
Tel.: 81 3 3239 5137
Fax: 81 3 3239 5140
E-mail: qc.tokyo@mri.gouv.qc.ca

MEXICO

Délégation générale du Québec à Mexico
Avenida Taine 411
Colonia Bosques de Chapultepec
11580 Mexico D. F., Mexico
Tel.: 525 55 250 8222
525 55 250 8208
Fax: 525 55 254 4282
E-mail: qc.mexico@mri.gouv.qc.ca

SPAIN

Bureau du Québec à Barcelone
Passeig De Gracia, 16-6th Floor
08007, Barcelona, Spain
Tel.: 34 93 481 3188
Fax: 34 93 318 8609
E-mail: qc.barcelone@mri.gouv.qc.ca

UNITED KINGDOM

Délégation générale du Québec à Londres
59 Pall Mall
London, SW1Y 5JH
United Kingdom
Tel. : 44 20 7766 5900
Fax: 44 20 7930 7938
E-mail: qc.londres@mri.gouv.qc.ca

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Délégation générale du Québec à New York
Québec Government House in New York
1 Rockefeller Plaza, 26th Floor
New York, NY 10020-2102
United States of America
Tel.: 212 397 0200
212 843 0950
Fax: 212 757 4753
212 376 8984
E-mail: qc.newyork@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Délégation du Québec à Boston
31 Milk Street, 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02109-5104

United States of America
Tel.: 617 482 1193
Fax: 617 482 1195
E-mail: qc.boston@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Délégation du Québec à Chicago
444 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1900
Chicago, IL 60611-3977
United States of America
Tel.: 312 645 0395
Fax: 312 645 0542
E-mail: qc.chicago@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Délégation du Québec à Los Angeles
10940 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 720
Los Angeles, CA 90024
United States of America
Tel.: 310 824 4173
Fax: 310 824 7759
E-mail: qc.losangeles@mri.gouv.qc.ca

Bureau du Québec à Miami
801 Brickell Avenue, Suite 1500
Miami, FL 33131
United States of America
Tel.: 305 358 3397
Fax: 305 358 5399
E-mail: qc.miami@mri.gouv.qc.ca

CANADA

Bureau du Québec dans les Provinces Atlantiques
777 Main Street, Suite 510
Moncton, New Brunswick E1C 1E9
Canada
Tel.: 506 857 9851
Fax: 506 857 9883
E-mail: bqmoncto@cex.gouv.qc.ca

Bureau du Québec à Ottawa
Place de Ville, Tower B
112 Kent Street, Suite 700
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5P2
Canada
Tel.: 613 238 5322
Fax: 613 563 9137
E-mail: bqottawa@cex.gouv.qc.ca

Bureau du Québec à Toronto
20 Queen Street West, Suite 1504
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3S3
Canada
Tel.: 416 977 6060
Fax: 416 596 1407
E-mail: bqtoront@cex.gouv.qc.ca

IN QUÉBEC

MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE ET DES COMMUNICATIONS

Québec
225, Grande Allée Est
Québec (Québec) G1R 5G5
Canada
Tel.: 418 380 2335, extension 6335
Fax: 418 380 2336
E-mail: dc@mcc.gouv.qc.ca

Montréal
480, boul. Saint-Laurent
Montréal (Québec) H2Y 3Y7
Tel.: 514 873 5128
Fax: 514 873 3437
E-mail: dc@mcc.gouv.qc.ca

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