

The Church of Mont-Saint-Hilaire

A mock façade concealing a magnificent interior



Choir and side altars
Photo : Germain Casavant

The mock façade, like those in Medieval England, is a type of frontage which has no connection with the structure of the interior of the building. It thus does not follow the French Gothic principles, but rather gives the appearance of a structure which has literally been stuck on to the nave. This construction, in a rather unusual form, can be seen at the church of Saint-Hilaire-de-Richelieu. There is an explanation for this. The original project, inspired by the neighbouring church of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, was for a frontage with twin towers, but this was abandoned. The result is quite exceptional in Québécois religious architecture.



Interior
Photo : François Brault

When the visitor arrives in front of the building, the main body of the church remains hidden behind this rather plain stone wall which is wider than the nave on both sides and stands taller than the roofs. However, once inside, this bleak exterior is immediately forgotten. In fact the interior is actually one of the best of its kind in the province of Québec.

The structural work



Vaulting in the apse
Photo : Germain Casavant

The building specification was prepared in 1830 and the church council hired Augustin Leblanc, a contractor from Saint-Grégoire de Nicolet, to replace the old chapel-presbytery of 1798. A Recollect plan was chosen with a flat chevet, a popular style in the Montréal area. Financial problems led to the slowing down of the building work and resulted in an adjustment to the initial project in 1834. The plan for the bell towers on either side was abandoned and replaced by a single tower integrated into the framework behind the gable of the façade. Work was finished in 1837 and the building was consecrated. The structural work, the framework, the roof, the false-vaulting and the supports which would take on the appearance of Neo-gothic columns as soon as the interior was finished, were all completed. The Neo-gothic style could already be seen in the pointed openings in the façade whereas they are semicircular along the side walls.

A lively Neo-gothic interior



reverse side of the façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

Perhaps they were trying for a Quévillon style interior, but nobody really knows. The semicircular openings of the nave and choir lead one to believe that the Neo-gothic style was not intended. However, it was finally decided to opt for an interior inspired by that of the basilica of Notre-Dame de Montréal decorated in a Neo-gothic style between 1824 and 1829.

The interior was begun in 1842 under the supervision of Antoine Prévost, a carpenter from Beloeil. The vaulting and columns were completed at this time. The dynamic form of this space with its three naves of equal height is enhanced by the delicacy of its columns composed of clusters of eight colonnettes surmounted by capitals with rounded abaci.



Adoration des mages,
toile du chœur
Photo : Germain Casavant

The style of the choir, imitating the polygonal structure of the chevets of medieval churches, was most likely chosen to blend in with the dynamic composition of the nave. The angular stonework is virtually clothed with carvings and a space is created behind the reredos as in the era of the French Regime. Doors on either side of the high altar allow access to this space before reaching the sacristy.

Minor additions in 1853 and 1878-1879 completed the interior which has remained unchanged to this day. First of all, balconies were built at the back and then, in 1878, the high altar was positioned, and wooden mullions were added to the bays in the nave to give them a Gothic appearance.

Enhancing the carved interior with Ozias Leduc's paintings

As in Notre-Dame de Montréal, the murals of the church of Saint-Hilaire-sur-Richelieu gave the interior a much greater impact. They were painted by Ozias Leduc between 1896 and 1900.



Façade
Photo : Germain
Casavant

"The decoration of the walls and vaulting was started in 1896. It comprises for the most part stylised plant motifs. The natural world mingles intimately with the spiritual message and a symbolic flora is spread over the whole. In the choir, a sense of unity is achieved with the decoration of the semi-dome using a motif of a blossoming vine running over a trellis. The painted architecture thus creates a sort of enclosed garden where a plant blossoms symbolising the Christ. In the nave and side aisles, the vaulting is adorned with laurel crowns, joined by a ribbon, in the centre of which the divine attributes and instruments of the Passion can be seen." (Laurier Lacroix and Guy-André Roy. «Église de la paroisse Saint-Hilaire-sur-Richelieu», *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 277.)

The rest of the decoration was completed after Leduc had returned from a trip to London and Paris in 1897. His iconographic scheme was complicated. He wanted to show the essentials of Catholicism rather than emphasising the more traditional theme of devotion to the saints.

The final involvement the artist had with the parish was in 1928-1929. He was asked to supervise the installation of the stained glass windows created from his sketches by G.E. Pellus. These exceptional works represent one of the peaks in religious decorative art in the province of Québec, both for their coherence and the refinement of detail. In a way, the austere mock façade hides and protects this priceless treasure.

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

Bibliography:

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