

# **The Church of La Purification-de-la-Bienheureuse-Vierge-Marie de Repentigny**

## **A rescue in extremis**

### **An unusual plan under the French Regime**

The seigneurie of Repentigny was conceded to Pierre Legardeur de Repentigny by the Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France in 1647. However, colonisation only really began under Royal decree in 1666. As with most new concessions of land, the first religious buildings were very simple. Only the presence of a larger population could justify building a church of stone which was much more costly but also more durable.



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

Work began on the present building in 1723 and progressed quickly; the framework was completed in 1725. The builder chose a Latin cross design with a five-sided apse. It had been a trend in France since the 12th century to punctuate the walls of the chevet in this way. However, in the architecture of the French regime in New France, the polygonal model remains relatively rare. Other than Repentigny, only the churches in Neuville and in Vaudreuil still have this type of ground plan. Elsewhere the builders usually choose the semicircular or the flat chevet. It is thought to have been a type of construction which was peculiar to the Québec city area.



Reredos

Photo : Germain Casavant

The interior remained rudimentary for a long time. In 1747, Antoine Cirier carved the two reredos and the tabernacles for the side chapels. He also undertook the construction of the main reredos but abandoned the project which was later completed by Philippe Liébert in 1761 with the help of his father-in-law, Vincent Lenoir. Liébert then undertook the construction of the tabernacle which was endowed with a magnificent altar-stone in 1808 by his pupil, Louis-Amable Quévillon. Quévillon completed the interior with vaulting in 1817. The addition of the pulpit concluded the project in 1822.

### **Important renovations in the middle of the 19th century**

In 1835 the wooden sacristy behind the high altar which dated from 1753 was replaced with one in stone. In 1850, the contractors Élie Brien, known as Desrochers, and Louis Guéret, known as Latulippe, enlarged the nave which had now become too small to satisfy the worshipping needs of the population. It was widened directly above the side chapels forming the transept and the façade was moved back six metres before undergoing a major transformation itself. The single bell-tower gave way to a symmetrical two-tower façade probably inspired by that of the church of Notre-Dame de Montréal erected in 1823.

The work which was carried out in the nave meant that some of the interior also had to be refashioned. Therefore, in 1852, Louis-Xavier Leprohon was commissioned to build a new entablature along with its supporting columns.



The building after restoration  
Photo : Germain Casavant

## More changes in 1907

Half a century passed before it was felt that it was necessary to change the appearance of the building once again. Rather than redo the structure of the vaulting by Quévillon which would necessitate repairs, it was decided, in 1907, to make a decorative covering for it. The architects Gauthier and Daoust took on the task of designing something that would be in keeping with the Québec architectural tradition of the 19th century, but their remodelling gave to the interior an aspect which was rather different from that of Quévillon. The sobriety and regular sectionalising of the vaulting compares more favourably with the style of the Baillargés than with the artistic conception associated with the Quévillon studio.



View towards the choir  
Photo : Germain Casavant

## A major fire in 1984

On 12 October 1984 the building caught fire. Although the flames were quickly brought under control and a good deal of the original interior was saved, it was still a heavy loss for the nation's ecclesiastical heritage. The interior had in fact included characteristic elements of each of the great periods in the history of Québec religious art. The 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were harmoniously combined and personal aspirations had given way to a desire for unity.

The 1907 vaulting had been completely destroyed, partly revealing that of Quévillon, though in a rather mutilated condition. Neither the polychromy of Leprohon's pillars in the nave nor the woodwork of the choir were saved. However, most of the decorative features from the level of windows still remain. In addition, the disaster necessitated a major restoration from 1984 to 1988. The renovations to the main altar led to the discovery of the old marbling on Quévillon's altar-stone.

The church at Repentigny still attracts visitors despite the ravages of the fire. Classifying it as a listed building in 1978 emphasised its exceptional character, and its recent restoration confirms the great value of its many elaborate features which are even more resplendent today than in the past.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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