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Fortress of the Soul

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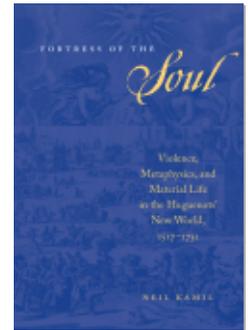
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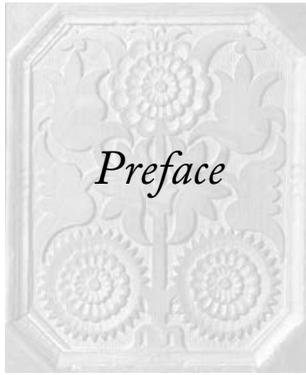
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Preface

How were the working relationships between words and things defined in the Huguenots' New World? This is the essential historical question faced by every actor—and myself above all—in *Fortress of the Soul*. Moreover, how were dispersed fragments of spiritual and material life reordered by artisanal experience on the edge of transatlantic memory and perception to embody the substance of everyday life?

These questions emerged at first, from the mystery of a curious old chair. As a graduate student studying material culture made in colonial America, I confronted the puzzle of the New York leather chair for the first time. I was perplexed by this enigmatic thing that tradition had attributed to the hand of some nameless New York “Dutch” craftsman. To my naïve eye, its formal features projected mixed messages, and even these seemed to derive mostly from the ornamental vocabulary of regional French furniture. How did this complex artifactual language remain hidden in plain sight from centuries of antiquarians? My answer is found in chapter 15, a small part of the final project; it seems to me now, however, that *Fortress of the Soul* was inspired by questions about an itinerant culture of artisans that fled to early New York as refugees from demolished bastions of heresy in southwestern France. Once there, they labored in the interstices between concealment and representation to produce an artifact as ambiguous—and as ubiquitous—as their experience in the Atlantic world.

I am an American historian by training, and my research began in New York's colonial archives, which reach back to the Dutch period in New Amsterdam. These revealed the outlines of a transatlantic network of craftsmen and merchants who made and marketed the stylish New York leather chair in the early eighteenth century. Indeed, I discovered a treasure trove of French names from the region of Aunis-Saintonge associated with the luxury trade in upholstered furniture in the cosmopolitan and heterodox city. For, despite being an ethnic minority under both Dutch and English rule that comprised only about 11 percent of New York's total population, the city's most influential artisans were French Calvinist refugees.

This pattern was not surprising. Beginning in the mid sixteenth century, Huguenot

refugees—though everywhere a minority—had started to transform the style and structure of artisanry throughout the courts and colonies of international Protestantism. What was surprising however, were the reasons for their mastery over the transformation, production, and consumption of material things. I soon learned that to study Huguenot artisans alone, in isolation from others, would be to disfigure experience. It is precisely their interactional practices that make them compelling for transatlantic historians. To understand refugee culture is also to encounter those people, places and things with which they came into contact. Wherever they went they created new contexts worthy of a kind of total history of material life. This is the subject of *Fortress of the Soul*.

Working my way through the archives back across the Atlantic, I reconstructed New York's French artisans' European origins and migration patterns. My method was the primarily slow and painstaking compilation of family genealogies. Though far from perfect, this is a more reliable indicator of transatlantic networks of interaction than divining cultural heritage from a quick reading of notoriously mutable surnames. Tracing the refugees, I found that their origins converged in southwestern France. Digging deeper into the sometimes grotesquely painful artisanal and religious history of this war-torn region, I came to understand that my initial puzzlement over the form of a New York chair had inadvertently revealed the incubator of a world of secrets.

Southwestern Huguenot artisans were the keepers of these secrets. Their shadow world was, in a social and historical sense, created by clandestine habits acquired over the course of generations of horrific religious violence. Maintenance of a subterranean culture of hiding, silence, and self-effacement became natural. This was especially true of Protestant survivors of the civil wars of religion in Aunis-Saintonge. During the wars, a vanguard of regional craftsmen wrote historical narratives and crafted innovative forms to represent the existence of a new world that had emerged from the ashes of the old in their troubled homeland well *before* they voyaged north into Protestant Europe and west to colonial America. The New World historiography of French refugee artisans in colonial New York was already being written and built on France's Atlantic coast nearly a century before New Amsterdam was settled. Huguenot New World history was perceived by its historian-craftsmen to be permanently fluid and portable. On a metaphysical level, however, craft secrets and the secrets of nature combined to form a powerful nexus in the southwestern Huguenot artisanal cosmos. This too emerged out of a condition of chaotic violence that sparked messianic experience and thoughts of final things, whereby nature, labor, and artisans interacted alchemically through soulish intermediaries capable of moving subtly between organic, bodily, and crafted materials. This artisanal experience of apocalypse reminds us of its definition as an act of unveiling and revelation. Leading Huguenot artisans thus became apocalyptic; they assumed the identity of revealers and interpreters for their

communities of knowledge hidden in corrupt natural materials afflicted by the decrepitude of a fallen and aging earth.

The status and identity of skilled artisans during the late medieval and early modern period in general, and in Saintonge in particular, were therefore profoundly altered by alchemic paradigms promulgated by practitioners of the “new” Paracelsian science. Paracelsus celebrated artisans’ unique abilities to position themselves as emulators of God’s primordial labor in a rustic, fecund, and spiritualized material world. This claim to their special status as soulful reformers of matter was underscored by the widespread phenomenon of artisans’ assertions of their role as manual philosophers; that is to say, of their God-given place in privileged territory in between venerable natural, oral, written, and material traditions, including their special hidden knowledge of materials both in and on the earth itself. Theirs was a Neoplatonic universe, in which everything was connected monistically at the most profound level of being and becoming. In this context, inner, soulful knowledge facilitated interdependence of natural and artisanal labor in the production of innovative things that, by virtue of their novelty, were destined to become commercially viable on both sides of the Atlantic. Material things were silent extensions of an entire cosmos of Huguenot artisanal discourse, mediating, like the refugees themselves, among different Protestant groups, as well as vis-à-vis their intractable enemies.

The Huguenot culture of silence and secrecy was commonly amplified by lies, stories, and other creative forms of artisanal representation of self or material goods, when contingency deemed it useful or appropriate. This too was a crucial component of craft skill and of the relation between words and things. Obfuscation was often key to the maintenance of the sort of fictional consensus that kept diverse or heterodox societies—such as Aunis-Saintonge or colonial New York—functioning more or less smoothly, without constant posturing or recourse to chaotic violence. Of course, violent resolution of differences was far more common in southwestern France than in colonial New York, where Old World experience taught that connivance between “enemies” in such tacit understandings should be the rule rather than the exception. Such connivance was over words left unsaid, but also things left unseen. Only if there were breakdowns in those delicate understandings or when renegotiation of new arrangements was necessary, were corrosive Huguenot craft “secrets” exposed to public scrutiny by their hosts. This occurred in early modern Britain when guilds representing native-born English craftsmen accused their Huguenot counterparts of “fraud” and “counterfeit”—forms of alchemic *maleficium*—and again in colonial New York, where Benjamin Faneuil, a refugee from La Rochelle and the foremost merchant of New York leather chairs, was accused of spying for Louis XIV.

Fortress of the Soul considers these phenomena from the perspectives of many disciplines. Much of what follows is intended to engage historians of science as well as

historians of religion, technology, art and artisanry, sexuality (and the body), agriculture, human geography, textual criticism, the book, ecology, and, I hope most of all, the colonization of pluralistic New World societies. It is from the latter discipline (my own) that I develop the central questions I pose of the diverse materials, documents, and contexts I examine in this book: What was the relationship between several competing religious and cultural ideologies and the formation of material life? How were Continental and British artisanal paradigms from the Old World transformed in New World settings, and what did these changes mean from several vantage points? Can analysis of material culture address crucial problems in the maintenance and acculturation of colonial identities? What methods can historians use to analyze artifacts for evidence of social interaction, boundaries, and power relationships in pluralistic New World settings? Can our understanding of the Paracelsian worldview of highly mobile Protestant artisans such as the Huguenots of Aunis-Saintonge illuminate understanding of the relationship between skilled refugees and the expansion of a new international religious and political order? How does the interplay of violence, metaphysical experience, and material life help us to elucidate the unique roles that skilled artisans played as agents of change in early modern Atlantic history and culture?

One of the pleasures of completing this book is to acknowledge the enormous amount of help it actually took to get there.

I have been the fortunate recipient of several fellowships and grants, which made the research and writing possible. These included fellowships from the history department of the Johns Hopkins University, where the first part of the book began as a dissertation under the guidance of Professor Jack P. Greene, culminating in a Frederick Jackson Turner Research Fellowship in my final year. Without Professor Greene's support, patience, and especially his openness—ramified by the intellectual intensity of his formidable graduate seminar at Hopkins—this project could not have gotten off the ground. My graduate work was also influenced in many ways by Orest Ranum, whose early belief in material culture as a promising field of study for historians was an indispensable boost to my confidence, and whose awesome knowledge of seventeenth-century France was given generously to this often ill-informed student of early American history. The seminal work of Professors J. G. A. Pocock and Nancy Struever at Hopkins on the pragmatic relationship between language, form, and context in early modern life provided a fertile theoretical foundation, as did participation in Michael Fried's seminar on the phenomenology of perception. Gerard Defaux, Robert Forster, William Freehling, Josue Harrari, Richard Kagan, Vernon Lidke, John Russell-Wood, and Mack Walker were unfailingly helpful as readers, advisors, and teachers.

A Fulbright-Hays Advanced Student Research Fellowship for France facilitated my study in La Rochelle. I lived a wonderful year in the old fortress, where I enjoyed the

warm hospitality of today's Rochelais, though most understood that I passed my time searching for traces of people their ancestors had displaced. Françoise Giteau and her staff at the Archives départementales de la Charente-Maritime and Bernard Démay and his staff at the Bibliothèque municipale de La Rochelle cheerfully complied with endless requests for documents and photocopies. The presence of the late Alain Parent, the first *conservateur* of the Musée du Nouveau Monde, a kindred spirit in the study of the transatlantic history of La Rochelle and its material life, and also at that time a newcomer to town, was essential to the success of this project. Alain and I spent many hours driving the backroads of Aunis and Saintonge in search of artifacts from the region's past. His wholehearted support, and the town's strong backing of his new museum with interests in the *outré-mer* similar to mine, encouraged librarians, historians, antiquarians, and collectors to share local knowledge with me. The late Father Bernard Coutant (who, when he discovered my interest in furniture, produced a handwritten manuscript on the subject from decades of work in La Rochelle's notarial registers) was generous with advice on the vagaries of the archives' cataloguing system. Among the local antiquarians who allowed access to their personal collections and shared hands-on experience with the early pottery of La Chapelle-des-Pots, I am particularly grateful to Jean-Pierre Bayeux, Pierre Clion, Jacques Denis, Yvette Gautron, and Florence Laversin. New friends in La Rochelle and Saintes made time away from the archives a great pleasure, as they kindly showed me the parts of their ancient region and its waterways they knew and loved best. Patrick Soulimant and Sylvie Gaud Soulimant opened the doors to their old stone farmhouse at Courcoury, outside Saintes, and joined me whenever I wanted to explore Palissy's old haunts. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to that great sailor and chef Philippe Lecalve, as well as to his wife, Martine, and all the gang at Le Coquelicot in La Rochelle, for the food and wine and company.

Many fruitful hours were spent as a postdoctoral fellow at the Folger Institute in the Folger Shakespeare Library, where I took part in Owen Hannaway's seminar on *technologia* and natural philosophy in the early modern period. Hannaway's path-breaking work at Hopkins on the history of alchemy, artisanry, and manual philosophy has informed this project in fundamental ways. His enthusiastic support, friendship, and encouragement have meant more than he can know.

Subsequently, I served as an National Endowment for the Humanities research associate and postdoctoral fellow in early American history at the University of Maryland, College Park, where for two years I worked on the book while administering the Washington Area Seminar in Early American History and Culture, then directed by my friend and colleague John J. McCusker. This experience culminated in a conference that drew its themes from my research and the resulting volume of the same title, *Religion, Popular Culture and Material Life in the Middle Colonies and the Upper South*,

1650–1800, edited by McCusker and myself (College Park, Md.: Maryland Colloquium on Early American History, 1990). I remember my sojourn at College Park fondly, not only because I got to know John, but also because my project benefited from the insights of the famously strong (and strong-minded) group of colonial historians who sat around the table at that seminar. I am speaking, of course, of Lois Carr, Emory Evans, Ron Hoffman, Alison Olson, and Lorena Walsh.

Finally, as its length and numerous photographs will attest, this was an expensive book to publish, and I am happy to gratefully acknowledge generous assistance from the Chipstone Foundation, a personal subvention given by Oloruntoyin O. Falola, Frances Higginbotham Nalle Centennial Professor in History, the University of Texas at Austin, and a University Cooperative Society Subvention Grant, awarded by the University of Texas at Austin.

Research was facilitated by the enthusiastic assistance of the staffs of a number of libraries: among those who were particularly helpful, I thank Neville Thompson of the Winterthur Library; Leo Hershkowitz of the Historical Documents Division, Klapper Library, Queens College, New York; the Interlibrary Loan departments at Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University and the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas at Austin; archivists at the New York Historical Society Library, the New York Public Library's Rare Book and Manuscript Room, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, and the Friends' Library of New York City; Heidi Hass of the New York Society Library; and Phyllis Barr of the Trinity Church Archives.

Many wonderful days were spent sorting through the collections of museums and historical societies on both sides of the Atlantic. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the unparalleled collections of colonial American furniture and decorative arts at Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, where, under the guidance of the late Benno M. Forman as my thesis advisor, I first began to ponder problems of influence and form in New York Colony. I am also grateful to the late Marge Sterns and Deborah Waters of the Museum of the City of New York; Joe Butler, Anne Larin, and Kate Eagen Johnson of Historic Hudson Valley; John Scherer of the New York State Museum; Frances Gruber Safford and Peter M. Kenny of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the late Don Pierce and Diane Pilgrim, formerly of the Brooklyn Museum; Susan Schoelwer of the Connecticut Historical Society; William Hosley, formerly of the Wadsworth Atheneum; Pat Kane and David Barquist of the Yale University Art Gallery; Michael Brown and David Warren of Bayou Bend Museum and Gardens; Roderick Blackburn, formerly of the Albany Institute of History and Art; Mrs. Tennant of the Bowne House Historical Society; Dean Failey, formerly director of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities; Mrs. Joan Kindler, Clerk of the Friends' Meetinghouse in Flushing; Mitchell Grubler and Richard Hourahan of

the Queens Historical Society; and Luke Beckerdite, whose work at the Chipstone Foundation has reenergized the publication of American furniture history. Chapter 15 has appeared in Chipstone's journal *American Furniture* in a different form and context; I am grateful to its editors for permission to include a new version of that essay here.

The staff at the Musée national céramique de Sèvres in Paris kindly allowed me to view its collection of early Saintongeais pottery although the galleries were closed to visitors. I also benefited from the expertise of Lise Carrier, curator of the Musées d'Orbigny-Bernon and des Beaux-Arts at La Rochelle; M. le docteur Duguay, curator of the Musée d'histoire naturelle et d'ethnographie de La Rochelle; and Mlle. Olga de Sainte-Affrique, historian and curator of the Musée protestant de La Rochelle. Jean Chapelot, whose archeological scholarship on the pottery and kiln sites in and around La Chapelle-des-Pots has become indispensable to all subsequent work on the subject, helped with advice and encouragement.

A number of friends and colleagues read at least part of the manuscript at various stages, including Bob Abzug, Rudy Binion, Dave Bowman, Sally Clarke, Sam Cohn, David Crew, Susan Deans-Smith, John Demos, Jack P. Greene, Michael G. Hall, Peter Jelavich, Ben Kaplan, Kevin Kenney, Brian Levack, Howard Miller, Martha Newman, Michael O'Brien, Jean Russo, Jim Sidbury, Mark Smith, Pamela H. Smith, Denise Spellberg, Nancy Struever, and Mauricio Tenorio. Elizabeth Hedrick shared her essays and ideas about Sir Kenelm Digby, helping to illuminate the many lives of that obscure yet ubiquitous courtier and alchemist. Bruce Hunt generously placed his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of science at my service too many times to remember. Ann Ramsey's keen insight into expressions of Catholic spirituality in seventeenth-century France was helpful on many occasions, as was Bob Olwell's understanding of the history of French refugees in the South Carolina low country, an early matrix of Huguenot culture in the Deep South. Alan Miller gave freely of his unparalleled knowledge of early woodworking. Bob Brugger at the Johns Hopkins University Press has stood behind this project from the beginning, waiting patiently until I was finally ready to relinquish the manuscript. Peter Dreyer's editing was first-rate. Avi Zakai was a one-man cheering section in Baltimore and Jerusalem. The friendship and moral support of Harvey and Sandy Sussman and John Tongate have been constant, and John Dorfman and Nickie Irvine have helped in so many ways that I can never thank them enough, especially for their generosity of spirit.

Caroline Castiglione, Donna Evergates, Alison Frazier, Janet Meisel, and Anna Taylor helped make sense of my translations of "corrupted" forms of Latin used by artisans and natural philosophers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Arndt Bohm reviewed some tricky German. But my deepest gratitude in this context is reserved for Marie-Aline Irvine, who spent many hours cheerfully comparing notes on

my translations of Bernard Palissy's sometimes intractable Saintongeais French. Translation is a complex and inexact labor at best, but this is especially true of early modern languages. This task was made much less difficult by reference to Randle Cotgrave's great *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), a monument of seventeenth-century translation.

My sister Susan Kamil, a well-known editor, accustomed to refining the work of truly accomplished writers, waded through an early draft of the first part of the book and somehow emerged from the morass with sage advice. My wife, Madeline Irvine, has lived with every word of this book for so long that she tells the story better than I can. She believed in me, and in it, more than I have myself.

I am unable to place this book in the hands of two family members who contributed more to the formation of my historical sensibilities than they ever imagined, but who died before it was finished. For them I reserve the dedication.

F O R T R E S S O F T H E S O U L

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