

FASHION IN THE KITCHEN: CAST IRON STOVES IN THE PROVINCE OF QUEBEC, 1900-1914

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The role of aesthetics in the marketing strategies of Quebec's foundries and retailers at the beginning of the 20th century is not well known. This qualitative analysis of published cast iron stove advertisements suggests that the use of aesthetics to market stoves was far more elaborate than the simple alignment with trendy or classic style categories. In fact, aesthetics were the cornerstone of advertising activities aimed at developing and capitalizing on various market segments at a time of burgeoning consumerism.

This paper investigates the sales arguments used in advertising campaigns promoting cast iron stoves at the beginning of the 20th century in the Canadian province of Quebec, and also examines the evolution of model designs during the same time period. Assessing the role of aesthetics in marketing campaigns deployed by foundries and retailers, this study is the first to go beyond taxonomical analyses of cast iron stove design or aesthetical features¹ to explore instead the *purpose* of aesthetical choices. It is also the first investigation of foundries' production that relies on analyses of printed advertisements as data sources. More broadly, the paper adds to the intersection of business and material culture history and to the body of literature suggesting that many early 20th century firm operators in Quebec were indeed sophisticated managers and strategists.²

The early 20th century was a transformational era for craft firms. The time when only rich people could afford "luxury goods" faded with the beginning of mass production,³ which allowed for lower prices.⁴ Seeking to remain competitive and to meet customers' elevated expectations for products infused with both form and function, manufacturers in a variety of industries in the

United Kingdom, Europe, and North America increasingly began to focus on crafting products that were both practical and aesthetical.⁵ At the time, aesthetics were determined by the artisan,⁶ the technology,⁷ and the consumer.⁸

Consistent with this trend of combining practicality and aesthetics, a variety of stoves for a wide range of financial means and tastes abounded in the province of Quebec's marketplace. From small to big, cheap to expensive, and plain to fancy, the variety reflected consumers' rising preference for stoves with not just solid heating properties, but also ornamental value — a piece of furniture that might be worthy of exhibit in their kitchens or living rooms. The increased importance that consumers attached to multiple product choices⁹ and to stove design and appearance coincided with a heightened popular awareness of general fashion trends, as consumers in North America gained enhanced access to specialized trade magazines, catalogues, and department stores and began expecting more of manufacturers.¹⁰

Existing Canadian studies of cast iron goods' aesthetics are found only in the areas of art history¹¹ and material culture history.¹² This literature suggests that in the early 1900s, a foundry's reputation was increasingly a consequence of the beauty of its products. However, this existing scholarship has in no way noted any mercantile purpose to style or aesthetics — just that, to many consumers, appearance represented a consideration more important than price.¹³ This paper challenges this narrow viewpoint and argues that manufacturers and retailers deliberately utilized stove aesthetics to create consumption needs in the market and, consequently, to maximize their revenues and profits.

To test this argument, this study focuses on cast iron stove advertisements published by foundries and large merchants. The latter sold stoves from other producers but also produced and sold one or two of their own models, which were often simplistic. There are good reasons to believe that the early 20th century market could have been sufficiently segmented to allow a profitable strategy based on need creation. First, the range of stove designs was wide. Second, a combination of prior studies of domestic goods produced then shows that firms, in their production decision-making processes, did not identically take into account the tastes of consumers. At one end of the spectrum, some firms based design decisions on the minimum standards that consumers were willing to accept and purchase. Notably, this was the case with mechanized American production which contributed to increasing product choice at lower prices.¹⁴ Those products were designed to accommodate the machine rather than the clients;¹⁵ nevertheless, they often were as diversified as technology allowed,¹⁶ because household product design diversity was a retail success factor.¹⁷ The success of this constrained diversity is also consistent with Americans' limited historical appetite for elaborate stove aesthetics when it impaired functionality, durability, or ease of use.¹⁸ At the opposite end of the spectrum, object design was based on specific demands expressed by buyers who imposed tastes that constrained firms in their exploitation of technologies.¹⁹ The resulting high-end products more typified the Europe and U.K. markets.²⁰ Third, the variety of

cultural backgrounds found in the bilingual province of Quebec likely resulted in more taste diversity than what would be typical of a homogeneously populated similarly sized territory.

This analysis relies on two primary sources of data. The first is a sampling of newspaper and magazine advertisements purchased by 33 foundries and 28 merchants to promote stoves²¹ that were published in 22 Quebec newspapers between 1900 and 1914. The sample of newspapers (totaling 2,553 advertisements) is presented in Table 1. The second main source of data includes six catalogs²² that were published and disseminated by some foundries during the same period. The catalogs provide model pictures, descriptions, prices, and options.

Table 1. Sample of Quebec Province Newspapers Publishing Stove Advertisements between 1900 and 1914

Names	Years of Publication	Language	City	Daily(D/Weekly (W)/Monthly (M)/Annual (A)	# Ads
L'Action Catholique	1907-1912	French	Quebec City	D	57
Almanach du Peuple	1906-1914	French	Montreal	A	13
Le Bien Public	1909-1913	French	Three Rivers	D	6
Le Canadien	1905-1913	French	Montreal	W	5
Le Cultivateur	1902-1906 & 1911-1913	French	Montreal	W	17
Le Devoir	1910-1914	French	Montreal	D	40
L'Éclair	1906	French	Quebec City	W	4
L'Événement	1900, 1904, 1905-1910	French	Quebec City	W	91
L'Événement	1900- 1914	French	Lévis	W	6
La Maison Moderne (Magazine)	1905-1908	French	Montreal	M	28
Le Moniteur du Commerce	1900-1912	French	Quebec City	W	34
Montreal Gazette	1906-1910	English	Montreal	D	10
Montreal Herald	1905-1912	English	Montreal	W	90
Montreal Star	1900-1912	English	Montreal	D	87
La Patrie	1901, 1903, 1904, 1909 & 1910	French	Montreal	D	597
Le Peuple de Montmagny	1900-1915	French	Montmagny	D	324
La Presse	1900-1915	French	Montreal	D	21
Le Prix Courant (Magazine)	1900-1912	French	Montreal	M	70
The Quebec Chronicle	1904-1912	English	Quebec City	D	61
Québec Mercury	1902-1903	English	Quebec City	D	4
Sherbrooke Daily Record	1900-1910 & 1912	English	Sherbrooke	D	177
Le Soleil	1900-1914	French	Quebec City	D	811
Total	1900-1914				2,553

The analyses used to test this paper's argument can be divided into two categories. The first series of analyses are quantitative and, consequently, more factual and objective because they rely on statistics derived from a database of coded information describing each of the 2,553 ads. These statistics are meant to confirm the presence and predominance of aesthetical references in published ads, a pivotal prerequisite to this paper's main argument. The second series of analyses are qualitative and, therefore, more subjective, as they rely on

an interpretation of the images, slogans, descriptions, and names of the stoves. These interpretations probe in more details the purpose of the stove aesthetics.

For the purpose of this paper, the term "aesthetics" is defined broadly as it is in the marketing literature,²³ which suggests that aesthetics can be found in both physical²⁴ and intangible product characteristics. The latter refers to prestige and to symbolic attributes that fulfill consumers' inner need for self-enhancement, social role, or group and political affiliation.²⁵ Consequently, the analyses were structured to assess the presence, predominance, and purpose of physical and intangible aesthetic references in the promotion of stoves.

For quantitative statistical analyses, a database was prepared to record, for each advertisement, the name of the advertiser, its location, the newspaper's name, the geographical area of publication, the date of publication, whether the ad was repeated over the period, the product name, the model, the slogan/description, and the price, when available. Then each ad was classified according to whether it was referring to aesthetic or functional attributes, or both. When applicable, it was further recorded whether aesthetic attributes were associated with physical or symbolic attributes, or both. Other promotional arguments such as quality, reputation, popularity, durability, innovation/technology, performance, and price were also recorded when present in an advertisement.

The use of aesthetics in sales arguments through physical characteristics was also investigated through all pictures found and collected in catalogues and advertisements. Stove images were categorized within existing (i.e., previously published) stylistic categories wherever possible:²⁶ Victorian, Art Nouveau, Louis XIV (Baroque), Gothic, and "decorative process of factory." The Victorian style is directly associated with the Victorian era (1837-1901) in the United Kingdom under the reign of Queen Victoria. Typical Victorian designs include flowers, ribbons, laces, and, more generally, curves. The Art Nouveau style emerged between 1890 and 1910 and privileged overloads of phytomorphic patterns and ossifying lines.²⁷ The art nouveau influence was occasionally mixed with the Victorian style. The Gothic style refers to the medieval era with its cathedrals, castles, armours, chivalry, and courteous love. The Louis XIV style (Baroque) refers to the opulence that characterized the reign of Louis XIV in France. It was very popular until 1850 in Europe and remained a source of inspiration at the turn of the 20th century in North America.²⁸ The "decorative process of factory" is associated with mechanized mass production from which results a modern, standard, and more simplistic style. In addition to style, for each advertisement, the database records each time a description contained the following words or phrases referring to aesthetic characteristics: attractive, beautiful, beauty, design, elegance, fashion, fine art, graceful, handsome, jewel, magnificent, nice, nice appearance, polished, ornament, refined, and sparkling.

44 To assess the use of aesthetics in sales arguments through symbolic references, the database records for each ad whether stove names, slogans, descriptions or patterns contained symbolism regarding prestige, social class, or political affiliation. Prestige references inventoried include ornament, sophistication,

and high-end. Social class references inventoried include monarchy and high-class. Political affiliation references gathered include monarchy, patriotism, and history. Table 2 presents a sample of ads referring to symbolic or other aesthetical features either in the stove name and/or in the promotional slogan or description.

Table 2. Sample of Advertising Slogans and Descriptions Promoting Cast Iron Stove Aesthetical Characteristics and Quality Published by Producers in the Province of Quebec, 1900-1914

Producer's/Names	Stove Models	Symbols	Slogan/Description
McClary	<i>Pandora Range</i>	Mythology	"Rich nickel dress. Elegant and substantial appearance. Made only from the finest grades of iron and steel." (<i>The Sherbrooke Daily Record</i> , November 1905)
McClary	<i>Pandora Range</i>	Mythology	"It's the easiest thing imaginable to get a polish on the Pandora that rivals in brilliance and lustre the finish of high class furniture." (<i>The Quebec Chronicle</i> , August 1907)
Fonderie Bélanger	<i>Le Duc</i>	Monarchy	"This is a stove that will be an ornament for your home" (T) (<i>Le Soleil</i> , August 1903)
Fonderie Bélanger	<i>Le Laurier</i>	Canadian history	"Follow fashion..." (T) (<i>Le Soleil</i> , November 1900)
Fonderie Bélanger	<i>Bijou</i>	Wealth, prestige	"This stove of a new design is very elegant..." (T) (<i>Le Soleil</i> , September 1907)
The Gurney-Massey Co., Ltd	<i>Poêle Chancellor</i>	Monarchy	"It is the best for many reasons, the most attractive in design..." (T) (<i>La Patrie</i> , October 1909)
The Record Foundry Co.	<i>Penn Esther</i>	n.a.	"The Penn Esther has also a commodious warming closet and tea shelves and is throughout, a heavy, durable and handsome range." (<i>Sherbrooke Daily Record</i> , August 1907)

Note: "T" indicates that French descriptions have been translated for the purpose of this paper.

Sources: Bélanger Foundry's Catalog, 1910. Private Collection. Newspapers *Le Soleil*, *La Patrie*, *le Peuple de Montmagny*, *Le Cultivateur*, *La Maison Moderne*, *The Quebec Chronicle*, *The Sherbrooke Daily Record*, and *Montreal Star*, 1900-1914.

All of the 2,553 advertisements collected exhibited pictures of the advertised stoves. This suggests the seller's clear interest in communicating to potential buyers the product's appearance or visible functionalities. Pictures also gave more weight to evocative descriptions and names. They could even supplant them, considering that most of the French population in Quebec was illiterate at the time.²⁹ Illustrated advertisements also were consistent with the emerging conception of consumption as a "show" at a time when goods display rose in popularity with the development of department stores.³⁰

As indicated in Table 3, advertisements containing aesthetical sales arguments were most prevalent, constituting 2,119 (83 percent) of the 2,553 advertisements. Among the advertisements containing aesthetical sales arguments, 1,779 promoted physical characteristics, while 1,335 included symbolic aesthetical

references. Table 3 further shows that functional aspects ranked second, featured in 1,480 (58 percent) of the 2,553 advertisements. The three most prevalent functional sales arguments were, respectively: innovation/technology, performance, and durability. The use of price and reputation as promotional arguments ranked third and fourth respectively, with 14 and 3 percent of the 2,553 ads promoting stoves. These results confirm the predominant use of aesthetics as sales arguments, and this predominance increases the plausibility of a mercantile purpose to aesthetics.

Table 3. Types of Sales Arguments Used in the Promotion of Stoves by Foundries and Merchants of the Province of Quebec, 1900–1914

Sales arguments	Number	Percentage
<i>Aesthetics</i>	2,119	83 %
Physical features	1,779	70
Symbolic references	1,335	52
<i>Functional aspects</i>	1,480	58
Innovation/technology	873	34
Performance	607	24
Durability	192	8
<i>Price</i>	357	14
Producers	11	0
Merchants/producers	329	13
<i>Reputation</i>	77	3
Total	2,553	

Sources: Advertisements collected from twenty-two English and French Quebec newspapers from 1900 to 1914. Refer to Table 1 for source details.

The statistical analyses have limitations, however. First, the corpus of data is limited to publications and other documents that have survived, yet it is clear that many other catalogs and other promotional materials have been lost or destroyed. Second, the categorization methods are somewhat subjective and rely on the researchers' judgment, even though indications were usually unambiguous. The authors are confident that the level of subjectivity was not high enough to instill doubts in the overall findings that aesthetical arguments were predominant in the advertising of stoves during the period under consideration.

The following qualitative analyses probe stoves' physical and symbolic aesthetical references in more detail to assess their purpose. The most striking finding regarding physical features is the variety of styles depicted in pictures. As mentioned earlier,³¹ several influences were present at the turn of the 20th century: Victorian, Art Nouveau, Louis XIV, Gothic, and "the decorative process of factory." With their floral patterns, lace details, and central oval forms in some of their superior parts, stoves like the *Prince Crawford* by Bélanger, the

Imperial Oxford by Gurney-Massey, and the *Prince of Wales* by Clendinneng & Son are good examples of traditional Victorian inspiration. (See Figure 1 for an example of this style.) Stoves like the *GEM* by Bélanger (which featured bubble patterns), the *Northwest* by McClary (which contained an engine image), and the *Carnival* by Clendinneng & Son (which was decorated with winter scenes)³² are all examples of the Art Nouveau style, characterized by decoration overloads often made of floral designs, curved or ossifying lines,³³ and local topics (Figure 2). Some illustrations of Gothic style stoves are the *Bijou* by Bélanger and by Bernier & Bernier, the *Laurier* and the *Duke* by Bélanger, and the *Grand Universal* by Clendinneng & Son. That style (featured in Figure 3) was still present in stove design at the end of the 19th century in the United States.³⁴ Plausibly, the presence of that style in Quebec could have been inspired by its use in the United States, although its origins are European. Some stove designs, like the *Perfect Idea* by Guelph Stove, also refer to the Louis XIV style's opulence (Baroque style) (Figure 4). Finally, some stove models, such as the *First Royal* by Thomas Davidson or the *Leader Square* by Clendinneng & Son, exemplify the new "decorative process of factory." These models exhibit more repetitive, more standard, and often simpler patterns³⁵ resulting from thorough processes of production standardization in large-scale industry. Figure 5 captures that style.

Figure 1. The *Imperial Oxford* by Gurney-Massey

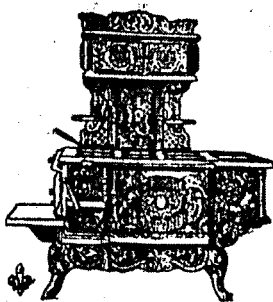


Figure 2. The *GEM* by Bélanger

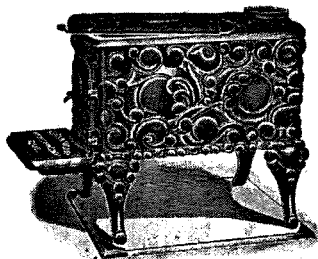


Figure 3. The *Grand Universal* by Clendinneng & Son

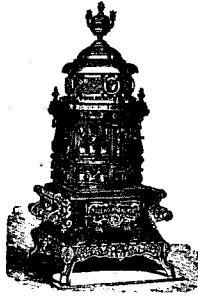


Figure 4. The *Perfect Idea* by Guelph Stove

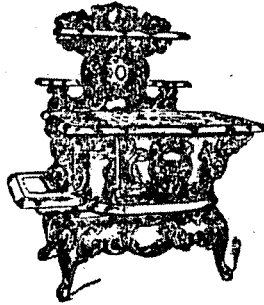
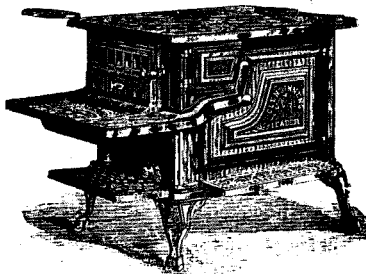


Figure 5. The *Leader Square* by Clendinneng & Son



Source: Newspaper ads, Bélanger Foundry's catalogues (1908 and 1913). Studies from M. Lessard, *Objet Ancien du Québec. La vie domestique* (Montréal: Les Éditions de l'Homme, 1994); M. Moussette, *Le chauffage domestique au Canada. Des origines à l'industrialisation* (Sainte-Foy: Laval University Press, 1983).

Written sales arguments also reveal that foundries and merchants gave particular attention to ornamentation, fashion, beauty, sophistication, richness, and elegance in their product design. For example, Eusèbe Picard specified that the *Econome* stove “is the ideal for housewives, an ornament for houses.”³⁶

48 Foundries consistently emphasized the visual aspect more often than other

aspects. For example, Bélanger built its reputation with the slogan, "My beautiful Bélanger stove." Individual models like the *Bijou* were famous for their beauty. In fact, Quebec foundries seem to have been more concerned with the appearance of their products than with price competition at a time when uniform pricing was not yet a trend.³⁷ The usual absence of price in advertisements reinforces the central role of aesthetics in the production and marketing processes. To finalize their designs, owners often relied on the creativity of their artisans and on the emergence of "professional taste"³⁸ in the province, and they sometimes even traveled to Europe and to the United States to spy or trade novel design ideas.³⁹

The last piece of analysis of physical characteristics is a longitudinal examination of stove pictures. The evolution of design provides empirical support for Styles' assertion that "a taste for visual novelty is implicit in the shift to lighter, less durable products."⁴⁰ Styles had developed his assertion based on observations in the United Kingdom during the development of mass consumption. This also applies to the market of stoves in Quebec during this period, according to a chronological review of pictures. The shift to lighter and less durable stoves allowed Quebecers to change decor and to follow fashion trends. Some Bélanger slogans explicitly claimed: "Follow fashion by buying ..."⁴¹ Consistently, mentions of new designs in the promotion of the same models invited consumers to buy a new fashionable and trendy stove. For example, Bélanger noted for the *Bijou* in 1907 that it was a "new design."⁴²

A closer look at symbolic aesthetic references within sales arguments suggests that stove manufacturers' concern for aesthetic went beyond the simple alignment of their design choices with trendy styles.⁴³ The words referring to aesthetics used in advertisements were high in meaning. They evoked an image of what the client presumably was seeking — an atmosphere for the house, or a sense of prestige.⁴⁴ For instance, McClary, in an advertisement for the *Pandora Range*, referred to the pride of owning a nice stove: "a *Pandora* owner is always proud of the impression this magnificent Range has on his neighbours."⁴⁵ Similarly, the *Rhéaume Laporte* stove, from La Fonderie Canadienne, had "an elegance of shapes that [made] it the desideratum of all good kitchens."⁴⁶

Evocative stove names further conveyed symbolism, an idea of the image the manufacturer wished to project to consumers to catch their attention and imagination. In some cases, stove names directly suggested aestheticism: *Bijou* [Jewel], *Wilder Beauty*, *New Forest Beauty*, *Superb Favorite*, *Clark Jewel* or *Ruby*, for example. Stoves also commonly were endowed with royalty-related names such as *King*, *Duke*, *Prince Crawford*, *Prince Royal*, *Prince of Wales*, *Majesty*, and *Imperial Oxford*. This trend was similar to that prevailing in England during the mid-Victorian era, where emerging middle classes used material goods to fulfill social aspirations,⁴⁷ thereby increasing the "meaning" of goods.⁴⁸ "The middle classes were obsessed with securing household products that expressed individuality, self-differentiation, and luxury by means of visual diversity."⁴⁹ Middle classes' appetite for socially fulfilling goods was also observed in the United States in the early 20th century in the pottery and

glassware industry where “rich and poor invested a good deal of meaning in the durable goods that made houses into homes.”⁵⁰

Stove names further aimed at fulfilling the need for political affiliation within two distinct segments of the Quebec population — the imperialists and the nationalists — while prestige and social class aspirations were apparently common to all. Imperialism refers to faithfulness to the England crown and was more prevalent in the Anglophone segment of the population. It was evoked in monarchical stove names such as *Prince Crawford*, *Royal*, *Prince of Wales*, *Majesty*, *Imperial Oxford*, *King*, and *Duke*. Imperialist references were also located in emblematic patterns such as the *Prince of Wales’* feathers.⁵¹ Nationalism refers to French Canadian history and was embedded in stoves named after provincial and national political history. Examples include the *Union* by Bernier & Bernier, which refers to the 1867 Confederation of Canada, as well as the *Laurier* by Bélanger, named after a former prime minister. On the latter, the face of Sir Wilfrid Laurier was moulded in the stove’s decorative patterns.⁵² In an era where women lacked political rights, these references suggest that they might have been at least able to express to some extent their political positions through stove choices.⁵³ Other nationalist patterns included the maple leaf, the beaver, the lily flower (*Royal* by Bélanger), the deer of America (*New Forest Beauty* by Findlay Bros Co.), and scenes of winter (*Carnival* by Clendinneng & Son).⁵⁴ Finally, stove names like the *Jacques Cartier* by Bernier & Bernier⁵⁵ referred to French Canadian history. In these myriad ways, producers were embedding stoves with a range of physical and intangible aesthetical attributes that were able to satisfy a wide array of customer aspirations in an increasingly consumerist society.

Globally, the results of the analyses provide support for this paper’s argument that the role of aesthetics in stove design was broader than building a foundry’s reputation or following fashion trends. The purpose of stove aesthetics was to create consumption needs in the market to allow manufacturers and retailers to maximize their revenues and profits. Many findings point to that conclusion. First, stove aesthetics were the most prevalent sales argument in advertisements that manufacturers and retailers purchased from publishers or printers. Had stove aesthetics been the random result of design determinants (such as the ability of artisans or the design latitude from the available technology), it is unlikely that aesthetics would be the very most prevalent sales argument, and it would be even less plausible that symbolic references would be embedded in more than half of the advertisements. Second, it also appears improbable that consumers, seeking good-looking or evocative models, mainly drove the evolution in stove aesthetics, rather than manufacturers and retailers in search of profits primarily driving the trend. The variety of influences in stove design at the time appears far greater than what the local market, especially illiterate French Canadians,⁵⁶ could have demanded. Third, findings reveal clues that the stove market was segmented in several ways. There were richer and poorer consumers,

50 Anglophones and Francophones, imperialists and nationalists and, implicit

from the data, fashion followers and more conservative buyers, the latter more focused on performance and durability. A segmented market is conducive to the pursuit of profitability from selling product attributes other than the primary functional purpose. The observation of symbolism in stove promotion and the observation of consumerist patterns reinforce the plausibility of lucrative market segments where consumers were willing to pay premiums for attributes beyond functionality. This study consequently complements taxonomical analyses of design found in the material culture history literature. Whereas those studies situate foundry owners of the early 20th century as artisans-in-chief searching for a reputation based on the beauty of their products, this paper repositions foundry owners as astute managers, marketers, and strategists.

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NOTES

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