

Art at A&P

Metalsmith Paul Beau Created a Masterwork for the Chapel

While sitting in church during the Sunday service, my eyes often wander toward the elegant wrought-iron screen that separates the side chapel from the rest of the church. The filigree of finely wrought, black iron scrolls spans two arched openings and closes off the small chapel, creating an intimate space for less formal services. It is the work of Montreal-born metal craftsman Paul Beau (1871-1949), who in the first decades of the twentieth century was one of the most prominent metalsmiths in Canada.

Beau was perhaps best known in Montreal for the brass and copper jardinières, vases, desk sets, and coffee services he created by hand and sold through the Canadian Handicrafts Guild or from his Mountain St. shop in the period from about 1907 to 1917. Beau's "artistic brasses," as he advertised them, were as highly regarded for wedding gifts as silver from Montreal's well-known Henry Birks & Sons. Contrasting the

golden lustre of brass with the reddish tones of copper in his pieces, Beau borrowed freely from various styles, hammering out natural leaf shapes inspired by English Arts and Crafts design or using geometric patterns from the antique. He insisted on handcrafting each piece, according to the traditional art of metalsmithing.

In 1919, Beau's reputation was such that he was invited to carry out all the wrought iron work for the rebuilding of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, which had been destroyed by fire in 1916. For seven years, Beau managed a workshop of blacksmiths and craftsmen on Parliament Hill to produce the ornate andirons, fire-tools, fireplace fenders and decorative railings and grilles, which may still be seen throughout the offices, reading rooms and halls of the House of Commons and Senate chambers.

Afterwards, in about 1933, Beau was commissioned to create the screen for the Church of

St. Andrew & St. Paul, after a design by architect H. B. Stout. The left panel incorporates the heraldic coat-of-arms of the Meredith family, who donated the chapel to the church, and the right panel shows a shield with the figures of St. Andrew and St. Paul. If you look closely at details in the screen, you can admire the leafy wrought-iron scrolls ending in small rosettes, the finials of lilies and tulips, and even a small pumpkin in this showpiece of metalsmithing.

Paul Beau continued working up until his death in 1949 at the age of 78. The war years were difficult for Beau, because metal was scarce, and people no longer wanted to afford handcrafted wares. For many years his work was forgotten until about the 1980s, when collectors and museums began to rediscover the beauty of his art. The church may be proud to have this masterwork by one of Canada's top metal artists.

Rosalind Pepall



Photo by Brian Merrett