



The master and his craft: Foster is hands-on with planing, steaming, bending, sanding and assembly of the woods that go into these traditional canoes.

ART

Vessels for the Soul

Carlisle artisan Roger Foster finds deep comfort in a canoe | BY TOR LUKASIK-FOSS

Canoeing, right up there with maple syrup and hockey, is one of the divine marks of being Canadian, and as such has a mythology and symbolism surrounding it which can be downright overwhelming. An Aboriginal design, modernized only slightly over the last hundred years by things like fibreglass and canvas, succinctly expresses exactly the kind of relationship humans should have with their rivers and lakes: quiet, non-invasive, graceful, respectful, traditional. To be able to canoe well is the fantasy of every good Canadian. To make your own canoe is a sort of final mystical step in becoming one with the nation's history, land and water. As achievements go, it's like becoming Canada's equivalent of a kung fu master.

As I'm driving west on Highway 6 toward Freulton to interview Roger Foster, a master builder of traditional cedar strip and wood canvas canoes, it dawns on me that I am nervous. I have canoed just enough in my life to feel its looming cultural and spiritual weight. I also hide a litany of secret shames. My dirty Kevlar canoe is improperly stored in my small backyard, and has plastic seats. I still don't know my J-stroke. I have never watched Bill Mason's seminal NFB

film *Waterwalker* and can only remember patchy things about *Paddle to the Sea*. Turning off 6 on to Concession 11 toward Foster's home and his business, the Carlisle Canoe Company, I wonder if the steely gaze of the boat builder will reveal me for the spoon-fed city boy I know myself to be. I'm also worried that meeting a canoe maker might deflate the high esteem I have always reserved for them. Maybe Foster's whole enterprise is one of making canoes for the wealthy: pretty, precious, fragile things that cost a fortune, are never used, and are purchased as sort of bauble to be placed beside SeaDoos in million-dollar Muskoka cottages.

“The canoe is a very sensuously shaped object. It is all curves; nothing connects to anything else at a right angle.”

ROGER FOSTER

Luckily, all of my anxieties are quelled the minute I step out of my car and shake hands with the man. Roger Foster manages to sidestep the stereotypes I have constructed for him, while still convincing me he's exactly the sort of person who should be making canoes. An affable, approachable man, Foster is neither flaky nor inscrutable about his trade. He has for the last 11 years cultivated a business whose foun-

dations combine an attention to workmanship and detail, a respect for materials and traditions, and an intense and communal bond with his students and clients. He's as dedicated to the building process as he is to the finished product, and he is eager to describe his work in the wider context of Canada, its environment, history and identity.

Foster entered into this life 11 years ago. Prior to that, he had invested 15 years in a career installing wagering computers at racetracks. Although he found the work extremely gratifying, a promotion into management took him away from the hands-on troubleshooting he loved, and made

him more aware of the shaky ethics that surround gambling culture. He quickly formed a desire to find work that was honest, physical and with some kind of resonance to it.

“I was sitting with my dad out in the backyard, and asked him what I should do with my life. I was leaning on the family canoe at the time. He said, ‘Why don't you start by fixing that thing?’ And that basically was it. I knew I