

# The Church of Le Gesù de Montréal

## A new use for the grey stone of Montréal



Side aisle

Photo : Germain Casavant

The church of Gesù was adjacent to Sainte-Marie college, a place for the education of boys, the supervision of which Monsignor Ignace Bourget, bishop of Montréal had entrusted to the Jesuits. Its recognition as a historic monument in 1975 saved the church from the demolition workers who, nevertheless, did not spare the old college.

The Order of Jesuits had been re-established by Pius VII in 1814. They came back to Montréal in 1842 under the protection of Monsignor Bourget who supported their return. He considered that their presence would reduce the hegemony of the Sulpicians in Montréal. The college was built in 1842 using plans drawn up by the Jesuit Félix Martin. A chapel was included in the college but some twenty years later, noticing the growing population in the sector, the bishop proposed building a public chapel attached to the college which would serve the community and the local population. It was to be dedicated to the Sacré-Cœur-de-Jésus, a devotion which had become very popular amongst the Catholic francophones of Montréal.

The name of Gesù is a reference to the Principal Church of the Jesuits in Rome. Correspondence between Monsignor Bourget and Father Rémi Tellier, the Father Superior of the Jesuits in New York, reveals the outline of the original project which was based on a Montréal version of the church in Rome. The neo-gothic movement had been widely adopted in the 19th century by different Christian denominations, including not only the Roman Catholic Church but also the Protestant and Reformed Churches such as the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists etc. In effect Monsignor Bourget was hoping to renew the style of religious architecture in his diocese. Using the important monuments of the Catholic Church as a model (remember his wish to reproduce St. Peter's in Rome for the basilica-cathedral of Marie-Reine-du-Monde) the bishop would play a part in diversifying the stylistic approach to religious architecture by returning to the formal vocabulary of the Renaissance, more particularly in its baroque development. He therefore rejected the plans drawn up by the architects Lamontagne and Perrault without hesitation judging the influence to be too 'gothic', despite the fact that the Jesuits had approved the plans.

It was probably Father Tellier who proposed the services of the architect Patrick C. Keely, a native of Ireland, who had emigrated to the United States in 1841. He had designed over two hundred churches in the north-east states, notably that of New York. The architect designed a church with five naves creating large side aisles of over four metres which opened on to side chapels intended for the use of members of the community. Beyond the transept, a vast choir allowed concelebrants to circulate for grand ceremonies.

The 23-metre high ceiling was produced in trompe-l'œil, and is entirely covered in frescos. These were painted by the artist Daniel Müller, a native of New York, and copied from the German school of Düsseldorf, the main theme of the iconography being the life of Christ.



Interior

Photo : Germain Casavant



Exterior

Photo : Commission des biens culturels

The façade overlooking Rue De Bleury comprises two storeys above the basement and is crowned with a triangular pediment which incorporates a niche containing a statue. The portico is flanked by two diagonally-positioned towers which, had they been completed, would have added a greater sense of the vertical to the building. The side elevation shows quite clearly how the interior is laid out.

The church is built of the grey stone of Montréal and is in conformity with the typical tendencies of the second half of the 19th century. The characteristics of this style are sometimes seen in the striving after effect by using polychrome techniques or varying the way the stone is cut, and sometimes by a varied use of the materials used in the building. Therefore, depending on how the stone was to be used, it would be cut with different types of finish: the more finely-hewn stone is generally found on the façade, at the chain-work in the corners and at the framework of the openings, and rubble-stone (which is generally quarried more roughly) is combined with it to emphasise the shadow and light on the surface. The latter, less expensive than freestone, can be found on the secondary elevations.

The basement of Gesù was made into an auditorium. It has played an important part in Montréal's cultural life. It has provided a venue for actors both from the locality and from elsewhere. Some of those who have acted here include the *Compagnons de Saint-Laurent* (under the direction of Father Émile Legault) and the *Théâtre du Nouveau Monde* (TNM). Both companies have provided Quebec with a number of well-known actors.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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