

# An Installation by Michèle Lapointe

by Jean-Pierre Léger

photographs by René Rioux



*Interior view of Michèle Lapointe's installation at Jean-Eudes College, Montreal.*

In Quebec, there exists what is popularly known as the 1% law. It is a government regulation that requires public buildings to set aside 1% of their budget to incorporate artwork in their construction or expansion projects. Even though Jean-Eudes, as a private college, did not have to respect that policy, the school administration was sensitive to artists' work and decided to apply this rule to their expansion project.

After the selection process, the jury chose Michèle Lapointe, a sculptor who has created more than a dozen monumental art works in public buildings over the last 20 years. Besides participating in many solo and group exhibitions, she teaches at the glass school Centre des métiers du verre du Québec/Espace Verre in Montreal.

## ***The Idea***

Michèle took her inspiration from the site itself, a school, a place to learn and gather, located close to the city's Botanical Garden. She sought to integrate this with sensitivity into her work. The challenge was twofold. On one hand, she had to consider the space, its users, its functions and the window orientation and, on the other hand, create a remarkable one-of-a-kind artwork.

Michèle proposed four huge, colored feathers, each one measuring six feet by 10 feet, floating in the air, symbolizing the surpassing of oneself and equilibrium. Those four expansive, colored surfaces would represent the principal focus of the college's fields of education: art, science, sport and communication.

Such a large project requires a skilled work team. This is where Michèle sought out my services. The creator always hopes that the group will form an cohesive relationship, to ensure as much harmony as possible in the work process. That was the certainly the case in this project.

## ***The Material***

To render the spirit, the purity, the delicacy to these coloured surfaces, Michèle chose antique glass for its shadings, refinement, its transparency and her preference to use a handmade product. So, René Rioux (her partner), Michèle and I went to New York City and visited S.A. Bendheim, the well-known glass supplier that has been in business since 1927. We were greeted like royalty.

In their 100-year-old warehouse, we found thousands of sheets of beautiful mouth-blown antique glass made in Germany by Lamberts. Michèle chose her glass in the daylight, as it should be done. The sheets of glass were to be displayed in the windows, and, as I always say: “Our basic material is not glass but light.”

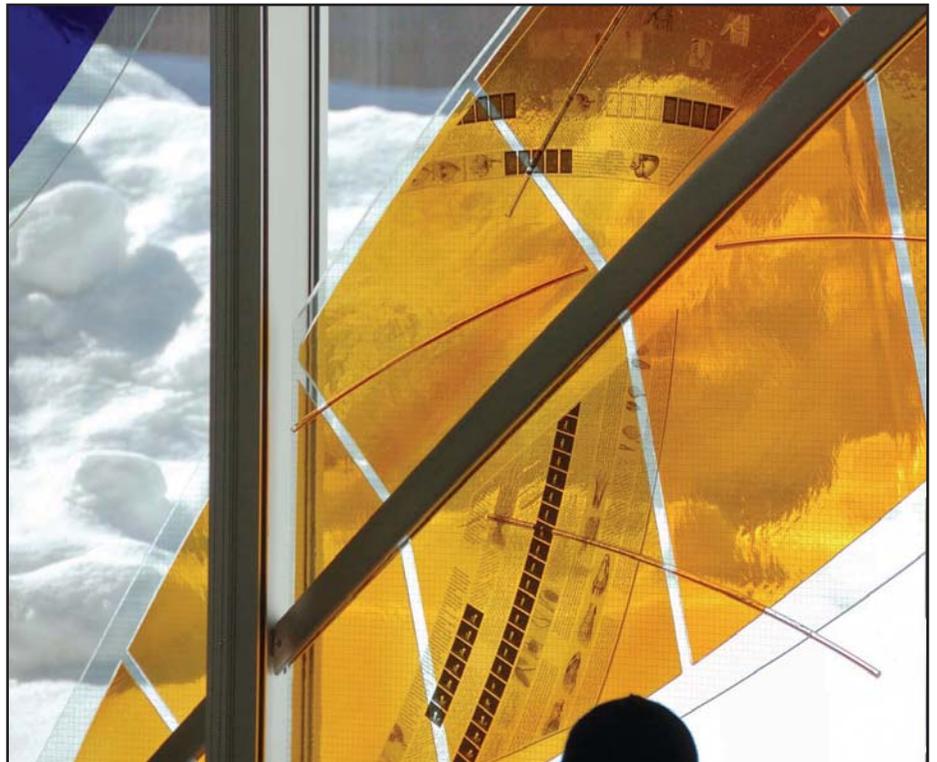
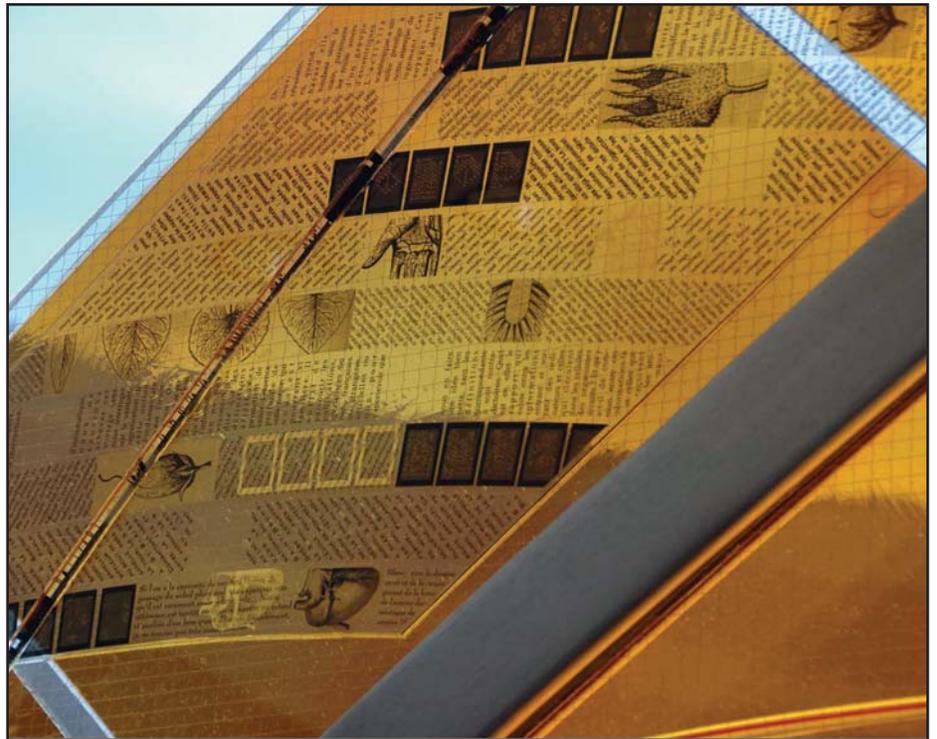
### ***The Process***

There is a tradition in Europe that we don't see very often in Quebec. What I am referring to is the practice in which artists retain craftsmen to fabricate their projects. This European approach explains why we can enjoy stained glass work conceived by Chagall, Rouault, Léger or Matisse, since they were not stained glass artisans. This way of doing things is still very popular today, as evidenced by the Derix Studios and Sattlers in Germany. In France, you only have to think about the work of the painter Pierre Soulages in collaboration with the stained glass artist Jean-Dominique Fleury for the Abbey of Conques. Fleury, himself a glass artist, put his experience at the service of someone else's artwork.

That was exactly my role with Michèle. I put my experience, my understanding of materials and my sensitivity to the service of Michèle's art work. This role is similar to the translator's role. He tries to convey as much as possible of the original spirit of the author without changing the meaning of the text. But in this project, there is one big difference. As opposed to Matisse or Soulages, Michèle Lapointe has been working with glass for the last 20 years. This is her material. In approaching this project, she began with industrial wired glass, on which the antique glass was to be laminated to create the feathers. Wired glass was chosen to express the pixels of colors and forms.

### ***The Opus***

The great glass panels that form the feathers are held in the air by long stainless steel rods that are integrated into the

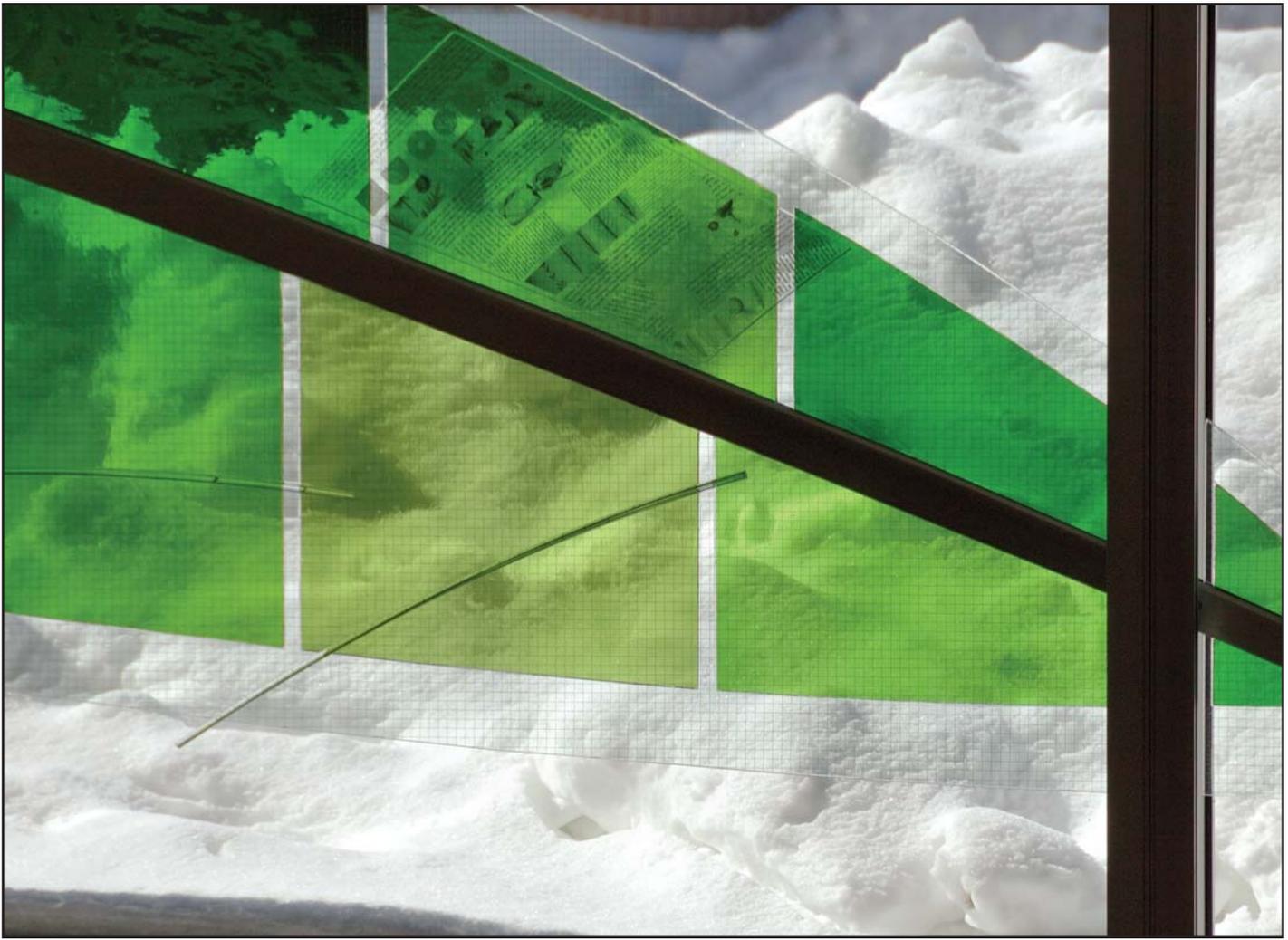


*Details of the yellow leaf, showing painted elements.*

art without revealing them as structural elements. Onto these great glass panels are overlapped motifs referring to the college curriculum: arts, science, sport and communication. Then, long colored glass stringers, stretched by hand, are fixed to

the feathers to accentuate movement and convey a lyricism.

As the installation was progressing, we felt the artwork taking on all of its meaning. From one day to the next, curious students asked questions as soon as



*Details of the green leaf, showing painted elements.*

we arrived on site. As we moved into the work area, we felt enveloped by the work. In this meeting space, the window is imposing by its presence. It calls out to the students and teachers for outstanding achievements and dynamism. At first look, one is overwhelmed by the colors and forms playing out on the huge white ceramic floor. The west-facing window lets the light penetrate the piece, especially at the end of the day.

The more curious observer will discover the profoundness of the work in its little details. As you look closer, you see all the fragmented motifs referring to different knowledge fields, all dispersed in a large labyrinth. To represent those different domains, Michèle chose a mix of texts and illustrations, either engraved or printed, that she discovered through in-depth research.

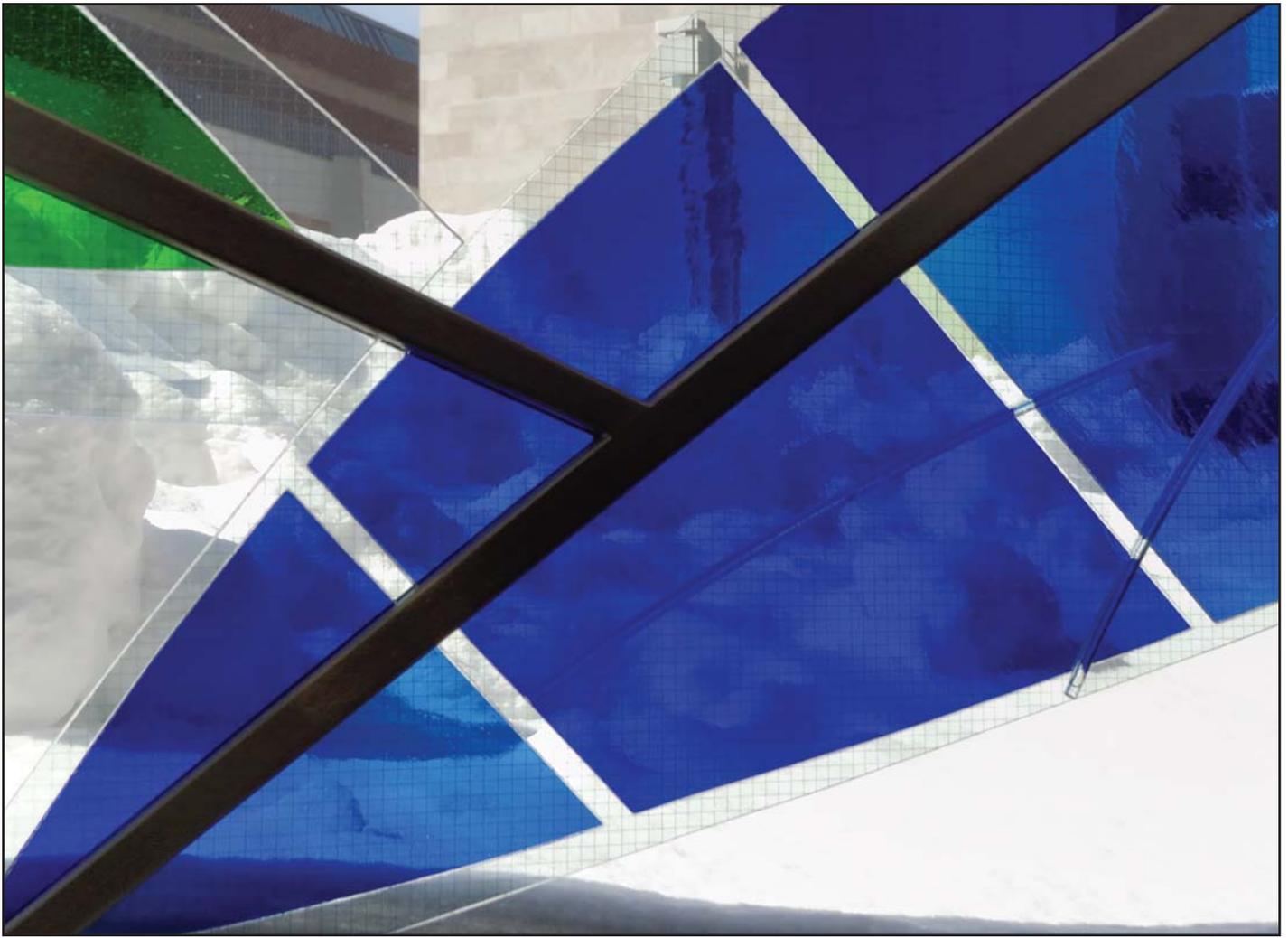
She chose literature — artists’s works that touched her emotions. She chose words from different authors — Gaston Miron, Marie-Claire Blais, Michèle Lalonde, Clémence Desrochers, Zazie Sazonoff — that had inspired the last theme of her last exhibition “Contes muets.” She chose words from the artists Paul-Émile Borduas, René Derouin, Robert Lepage, Betty Goodwyn and made references to inventiveness represented by sequences of animated films by Norman McLaren.

She made other references to knowledge and humanity from Pierre Dansereau, Hubert Reeves, Francis Hallé and Georges Ifrah, whose universal history of numbers are present in this work. On

these inscriptions, you also discover notes taken by observing birds and plant illustrations from *La Flore Laurentienne* by Frère Marie-Victorin. In these illustrations, you perceive traces of inscriptions appearing from the other side of the page of the book. These are the different coats of knowledge accumulated through time that Michèle expresses here. They are like “palimpsests,” in which people write new inscriptions on parchment passed on from prior civilizations. The parchment has the new as well as the traces of old inscriptions.

### ***In Conclusion***

The artwork contains several levels of meaning. We see big shapes moving



upward and vibrant that are the feathers in the space, evoking growth and development. For those who take the time, there are the tributes to the poets, artists and creators from different fields and times. These inscriptions are inspiring for the students using this meeting place.

Artworks in our lives help us to grow and to live better. The students from Jean-Eudes College are certainly privileged to have this artwork in their daily environment. It invites them to reflect and discover. Personally, participating in the realization of this project left traces.

Michèle Lapointe: [www.michelelapointe.com](http://www.michelelapointe.com)  
Jean-Pierre Léger: [www.ovitro.com](http://www.ovitro.com)



*Above: Interior View.  
Top: Blue leaf.*