

# **The basilica Notre-Dame de Montréal.**

## **The glory of Sulpicians, owners of l'île de Montréal**

In 1642, the year Ville-Marie (today's Montréal) was founded by Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, Jean-Jacques Olier established the Society of Saint-Sulpice, a society of priests who came to Montréal in 1657 and joined the Jesuits who had already established a mission there. In 1663 the seigneurie of l'île de Montréal was donated to the Sulpicians and they governed until 1840. A plan of 1672 drawn up by Dollier de Casson, Father Superior of the Sulpicians, formed the basis for future urban development: he established a linear layout of streets forming blocks of unequal dimensions, roughly rectangular, with a market place and parish church acting as focal points.



Les deux Notre-Dame  
Photo : François Brault

The parish was officially inaugurated and dedicated to the Saint-Nom-de-Marie in 1678. The construction of the first church of Notre-Dame began in 1672, on the site chosen by Dollier de Casson, aligned with the Rue Notre-Dame. It was built according to the Jesuit plan with a transept and a semicircular choir. It was enlarged for the first time in 1708 and then underwent a major transformation in 1722 when it was decided to lengthen it from the façade adding a large structure flanked with two towers after plans by Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry, the King's engineer. However, towards 1734 it was again too small for the growing population and was enlarged once more, this time creating side aisles linking the transept to the towers on the façade. The church

continued to be used until the present basilica was completed in 1830. The north tower (the only one which was built) was preserved until 1843, after the first tower of the new church had been finished.

It is hard to imagine the true dimensions of the church facing the place d'Armes, now surrounded by tall buildings. It was, however, the largest church in North America when it was built bar none. The towers are 66m high and the nave is 77m long, 41m wide and more than 24m high from floor to ceiling.



Notre-Dame vue de la  
place d'Armes  
Photo : François Brault

The Irish architect James O'Donnell emigrated to New York in 1812. When he was approached about drawing up the plans for Notre-Dame, he had just finished Christ Church in New York and was completing the First Presbyterian Church of Rochester. He renounced the Protestant faith just before his death on 28 January 1830 in order to embrace Catholicism, and this allowed him to be buried under his church (at the foot of the first pillar on the side of the churchwarden's pew).



Dessin tour  
Photo: François Brault

In 1822, the decision of the auxiliary bishop (Montréal was still part of the diocese of Québec at that time) to build the Cathédrale Saint-Jacques on la rue Saint-Denis prompted the Sulpicians to build a new place of worship. They were determined to avoid dividing the huge parish of Notre-Dame because they did not want to lose their hold on the territory which covered the area stretching as far as today's autoroute Métropolitaine would be much larger than any other on the continent while taking into account the limitations of the site. It was also to be built in a new style going against the established traditions.

The project gave rise to controversy: Jérôme Demers, Principal at the Séminaire de Québec, and the architect Thomas Baillairgé proposed a rather more conservative project following the classical tradition of architecture which they considered to be the only acceptable style for the country. Needless to say, this was immediately rejected by the Sulpicians who were, however, sensitive to the architect's arguments:



Gravure du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle  
Photo : François Brault

"Gentlemen, remember that this is not a temporary building that you are erecting, but one which will reflect glory on yourselves, on your congregation and on your country... I assure you that the history of your church will be passed on to future generations". Not only was O'Donnell an innovator with respect to style; he also imposed on the workmen a new method of working. They were no longer able to go about things in their own way. Instead, they had to be satisfied with carrying out the orders of a third person.

Work began in 1824. It took two years to erect the walls and the façade as far as the base of the towers. The wooden framework was completed in 1827 and the vaulting and original interiors were finished in 1829. The whole building, including the towers, is rectangular in shape, contrary to the custom which generally kept the towers and facade separate. With Notre-Dame, O'Donnell introduced the neo-gothic vocabulary to religious architecture north of the United States. The porch is composed of arcades with cross-ribbed vaulting and the towers are supported by buttresses surmounted by pinnacles. Rose-windows, window-tracery and crenels complete the décor. It should be noted that the neo-gothic elements are used more for a decorative effect than a structural one, the overall effect and the symbolic value taking precedence over the logic of the construction which is inspired more by traditional classicism which was firmly established during the 17th and 18th centuries.



Ensemble du chœur  
Photo : Germain Casavant

The architect Victor Bourgeau worked on the interior from 1872 to 1879. The original facing in grey and blue imitation marble was replaced with polychrome radiating over the entire surface. The large glass roof which had originally completed the chevet was replaced by three rose-windows set directly in the suspended ceiling and in the roof. This new interior, to all intents and purposes re-established a semicircular choir in the sanctuary.

During his visit to Paris in 1872 Benjamin-Victor Rousselot, priest of Notre-Dame since 1866, commissioned his compatriot, the sculptor Henri Bouriché, native of Angers, to produce the large statues and reliefs for the main altar and new reredos designed by Victor Bourgeau. At the top of the reredos, Mary is crowned by her Son.

The interior of the nave, influenced by that of the restoration of la Sainte-Chapelle de Paris, is in polychrome with blues, azure, reds, purples, silver and gold, and the vaulting is dotted with gold-leafed stars.

The pulpit was added between 1883 and 1887. It was designed by the Montréal sculptor Louis-Philippe Hébert, after plans by the French sculptor Henri Bouriché. It was modified during construction because the course of the stairway left only enough space for two prophets at the base of the pulpit whereas the initial project had included four.



Prophètes, détail de la chaire  
Photo : François Brault

The organ was made by Casavant de Saint-Hyacinthe. Its last overhaul took place in 1991, and today it comprises 97 stops divided between four keyboards and pedal board, with almost 7000 pipes.

The baptismal font was installed in 1882 at the entrance to the church in a small purpose-built baptistery, under the supervision of architect Pierre-Louis Morin,. The vaulting, walls, doorways and design of the stained glass windows are all the work of the artist Ozias Leduc and date from 1926.



Chaire  
Photo : François Brault

In 1888, it was decided that the splendour and dimensions of the church were not suitable for intimate marriage ceremonies or the less formal meetings of the congregation. The architects Perrault and Mesnard came together to construct a chapel, a sacristy and offices behind the church. The chapel was entirely made of wood and could hold up to 1000 people. It was officially opened in 1891. The architectural décor reminds one of the wooden ceilings of the English gothic style characterised by corbelling and polychrome materials.

On 7 December 1978 a terrible fire devastated this treasure which was part of Montréal's religious heritage. The reconstruction of the chapel was entrusted to the architects Jodoin, Lamarre, Pratt & Associates. The first two levels were reconstructed using drawings and old photographs. The vaulting was treated in a contemporary style. The reredos, containing 32 bronze panels, is the work of the Québécois sculptor, Charles Daudelin. It illustrates Man's earthly pilgrimage through all life's difficulties towards the heavenly glory of the Blessed Trinity.

The church of Notre-Dame was raised to the status of minor basilica by Pope John-Paul II, when he came to Montréal, on 21 April 1982.

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