



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 fiberglass 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 Freleton 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

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had in my head some romantic image of whitening out boat ribs around a campfire while the deer walked by, but after my dad planted the idea, I just couldn't shake it off. I just had to learn exactly how it was done."

Foster began apprenticing under Ron Frenette, owner of Canadian Canoes, a small factory based in Toronto at the time. He worked out of Frenette's space for 18 months, the first half as an apprentice, the last half as a tenant, building his own canoes in Frenette's shop. When Foster's business became too big to continue sharing space with Frenette, he relocated onto his current property just outside of Freelon. He converted a large shed into a small sawmill, and built an addition, which gave him two small indoor spaces for assembling and finishing. His facility is conveniently tucked into an 11-acre property, which ably contains the small amount of equipment noise, allows him to harvest small quantities of wood and most importantly, enjoy a mind-clearing walk whenever the need arises.

The Carlisle Canoe Company offers classes in canoe building and paddle carving, and does restoration and repair work alongside its primary focus constructing two kinds of canoe. The cedar strip canoe or wood epoxy strip canoe is one where thin strips of tongue and groove white cedar are arranged and glued lengthwise to form the shape of the vessel. These strips are held in place and further strengthened by a sheet of transparent fiberglass on both the inside and out, sanded so as to be utterly invisible. The second style is a wood canvas canoe, in which wider strips of cedar are steamed and twisted into position both lengthways to form the shape of the canoe as well as ribbed along the interior. Canvas is then stretched on the outside, waterproofed and painted. Both canoes are priced roughly the same, both require approximately 140 hours to construct and both vary only marginally in weight and strength. It is mostly a matter of taste whether customers will choose the more traditional look of canvas over the opulence of the cedar strip canoe.

Because of the time and care they take to construct, and the fact that each boat requires around \$2,000 in wood and material costs alone, finding the right kind of clientele for his products is a challenge. This is a sensitive point for Foster, because he definitely does not want his canoes to be considered items of ostentation. He wants these canoes to go in the water, and be used by families who will cherish them for generations.

"When I completed my apprenticeship I realized there was no way to compete with \$800

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dollar Kevlar canoes, and I was looking for something that would set me apart from other craftsmen. So I hooked into the idea of selling the experience. Instead of hiring assistants, I began talking my customers into helping, get them hooked on the experience of watching their own boat come together... Soon I realized that there were all kinds of people — all of them salt of the earth people — who wanted this experience. Women who have never held a tool, businessmen who have retired after being behind a desk all their lives, people recovering from injuries sent up here by their physiotherapists — they all find something very empowering about the experience working at a project of this scale. And it doesn't hurt that they save themselves a considerable chunk of money by providing most of the labour."

Although Foster oversees and assists with every aspect of the process, he actively encourages his customers to put in as much time as they are able, and participate in every stage of the process. This incorporates not only the planing, steaming, bending, sanding and assembly of the boat hull, but can also include paddle carving and hand-weaving rattan into the seats (called "caning").

"The canoe is a very sensuously shaped object. It is all curves; nothing connects to anything else at a right angle. The scale and weight of the canoe is also sort of perfect — big enough to have a grandeur, but small enough to allow the customer to form a personal relationship with it. Canoe making allows the builder to think artistically, to make all kinds of aesthetic decisions regarding how to lay in the wood, or any of the finishing details."

Building a canoe is a journey, and when the process is finished, the customer has cultivated a deep sense of accomplishment, and often an entrenched, ongoing friendship with Foster himself. This is how Foster justifies a job that pays substantially less than the one he was used to, and is why he won't strive to build his business any bigger than the one-man operation he has set up for himself now, regardless how busy he may be.

"I make a third of the income I did when I was working with computers. But I don't want to expand my operation because I don't want to lose the hands-on aspect of the work. Plus, if you're in a situation where you can keep the wolves from the door financially, do work that makes you happy, and be able to talk a walk in the woods any time you like, why would you want to change anything?"

You can contact the Carlisle Canoe Company at 905.659.0883.