SCANDAL!

Vice, crime and morality in Montréal, 1940-1960

AN EXHIBITION OF THE CENTRE D'HISTOIRE DE MONTRÉAL
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Montréal
Le monde venait de partout pour venir à Montréal. Ça partait des États-Unis. Ils savaient qu’ils auraient du fun, ils venaient passer une fin de semaine. Tout était ouvert tout le temps !
Gilles Latulippe, comédien
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Canada’s largest city in the mid-20th century, Montreal was, as it still is, a port city and a transportation, business, and immigration hub. Manifestly Catholic in the daytime, it tuned into a capital of entertainment and adult gratification at night. Quebec having refused to adopt the prohibition laws that were passed in the United States in the early 1920s, Montreal acquired the reputation of a city of pleasure with an exuberant nightlife, where North-American tourists could come to enjoy themselves, drink, and go slumming without fear of raids or arrests. Besides the all-night bars, there were countless restaurants, movie theatres, nightclubs, and cabarets in the city.

An obligatory tour stop for North-American entertainers, Montreal attracted big-name singers, jazz musicians, and burlesque stars like the famous American striptease artist, Lili St. Cyr, irreverently called “the Queen of Montreal”.

Existing in symbiosis with the city of glamour was the clandestine Montreal of crime and illicit activities. The “Paris of North America” was one of the last cities on the continent to still have a functioning red-light district during the Second World War. Hundreds of brothels operated openly, a few yards away from the best-known nightclubs. Gambling dens and bookmaking counters proliferated downtown and spread to the four corners of the city, enriching gangs who were also involved in heroin trafficking. The police weren’t doing enough to reassure honest citizens until the occurrence of shocking events provoked a major scandal.

“Roof Look-Out is precaution often taken by gamblers.”, article “Morality Squad Canada’s Largest City Proves Vice Can Be Conquered “, The Standard, 2 août 1947. Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, e011067352.

Generally, nightclubs […] were entertaining people from the United States who were sitting there, with their mouth open, watching all this slightly risqué stuff. William Weintraub, journaliste et auteur du livre City Unique.
In the summer of 1946, gambling kingpin Harry Davis was shot dead in full daylight in the centre of downtown Montreal, a scenario that seemed straight out of 1920s Chicago. An incorruptible young lawyer, Pacifique Plante, was appointed to head the morality squad. However, his energetic anti-vice activities soon caused him to be fired for excessive zeal.

The mistreated crime-buster became the hero of the leagues formed after the Second World War by citizens worried by the growth of “commercialized vice”, which they attributed to a worsening of urban problems due to the war (the housing crisis, increased noise and crime). With the help of Plante and the press, ever on the alert, these associations succeeded in obtaining the public inquiry they had long demanded. Behind the police officers cited at the Caron Inquiry (1950-1953), the highest municipal authorities were accused of having allowed themselves to be corrupted by organized crime.

The sensational revelations of the inquiry enabled young reformist politicians like Jean Drapeau, elected mayor in 1954, to come into power on their promises to clean up, modernize, and democratize Montreal. At the same time, the increased use of the automobile, the expansion of the suburbs, and the advent of television sealed the fate of the city’s downtown nightlife.

« Section Identité Judiciaire. », vers 1960. Musée de la police de Montréal.

Il ne faut jamais prendre la mafia à la légère. Leur réseau de contacts est tellement étendu qu’ils ont commencé à infiltrer à peu près tous les secteurs de l’économie. Donc, il faut être très vigilant et les dénoncer quand on a une chance.

André Cédilot, journaliste et auteur du livre Mafia Inc.

Mathieu Lapointe
Guest researcher
The McGill Institute for the Study of Canada
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THE EXHIBITION TRAJECTORY

HELDOL MONTREAL!

The exhibition begins with a look at the origin of Montreal’s reputation as a city of pleasure. In the 1920s, when Prohibition was enforced in the United States, alcohol continued to flow like water, especially in British Columbia and Quebec. Montreal became the choice tourist destination for Americans desiring to escape the dry times. A free-for-all atmosphere reigned in the city as countless restaurants, hotels, dance halls, night clubs, and cabarets opened.

Postcard of St. Catherine Street, 1952.
Centre d’histoire de Montréal.

Musical score of Hello Montreal!, circa 1925.
Centre d’histoire de Montréal.
TONIGHT, WE’LL PAINT THE TOWN RED!

Visitors enter a typical nightclub of the era, displaying of the names of the biggest, most popular cabarets, restaurants, and movie theatres in town. Objects recall Montreal’s effervescent nightlife at such legendary hotspots as Rockhead’s Paradise, the Kon-Tiki Hawaiian Lounge, the Montmartre Café, the American Spaghetti House, and the Normandie Roof.

The atmosphere in the club is both velvety-smooth and animated. In the middle of the room, images bring to life the many entertainers, activities, and places that enlivened Montreal in those years, including the emerging gay and lesbian bar scene. At the tables, witnesses talk about what they did and what they saw in this era of wild Montreal nights.

It all unfolds under the radiant gaze of eight artists prominent on the local entertainment scene: Lili St. Cyr, Jacques Normand, Oscar Peterson, Guilda, Gratien Gélinas, Olivier Guimond, Alys Robi, and Murielle Millard.

En 1957-58, 250 homosexuels dans la même place c’était considéré pas loin d’un bordel.
Armand Larrivée Monroe, animateur de spectacles, 1957-1993
Montreal was big! Montreal was happening! Montreal was THE place. There were so many acts: singers, dancers, comedians. You name it, they were here.

Ethel Bruneau, danseuse et chanteuse, 1953-1979

MONTREAL, SIN CITY

By the 1940s, Montreal's reputation as a wide-open city where everything was allowed was firmly established. Exhibition visitors are invited to enter this permissive world offering the whole gamut of nocturnal pleasures, and take in the bright lights of St. Catherine Street. Like tourists arriving in the big city, they plunge into the adventure, curious to discover the town that never sleeps.

Most of the showgirls in these years came from the United States; 1951. Photograph: Louis Jacques (Weekend Magazine). Library and Archives Canada, e005477044.


When you came to Montreal you came to Rockheads's. [...] They used to come by the bus load. [...] The line-up would be around the corner, people waiting to get in.

Anne Rockhead, épouse du propriétaire du Rockhead's Paradise
On était payé 17 sous de l’heure. C’était bien payé parce qu’on faisait beaucoup de pourboire. […] Si le cigare coûtait 10 sous, y donnaient 15 sous. […] C’est Jacques Normand qui nous engageait. Y nous faisait marcher pour voir qu’est-ce qu’on avait de l’air.

Thérèse Vallée-Fiorilli, cigarette girl du Faisan Doré, 1946-1948


To discover the underside of the glitter, our expert guide is Al Palmer. Reporter and sophisticate who knew all there was to know about Montreal’s nightclub patrons, Palmer spent his nights in the city’s hot spots which he described in his columns, Man About Town, Cabaret Circuit (the Montreal Herald), and Our Town (the Gazette). Palmer’s book, Montreal Confidential, published in 1950, was a veritable tourist guide for neophytes wishing to go behind the scenes of Montreal nightlife. A book to hide deep in one’s pocket!

To help the “tourists” find their way, a huge map of the downtown area shows where the best addresses are located. By an ingenious mechanism, this map of legal pleasures gives access to the clandestine city. Behind the Montreal of neon lights and sparkling sequins, the illegal gambling dens and the brothels await those who are brave enough to venture there.

Pendant toute les années 1940 et 1950 la presse joue vraiment un rôle central […] Ces personnes découvrent et exposent la présence du vice commercialisé et montrent l’ampleur du phénomène et c’est eux qui gardent la flamme allumée. Mathieu Lapointe, historien

**Al Palmer, circa 1948.**
Records Management and Archives, Concordia University. Al Palmer fonds, scrapbook.

“Illegal barbotte game” in article “Morality Squad in Canada’s Largest City Proves Vice Can Be Conquered”, The Standard, August 2, 1947. Library and Archives Canada, e011067356

«Making Reports is daily duty of squadmen who write out in triplicate their actions on investigation.», article « Morality Squad Canada’s Largest City Proves Vice Can Be Conquered », The Standard, 2 août 1947. Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, e011067346.
THE UNDERSIDE

Pulling the curtains aside, visitors suddenly find themselves in the dimly-lit, hidden milieu of colourful night-crawlers and risky pleasures. After a detour towards the Port – the entryway for illegal substances – the route continues to the façade of a bordello in the Red Light District. Will exhibition visitors dare open the curtain that serves as a door? Inside, stories are told and secrets are revealed.

Taxi drivers, cigarette girls, entertainers, and experts on the period confirm it: Montreal’s downtown from 1940 to 1950 with its red light district was a hot neighbourhood where law-abiding families shared the turf with criminals and prostitutes. Hundreds of bookmaking establishments, casinos, and barbotte games flourished, without counting the always-popular bingo games and lotteries. Beginning in the 1940s, Montreal became the centre of one of the world’s biggest illegal betting networks, a fact not widely known today.

Try your luck at the bookie’s counter: pick up one of the phones and bet on the results of the next hockey game or horse race. Surprise! Witnesses tell you about the underground world of gambling and illegal betting where small operators and big crime syndicates made fortunes.

“Taxi drivers are biggest problem today in field of prostitution”, from the article “Morality Squad in Canada’s Largest City Proves Vice Can Be Conquered”, The Standard, August 2, 1947. Library and Archives Canada, e011067353.

“Tourist homes present problem to the squad”, from the article “Morality Squad in Canada’s Largest City Proves Vice Can Be Conquered”, The Standard, August 2, 1947. Library and Archives Canada, e011067355.


C’est pas tous les touristes qui viennent à Montréal pour aller à l’Oratoire Saint-Joseph. Maurice Duplessis, premier ministre du Québec, 1936-39 et 1944-1959
On appelait ça le Red Light. Et il y avait un certain lien avec la lumière rouge qui s’allumait avec peut-être la disponibilité de ces dames. Étant jeune et bien tournée, on pouvait vous confondre avec une prostituée […], vous faire des avances, alors c’était à éviter ces quartiers-là.

Marcelle Valois-Hénault, résidante du centre-ville, 1928-1950

THE UNDERWORLD SCENE

If Montreal had its big names in entertainment, it also had its mob celebrities. Get to know some of the distinguished figures of the city’s criminal factions. Among the brothel keepers, drug dealers, and members of the mafia, contemplate the faces of famous crime bosses Vic Cotroni, Harry Ship, and Lucien Rivard, who ruled the roost in Montreal during these years. Here too is the personal address book of Harry Ship, operator of an illegal gaming house, with Mayor Camilien Houde’s name and number in its pages.


THE MURDER OF THE KING OF GAMBLING, HARRY DAVIS

1946. Gambling king Harry Davis has been killed! The gaming-house operator was shot dead on July 25, 1946, during the daylight hours in the middle of downtown, by another local racketeer. This brazen act hit the city like a bomb, causing people to ask if Montreal was controlled by organized crime.

SCANDAL! CITIZENS TAKE ACTION

Citizens are shocked. It’s time to do something before it’s too late! In flashing lights, newspaper headlines and caricatures from 1939 to 1950 chronicle the accumulating scandals connected to “commercialized vice”. Montreal’s Eliot Ness, attorney Pax Plante, is appointed head of the morality squad and becomes the darling of the press. He instigates a major clean-up campaign that culminates in a series of articles in the daily Le Devoir, entitled “Montreal under the Rule of the Underworld”. Are the police aiding and abetting the gangsters? The debate is launched.
TOLERANCE AGAINST REFORM

At Pax Plante’s side, the reform-minded actors use all the means at their disposal to put an end to the regime of tolerance that, in their view, is the cause of the rot in the city and its administration. How will they go about it? What is the spark that causes citizens’ groups to rise up and demand a clean-up?

Objects in the exhibition remind us of moments in the citizens’ revolt: a book, *Montréal sous le règne de la pègre*, written by Pax Plante; an observation report on the El Morocco nightclub written by a member of the Public Morality Committee; and a job announcement to recruit more police officers. Items in a cupboard relate to police work: a helmet, a billy stick, a badge, handcuffs, and a pad for issuing fines.

Across from the morality squad bureau, suspects in a line-up face exhibition visitors. Several of them have juicy revelations to divulge. Prostitutes, policemen, and employees of gaming houses give their answers during the interrogation. Hearing these reconstituted but authentic statements, we penetrate into the heart of the system where these people earn their living for better or for worse. And J.-O. Asselin, the city’s executive committee president, Mayor Camilien Houde, and police chiefs Fernand Dufresne and Albert Langlois, what are they doing here? Are they among the overly tolerant?
Visitors are invited to take a seat in Room 24 of the Montreal courthouse. Justice François Caron is about to bring down his verdict on the accusations of police tolerance towards illegal gambling and prostitution. In the few minutes of a video montage, visitors gain a clear perspective of the stages and the context that led to the holding of the famous inquiry and of its direct consequences. Valuable proof is on view: Justice Caron's final report, taken out of the vaults of the City of Montreal Archives for the exhibition.

Pour beaucoup de réformateurs qui vont faire la Révolution tranquille, au début des années 1960, le rapport Caron et l'élection de Jean Drapeau en 1954 c'est une première victoire, un premier nettoyage qui annonçait celui qui était pour être fait dix ans plus tard dans l'administration politique provinciale.

Mathieu Lapointe, historien
There's always going to be people like Pacifique Plante or Jean Drapeau who think that Montreal’s reputation as an open city is a scandal, an outrage and should be negated, and controlled, shutdown at all costs but I think there’s also a lot of people who have always kind of appreciated the fact that Montreal had this sort of free, easy, open reputation.

Karen Herland, professeure à l’Université Concordia

The sparring is fierce. The civil and judicial revolt takes a political turn. Mayor Houde steps down. Three weeks before the municipal elections, Justice Caron submits his bulging report. Like in the movies, the good guys win: Pierre Des Marais and Pax Plante smile and raise their arms to salute the victory of their friend and acolyte, Jean Drapeau, elected Mayor of Montreal for his promise to cleanse the city of graft and moral turpitude.
MONTREAL, STILL SCANDAL-RIDDEN?

The exhibition ends with a panoramic view of Montreal, and the question: did the city's shocking reputation survive the big clean-up?

Visitors are invited to throw dice in a game of chance in the form of a large question mark on the floor. Would you have stayed silent as an accomplice or would you have stood up as a witness? On the side of tolerance or of reform? Would you have been indifferent or scandalized? The characters, places, and events in the saga just revealed by the Centre d'histoire pass in review.

Just like the exhibition visitors, witnesses express their often conflicting opinions on this period of Montreal's history and its impact on the city's reputation and identity, past and present. The game doesn’t end when visitors leave the exhibition, but continues into the street, in the present-day city with its current issues and challenges.
On est conscient que cette période a marqué Montréal, qu’elle a marqué son histoire, qu’elle a marqué notre vie culturelle […] et donc sa réputation, et on en est fier. Mais, en étant fier d’un passé que l’on n’a pas trop connu, on entend surtout une version romantique de cette histoire.

Anouk Bélanger, professeure au département de sociologie de l’UQAM
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The Scandal! adventure was launched in January, 2011, when we began the vast research process which would last almost two years. And what a research topic! Vice, crime, and morality in Montreal from the 1940s up to 1960. You want the inside scoop, the low-down, the skinny, the straight dope? Here you go!

As the starting point for our research, the Caron Inquiry fonds in the City of Montreal Archives was a veritable mine of information. Added to those discoveries were the treasures lodged in the Archives nationales du Québec, the Concordia University Archives Department, and Library and Archives Canada. For many months, the research team steeped itself in the legendary era when Montreal, nicknamed “Little Paris”, drew people in search of pleasure and adventure with its many legal and illegal nocturnal attractions. As our research files grew, a fascinating detective story unfolded before our eyes, against a backdrop of glittering cabarets, clandestine dens of vice, and the courtroom: a story written by policemen and racketeers, burlesque stars and prostitutes, authorities who turned a blind eye, and zealous reformers who populated the wide-open city that seemed to live by the rule “anything goes”.

The entire saga literally comes alive through eye-witness testimony and comments by specialists, presented in brief documentary segments that take us into the atmosphere of Montreal nightlife during these years, into the underbelly of the criminal world, and into the public morality campaigns and inquiries. Nothing could be more telling than...
the accounts of a former cigarette girl at Au Faisan Doré, a club owned by mafia boss Vic Cotroni; of a taxi driver recalling the days when he procured prostitutes for his customers; and of a former officer of the Montreal Police Force alluding to the doubtful methods used by the men in blue. In all, the research team gathered more than 70 hours of interviews, condensed for the exhibition into eleven documentary segments totalling approximately two hours of viewing.

Walking through sets modelled on a nightclub, a betting parlour, and a police precinct of the era, visitors can peruse hundreds of photographs and dozens of rare, sometimes surprising objects: a cocktail glass from Rockhead’s Paradise, a VD prevention kit distributed to soldiers during the war, a slot machine seized by the provincial police, mug shots of prostitutes and gangsters, and even a personal address book that belonged to Montreal’s king of gambling, Harry Ship, in which Mayor Camilien Houde is listed.

This period strikes an imaginative chord in many Montrealers but is unknown to younger generations, and therefore, we take great pleasure in revealing the underside of vice, crime, and morality in a Montreal that, between 1940 and 1960, scandalized many of its citizens.

**Catherine Charlebois, museologist**
Curator of the exhibition

**Maryse Bédard**
Assistant, research and production
THE INTERVIEWS

My name is Antonio Pierre de Almeida and I’m a filmmaker. Among my activities, I directed the documentary *Rapailler l’Homme* and was the director of photography of feature films and other documentaries such as *Un nouveau monde* and *Gilles Pelletier: Le chemin parcouru*. I have collaborated with the Centre d’Histoire de Montréal on various projects for a few years now.

When Catherine Charlebois asked me if I’d be interested in making the audiovisual segments for the exhibition *Scandal! Vice, crime, and morality in Montreal, 1940-1960*, I didn’t hesitate for a second. The challenge of bringing the Montreal of those times back to life through oral history in the framework of an exhibition appealed to me.

My role in the *Scandal!* exhibition was to shoot, edit, and direct the audiovisual segments. The “collecting” of the audiovisual content stretched over a period of ten months of filming. In all, we shot approximately seventy hours of interviews. After that, several editing stages were required to assemble all of the stories into a dynamic discourse, rich in (hi)story/ies. More than five months after beginning the editing process, a dozen segments and other audiovisual elements are available to visitors, allowing them to experience, for the time of a tour (or two) of the exhibit, the era when Montreal was known as the Little Paris of North America.

Montreal night life. Montreal’s Harlem has two outstanding clubs, Rockhead’s and Cafe St Michel. At downstairs bar of Rockhead’s, famed calypso singer Lord Caresser visits jam-packed tables fitting his impromptu songs to the mood of the customers.


*Working in the clubs, I learned very, very early; You go, you do your job and you don’t get involved with too much of what is going on.*

Oliver Jones, pianiste
Each meeting with our witnesses was a trip back in time. During our interviews with them, their words, their stories, and their love for Montreal transported us into the streets of those years, the smoke-filled nightclubs and the neon signs lighting up St. Catherine Street, but also into the murky zones of the city’s red-light district, the criminal underworld, illegal gambling, a police station at the time of “the big cleanup”, and some of the less sparkling sides of Montreal’s history.

Two people made up the film crew. Stéphanie Teasdale conducted the interviews while I took care of the lighting, shooting, and sound recording. The presence of a camera and a few spots to provide good lighting can easily intimidate people: we had to be very careful not to seem intrusive so that the interviewees wouldn’t feel ill at ease with us. After all, the main purpose of being in their homes was to listen to them! Once the editing began, we worked very hard to remain true to what our witnesses communicated while keeping as close as possible to the historical record.

The oral history revealed by our witnesses and recorded on camera is an incalculable treasure, a rich heritage source of a past that is not too distant and which still makes us dream. I hope you’ll have as much fun seeing and hearing our audiovisual segments as we did making them. Bon voyage!

Antonio Pierre de Almeida
Filmmaker
THE WITNESSES

The Centre d’histoire de Montréal wishes to acknowledge the exceptional contribution of the following specialists, actors, artists, and eye-witnesses who generously offered their perspectives to the camera.

Réal BEAUCHAMP

Anouk BÉLANGER
Professor, Département de sociologie, UQAM; specialist in popular urban culture.

Cmdt Sylvain BISSONNETTE
Police chief (active) and historian of the Montreal Police Force.

Joseph BLUMER
Attorney; student at McGill University from 1952 to 1961.

Magaly BRODEUR
Lecturer, Université de Sherbrooke; author of Vice et corrup­tion à Montréal, 1892-1970.

Ethel BRUNEAU
Singer and professional tap dancer (Miss Swing) who began her career in Montreal nightclubs in 1953.

André CÉDILOT
Journalist and author of Mafia Inc.

Line CHAMBERLAND
Professor, holder of the Research Chair on Homophobia at UQAM and specialist in lesbian history.

Jean-Pierre CHARBONNEAU
Journalist and author of The Canadian Connection.

Jérôme CHOQUETTE
Attorney; former minister in the Quebec government.

Robert CÔTÉ

Charles DARVEAU

Claude FLEURENT

Francine GRIMALDI
Cultural commentator on the present-day Montreal scene and daughter of Jean Grimaldi.

Karen HERLAND
Professor, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Concordia University; specialist in the history of prostitution.

Scarlett JAMES
Producer and burlesque artist in present-day Montreal.

Oliver JONES
Montreal jazz pianist whose career began in the 1940s.

Monique LAJEUNESSE-TOUPIN
Customer of Montreal nightclubs and cabarets in the 1950s.

Émilie-Cloé LALIBERTÉ
Director of Stella, an organization that defends the rights of sex workers.

Mathieu LAPOINTE
Historian; member of the scientific committee for the exhibition.

Mario LATRAVERSE

Charles-André LATULIPPE

Gilles LATULIPPE
Actor and comedian.

Armand LARRIVÉE
Floor-show emcee and important figure of Montreal’s gay scene in the 1950s and 1960s.

Claude LAVALLÉE

Anne ROCKHEAD
Wife of Kenny Rockhead, owner of Rockhead’s Paradise.

Gaston SAINT-GERMAIN
Frequenter of Montreal nightclubs in the 1950s.

Thérèse VALLÉE-FIORILLI
Cigarette girl at Au Faisan Doré (1948 to 1950).

Marcelle VALOIS-HÉNAULT
Resident of downtown Montreal from 1928 to 1950.

William WEINTRAUB
Journalist, film director, and author of City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and ‘50s.

In preparing this exhibition, the Centre d’histoire de Montréal relied on the help of several experts. Michèle Dagenais and Magda Farhni were instrumental in defining the orientation and historical content of Scandal. Mathieu Lapointe faithfully participated in all the stages of the exhibition from documentation to design, contributing to the creativity of the production team with his knowledge.

Magda FAHRNI
Professor, Département d’histoire, Faculté des sciences humaines, UQAM.

Mathieu LAPOINTE
Historian; guest researcher at the Institute for the Study of Canada, McGill University.

Michèle DAGENAIS
Historian; guest researcher at the Institute for the Study of Canada, McGill University.
For the past thirty years, the Centre d’histoire de Montréal has shown the visitors and citizens who participate in its activities how, to quote from our mission statement: “the history of the city’s inhabitants has forged the urban environment, left an imprint, and defined the city’s identity.” Increasingly, the question “Montreal, who are you?” has motivated our choice of exhibition themes. The intention in our many projects is to bring a better understanding of the present-day city through its history and heritage. At the same time, our aim is to gradually build a new heritage, one made up of eye-witness accounts and life stories of citizens from all walks of life, which, with every exhibition, will continually add to the value of the rich archival and visual documentation held by the City of Montreal Archives, with whom we have collaborated for a number of years.

One of the outstanding aspects of our city is its reputation for openness and joie de vivre. This notoriety was established in the early 1920s, when the Province of Quebec decided to regulate the sale of alcohol instead of banning it. As Prohibition was enforced in other parts of Canada and in the United States, Montreal attracted pleasure-seekers and entertainers from far and wide. With hundreds of bars and nightclubs, a French-speaking population, an exotic European sheen and a south-of-the-border style, it was seen as the Paris of North America.

In this exhibition, as in the preceding ones at the CHM, we wished to reveal some lesser-known aspects of Montreal’s diversity, as expressed in the city’s distinctive neighbourhoods, inhabitants, and manifold cultures. The legendary Red Light District is part of this. We first realized it when interviewing former residents of that section of town for our project, The Habitations Jeanne-Mance - 50 Years of History, and for our Lost Neighbourhoods exhibition. Our work for Scandal! gave us the opportunity to explore the vigorous popular culture that enlivened the downtown area and St. Catherine Street, earning Montreal the nickname of Little Paris. That wasn’t all: what allowed us to discover another, more truculent Montreal were the efforts of the citizens’ groups, professionals, and associations who denounced organized crime’s control of nightlife to the authorities and to the media, despite the resistance of certain elites and members of the underworld. This conflict and the ensuing victory of the reformers, including attorney Pax Plante and Mayor Jean Drapeau, brought on the radical transformation that shaped the city of today.

We hope that when visitors have plunged into this fascinating era via the Scandal! exhibition, they will be inspired to ask questions about the current situation, in the same way that other citizens did before them. In every large city, some issues never completely disappear, but resurface every once in a while.

Jean-François Leclerc
Director
Centre d’histoire de Montréal.
Montreal’s city museum, the Centre d’histoire de Montréal, was created in 1983 and is located in a unique heritage building: an historic fire station.

On the ground floor, the museum’s permanent exhibition, Montreal Five Times, offers an overview of the city’s history from 1535 until today. This exhibition opens onto the city itself, inviting visitors to wander through the streets and rediscover traces of the past.

Above all, the Centre d’histoire is interested in Montrealers’ daily lives and personal stories. Our temporary exhibits focus on the city, its inhabitants and their experiences.

The Centre d’histoire also fulfills a role as an activity hub in the city. This is why we have initiated research and story-gathering activities in a number of city boroughs on the Island of Montreal. Museum tours have been developed for both adults and young people, with a wide choice for primary schools, including tours tailored for newly-arrived children who are learning French.

The specificity of the Centre d’histoire lies in a community and social approach that centres on the memory of Montrealers. The institution wishes to be known as a base for gathering citizens’ personal accounts.

The museum places its expertise at the service of neighbourhoods, cultural communities, and other groups to support commemorative and memory-preserving projects. The CHM’s mission is to highlight the value of memory rooted in territory, heritage, and Montreal history. This museological orientation towards intangible heritage and citizen participation is evident in the Scandal! exhibition.

Due to the rich intangible heritage it has gathered and its collection of objects, the Centre d’histoire de Montréal has become the primary actor in the presentation of the city’s history – more specifically, its recent history – and in following its present and future transformations.
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THE CENTRE D'HISTOIRE DE MONTRÉAL

The mission of the Centre d'histoire de Montréal, the city museum, is to transmit an understanding of Montreal, its cultural diversity, and its tangible and intangible heritage. Engaging with the public, the museum offers its expertise to citizens to present their stories and mementos in exhibits and activities, thus highlighting the different ways Montrealers have forged the urban environment and defined the city's identity.

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