

The Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre de Montréal

A French or English Neo-gothic?



ChoirPhoto : Germain
Casavant

The neo-gothic style in the Montréal diocese

"The neo-gothic style was the most important trend in the diocese of Montréal at the beginning of the 19th century. [...] The construction of the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Montréal marked the first stage, and the second was inspired by the work of Auguste Welby Pugin (1812-1852) and appeared after 1840." (Raymonde Gauthier, *Construire une église au Québec. L'architecture religieuse avant 1939*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1994, p. 99)

Notre-Dame was built by James O'Donnell who began the work in 1824, but it was not until 1843 when the site of St. Patrick's was opened (also in Montréal), that the new styles really became popular.

"The Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre [...] was the first parish church built by the bishop of Montréal, Mgr Ignace Bourget. It was built after a forty-year quarrel between the bishop and the Sulpicians who were seigneurs of the island and responsible for the parish of Notre-Dame. At that time, the Sulpicians wielded authority over the people's consciences as well as over their tithes. To avoid losing any of the power they held over the Catholics in Montréal, they were determined to prevent the creation of new parishes in a town where the majority of the population were already believers in 1845. In order to benefit the inhabitants of outlying areas, the Sulpicians had already built places of worship in the districts of Saint-Antoine and Sainte-Anne. These buildings, however, were only chapels because they were not authorised for the registration of baptisms, marriages or funerals. Mgr Bourget decided, for his part, to erect a chapel in the quarter of Québec." (Raymonde Gauthier, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 143.)



Section of
Bourgeau's plan
Photo : François Brault

Mgr Bourget freely admitted that he installed oblates in the quarter of Québec to counterbalance the Sulpician's power. He put the oblates in charge of the chapel which was at first temporarily installed in a shed. Their holding was rapidly extended thanks to various gifts. In 1848 they were the owners of a sizeable piece of land between the Rue Panet and the Rue de la Visitation. However, they had to wait until 10 October 1900 for the chapel to become a formally constituted parish chapel.

The first major of Victor Bourgeau

The foundation stone of the new building was laid on 29 June 1851 by Mgr Bourget himself. The architect for the project was Victor Bourgeau. The Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre was his first major building. A carpenter by profession, Bourgeau introduced himself to the oblate who was responsible for the project, bringing with him various designs including a plan for a neo-gothic building. The oblate was impressed by the quality of the project presented and Bourgeau was appointed without hesitation.



Aerial view
Photo : François Brault

In spite of his limited training, Bourgeau was passionate about architecture. Inspiration for the Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre was taken from a design which Bourgeau succeeded in adapting in order to create an original, integral work. He was directly influenced by the architect Minard Lafever and his Trinity Church of Brooklyn.

The church was designed in a basilican style with flying buttresses. The main entrance is situated under a tower which forms a porch and it ends in a five-sided apse. The side aisles are covered with gabled roofs which give to the exterior of the building a pleasing sense of rhythm. The tower is surmounted by a spire which together total a height of 70 metres.

Inside, the three-storey elevation is composed of enormous and elaborately carved arcades, a corbelled balcony used as a walk-way, and a clerestory. These are crowned with a wooden vaulting imitating the gothic layout of transverse ribs, diagonal-ribs, liernes and tiercerons. The absence of a transept and horizontal line of the gallery help to emphasise the longitudinal unity of the structure.

The structural work, with the exception of the spire, was finished in 1853. Work on the interior started a year later. The spire was installed in 1874, but the decoration was only completed in 1931.



Bay in the nave
Photo : Germain Casavant

A gothic eclecticism deriving inspiration from various sources

The North-American neo-gothic is sometimes difficult to define. Its leading practitioners often borrow ideas with a surprising eclecticism; but this is not done with the intention of providing the architecture with models which are historically precise or unique. The Medieval era from which this style is taken presented a variety of design possibilities which constituted a rich and flexible vocabulary. The general intention aims at creating visual effects rather than a slavish adherence to historical forms. Most of the time, the architects' inspiration oscillates between British and French neo-gothic styles.



Side aisle
Photo : Germain Casavant



Tower
Photo : François Brault

Bourgeau gave the exterior of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre a French look, whereas the interior calls to mind English architecture of the 13th century. The restraint of the exterior, the vertical lines provided by the flying buttresses surmounted with pinnacles, the simple lines used for the tower, and the polygonal chevet are all features which were developed in the French gothic era of the 12th and 13th centuries. When these were adapted in England in the 13th century, they already derived their inspiration from France, but local builders soon made alterations which resulted in giving them a more national flavour. The interior of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre, on the other hand, calls to mind the Early English 'Decorated' style which was prevalent at the beginning of the 14th century.



Coupe, détail.
Plan de Bourgeau
Photo : François Brault

This can be seen in the richness of decoration, the treatment of the walls, the decoration of the spandrels, the rounded form of the capitals and the complex design of the vaulting.

The other examples of Québec neo-gothic also alternated between these two influences, sometimes favouring the English style and sometimes the French.

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunncliffe

Bibliography:

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