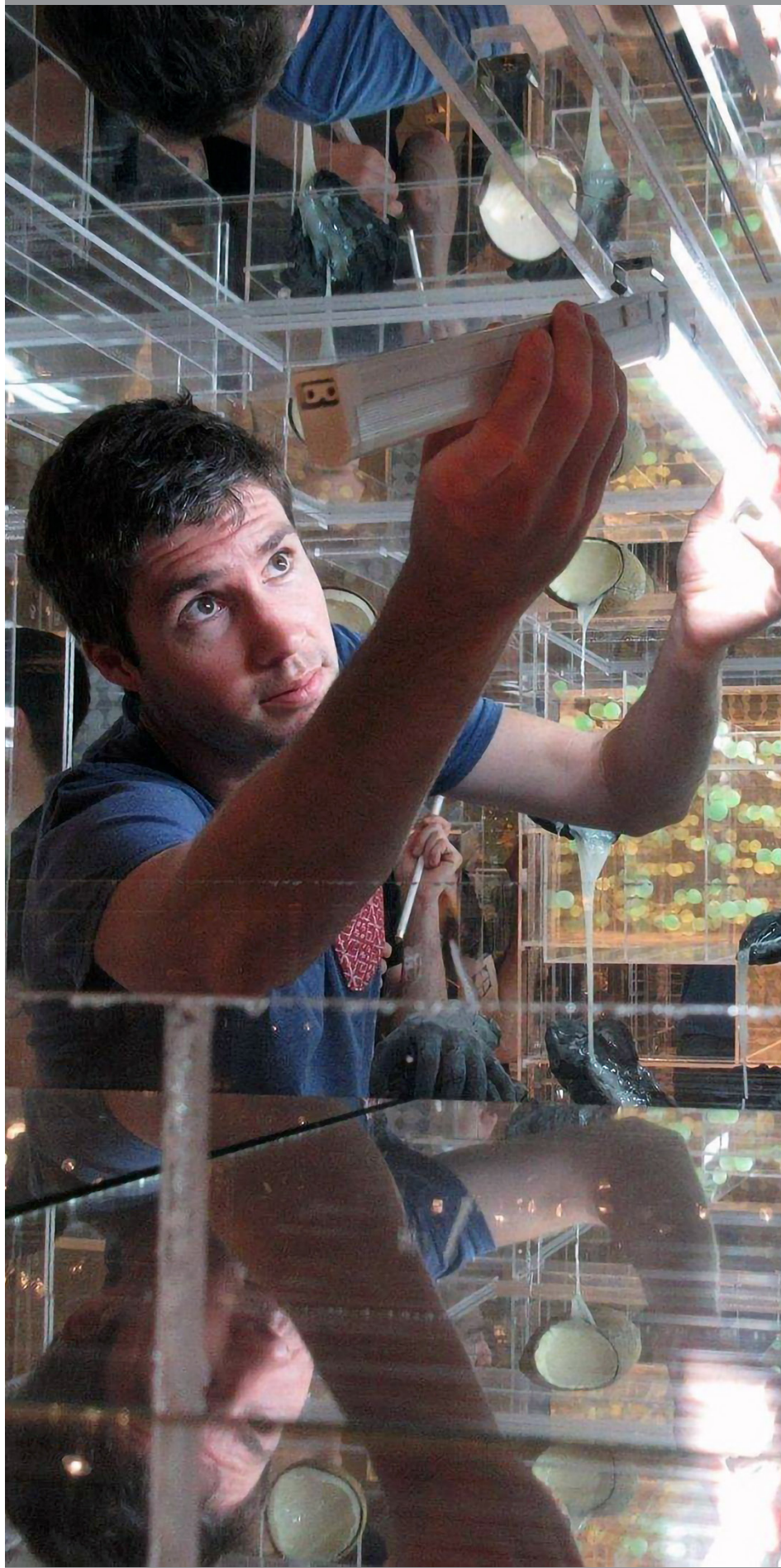


HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE

MOUNTMAKER  
MUSÉE NATIONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS DU QUÉBEC  
QUÉBEC, CANADA



# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE

IMF's Social Media Manager since 2020, Pierre-Luc Brouillette has brought mountmaking to a new dimension with his curiosity, skill, and humor. In this interview, we discuss how he got started in mountmaking, how his passion for the work has evolved, and the importance of taking your own measurements.

**Shelly: How did you find your way to the mountmaking profession?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I started working in the museum industry in 2009 when I was 23 years old. Very young. I have now worked at MNBAQ (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec) for close to 15 years and I have been making mounts for about 12 years, but I started out unexperienced in the museum industry. At each exhibition project I was involved with, I learned more and started getting more and more fascinated by how the works were installed and how objects can be secured while on display.

My mountmaking journey started with an interesting project. It started with an exhibition which was a loan from the Cluny Museum. The Cluny is a medieval museum, and they hired the museum where I work, which is a fine art museum. At that time, we didn't have any mountmaking services in house, so they had to hire a contractor to do the work. Things didn't get done as expected, so we needed to redesign and rebuild all the mounts. I just raised my hand and said, "Hey, I think I might be able to do this". So, I tried at first. I made the whole project without soldering or welding because we didn't have any welding equipment. We were just bending rods and covering them with shrink tubing. I made the mounts with multiple branches coming up from the pedestal which then came around to grab the objects. I was inventing ideas for myself, because I wasn't aware of what was going on in the field of mountmaking. I was inventing mechanical connections that were very challenging to make without any tapping and just by bending metal. This was the beginning of a kind of love story for me.

**Shelly: It seems like a kind of dysfunctional love story... :)**

**Pierre-Luc:** Yes, but the couriers were satisfied with the results because it ended up working well. Even though it developed a different aesthetic with multiple branches coming out of the pedestal, in the end, it offered the same safety for the objects. The presentation of the mounts was more obvious than it could have been, but everything went well all in all. I made about 35 mounts for objects in a week. There was no time for painting or coating, so it was just shrink tubing for finishing the rods because we had no time for painting. I feel it went pretty well for a first start with the limited resources we had at this time.

**Shelly: Jumping right in! This also leads naturally into the next question, which is about what kind of education or professional experience you might have had that gave you the confidence to offer to do that first bit of mountmaking?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I studied visual arts at university, and I started working at the museum at the end of my bachelor's degree at the university. When I first started at the university, my main occupation was in the metal workshop, and I was always working late and creating artworks with many metal components. We had a very good technician in-house at the university that taught me how to work with industrial machines, welding, and brazing, so I had a very good start with that too.

The artwork I was creating at that time was a lot of miniature work, so I found it easy to work with very small things. It's not even just an ease though, it's more like a passion for working with very small fields of work. I guess that might have helped me to care about small objects and fragile things. I was already into it before starting to work at the museum, but in a different path.



## TESTING THE TINY

Brass mount for a miniature ivory Shotgun, Unknown artist (2005.953)  
(COVER IMAGE: 2018 installation work inside *The Flux and the Puddle*, Artwork by David Almedj)

# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE

I think the quality of the mounts that you make doesn't rely only on the tools you have, because it's more about the consistency of the solutions that you are making when you're working on a show. It's better to have a kind of guideline for the aesthetic of the mounts that you are creating for different applications and objects. So even if it's very low tech, if everything has a kind of similarity between the mounts that participates in the general aesthetic of the exhibition, whatever tools you have or whatever budget you have, you can still make something really interesting, and something that is also as pleasing for the visitor as for the conservation of the objects. You can get used to an aesthetic as you are walking through the exhibition, and after a moment you just forget that the mount is there because it's a part of the furniture of the exhibition.

**Shelly: Can you share anything about what your day-to-day work looks like?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I can try, but from day to day, it's never the same. I work in a fine art museum, so my daily challenges are very much like roller coasters. Some days I'm working on a small painting, sometimes I could be making mounts for a whole installation that has many different parts, and sometimes, it might be found objects that an artist intentionally installed into their exhibition. It's never the same kind of challenge. This makes my day-to-day work pretty hard to describe.

I spend a lot of time working with curators and conservators, viewing the objects together. Especially if we are working with living artists, we need to be in communication to see what fits the best for the works. Most of the time, artists have never heard of what a mount is or

how it can help the work, so we need to make this part of the education. Often, I need to make some documents and plans to explain the intentions and why we are making mounts for objects. To respect the integrity of an artwork, most of the time, a mount has to be less visible. There's also a lot of balance required between the aesthetics and what's an acceptable risk for the work. Sometimes we might prepare a whole scenario of making a mount, and in the end, the artist might prefer to take their own risks without it. If the work is in the artist's home collection and it doesn't cause a security issue, you have to take that decision and kind of leave it like it is. It's still our duty to attempt to educate and let them know that there is a mountmaking solution that exists and can help. We can offer a different approach. Sometimes, I think my day to day is mostly education and compromise.

We do tend to have different standards regarding the finish and the aesthetic of the mounts at MNBAQ, because our collection is divided by periods. We have ancient art, we have modern art, we have contemporary art, which is the period between 1970 and 2000, and we have actual art, which is where we work mostly with living artists. We tend to have different aesthetic approaches with different objects. When we are intentionally making mounts obvious, the approach that we prefer is to make an obvious connection between the furniture, the design, and the mount. Most of the time, the mount is painted the same color as the background or the pedestal to make it a part of the presentation furniture. As much as possible though, the first approach is always to try to make the mount invisible.



---

#### 2019 : BOOK MOUNT

Temporary ethafoam book cradle for templating an acrylic book mount

“ ... MOUNTMAKING IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL JOB IN THE WORLD BECAUSE THE COMMUNITY WE HAVE COMES FROM SO MANY DIFFERENT TRADES THAT ARE PUT IN COMMON. ”

# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE

**Shelly: Does your team ever make storage mounts?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I work in the exhibition department, so we are mostly making mounts for presentation and display. There's another team in the collections department who makes all the storage mounts. On rare occasions, the same mount that goes on display can also be used for storage depending on the needs. In my department, we mostly make crates and exhibition mounts.

**Shelly: Would you say that your work is mostly done independently, mostly team based, or some percentage of one or the other?**

**Pierre-Luc:** It is always team based, because when I design mounts, I need to work closely with the conservators, designers, and curators. So, depending on the need, one of these actors can come up to be more important in the design of the mount. This is a part of my role, to see how I can develop the design of the mount and with which people I need to mostly refer during the process of creating the mount.

**Shelly: Now we get to the "favorites" section of the interview. What is your favorite thing about mount making?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I'll say that for me, it's the challenge of balancing preventive conservation and accessibility. I think this is a kind of perpetual challenge that you can never solve perfectly. You always have to try to do your best, and you may have to reinvent your whole working process, so this is a very creative part of the job. This is a perfect field to participate in innovation and exchange with community because we are all grinding our gears to figure out ways we can create a mount that fits as perfectly as possible, while at the same time trying to avoid manipulating the object. It's a kind of a paradoxical way to work. You can constantly reinvent your process, depending on the objects because from object to object, they never have the same kind of fragility or issues. I find this very fascinating.

A kind of guideline I set for myself when I work is that I try to avoid touching the object as much as possible. If I can make a mount without touching the object at all, this is a win for me. It is very hard to do, but sometimes it's possible just with measurements and templates, we can achieve that goal.

**Shelly: Do you find that over the years, as people recognize your skills and what you can bring to the table, that you are invited to more of the conversations earlier than maybe you were in the beginning?**

**Pierre-Luc:** Yes, I am. It took a long time before I was able to achieve the title of Mountmaker in my institution, but since then, I am more involved in the conversations, and I have also credit for a part of the designs that I am making in the mounts.

**Shelly: Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on?**

**Pierre-Luc:** My favorite projects are always the ones based on the artworks from our own collection, especially for permanent exhibitions or for traveling exhibitions. Because for those, we have easy access to the objects. We can reflect better on how and what we are doing. The deadlines are most of the time more reasonable. So, these are my favorite projects.

I think that if I needed to choose one, I would say that the exhibition that I presented at the 2022 IMF, Manasie Akpaliapik. Inuit Universe, would be one. This was probably my favorite show that I ever worked on because it was a show that brought together all the challenges that I like tackling the most in mountmaking: very fragile objects in precarious balance using organic materials. I needed to be very creative in the solutions that I proposed.

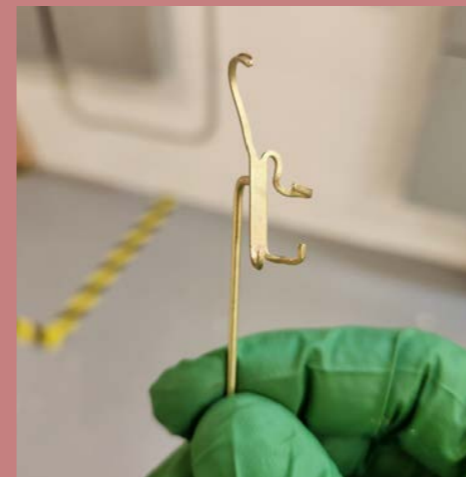
Manasie, like many Inuit artists, is always working to the limit of the material and balancing the objects. So, if you make a mount that is obvious, you are kind of breaking the magic of the object. This was the main challenge of this exhibition. All of the sculptures are made of organic materials like whalebone, caribou antler, ivory. These tend to be very unstable materials and very fragile. They can crumble easily. Even the assembly of the works are made with organic materials: a caribou antler might just fit inside a whalebone with a huge mass of ivory on top. It's just balanced. The artist, when he works in his studio, is just putting the pieces together and trying to find the magic spot where everything's held together perfectly.

Another interesting thing about this show is that the curator asked me to create a faux finish on the mounts, so this



## 2023 : MOUNT SPOTLIGHT

Recto-verso medaillon, William Berczy. *Portrait of Pierre-Amable De Bonne*, 1808. Watercolor on Ivory & human hair. 6.3 x 5 cm. (1991.103.01)



## 2023 : MOUNT SPOTLIGHT

Unknown Artist, *Women and Man*, between 1960 and 2000. Ivory. 3.7 x 1.7 x 0.6 cm. (2020.270)



## 2023 : MOUNT SPOTLIGHT

A piece of dartek is used as a temporary barrier before padding the mount with sueded polyethylene. Unknown artist. *Child and his dog*, between 1960 and 2000. Ivory, 6.6 x 4.9 x 8 cm. (2020.265)

# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE

gave me an opportunity to try a new paint. This is when I started working with Gamblin Conservation Colors. I think I wouldn't have had a chance to try it if I didn't have a good timeline to experiment with it. I'm pretty happy because it has become the main process that I use for painting mounts for now.

**Shelly: Do you have any "lessons learned" stories that you'd like to tell? Anything that had a big effect on how you work now?**

**Pierre-Luc:** I would say, the biggest lesson I have learned over the years is to always take your own measurements and don't rely on database measurements. Trying to adapt the design of your mounts to be very flexible is also advice I would offer. You're never safe from a last-minute change or a mistake in measurement. I deal with this by sometimes adding telescopic parts to the mount. Sometimes, when I make a deck mount, I see if I can figure out ways for the same mount to become a wall mount. Also, I am trying more and more to create mounts that are designed to be able to switch parts of the mount in order to create a new one by reusing tubing and telescopic assemblage and stuff like that. The goal is to get very versatile. I always have a bunch of mount parts in the shop that I can use if I get a last-minute request. I can use some pre-painted mounts that I just modify and use to make a mount very quickly and avoid needing to paint at the last minute. I want to avoid needing to paint right before the display case is closed, to avoid any off gassing during the display.

We have often displayed recto/verso paintings or picture frames. Framed works are the most challenging because you never know if the measurements will include the frame or not, and even if they do, we are never told whether it will be a good one. So, when I'm making a mount for a recto/verso painting, I am very careful to build a mount that is telescopic in the XYZ axis so that I can really adapt it. I have a design that I have used 3 times for different exhibitions. We have that experience from working through times where we had the wrong measurements.



## 2022 : GO BIG OR GO HOME

Installation of Geometrical Mouse, Variation I, Scale A, from artist Claes Oldenburg in front of MNBAQ entrance. Artwork from Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden collection.



## 2020 : FITTING IT

TOP LEFT: Detail of a brass mount with an epoxy cast interface.  
 TOP RIGHT: Detail of faux-finish made with Gamblin conservation colors  
 BOTTOM: Casting process of an epoxy interface between two parts of a sculpture.  
*A shaman in his community, in connection with the universe*, c. 2000. Manasie Akpaliapik. 60 x 130 x 38 cm. Whalebone, caribou antler, baleen, white stone and black african wonderstone. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, promised gift of Raymond Brousseau (DPD.2016.03)



# PIERRE-LUC BROUILLETTE



## 2023 : REGULUS

TOP LEFT: Making of a cardboard template for a Regulus sculpture  
 CENTER: Detail of the clips made of brass and stainless steel  
 BOTTOM: Detail of the mount painted with Gamblin conservation colors and padded with brown sueded polyethylene



## 2021 : MAKE IT FLOAT

Telescopic brass mount to display Ken Dryden's mask, object presented in the exhibition, *Lemoyne Hors Jeu*

mountmakers should also be known for their job. I worked for several years as a museum technician and the duties are not exactly the same as a mountmaker's. You can make mounts when you work as a museum technician, but the time you have to improve your skill can be very limited. As a technician, there is a glass ceiling that you can't break. Here in Canada, we have a lot of preparators, art handlers, museum technicians, but the title of "mountmaker" is not very common here, not like in the U.S. or in Europe, where it seems to be more common.

I wish that this profession would be recognized in the museum industry as something different than an art handler or a preparator, because it is a kind of specialty. I think the best way to thrive in this profession is by being recognized for the job that you are actually doing.

If you are not careful, you can quickly become the slave of your passion. I think institutions need to have a kind of transparency with the mountmakers, because mountmakers are participating a lot in the viewer experience of an exhibition. It's not true that we are only "filling an order" with mountmaking. When I go to visit an exhibition, I can often recognize the mountmaker who made the mounts. I think every mountmaker puts their own signature in their institution, and I think it's important to recognize it.

**Shelly:** Would you like to elaborate on anything else about your job, the field, or any of the questions that we've already talked about?

**Pierre-Luc:** I'll say that mountmaking is the most beautiful job in the world because the community we have comes from so many different trades that are put in common. We have no specific definition of mountmaker, but we have a very good community and channel for knowledge and exchange together.

I think it's a very beautiful trade because it's open to everyone who has the same passion. You can be a great costume mounter, or you can make amazing mounts out of cardboard, or you can use metalworking tools, 3D printers, or whatever. I think we can use any tools that exist to build great supports that follow the guidelines of any object.

Mountmaking is at the intersection of so many trades that I think the main quality of a mountmaker is not their education, it's their passion for the job they're getting done. If you are passionate about the objects that you're working on, then you will have more sensitivity to what this object needs, and what has to happen to secure it safely. It's always about what the object is telling you and also what the exhibition context is telling you. These two major things need to be put together with the balance between the preventative conservation and accessibility. To me this is where the whole challenge is, and it makes mountmaking such a creative trade.