

The Church of Sainte-Famille de Boucherville

The exceptional presence of a baptistery in Québécois religious architecture



Reverse side of the façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The church of Sainte-Famille de Boucherville, despite the vicissitudes of history, managed to keep a pleasing appearance enhanced by an extraordinary liturgical feature. The general volume of the structures adjacent to the choir is characterised by a complexity which is rather uncommon in Québec architecture. The choir-sacristy-annexe-baptistery-covered passageway forms a complete liturgical complex. It was built up over the years and reflects the exalted spiritual ambitions of the community.



Tabernacle on the high altar
Photo : Germain Casavant

The tabernacle on the high altar - the only vestige of the church of 1712

The first wooden church (1670) was replaced with a stone building in 1712. Very little is known about this building. However, the tabernacle produced by Gilles Boivin in 1745 still exists and sits imposingly on the altar-stone created by Louis-Amable Quévillon in 1802

This particularly busy work of art with its curves and countercurves is one of the peaks of baroque expression in Québec. The same Italian spirit can be found on the baldachin of the church of Saint-François-de-Sales in Neuville or at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Québec.



Detail of tabernacle
on the main altar
Photo : Germain Casavant

A transition towards classic forms

The façade at Boucherville with its Ionic doorway most likely served as a prototype for that of La Présentation. Both buildings actually show the characteristics of an art form in transition. While still attached to the enduring traditional styles, as can be seen in the general layout of the openings, these façades are rather more rigorously structured than in the past where the classical portal played an important role in surrounding the main entrance.

These characteristics are those of the church which was begun in 1801 from the plans of Father Connefoy and supervised by the master mason, Louis Bouillereau, known as Comtois, and the carpenter, François Garaud, known as Saint-Onge. It was the same team who had built the church of Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu at the end of the 18th century.



Façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The greatest novelty proposed by Father Connefoy for the church of the parish of Sainte-Famille remains, without question, his famous specification (no longer in existence). This contained a huge amount of data relating to the construction of churches which was, for the first time, codified and included a vast number of directives. This document, which was widely used afterwards, left no room for interpretation » (Guy-André Roy, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t.II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 222-223).

The interior was the work of Louis-Amable Quévillon between 1801 and 1811, and then completed by Victor Bourgeau in 1838-1839. A fire in 1843 destroyed it apart from certain artefacts such as the altar-slab and tabernacle of the high altar.

A reconstruction which gives significance to the liturgical area

After this terrible event, the walls had to be braced and the framework and roofing needed to be redone. The building was in use once again at the end of the year and was given a new interior in 1844. This was created by Louis-Thomas Berlinguet, who used the same principles of layout as those developed by his master, Thomas Baillairgé.



Interior towards choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

In 1879, Victor Bourgeau was commissioned to construct a baptistery which he placed, very surprisingly, in line with the sacristy. With its concentric form, the particular significance of the baptistery is stated by the provision of a superb roof in the form of a cupola, a spectacular feature. Baptisteries are not generally developed in such a way in Québec and by tradition they are usually located in a side chapel, a space which is symbolically associated with the community of the faithful. This is the case in Cap Santé, for example, in the 18th century, and in Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Québec at the end of the 19th century.

The particular placing of this chapel in Sainte-Famille de Boucherville brings to mind the emphasis given to the sacrament of baptism at the beginning of the Christian era when the ceremony was carried out for many people at a time and required a large area. One may ask what could have justified the architect's providing such a space? We are still waiting for an in-depth study of the question.



The baptistery vaulting
Photo: François Brault

One thing is clear. All subsequent additions to the building are concerned with improving the annexes to the choir. In 1964, a new covered passageway was provided. Built of stone, it linked the central sacristy to the transept. An enormous annexe to the sacristy, serving as a multifunctional room, completed a structure which was already extremely complicated.

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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