



St-Gilles

Part 1 Impassioned by Nature

written by Debra Usher

St-Gilles is an artist whose career has taken him on an adventure of exploration, both in the beauty of Canada and the world, and in the joy of interpreting that beauty on canvas. In Part One we explore the artistic journey of St-Gilles as he begins to master capturing the landscape of Canada for an appreciative audience and a group of collectors.

Life takes us on a voyage of discovery. As we explore we learn more about our differences, and about our roots, to which we return when we have completed our journey. Gilles knew what he wanted and boldly set out to realize his dream:

“After all, do not dreams amount to youthful visions that come true in the autumn of our lives?”

-Paul Brien (mentor, friend and painter)

This quote comes on the last page of a booklet written by Paul Brien in 1979 about St-Gilles’s first show. That fall, the artist exhibited some 40 watercolours and drawings in Quebec City at the Maison de la Francophonie, where Mr. Francesco lacurto served as honorary president.

As an ambitious and skilled 23-year-old, Gilles Côté had decided that the time had come to make a name for himself on the art stage. That evening, as all his works sold, he assumed the name of his artistic persona, St-Gilles. Thus began the



Randonnée, Vallée Mont Tombstone, Yukon, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"



odyssey of exploration and discovery that would change the course of his life, as did meeting well-known artists, gallery owners and other people of creativity and vision.

At the Start

Standing atop Cap Diamant, on the ramparts of the Citadel in Quebec City, Gilles Côté (St-Gilles) looked northeast to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River over which the sun rose. With the city below him, he stretched out his arms so the tips of his fingers could touch the mountains and the valleys. When he got dizzy, his father steadied him with a reassuring hand on his shoulder. To this day, St-Gilles has never forgotten that moment and the sense of grandeur that he felt.

St-Gilles was the youngest in a family of five children that lived inside the fortified walls of Quebec City. The Côtés were a loving and supportive family and Gilles's parents cherished him. The family was extremely close and these close ties extended to the mother's and father's relatives as well. St-Gilles can still remember some of the great parties and family events during the

holidays of his childhood.

St-Gilles was a calm, curious and observant child by nature, and his adult siblings triggered his impetus to explore. Whether an activity in town or a long trip to Montreal, St-Gilles always eagerly took part in these adventures. "To the best of my recollection, I never refused an invitation to do something or to go somewhere. I always wanted to discover and know the world around me," he explains. "The beauty of places and situations, the people one meets, all these things have an impact on what one will create. Reading, the theatre, the cinema, a song – anything can influence a person and it is through one's own emotional experiences that a unique pictorial language flows," says St-Gilles. It is no wonder, then, that St-Gilles's seizing of all available opportunities for growth and enrichment ultimately led him to find his original artistic voice.

Although his father – who worked as an accountant at a lumberyard – didn't earn a lot of

money, he earned enough for the family to rent a cottage north of Quebec City at Lake St-Joseph. There, St-Gilles began to observe and experience nature. In his youth, he would wander off on his own, always with his box of Prismacolors. He would spend hours observing the beautiful scenery around him and replicating the landscapes with his pencils. Unknowingly, he had already started down the path he would follow for the rest of his life.

By the age of 16, St-Gilles's growing interest in painting encouraged him to take workshops at the Galerie Jules Harvey in Quebec City. During the 1970s, this gallery enjoyed a solid reputation and had a very art-informed clientele; consequently, it served as a meeting place where many established artists exchanged ideas and even taught. Artists and influential collectors excitedly discussed painting, and there were often heated and creative debates. "This represented true learning for me," says St-Gilles. He even admits to having attended these remarkable discussions, when he

Poudrerie à Cap Chat, Gaspésie, Qc, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Coup de vent, Anse St-Jean, Saguenay, Qc, oil on canvas, 40" x 50"

really should have been at his collegial classes.

In light of his youth, discretion and inquisitiveness, St-Gilles had little difficulty meeting and engaging artists such as Francesco Iacurto, Mario Mauro, Arthur Genest, Paul Brien and Albert Rousseau. From the very start, St-Gilles's hard work and devotion to his craft caught the eye of the artistic community and he was well supported by friends and fellow artists. Artists immediately noticed the quality of his drawings and his painstaking focus on composition. He was lucky in that many of the best artists of the time chose to give him their well-meaning advice. This attentiveness was not only flattering encouragement – it was also invaluable instruction along St-Gilles's journey to becoming a true master of his craft.

St-Gilles emphasizes that those we meet in our youth shape us for the rest of our days and that

he was extremely fortunate to have been blessed by those individuals who populated the beginning of his story. Of all the people he encountered at this stage of his life, none had more impact than Bruno Côté. Although he was 16 years older than St-Gilles, they both shared a zest and desire to paint the great outdoors. Both artists drew their inspiration solely from nature. While they did not share the same family tree (despite their common last name), they were blood brothers in their hearts. Their personalities were well matched and they respected each other's vision and craft.

St-Gilles and Bruno also shared the benefit of the same teachers. In particular, Arthur Genest taught them the painterly art of observing a landscape so as to grasp its light, shadow and colours in order to convey the emotions of that specific time and place. From Arthur Genest, St-Gilles and Bruno





previous page, North Rustico, P.E.I., oil on canvas, 46" x 72"
 above, Le phare de Pointe Prime, P.E.I., oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

learned to delineate with a paintbrush, rather than to colour a drawing – a distinction that translates to a big difference in one’s ability to capture movement and light in a painting. Bruno Côté and St-Gilles shared the bond of learning their craft together, and a lifetime friendship grew out of these early years.

Thereafter, St-Gilles’s interest in nature continued unabated and he often camped in the Laurentian Mountains, the lower St Lawrence and Charlevoix. These beautiful places inspired his first sketches and small paintings. St-Gilles occasionally painted in oils, but he excelled with watercolours, which highlighted his sketching abilities. He discovered and experimented with the richness of this medium under the watchful guidance of Jacques Hebert. Additionally, St-Gilles took full advantage of learning from the American masters. Subsequently, he attended college to expand upon his initial artistic

endeavours and by the age of 20 he had his sights set on an artistic career.

Discovering Inspiration

In his early 20s, St-Gilles toured around the major cities of Europe, where significant art historical movements had taken shape. Later trips to Europe and the Caribbean, along with frequent visits to the major museums of New York and Canada, accentuated St-Gilles’s awareness of the artist’s important role in society.

His frequent journeys into nature had the same effect. From 1977 to 1980, Charlevoix proved an inexhaustible wellspring of inspiration and discovery for St. Gilles. Just a two hour drive from his home in Quebec City, he was positioned to paint both the picturesque villages along the St. Lawrence River as well as the mountains and wilds of its backcountry.

A few kilometers from Baie-Saint-Paul lies

Grands-Jardins National Park, where St-Gilles made scores of sketches in pencil and oil. In those days, few people had the resolve to paint the wilderness en plein air. This type of subject required that he adapt his way of painting to capture transitory observations on the spot. Over 35 years later, this park still entralls St-Gilles with its beauty. Between the splendor of Grands-Jardins National Park, Baie-Saint-Paul, La Malbaie and the hamlet of Cap-aux-Oies in between, there was so much to paint – for St-Gilles wanted to capture and share the unique landscapes and ways of life that existed just northeast of Quebec City.

This period of time was when St-Gilles discovered who he truly was and what he valued. It served to strengthen his mastery of his craft

and increased his confidence in his abilities. With strong determination and a rigorous work ethic, he began to envision and believe in the artist that he would become.

His Artistic Career

In the early 1970s, St-Gilles made up his mind to present his first exhibit. He worked around the clock for over six months to prepare for his first solo show in Quebec City, which consisted of forty original pieces. He was seeking both artistic recognition and financial independence. People who came to the exhibit noted the inventiveness and skillfulness of St-Gilles’s watercolours, yet sales barely covered his expenses – clearly, financial success was not going to happen overnight. Nevertheless, the success of St-Gilles’s

L’Anse à la Cabane, Bassin, Iles-de-la-Madeleine, Qc, oil on canvas, 46" x 54"







above, Campement cri, Lac Mistassini, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"
 previous page, Vent d'ouest, Ile-aux-Perroquets, Archipel Mingan, Qc, oil on canvas, 30" x 50"



right, St-Pierre, Ile-d'Orléans, Qc, oil on canvas, 60" x 44"

first solo show paved the way for more exhibits. Three exhibits followed in 1980, and the positive response from the art market started to boost his fledgling career.

In the early 80s, St-Gilles met some remarkable people, thanks to an artist reception hosted by the Lieutenant Governor. All major figures of the art world gathered there and St-Gilles henceforth began to move in this crucial and select circle. Great conversations with Rene Richard, Jean-Paul Lemieux, Paul-Vanier Beaulieu and many others gave him a glimpse into their genuine and unassuming personalities.

St-Gilles also started to teach painting in Quebec City around this time. Despite his youth, many people lined up to take his courses. Teaching for over ten years gave him the opportunity to put his knowledge to the test and he learned how to communicate his expertise with conviction. With teaching his own classes came other opportunities

to lecture and give demonstrations around the province, further enhancing his reputation.

In 1981, a strategic meeting took place with Mr. Raphael Shano, the owner of Art et Style Gallery in Montreal. Raphael had a firm grasp of the Quebec art market for paintings, and the work of St-Gilles had caught his eye. That same year, St-Gilles had his first Montreal show at Raphael's gallery, at which he exhibited only his watercolours. These met with limited success because clients were fearful about the fragility of the works on paper; thus, Mr. Shano encouraged St-Gilles to pursue working in oils. The switch proved difficult at first, but with his knowledge of watercolours and his newly acquired expertise in oils, subtle harmonies began to appear in his works. Suddenly, St-Gilles's shows garnered him more financial success and he began to build a loyal clientele and following.

In the years that followed, Raphael Shano continued to guide St-Gilles's career as he



Au pied des Chics Chocs, Rivière Cascapédia, Qc, oil on canvas, 46" x 54"

generously served as the artist's advisor. Raphael's efforts opened the doors to other galleries across Canada for St-Gilles. For instance, he had his first show at the Hollander York Gallery in Toronto in 1983, whereby he became the gallery's first Quebec Landscape painter. At this show St-Gilles presented over 30 paintings of the villages of the St. Lawrence Valley. The luminosity and colour of his compositions spellbound customers.

Due to the outstanding success of this Toronto show, St-Gilles subsequently presented over 20 annual exhibitions in a row. He started holding shows all across Canada, featuring beautiful and high-caliber paintings of his travels to which the art market was exceptionally responsive. He began exhibiting and painting in other countries

as well, developing an international demand and appreciation for his work. Over time, he acquired corporate collectors all around the world. According to St-Gilles, the secret to his success was intense self-discipline and hard work, which prepared him to face new adventures and equipped him to paint the landscapes he encountered along the way skillfully and beautifully.

The Call of the Wild

From the start of his painting career, St-Gilles was always enthralled by the natural beauty around him and drawn to wide-open spaces. The vastness of the countryside still mesmerizes St-Gilles and he ceaselessly strives to capture its play of light and movement in his paintings. To capture more



Le vieux camp, Laurentides, Qc, oil on canvas, 40" x 36"



above, Printemps à Fogo Island, Newfoundland, oil on canvas, 40" x 50"
left, Lever du jour à Rose Harbour, Gwaii Haanas National Park, B.C., oil on canvas, 50" x 40"

of rural Canada, St-Gilles was always taking trips further and further into the wilderness, exploring the beauty and personality of the countryside and the small villages along the way.

In July of 1989 he boarded the "Louis Rochette" – a 300-foot vessel that supplied oil and petroleum to the villages of southeastern Baffin Island. At each stop on the five-week journey, St-Gilles got off the boat and explored his surroundings. He sketched and painted incessantly during these stops, capturing a spectacular world. He was enthralled with the images he saw and a brilliant body of work resulted from the journey. The exhibition of these paintings opened in Hollander York Gallery in Toronto in February of 1990 and was met with huge success. St-Gilles says, "The Arctic left its imprint on my imagination, and images of the Far North still inform and inspire my art."

He also explored the landscapes of western Canada and the Rockies. It took St-Gilles a while

to capture the scale of these vast and enormous spaces, but with each trip he learned a little better how to artistically approach these distinctive environments. In St-Gilles's opinion, the beauty and grandeur of the Alberta and British Columbia national and provincial parks represent some of the most stirring geographic regions of Canada.

The Groupe La Norditude

St-Gilles has stated, "I have always thought that by virtue of discovering the landscapes portrayed in my paintings people would develop a consciousness of their immediate environment, so as to appreciate its merits, take care of it and ensure its conservation." It would appear he was right on the mark.

Several of Canada's pre-eminent artists have since sojourned in the Charlevoix hinterland in order to absorb its tranquility and shimmering north light. In 1997, six of Quebec's best



left, Un détour de la Ste-Marguerite, Saguenay, Qc, oil on canvas, 40" x 40"

landscape artists banded together because of their common artistic appreciation of the park. Painters Bruno Côté, Marcel Fecteau, Jacques Hebert, Paul "Tex" Lecor, Louis Tremblay and St-Gilles met at Lac Pointu. The director of the Grands-Jardins National Park invited them there in an effort to bring support for development of the park. They called themselves Groupe La Norditude, which described one's frame of mind when contemplating this northern habitat. The association endeavoured to build up a collection of paintings that would illustrate the northern mindset that characterizes this country.

What initially brought the Groupe La Norditude together – a bond based upon friendship, environmental contentousness, an appreciation for nature's majesty and a shared hunger for human adventure – has never waned over the years. An exhibit of over fifty works by the Groupe La Norditude was put on display at the Museum of Charlevoix during the summer of 2008. In the history of Canadian painting it has not been often that a group of landscape painters banded together for a common cause.

St-Gilles gladly committed himself to this venture. For him, the group feels like a family of kindred spirits. "The essence of my artistic endeavour has always been to represent human nature in its spatial environment. I seek, through a balance of emotion and intellect, to capture the energy of forms and colours, juxtaposing shadow and light to create a visual atmosphere," says St-Gilles. In this mission he has been wildly successful – he has discovered a unique way of allowing his scenery to express profound emotions and touch something deep inside his viewers. While observing St-Gilles's paintings, we cannot help but hear the rhythm of his waves, feel the sensual caress of his breezes, or feel the warmth of his sunlight on our cheeks.

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