

Joseph légaré's the battle of sainte-foy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Joseph Legare (1795-1855), a prominent 19th century Canadian artist, art collector, and politician, often used his art to demonstrate his political and social views and propagate his ideas among his fellow countrymen. Art critics agree that Legare's paintings were undoubtedly masterfully painted; but aesthetic and artistic values of his paintings apart, they also point out that many of the artist's works reflected his social or political position on a particular subject that he wanted to communicate to viewers.

Several facts examined below attest that Legare's famous historical painting *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy* (The Battle of Sainte-Foy), 1854, oil on canvas, currently in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, is an attempt to emphasize the historic heroism of French Canadians and inflame patriotic sentiments among the painter's fellow countrymen (Punter, 2006).

Before analyzing Legare's *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy*, for which he was awarded a special prize at the 1854 Agricultural and Cultural Exhibition, and also the goals the artist pursued by painting it, it is important to understand Legare's personality and beliefs, as well as political and social conditions that existed in Canada at the time when he produced his work. Joseph Legare was a known Quebec activist with nationalist beliefs who worked to promote French cultural traditions and the French language at the time of complicated relations between the French and the British in Canada.

As a public official, he did a lot for ordinary Quebec Canadians while serving in various public offices. As an artist, Legare established the first art gallery in Quebec in 1833 whose paintings had been brought mostly from France; and by copying many of them for being placed in Canadian churches he contributed significantly to the promotion of French art in Lower Canada

(Punter, 2006). In many of his paintings, Legare depicts heroic and tragic events of the French Canadian population at various historical stages.

For example, in *The Martyrdom of a Jesuit Father*, produced in 1843, Legare depicts the death of a French priest, a missionary, killed by an Iroquois warrior. In *The Massacre of the Huron by the Iroquois* (1828) the artist shows his sympathy for the Huron, a one-time ally of New France. In *Cholera Plaque, Quebec* (1837) some art critics see not only the artist's sympathy for the suffering citizens of Quebec, but also criticism of the British administration whose officials took no efficient action to curb the cholera epidemic but instead evacuated the city leaving its people to fight the disease on their own.

His favorite subjects seem to be everything that is related to New France, the French Canadian culture and history (Punter, 2006). In view of Legare's active political, social, and artistic life, his *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy* can be viewed as one more painting in a series of works promoting the artist's beliefs and ideas. Historically, the battle of Saint-Foy, fought on April 28, 1760 for the city of Quebec, was one of the final battles between the French and the British armies during the French and Indian War (1754-1763).

It was the last battle won by the French army in the war for Quebec as the British garrison besieged in the city was rescued by the arrival of three British warships. Several months later, New France was surrendered to the British administration. The French forces under the Chevalier de Levis' commandment won the battle of Sainte-Foy but France lost the French and Indian War to Great Britain (Battles of 1759-1760).

For Legare, as for most other Quebec nationalists, such an outcome was a tragedy. But it was the victory in the battle of Sainte-Foy that the artist decided to depict in his painting with the purpose of emphasizing and reminding one more time to his contemporaries the glory, bravery, and patriotism of their fathers (Punter, 2006). Legare learned a detailed description of the battle of Sainte-Foy from Françoise Garneau, a Canadian historian.

He chose to paint not only the battle in which the French gained a victory, but also depicted the most glorious moment of the battle. The central figure in the foreground is the Chevalier de Levis on his white horse commanding the advance of the French forces. Levis manoeuvred his army so masterfully that the British troops commanded by General Murray found themselves encircled by the French, Canadian militiamen, and local aboriginals, France's allies.

To the left of the tableau, French Canadian troops are marching bravely into the fight. Under these circumstances and after having suffered great losses in men, General Murray is left with no choice but to withdraw his troops to a safe position (Punter, 2006). Legare painted *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy* in a way so that the viewer can see the victorious moment of the French and French Canadians, and also admire the beautiful landscape of Quebec countryside and the St. Charles River during the sunset in the background of the canvas.

Legare is known to be the first landscape painter in Canada who produced many beautiful and masterfully composed landscapes in his lifetime (Punter, 2006). Standing in front of *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy*, an attentive viewer is

tempted to conclude that Legare's objective was to emphasize both the natural beauty of his country and the heroism and patriotism of the people living in it.

The battle depicted in Legare's painting was fought on the land of a French Canadian farmer Dumont. The St. Jean Baptiste Society, whose member Legare was, found the remains of the soldiers that had fought in the battle of Sainte-Foy on Dumont's farmland and organized a pompous burial of those remains (Punter, 2006). It is clear that Legare showed a lot of interest in the dramatic events of the French and Indian War and sought the scene which could be worth being painted.

The discovery of the remains of French Canadian soldiers killed in the battle, their pompous burial, and his painting *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy* were a series of measures by which the artist and his colleagues wanted to immortalize the deeds of heroism of their ancestors. Legare's painting *La Bataille de Sainte-Foy* was supposed to make all French Canadians proud of their heroic and glorious past, the cultural role they played in Canadian history, and also give them a sense of being an important ethnic group which could withstand any attempts of diluting them that Legare believed the British administration was making (Punter, 2006).