

Down the St. Lawrence in a paper boat

(https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/the-st-lawrence-in-a-paper-boat)

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Jul 25, 2012 — Rowboats are a common sight on the St. Lawrence River, but a *paper* skiff is making its way through the Thousand Islands and down river to Montreal this week. The 17-foot boat was made by a group of New York City artists at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton.



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Jean Barberis and Ben Cohen test their paper skiff around the docks at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton.

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The urban artist/boat builders spent the last two weeks using the museum's collection and resources to build a new boat and learn more about the boating culture on the St. Lawrence. Their residency is a partnership with the museum's

current exhibition of maritime-inspired art, called "Floating Through: Boats and Boating in Contemporary Art."

The artists are members of a Brooklyn collective called "Mare Liberum" and approach boat building in a non-traditional way: cheaply and quickly. With a little help from experts at the museum, they completed the boat in two weeks. But, a skiff made of paper? Could it really be rowed 168 miles past islands, through shipping channels and the St. Lawrence Seaway? Todd Moe stopped by the Antique Boat Museum late last week during the final stages of construction.

About five years ago, the Mare Liberum artists started building improvised watercrafts out of found materials such as plywood from local construction sites. Their small wooden boats, or dories, allowed them to get onto and explore the waterways of the city. They also printed and sent off boat plans and how-to guides to artists and others interested in art and boating off the grid.

In the last few years, the artists have built about a dozen dories and kayaks. The boats have been exhibited at various museums and galleries. Ben Cohen, Stephan von Muehlen and Dylan Gauthier are the three artists who created the paper boat currently making its way down the St. Lawrence River.

They built a paper-*mâché* style boat based on the design of a Lake Ontario skiff. One of the artist said, "Last year, we kind of decided that the doors were too hard to build, really. There are things that we would have done differently, so we made a bamboo zip-tie canvas kayak design and we made some of those. And, you know, kind of continued to put boats out in the water in New York with a lot of people, and it kind of happened upon the little art boat scene there and put this show together here."

The artists were invited to do a residency at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton, New York. Gauthier had found paper boats a while ago and said, "I think really, just maybe before we started really building boats, or as we were starting, the story of the paper boat from Troy, New York sort of came across my radar."

The story of an adventurer journalist named Nathaniel Bishop caught his attention. According to Gauthier, Bishop started a trip from Montreal in a cedar canoe. When Bishop heard that paper boats were available in Troy and that they weighed about a third of what their wooden counterparts did, he bought one. Bishop ultimately took a 2,000 mile trip in his paper boat from Troy to Cedar Keys, Florida.

Gauthier said, “It was kind of this adventure story that we had been thinking, and I think every time we went to build a boat, we thought, ‘Is this going to be the paper boat? Do we have enough knowledge now to build a paper boat? How are we going to do it?’ We thought of all different ways of doing it, making molds, using paper pulp that you would actually put into some kind of a mold to build a boat out of.”

When the artists arrived in Clayton two weeks ago, they planned to build two boats and race them. However, the idea of building a paper boat took hold of the artists’ imaginations and they decided to build it instead.

Jean Barberis is the captain of the paper skiff. He has built kayaks and circumnavigated Manhattan, but this is his first trip on the St. Lawrence. He is from France but currently resides in New York City. He said, “I’m an artist and a maker and a curator. But for me it’s all the same, where you’re organizing a show or making a boat, it’s all part of the same practice. And I’m really interested in waterborne art.”

Last year, Barberis co-curated a show called “Seaworthy.” Barberis’ organization Flux Factory, along with two other groups, commissioned a dozen artists to build boats in New York City. The boats were available for the public to go on. Barberis said, “It was this whole, huge project that was all about the experience of being on a boat and the waters of New York. And that’s how I got really interested in working with waterborne art.”

Emmett Smith is curator of watercraft at the Antique Boat Museum. He says that urban environments are often restrictive and crowded. “Being on the water in New York City, which is a city that doesn’t have a lot of water traffic at this point, getting on the water is a good way to make personal space,” said Smith. “And since they’re such a do-it-yourself crew, they struck on building their own boats. Well, when you go to build your own boat, it turns out that some of the easiest boats to build are traditional wooden boat designs.”

According to Smith, the Mare Liberum artists connected to the core mission of the museum in a way that the museum staff had not anticipated. He said, “So it was kind of natural to collaborate and since they were already building traditional dories, and Ben had built an Adirondack guide boat, it made sense for them to come up here and build a boat inspired by our collection.”

Smith says that the artists taught him about the history of paper boat-making that he hadn’t known before. He knew nothing about the company the artists were inspired by before they arrived. He said, “It was wonderful that we had a boat they could use as a mold, and now they’re going away with a really lovely traditional boat, and they’ve learned a lot about traditional boat-building as well as experimenting with paper boat-making. So it’s been a really great project.”

There are a lot of boaters and boat-builders in the area that are talented and perfectionistic when it comes to recreating traditional boats, according to Smith. He says that this contrasts with the Mare Liberum artists who make boats in 10 hours with the main goal of getting out onto the water.

“The purpose is not to build a beautiful boat that worships the craftsmanship of the past. And so this is kind of a halfway point between that, where they’re sort of holding a mirror to us and prioritizing getting out on the water, and they’re also learning a lot about traditional craftsmanship and things like that while working in our shop,” said Smith. “In the end, they’re going to have a great boat and they’re going to do a boat trip the likes of which we haven’t done here in a long time.”

Skiffs like the one that the artists made were primary modes of transportation throughout the islands about 100 years ago. The Mare Liberum artists' skiff is not entirely made of paper; the gunwale, ribs and oars of the boat or are all made of wood. The artists built the paper skin first by using a century-old skiff as the mold. Then, they integrated the wood frame into it.

Ben Cohen, one of the artists, built an Adirondack guide boat at his family's camp and oversaw the construction of the paper skiff. He said, "It's a new and exciting way to try to build a boat sort of from the inside out; start with something old, and get something new out of it. You know, this boat is all but dead, and we can sort of bring it back to life in its next life with a different material and a little time."

Though the idea of building and rowing a paper boat may seem strange today, but it was a prosperous industry in Troy during the late 1800s. Elisha Waters and his son were paper box manufacturers that began to make boat hulls from paper. In 1875, the local press credited them with having the largest boat factory in the United States.

Gauthier says that this technology has been largely forgotten and said, "I think most people think of those little folding boats that kids make that look like a hat; I mean this technology kind of hasn't been used for a hundred-something years. So we'll see; it depends on how well the river treats it and how well these guys manage to steer clear of rocks and other obstacles, whether it lasts. But like I said, it's something that you can patch again if you get a whole in it. That's one thing that's so nice about the paper: you can fix it."

"One of the great elements of this project has been watching skepticism turn into enthusiasm. Because when they first brought it in and said, 'We're going to build a boat out of paper and row to Montreal,' you know, that's ambitious. But they've really made it happen; the boat looks great and people have really realized that, you know, you can do anything," said Smith. "These are unlimited people that

have shown up, and it's wonderful to see it come together. And I think that it's really built enthusiasm, and the folks in the shop have been really excited to help them figure out how to frame and rib and things like that.”

“And I've got to say, we were skeptical at first too, a little bit. You know, because we just had faith in these 100-year-old texts about those paper crafts, but it turns out it actually works,” concluded one of the artists.

The paper skiff is currently near Rockport, Ontario and is heading towards Brockville. If it survives the journey to Montreal, the artists say that their paper boat will end up back in Brooklyn where it will join their fleet of dories as part of the waterborne art scene in the city.

Related links

Antique Boat Museum (<http://www.abm.org/>)

More on the project, and lots of pictures, at Mare Liberum's website (<http://thefreeseas.org/>)

Museum Selection Discounts (<https://www.nexusonline.org.uk/discounts/museum-selection-voucher-codes/>)

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