

The Church of Saint-Pierre de Sorel

Like a jewel in its setting



Façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

In 1678, a wooden mission chapel was erected and dedicated to Saint Peter at the confluence of the river Richelieu and the Saint Lawrence. Two other chapels were built on the site in 1708 and 1732, before the erection of the first parish church in 1750. After two projects for major renovations in 1769 and 1799, this was finally demolished when the present church was completed in 1832.



Interior towards façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The original project was based on the Jesuit plan, but was modified because it was considered to be too costly. The height of the walls was reduced by about 3 metres and the side chapels were removed. This was more in keeping with the Recollect plan.

It is not known who the architect was. However, an announcement appeared in the Gazette de Québec in 1826 seeking the services of an architect and indicating that the plans could be consulted at the presbytery of Sorel or at the house of the carpenter Louis Dufresnay, in Québec. In 1829, François Larue, a master builder, undertook to build the doorway and employed Pierre Deauplaise to assist him. The bell-towers were built in 1831 and the roof was covered in white metal the same year. The sacristy was lengthened by about 6 metres in 1881 using the plans drawn up by the architect, L. Z. Gauthier, from Sorel, and new bell-towers were planned (but only built in 1906-1907) which meant altering the upper level of the façade.



Interior
Photo : Germain Casavant

The interior, 1833 to 1844, was the work of Augustin Leblanc, sculptor-contractor from Saint-Grégoire de Nicolet. Although it has been much altered and restored, it is still evocative of the individual style of Leblanc. This was a combination of the influence of the school of Thomas Baillairgé, where decoration is closely associated with the architecture of the building, and that of the sculptor-ornamentals of the school of Quévillon, characterised by a greater freedom of composition.



Ceiling
Photo: Germain Casavant

In its position between two towers supporting belfries, the façade is an example of the neo-classical style which would influence religious architecture from 1830 to 1850. At the lower level, the regularity and symmetry of the openings is worthy of note. The upper level, however, was altered during the restoration work of 1906-1907, and gives to the principal elevation an impression of heaviness.

The church is covered with a pitched roof. Inside, it comprises three vaulted naves separated by an entablature which is supported by a continuous composite colonnade. This provides an ambulatory in the choir. On either side of the altar, barley-sugar columns replaced the original fluted columns in 1920 thus emphasizing the importance of this section of the church. The interior of the church is elegantly decorated with a running colonnade which has the effect of enclosing the nave and choir as if it were in a jewel box.

Over the years the interior has undergone many changes to adapt to the fashions and needs of the time: between 1850 and 1880, side galleries and a balcony above the ambulatory in the choir were added. At the same time, the walls behind the small side altars were made higher in order to hide the stairways to the galleries. In 1881 Naphtali Rochon, painter-decorator from Saint-Eustache and pupil of Napoléon Bourassa, removed the carved ornamentation on the ceiling and replaced it with

a painted fresco contained in new panel divisions. The fresco included 26 characters, 8 scenes and various symbolic figures of the Virgin Mary. Between 1919 and 1923, the architect L.-P. Héroux from Sorel replaced the fresco with the present ornamental motifs which were more in keeping with the original project. The church was finally restored between 1957 and 1961. At this time the side galleries and balcony above the ambulatory were removed, the structure of the reredos was altered and the rear balcony was enlarged using part of the balustrades from the former galleries.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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