

The Church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville

The art of trompe-l'œil



Exterior
Photo : François Brault

From architectural ornamentation to the art of painted décor

The idea of painting the interiors of churches was introduced into Québec from the second quarter of the 19th century. Sculpture in relief or in the round had been favoured for traditional interiors from the time of New France until then. The introduction of the neo-gothic style into Québécois architecture in the eighteen-twenties, brought new methods of ornamentation.



Vaulting
Photo : Germain Casavant

However, it was only during the second half of the 19th century that the use of symbolic paintings as an enhancement for architecture became established. Various styles from past French and Italian designs. The neo-gothic style which had been in use since the eighteen-twenties (and especially after 1840) was now accompanied by neo-renaissance and neo-baroque styles. This made for a rich and varied architecture which was emphasised by these paintings. At the end of the 19th century, more than a hundred churches in Québec were adorned with trompe-l'œil style décor. In many ways this new technique helped the transition from traditional to modern design in the 20th century.

The Church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville: a witness to the use of both methods of ornamentation

The church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville was built in 1807, deriving its inspiration from the church in Boucherville. It was built to a Latin cross design ending in a semicircular chevet. The stages of construction of this church are simple. Only the façade has been restored since the building was built. Efforts for improvement were concentrated on the interior.



Aerial view
Photo : François Brault

In the well-established tradition, carving and sculpture are prominent features throughout most of the building. From 1809 onwards the church council commissioned a number of well-known sculptors from the area, including Louis-Amable Quévillon. At the end of the 19th century, however, the keen interest in painted décor prompted them to change their ideas. Several foreign artists such as Angelo Pienovi, Julius Heldt, and William Lamprecht etc. had started to prepare the ground for this new method of decorating places of worship. The priest-in-charge of Rouville commissioned François Edouard Meloche to embellish the interior of the church with suitable paintwork.



Detail of semi-dome
Photo : François Brault

This church has one of the most beautiful examples of painted décor in Québec. Meloche studied under Napoléon Bourassa and quickly made a name for himself as a skilful painter, decorator and fresco painter, excelling in the art of trompe-l'œil to reproduce in paint various architectural features. In Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville his paintings demonstrate great skill in portraying architectural ornamentation with astonishing verisimilitude. The effects of light and shadow are skilfully achieved. Following Bourassa's example, he uses trompe-l'œil motifs and produces a profusion of reproductions of cartouches and mouldings etc.



Choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

The iconography in the church is based on the life of Saint John the Baptist and Christian symbolism. Subjects are taken from both the Old and New Testaments to illustrate the teaching about John the Baptist as the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first of the New.

In addition to the murals in the main body of the church, François Edouard Meloche also painted the chapel-sacristy. An imitation bas-relief illustrates cartouches in which verses from the Bible are written. Meloche's last involvement in Rouville was in 1892. He created a triptych in the graveyard oratory illustrating the Holy Land.



Chapel-sacristy
Photo : François Brault

Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville is unquestionably one of the most important examples in Québec of a church with a painted interior. Although Meloche painted about forty church interiors in Québec and Canada, only six of them have been preserved. He used several different styles: Byzantine, Roman and Celtic etc. Meloche won prizes for his work in Chicago in 1893 and again at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900.

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