

The Church of Saint-Louis de Lotbinière

Flat chevet and aligned sacristy



Aerial view
Photo : François Brault

With its contrasting colours, the Church of Saint-Louis de Lotbinière is the third church to be built on this site. The first church was built in 1717 and was replaced in 1750 by one which was considered rather mediocre by the local population. In 1816 they started to talk about rebuilding it. The new church built at the beginning of the 19th century is certainly eye-catching. Its white roughcast walls bring out the slate-grey of the spires and the bright red roof. It overlooks the Saint Lawrence River and the statue of Saint-Louis on the roof seems to dominate the whole area.

Thomas Baillairgé's second building



Nave towards façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The personal career of the architect Thomas Baillairgé began in Saint-Joachim where he produced the interior. Although his father, Jean, assisted him at first, he finished the project alone in 1829. He signed the plans for Saint-Louis-de-Lotbinière in 1824. It was the first time his was the only signature which figured on the plans. It was therefore his second project, and the first for which he had been commissioned directly.

The structural work of the present church began in 1818. The plan seemed completely novel for a building of that era. The nave crossed by a projecting transept opens out on to a choir with a flat chevet. It was rare, in the early 19th century to find this form of chevet. A sacristy was built in the sanctuary in alignment with the nave.

The façade was originally supposed to have a single bell-tower surmounting the gable. The local priest, however, decided he wanted two towers such as those in Cap-Santé on the other side of the river (1754-1758) or in Louiseville (1804). The head contractor, Jean-Baptiste Hébert, had to adapt his plan. The building was ready for decoration in 1822.

Major changes to the façade at the end of the 19th century

In 1888, the façade needed to be restored. David Ouellet rebuilt the bell-towers and proposed a new couronnement for the central part. Unfortunately, a hurricane in 1913 led to the underpinning of the two bell-towers which were then lowered by 4.5 metres. This did not particularly change the general layout of the façade, however, and Ouellet's work remains relatively true to his vision of it.

The revolution of the aligned sacristy in Québec architecture

The end of the 18th century "saw a major change in religious architecture: the general construction of sacristies. This innovation, of which Mgr Briand was a keen promoter, brought a double transformation. The first change was to the design. After 1760, a stone or wooden annexe was added to the church in the extension of the choir. The second change concerned the interior: without the interior sacristy, the round end of the choir was left completely free." (Luc Noppen, *Les églises du Québec, 1600-1850*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 34).



General view from the roof
Photo: François Brault

From this time on, the reredos was no longer considered as a partition. Formerly, the reredos was installed a certain distance from the semicircular wall of the apse, both in buildings based on the Recollect plan and the Jesuit plan. This produced a space between the reredos and the wall which would often be used for the sacristy. With the Recollect plan, the reredos formed a rectilinear partition and with the Jesuit plan, it reproduced the polygonal aspect of the interior of the choir.

The use of a flat chevet in Lotbinière lends a general coherence to the carved interior. "The novelty is in the triumphal arch-shaped reredos which fits perfectly into this interior architecture. It is no longer a case of an isolated reredos like those of the Levasseurs; it really is a part of the whole which is continued along the sanctuary walls and the vaulting." (Luc Noppen, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 416).



Aerial view
Photo : François Brault



Detail on façade
Photo : Germain Casavant



Pulpit
Photo: Germain Casavant



Interior
Photo : Germain Casavant

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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