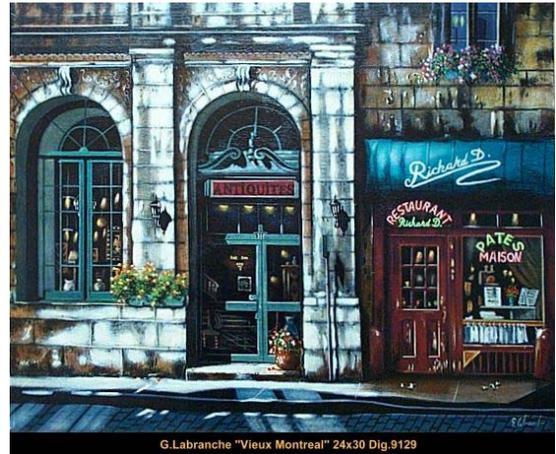


## Gilles Labranche Faces of the city

Gilles Labranche paints what he sees – the city. Of course urban scene painters are almost as numerous as landscape artists in the artistic milieu, but Labranche stands out as the one who bravely informed prominent art critic Guy Boulizon that he preferred winter to summer and the city to the country.

Although Labranche paints cityscapes; he has evolved over the years and has avoided pigeonholing. Early paintings showed passers-by huddled against gusts of snow. Coin de Beaver Hall is a perfect example. These paintings sought to translate the cold and hostile décor of the city caught by a storm. Since then, however, Gilles



has moved to sunny, hospitable facades and intersections. He even allows a bit of bright greenery to pop up. (Green was previously a “verboten” color!)

Other contemporary artists with an urbanite’s soul such as Albini Leblanc and Louis Robichaud, have all been fascinated by boutiques, their signs hand their history. No one, however, interprets them the same way that Labranche does.



Gilles Labranche shows the same passion, not just interest, in painting the façade of a commercial building or a simple house in the south west of the city as did the masters in depicting dramatic ancient Greek or Jewish themes. The sidewalk, road, stones (especially old) and the storefront windows release a rush of imagination and creative energy. Gilles notices the slightest picturesque detail and conscientiously draws architecture, be it passive or functional, pretentious or modest. His use of light, his choice of matte and shiny surfaces with contrasting shadows actually highlight the contours of the various materials.

The city and its components pose no threat to Labranche; on the contrary, they are allies in a living source of constant inspiration. The only criticism leveled at the Labranche’s acrylics is that people want to see more! For various reasons. Perhaps composition or enhanced visual impact, Gilles cuts buildings, especially the upper part of walls. However, that’s precisely the point. This artist does not make posters or blueprints; instead, he chooses a subject that suits the size of his canvas. He is a master in choosing parts of walls and then omitting whatever does not interest him.

Gilles was born in the Montréal neighborhood of Saint-Henri in 1947. His social milieu not only made him independent but also made him dream of a world beyond the next block. Nevertheless, he remains a downtowner who identifies with his visions of the city. Often the name of the boutique, restaurant or road that he paints becomes the title of his work, e.g. Restaurant Continental, Belle de Jour, l’Hotel Québec. A union of sorts is created between the artist and the authors of these place names.

Labranche was already painting by the age of 10. He enrolled at the Montréal School of Fine Arts, but lasted only two weeks there. It was just not for him. Instead he opted for studio arts at the Académie

des Arts du Canada for three years. He then spent four years making the rounds of local advertising agencies as a graphic artist. His day job did not stop him from painting and taking part in Gallery shows in Montréal, Québec, Saint-Sauveur, New York City and Paris. He has visited Europe several times, especially France, Holland and Italy, where he discovered the grand masters of European painting. He learned their secrets by visiting many galleries and museums.

His early love of the Canadian winter is not exclusive but does confirm that this season defines us better than other seasons. In the memorable words of Gilles Vigneault: *mon pays c'est l'hiver*. (my country is winter). Contemporary painters have gone beyond the traditional Canadian masters, like Gagnon, Pilot, Hutchinson, Suzor-Côté, to show us winter's splendid changing light in countless ways, as if through a personal prism.

Now Gilles Labranche stalks his neighborhood year-round on the lookout for parades or those everyday events that inspire him. His vision of the beauty around him reminds us that we, too, are part of that same society.

