

The Church of Saint-Michel de Vaudreuil

An interior to fit the polygonal structure of the chevet

The Church of Saint-Michel de Vaudreuil was built between 1783 and 1883, and illustrates four important stages in the history of Québec religious buildings. During this hundred-year period, the architecture developed in line with the changing perceptions of builders and artists with respect to architectural and artistic forms.

Although the area had been inhabited ever since the seigneurie had been conceded to the Marquis de Vaudreuil in 1702, the parish was not officially established until 1773.



Interior
Photo : Germain Casavant

Ten years later it was decided to replace the small stone chapel built in 1771 with "a Church built with a mortar made of lime and sand, with a length of one hundred and fifteen to one hundred and twenty feet clear and a width of forty-two feet clear also, at public expense, on the land donated for the purpose by my lord Chartier de Lotbinière 'père Ecuyer', seigneur of the said place..." (Contract cited by Luc Noppen, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 339).



Reverse side of the façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

A chevet in keeping with the style of the French regime

The polygonal chevet is an architectural form which was developed by the builders of gothic churches in the 12th and 13th centuries. Each of the walls of the chevet was then supported by a buttress to counter the thrust of the stone vaulting.

This design continued to be used for a long time after the Medieval era and was quite naturally introduced in New France. It was soon replaced by semicircular and flat chevets although it came back into use in structures built at the end of the French regime such as Saint-François-de-Sales de Neuville or the Church of Saint-Augustin de Desmaures (no longer in existence) near Québec.

This was the design chosen for Vaudreuil in 1783, probably copying the older medieval pattern. This shape made it easier to include an aligned sacristy. The rounded surface of a semicircular chevet can sometimes cause problems where it is joined to the contiguous parts of the stonework. The rest of the building is based on the Jesuit plan with chapels forming a transept. The original façade must have resembled those of churches such as Sainte-Marguerite de Blairfindie de l'Acadie because it was to all intents and purposes the normal architectural practice at that time.



Side chapel
Photo : Germain Casavant

An interior by Quévillon at the beginning of the 19th century

The structure of this type of chevet allows for an interior which is rather distinct from those developed at that time for semicircular or flat chevets. Quévillon undertook to decorate the interior in 1803 paying close attention to the pattern of the stone chevet walls. Some of the features had already been commissioned from his master, Philippe Liébert, between 1792 and 1797. These included the altar-tables and tabernacles for the high altar and side altars, the pulpit and the churchwarden's pew.



Exterior of chevet
Photo : Germain Casavant

Quévillon produced the magnificent cornice and the woodwork in the choir which were well-adapted to the angular shape of this part of the structure. Vaulting was installed by André Achim in 1834 in a style in keeping with the school of Quévillon. This vaulting no longer exists. The only remaining features from this enormous decorative project are those which were sculpted by Quévillon and Liébert. The galleries in the side chapels were installed in 1840-1841.

A new façade in the middle of the 19th century

The façade was rebuilt in 1856 in a hybrid style mid-way between neo-classical and neo-gothic. F.-X. Lacas was commissioned for the project which was completed in 1859. The original bell-tower was destroyed by fire in 1870 and replaced with the one we still admire today. It is a replica on a larger scale than the original, and is in keeping with the traditional style of the rest of the exterior structure. Also at this time, certain alterations were made to the rear balcony in order to house the large organ acquired in 1871 which had been temporarily placed in the transept.



Choir
Photo : Germain
Casavant

The final touch - an interior painted by F. E. Meloche

The painted interior was commissioned from F.E. Meloche in 1883 with the aim of adding a touch of second empire eclecticism and a more contemporary look to the inside of the building. The artist painted murals which looked exactly like architectural features. He achieved this by using trompe-l'œil techniques to depict supporting features in keeping with the large divisions in the ceiling which was also painted using trompe-l'œil. The lancet shaped scenes in the choir bring to mind the forms favoured by the artisans influenced by the school of Quévillon. It is possible that the original vaulting was divided in this way and that Meloche took his inspiration from it to create his painted version.

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