

# The Church of la Présentation

## And its magnificent Ionic portal

The church of la Présentation in Saint-Hyacinthe is representative of an example of religious architecture which is transitional between the Québécois traditional style and the Neo-classicism of the eighteenth-twenties. Due to its façade, it is a key building in the evolution of Québécois architecture. It also boasts a magnificent interior which shows the influence which the Québec styles had on the creative artists who were working around Montréal.



Exterior

Photo : Germain Casavant

### The dividing of a parish

On 24 October 1804, Cherrier, the priest of the church of Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu went to Saint-Hyacinthe on behalf of the bishop of Quebec to decide whether or not it was necessary to divide the original parish. It appears that the need was not overstated because since 1807 a presbytery-chapel was in use in Salvaille, which is the present parish of la Présentation.

Permission was given in 1814 for the building of a stone church. The quick transition from presbytery-chapel to church shows just how important it was to divide the parish in 1804. Construction began in 1817 under the supervision of Pierre Auger (master mason from Terrebonne) using plans drawn up by the parish priest (Cherrier). The consecration took place on 4 May 1820.



Doorways

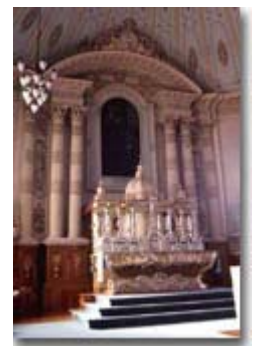
Photo : Germain Casavant

### A façade going beyond tradition

Cherrier chose a Jesuit plan like that used for Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu and the structural work, apart from the façade, is completely in keeping with the enduring traditional Québécois form in the architecture of the early 19th century. The stonework using local, uncut stone, and the carving which surrounds the semicircular windows are in line with the more traditional architectural conceptions.

The façade, although still relatively conventional in structure, stands out for several reasons. Firstly, it can be included amongst the designs of traditional architecture because of the placing of the doorways: two side doors in close proximity to a more ornate central doorway. The second tier houses an oval oculus surrounded by two semicircular openings, and a final oculus crowns the composition under the gable where a small niche can be seen. The bell-tower, with its double lantern in an open-work design, matches exactly the sort of buildings which were developed under the French Regime.

If the façade of la Présentation is compared with that of Saint-Paul-de-Joliette or Sainte-Marguerite-de-Blairifindie de l'Acadie, one becomes aware of the evolution of architectural design from 1810 to 1820. In these last examples, the use of local uncut stone and the understating of the doorways fits in well with the traditional thinking of Cherrier who took his inspiration from Father Connefof. At la Présentation, things are very different. The regular structure of hewn stone gives to the building a rather severe aspect, and the addition of classical orders framing the main portal seems to indicate new thinking on the part of the designers. The presence of corbels at the extremities of the gable creates a horizontal line which softens the general verticality of anterior façades. This new design can be found in several buildings of the 19th century such as Saint-François-de-Sales de Neuville built by the school of Thomas Baillairgé.



Reredos

Photo : Germain Casavant



Interior

Photo : Germain Casavant

## The magnificent Ionic portal

"One cannot say that Québec society of 1820-1830 discovered Classical antiquity: the links with France and England from 1760-1820 facilitated an exchange of books and ideas on the subject. However, in a strange way, various events together with a number of buildings point to our being able to date the renewal of interest in classicism around 1820-1830" (Noppen, *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec et Montréal, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 48.)

In its doorways, the Church of la Présentation shows how the classical style can be integrated in a reasonably coherent manner into a traditional church façade. This is one of the first examples in Quebec. The proportions of the central doorway resume the Ionic in style. This portal is crowned with a triangular pediment while the two side doors are Doric, crowned with a simple entablature. This difference serves to emphasise the hierarchy of the entrances to the nave. The resulting wall effects are strongly visual showing the particular status that has been conferred on them.

## An interior with surprising ceilings

René Saint-James, pupil of Louis-Amable Quévillon, was commissioned to do the interior in 1823. Being too busy himself, he entrusted the designing and supervision of the work to François Dugal, also influenced by Quévillon. Dugal worked there intermittently between 1823 and 1847.

This interior indicates the tendency towards formality shown by the Montréal teams of workers from the end of the 18th century. However, the new sense of discipline which came to the fore in the school of Thomas Baillairgé in Saint-Joachim towards 1820 influenced the design of certain details. The reredos behind the high altar, together with the structure of the roof vaulting with a false-cupola at the crossing and its radial decoration in the choir recall the Montréal tradition.

Elsewhere, for example at the entrance to the choir, Dugal added culots supporting the transverse ribs of the vaulting. However, it is the arrangement of the parts in relation to the whole which shows the leaning towards a new austerity which one generally associates with the development of Neo-classicism.

**Charles Bourget**

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

### Bibliography:

- Noppen, Luc. *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec et Montréal, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 118-121.
- Robert, Jacques. « Site et église de la Présentation », *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 272-275.