

The Church of Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours de L'Islet-sur-Mer

The architectural development between the end of the 18th and end of the 19th centuries



Façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

As a work of art the church of Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours of L'Islet-sur-Mer is rather like a mosaic which has benefited from the contribution of some of the most important artists and architects in the history of Québec architecture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Construction of the present church began in 1770. It was preceded by a wooden chapel (1699) which had been replaced by a larger church (22m x 7.6m) in 1721. The first structural framework took about 10 years to complete. The master builders, Chéquy and Magnan, from Québec, built a place of worship, 36.6m long by 17m wide using a Recollect plan which was in effect just a single nave wider than the choir to allow for side chapels. We do not know what the outside of the building looked like. The façade most likely had a doorway surrounded by oculi or niches, and the gable was no doubt crowned with a lantern tower.



Interior towards choir
Photo : François Brault

In 1830, Jean-Olivier Leclerc, contractor from L'Islet, lengthened the church by about 9m. The façade was then enclosed by two towers supporting belfries. The soaring height and the monumental aspect of the whole building were toned down by reducing the size of the openings and arranging them in horizontal layers. In 1840 the new sacristy was built in the choir extension. This led to the construction of the chapels of la Congrégation and la Sainte-Famille (1853-1855) adjoining the nave on the north wall replacing the first sacristy (1799). At the same time, the crossing of the nave was raised by about 0.6m in order to erect a "projecting dripstone of about two and a half feet".

The architect, David Ouellet, gave the church a new façade in 1882. Such alterations were very common during the second half of the 19th century. The idea was to try to create a monumental effect by affixing to the gable a screen façade surmounted by heavy bell-towers. This was done in order to emphasise the presence of a church in the area.

The decoration of the choir was carried out between 1782 and 1787 by Jean Baillairgé and his son, François. The reredos extends over the whole of the apse covering all the walls of the choir. This layout appeared to be new in L'Islet as the traditional, 'Recollect-style' reredos covered only the end wall of the choir, the others walls being treated differently. In all probability it was a new idea introduced by François Baillairgé on his return from France.



Choir
Photo : Germain Casavant



Angel of the side chapel
Photo: François Brault

The reredos is constructed on two levels. The first level is decorated with false-arcades crowned with a frieze and a rectilinear entablature. The cornice is interrupted by the windows. The upper level presents a clever composition of pilasters around panels with plant motifs. Brackets hold two sculptures representing Holy Bounty and Holy Modesty by François Baillairgé in 1786.

In 1808, the ceiling by Benoni Aubut was painted 'sky blue' and covered in stars. In 1818-1820, Amable Charron, who studied under Quévillon, added coffers to the ceiling decorated with stars. He had already arranged the pilasters in the nave to support the cornice.



High altar

Photo : Germain Casavant

The existing coffered ceiling in plaster was produced by the architect François-Xavier Berlinguet in 1865. The ceiling partly follows the slope of the roof making the nave into an immense reception hall since the side galleries (added in 1898) were removed. One has to imagine it with polychrome and gilt according to the aesthetic predilections of that time.

With respect to both its exterior and interior, Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours of L'Islet is a fine example of the development of architecture from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th centuries. The facade effectively conceals the single nave built in traditional style. This facade with its robust string courses and entablatures gives an imposing and monumental aspect to the building by setting emphatic horizontal lines against the tall vertical thrust of the bell-towers. Inside, the formal simplicity of the ceiling considerably enhances the quality of the sanctuary. The church was listed as an historic monument in 1957.

Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours also harbours some notable works of art from the 18th and 19th centuries, notably the reredoses and the angel reliquaries of the side chapels (1801-1805) by Pierre-Florent Baillairgé (François' brother), two angels with trumpets by Amable Charron (1812-1816), the statues of the Sacred-Heart and Christ preaching by Louis Dulongpré (1807), and six paintings by Antoine Plamondon (1871).

The tabernacle for the high altar was created between 1728 and 1730 by the sculptor, Noël Levasseur, for the first church in L'Islet. It then served as model for Batiscan, Grondines, Saint-Sulpice and Saint-Vallier de Bellechasse. A painting by Jean-Antoine Créquy, created in 1776, adorns the wall above the high altar.

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