

D'ARCY MCGEE LINTELS, (Unknown year) Unknown Artist

This is the first stop on the Public Art, Public Memory tour.

The lintels are installed into the wall of the EV atrium at the same height as a doorway, which would have been at a similar height as their original intended use as structural supports. These stone lintels were hand-carved in the mid-nineteenth century for the home of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, widely known as D'Arcy McGee. McGee was an Irish Catholic settler in Montreal and a key player in the federation of the Canadian state. If you are able to get a wider view of these works, try taking a seat on the benches along the opposite wall, or imagine this view. McGee's house stood on what is presently Drummond and Ste-Catherine streets. As the story goes, his constituents gave McGee funding for the house in 1864. The shamrock motif on the top of the arches is a nod to McGee's Irish heritage. The lintels were hand-carved from St-Marc limestone, which is still quarried in Saint-Marc-des-Carières near Quebec City. The names of the artisans who carved the lintels are unknown to us, which is to be expected — these kinds of decorative elements and architectural ornaments aren't always attributed, even today. However, when we examine these objects now, do we consider them as architectural fragments or sculptures? When they become part of a public art collection, are they transformed into artworks for us, the audience? Perhaps the lintels land somewhere in between these categories as portals into an otherwise unseen history.

D'Arcy McGee emigrated from Ireland in 1842. He went to Boston to work as an editor for a Catholic newspaper, setting off his political education and commitment to Irish republicanism. He returned to Ireland in 1845 and was involved in several national independence efforts for a short period. After a warrant for his arrest was issued for his revolutionary activities, McGee escaped back to North America disguised as a priest. He eventually settled in Montreal — a place friendlier to Irish Catholics at the time (or so he believed) — where he again worked as an assistant editor at a newspaper. McGee founded a small press and eventually earned a law degree from McGill University.

McGee was first elected in 1858 to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, where he fostered the Canadian Confederation. After confederation in 1867, he was elected to the first Canadian Parliament. McGee continued to advocate for Irish independence for the rest of his life. However, his views regarding Canadian and American republicanism diverged from those of other Irish Republicans, notably the Fenian Brotherhood, which was founded in the US by Irish Republican exiles. Fiercely anti-British, the Brotherhood advocated for the forcible takeover of Canada by the US — something McGee strongly opposed, and which later led to his denunciation of the group. On April 7th, 1868, after giving a speech in Parliament, McGee was shot and killed by someone who lay in wait at his boarding house. Patrick Whelan, a Fenian sympathizer, was later tried, convicted, and executed for the assassination, although some controversy remains as to whether he was guilty. For a time after McGee's death, the family home remained a destination for tourists.

In the post-WWII era, the McGee house (by then covered by an extension on the façade) was owned by brothers Cecil, Eli and Victor Hill, and hosted two popular restaurants. After a fire in 1962, the original building was destroyed, and the Hill brothers uncovered the lintels. The brothers donated the lintels to Loyola College, where they were mounted onto cement blocks and displayed outside Vanier Library for many years. By the early 2000s, the pieces had experienced significant erosion due to the elements, so they were removed from the Loyola Campus to be restored. In 2005, the refurbished lintels were installed in the newly built EV Building.

To continue this tour, click on *Cinema Architectonica* by Richard MacDonald.