

The Church of La Visitation-de-la-Bienheureuse-Vierge-Marie of Sault-au-Récollet in Montréal

Refinements in detail

The large increase in population in the 19th century led to the reconstruction of most of the parish churches built during the French Regime on the island of Montréal. The general structure of the church of La Visitation in Sault-au-Récollet, however, managed to resist the various restorations and additions of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Rather than adulterating it, the various building initiatives have made it one of the most interesting parish churches in the province. The overall effect together with the fine workmanship in the detail combine to produce a whole building of high quality.



Exterior elevation
Photo : François Brault



Façade
Photo : François Brault

The main work started around 1749 at the instigation of the priest, Guillaume Chambon. A Recollect-type plan was chosen, in other words, without transept and with a narrowing of the chancel, a current trend at this time. The first services were held in 1751 which indicates how rapidly the work was done. The solemn consecration was carried out in 1752 by Monsignor de Pontbriand, bishop of Québec.



Façade window
Photo : François Brault



Spandrels
Photo : François Brault

An interior completed in four stages according to the aesthetic of Quévillon

Philippe Liébert completed the first reredos and the interior of the church between 1764 and 1773. The carved walnut doors which are still to be found on either side of the altar are certainly all that remains of this project. In 1791, Liébert was once again commissioned by the church council to construct a pulpit and a tabernacle for the main altar in order to complete the initial furnishings.

The pulpit has disappeared but the tabernacle can still be seen on the altar-stone that Louis-Amable Quévillon produced in 1806, two years after the death of his master, Liébert. The magnificent interior which we can still admire today is by David Fleury-David, a sculptor apprenticed in the school of Quévillon. He was commissioned by the church council in 1816 to modernise the interior. It really is his masterpiece and is striking in its harmony of colours and the delicacy of its decorated motifs. The vaulting was completed in 1820 and Fleury-David went on to produce three new reredoses.

Vincent Chartrand, who also studied under Quévillon, became, in 1831, the church council's appointed chief architect. He built the present pulpit, enlarged the rood screen and designed the main altar (no longer in existence) for the new sacristy built in 1844.



vaulting Choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

A façade which contrasts with the interior

In 1850, with the approval of Monsignor Bourget, it was decided to lengthen the nave by eight metres, that is to say by adding two bays, and to construct a new façade. John Ostell (from a company of Anglophone architects from Montréal), who was to all intents and purposes the chief architect of the diocese of Montréal at this time, used a design which recalled to mind his work in the churches of Notre-Dame-de-Toutes-Grâces (1851) and Sainte-Anne of Griffintown (1852).



Pulpit
Photo : Germain Casavant

He chose a neo-classic vocabulary, which had been in fashion for the previous thirty years in Québec, while accentuating the monumental character of the structure. The work continued until 1863 when spires were added to the two towers. This austere façade with its projecting triangular pediment and its strongly emphasised stonework in relief, contrasts greatly with the warmth of the interior for which one is totally unprepared by looking at the outside. One finds echo of this structure in the façade of Sainte-Rose-de-Lima in Laval built by Ostell at the same time.



Detail of the reredos
Photo : François Brault



Interior view towards choir
Photo : François Brault

An interior growing in grandeur

"The further one proceeds into the church, the more the roof vaulting seems to increase in grandeur reaching its culmination above the choir". (Jean Bélisle, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 169)

The bays of the interior are designed with an architectural logic peculiar to most Catholic churches since the Middle Ages. To emphasise the privileged position of the choir, the decoration becomes increasingly elaborate from the simple plant motifs at the back to the rich carving in the final bays. This is a good example of the creative originality of Fleury-David. "The transition from the vaulting above the choir to that of the nave is accomplished with spandrels which decorate the upper part of the chevet walls of the side chapels. The choir vaulting is decorated with lozenge and hexagon shapes circling a rose." (Jean Bélisle, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p.168) The delicacy of the motifs gives the impression of a damask style décor where the subtlety and play of colour bring about an enveloping effect and give a distinctive softness to the sacred parts of the structure.

The Chartrand pulpit goes particularly well with the other furnishings. Its dynamic form and the richness of its detail recall the virtuosity of the chancel vaulting and soften the passage between the comparative sobriety of the nave and the richness of the choir. The angel with a trumpet above the canopy along with the other sculptures in the choir and nave complete the interior which is otherwise rather abstract.

The church of la Visitation du Sault-au-Récollet can definitely be considered one of the most beautiful achievements of the school of Quévillon along with the churches of Saint-Mathias and Saint-Michel in Vaudreuil.

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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