

The Church of Saint-Joachim

The turning point in church interiors at the turn of the 19th century



Exterior of the chevet
Photo : François Brault

Church interiors - a symbol of wealth

Québec church interiors are among the most beautiful works of Québec art. They bear witness to an environment in which religious buildings become places of outstanding artistic achievement. They also demonstrate the passionate involvement of both artists and workmen in the development of places of worship.

The development of church interiors

The architecture of the French Regime was marked by the presence of some French master sculptors and architects as can be seen in the interiors of the Jesuit and Recollect churches. However, in a parish context where an economical use of materials and labour is required, it is rarely possible to achieve such high standards.

Church interiors at that time were carried out by applying the art of sculpture to the architecture. Consequently - for several reasons - parts of the decoration were often dismantled and sold or put into storage. This explains the relatively few remaining examples from the French Regime. Furthermore, very little documentation exists on the interiors dating from this time.



Detail of the high altar
Photo : Germain Casavant

On the other hand, a new labour force was formed in Québec and a few local people gained renown towards the end of the 18th century. They took their inspiration from the works produced at the time of New France and not from British art imported at the time of the Conquest. Therefore the artists and artisans who created church interiors perfected their artistry in loyal imitation of the artists and craftsmen of the French Regime.

Following his return from France in 1781, where he had been training at the Académie royale (Royal Academy), François Baillairgé also made his aesthetic mark on the creation of church interiors. His important contribution to Québec art was at a height when he completed the interior of the church of Saint-Joachim between 1816 and 1825.



High altar
Photo : Germain Casavant

The summit of achievement in church interiors - architectural ornamentation



Reredos
Photo : François Brault

The church of Saint-Joachim was open for worship in 1779. It was built to replace the first church of 1685 destroyed during the Conquest. The nave, the chapels and the choir, completed by the Baillairgés in 1816, still exist today. The façade by David Ouellet dates back to 1885 and the sacristy added to the chevet dates back to 1805.

The first contribution François Baillairgé made to the interior was from 1784-1785. He designed the pulpit, the tabernacle for the high altar, and the altar candlesticks. However, it was only in 1811 that the church council undertook to refurbish in its entirety the interior of the church, and Thomas Baillairgé and his son, François, were commissioned to carry out the project.

At Saint-Joachim, the Baillairgés made several innovations. Their most important contribution was to the architecture of the interior. For the first time, rather than considering each component as an independent sculpture, the interior was created as a complete entity fitting in with the building. The result was to give the whole building integrity, allowing one to appreciate the perfect continuity between the structural and decorative elements. The thrust of the transverse ribs against the entablature in line with the pilasters is an example of this.



Interior, view towards the façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

Another novelty introduced by the Baillairgés was to have an eye to the whole of the sanctuary area when they were designing the reredos for the high altar. To achieve this they applied the theories advocated by Neo-classicism as if they were setting about creating a piece of architecture.



Aerial view
Photo : François Brault

This method increased the coherence between the structural and ornamental elements. The sense of unity that they achieved by treating the project as a whole allowed the onlooker to appreciate the fine quality of the sculpted and gilded features. These are the characteristics which give the whole interior its incontestable quality as a work of art.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunncliffe

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