



A vibrant legacy:
The Campbell brothers

Description

Framing business is a fourth-generation family affair

By **Carmen J. Michaud**

Photography by **James St Laurent**

Working on a charity auction, one must keep costs down. I had acquired amazing artwork ready to exhibit but I had two photographs that needed a proper presentation. The Little Shop offered two frames of the correct size, which I sanded and painted, but the photos required matting and mounting. One was a print by George Zimbel of his shadow and his dog. It was signed on the back. The other by Mike Ruiz was a photo of Prince, taken a short while before his passing. It was signed and numbered in the white border. These required expertise.

I entered the shop that I had passed numerous times. There were oils and acrylics and prints on display. At the back of the room, the wall was so covered in frame corners that it gave the impression of an undulating wave of brown, silver and gold.



A tall man came to the counter.

“Hi! How can I help?”

I showed him the two prints. He suggested for the George Zimbel that I photocopy the back and then I could attach it to the back of the frame. This would indicate the authenticity for the buyer. We chose a smoky grey matte.

The Prince presented a problem as the signature and numbering were at the edge of the print. He suggested that the photo be anchored with small clear tabs on a white board and the deep purple matte would surround it.

It’s always easier to work with a professional.

I arranged to pick up the pieces in a few days.

“Sorry. What is your name?” I asked.

“Glenn.”

Pause.

“Glen Campbell?”

“Yes.” With a twinkle of the eye.

(My friend Barry Pascal asked, “How many times in a week do you think he gets a similar reaction?”)

Sorry. What is your name?” I asked. “Glenn.” Pause. “Glen Campbell?” “Yes.” With a twinkle of the eye.

Alexander Campbell, with his wife Gwyneth, moved from Sydney, Nova Scotia to Montreal in the early 1920s. Alexander had met his wife while serving in World War I. She was a lass from Swindon, Wiltshire, England.

In the twenties, Montreal was a bustling city with growing industries. Canadian Vickers was building aircraft. There was a surge in construction: the Jacques Cartier Bridge, downtown “skyscrapers” like the Bell building and the Royal Bank building, colleges and schools, churches like the Westmount Baptist Church and synagogues like the Shaar Hashomayim.

And there was a growing arts scene. Modernism was burgeoning with the Beaver Hall Group and those that followed. And Montreal had a thriving nightclub scene served in part by the prohibition regulations in the USA. It was attractive to those seeking a cosmopolitan life, and a golden opportunity to make a good living.

“How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?”



4119 Ste. Catherine Street West
Image: courtesy Campbell brothers

Alexander had apprenticed with a framer and with a cabinetmaker in Nova Scotia and went about using these skills to build his business.

The shop was first established in 1924 and located in the family home in Verdun and in 1936 moved to 4119 Ste. Catherine West. In 1940 A.H. Campbell moved to 4150 Ste. Catherine West where the shop remained until 1977.

In 1929, his son Ian had been born and would follow his father into the business. Ian would apprentice with his father for fifteen years. He took over in 1958. And so this pattern would continue.

Ian Campbell bought the building on Sherbooke Street West in 1977 and grew the business with his three sons serving apprenticeships. He decided to retire to pursue other interests in 1994, volunteering his time and energy to the community of Harrington County near Lake MacDonald.



4150 Ste. Catherine Street West
Image: courtesy Campbell brothers

Ian Campbell passed away in 2009 leaving his legacy to his trusted sons.

Glenn and John Campbell are partners in the business. Their elder brother Steve worked for a short time with them but chose another path. Glenn is the front man. He is usually the first person you meet. John enjoys the making and the problem solving.

Glenn's son Kevin, at seventeen, has begun his apprenticeship and works part-time. He was there on the day of the photo shoot. He is a tall, quiet young man.

We discussed some the highs, and no-so-highs, of working in a service industry, albeit one with an artistic bent. There are the great conversations with artists and collectors and historians. Being welcomed into someone's home to discuss the right placement, or the solution to the weight of a framed object, can lead to enduring friendships.

"We try to understand the customer needs and wishes and work to find the best solutions. We have products from all over the world: Italy, France, Czech Republic and some we create here". He shows me the corner of a frame with three bevelled layers created in the shop.

"We have some customers who we've worked with for so long they will simply allow us to use our judgement. And they are usually satisfied."

"Given that you've done this for so long, does it ever feel repetitive?", I asked.



fun.
what is

“What

is the most precious item you’ve ever framed?”

“Well, I can’t reveal too much. We keep the confidence of our clients. We once were given an Impressionist painting to frame.”

“Like a Renoir?”

“Like a Renoir” (but not divulging).

“That must have been a bit unnerving.”

“Well, we were once asked to frame an umbilical cord with the hemostat.”

“I cannot imagine.”

“Yes, that was in the 80s. I don’t think you are allowed to do that today.”

“Everyone has a different take on what deserves to be framed.”

“Yes. We have quite a few requests to frame the baby’s first socks. And these must be done quickly, and tracked... at every step. Such is the concern of the new parent.”

“What is the most precious item you’ve ever framed?” “Well, I can’t reveal too much. We keep the

confidence of our clients. We once were given an Impressionist painting to frame.'

I had to chuckle. To consider the value of the items that have passed thru these doors, and the care that is taken to maintain a multigenerational reputation is to know that your precious keepsakes are in good hands.

At this point John came upstairs with a triptych he was working on. Glenn quizzed me.

"Can you guess what this is for? A surrealist. Madrid."

"Dali?"

"Bosch."

(Now if I had seen the print... perhaps...)



There was some discussion between the two brothers regarding an order. One could feel the warmth, and the humour they share. I thought how wonderful it must be to spend your days working with someone you know so well and trust. They have an ease and a mutual respect. There is also a playfulness not always evident in siblings in business.

John explained that their apprenticeship taught them the same disciplines but they have areas of expertise, or more interest. Glenn does restorations of oil paintings. John does restorations of frames and gilding on frames. He also handles custom framing. But they confer and sometimes switch it up. The end result is what matters.

Back upstairs, I asked if Glenn had ever wanted to do anything else.

"This became my dream. If you get up in the morning, and you're happy, that's all you can ask for."

A customer came in. A warm greeting.

I would return for the Proustian Questionnaire in a few days. The responses were recorded separately.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Glenn: No such thing, but beach, sand and sun help.

What is your greatest extravagance?

John: Art.

What living person do you most admire?

Glenn: My best friend, my love, my wife!

John: My wife.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Glenn: My four children.

John: My children.

Who is your hero of fiction?

Glenn: Clint Eastwood. His characters in film.

John: Robert E. Howard's Conan.



Who are your heroes in real life?

John: Educators, caregivers.

Glenn: People who volunteer time and energy to someone who needs it.

What do you value most in your friends?

John: A sense of humour.

Glenn: Honesty.

On what occasion do you lie?

Glenn: What is a lie?



John: On questionnaires.

What is your motto?

John: Treat others as you would want to be treated.

Glenn: Ne Obliviscaris (The Campbell motto "Forget Not").

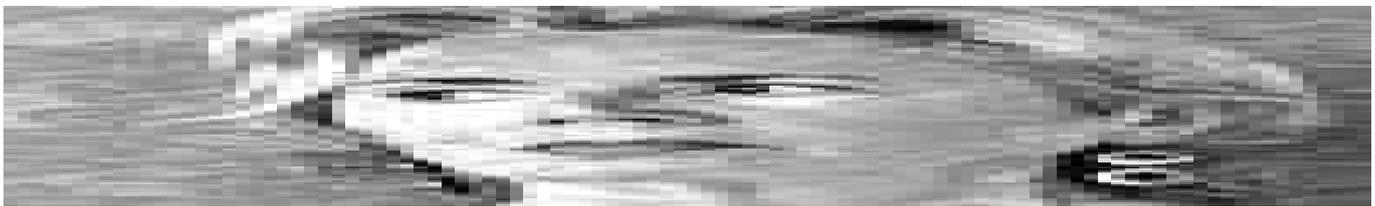
Images of the Campbell brothers by [James St Laurent](#)

Sign-up to our newsletter
and get email notification
of our most recent articles

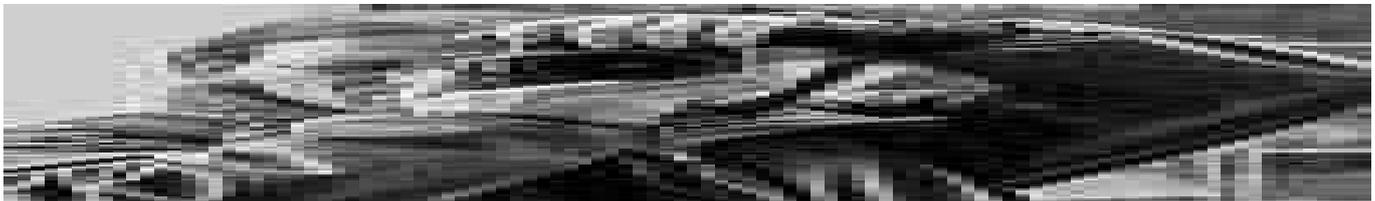
Sign up

Read

also: [April Cornell on travelling and living in India](#)
[Other articles featuring photography by James St Laurent](#)



Carmen J. Michaud likes to write (and paint) and is majoring in Curiosity.



James St Laurent – My work is all about the idea – to communicate through images that convey an emotive context and engage the viewer by presenting a visual paradox. Different types of subjects and genres require different approaches, but the end result is still a compelling image that captures your attention. Despite having had a camera early on, I found myself in a career as a stage set and lighting designer, then accidentally stumbled and fell back into photography. Since then I have shot a variety of genres, ranging from fashion to travel to portraits to concerts, and exhibited in galleries in both group and solo shows. There are photographs everywhere – the problem is to find the interesting images or those that no one else sees. The obvious is easy – the unique takes a little more time. jamesstlaurent.com



Category



1. Home Decor
2. Photography | Framing
3. Westmount

Tags

1. Carmen J. Michaud
2. framing
3. Glen Campbell
4. James St-Laurent
5. John Campbell
6. photography

Date Created

March 2019