

The Church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Jean-Port-Joli

And pseudo side aisles in Québec



Exterior
Photo : Germain Casavant

The Church of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli - a project in constant evolution

The present church of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli was built in 1779 to replace a chapel which had been built on the seigniorial estate in 1738. Just before the conquest, in 1756, the seigneur, Ignace Aubert de Gaspé, conceded a piece of land so that a church may be built. However, the political instability created by the conquest held up the project, and it was only about twenty years later that the church was finally built.

The project had to be approved by the bishop of Québec, Jean-Olivier Briand. In keeping with the tradition in his diocese he suggested using a Jesuit plan which would impart to the building an air of strength. Likewise, by adopting a uniform style of architecture, the diocese would reinforce its authority.



Façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The Church of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli - adapting to new ways of doing things

Although the church is built in the traditional style sponsored by the diocese, it also contains important features showing the evolution of Québec architecture. Some of these features date from the original building and some appeared later on. Either way, they witness to the flexibility of the church in adapting to new ways of doing things.

The church was built in the form of a Latin cross ending in a semicircular apse. However, the transepts where the side chapels are situated are not the usual size for this type of design.

Apparently, the project had originally been based on a Recollect plan and the transepts had been added to increase the solidity of the structure. Bishops are known to have preferred this type of plan mainly for reasons of stability: "the pressure exerted by the framework is best contained in a building buttressed by two chapels." In Saint-Jean-Port-Joli the side chapels do not stand out particularly far from the main body of the church and therefore they do actually resemble buttresses to some extent.

The 1815 extension considerably modified the look of the church because the lengthening of the nave towards the front necessitated some restoration work to the interior. The year after the extension, a sculptor from Montréal, Chrysostome Perreault, who had studied under Louis-Amable Quévillon, finished the interior of the sanctuary, the vaulting in the nave, and some of the furnishings.



Interior of transept
Photo : Germain Casavant



Interior towards façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

However, the most important feature was the galleries which were added in 1845, and appear almost independent from the structure of the building. They were produced by François Fournier, a student of Thomas Baillairgé, and were added to the nave, giving it three parts, in an effort to imitate the basilican-style.



Interior
Photo : Germain Casavant

They are supported here by a colonnade which was added after the construction of the single nave. This is the only remaining example of its type in Québec. Other known examples were not preserved. The tradition of side galleries began at the end of the 18th century in important buildings where a double tier of windows was favoured, for example: Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu and the Anglican Cathedral of Québec. Here in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, it seems that the original design was adapted to a structure with a single tier of windows. This illustrates a certain ambition to integrate into rural parish buildings an architectural feature which was generally reserved for more important buildings.

A traditional church

Although the Church of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli has undergone several transformations, its traditional look has been preserved. Its façade, which was rebuilt during the 1815 extension, certainly bears a strong resemblance to the original. It has a central doorway with two side niches and had three oculi in the upper part of the gable until the central oculus was replaced by a Venetian window in 1861. The stone sanctuary also dates back to 1815 but was redesigned from the plans of the architect David Ouellet in 1875, when he was commissioned to add a chapel to the sacristy.



Détail du décor sculpté du
chœur
Photo : Germain Casavant

Moreover, the Church of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli stands as witness to the involvement of artists and artisans from various schools and different eras. This diversity in no way harms the unity of the whole. The tabernacle of the high altar is attributed to Pierre-Noël Levasseur, the interior and some of the liturgical furnishings are by Chrysostome Perrault (school of Quévillon) and the Baillairgés, the tabernacles of the side altars were produced by David Ouellet, and the pulpit and statues of Médard Bourgault contribute to the richness and variety of this church.

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