

The Church of Saint-Joachim in Châteauguay

The vernacular adaptation of classical forms



Façade
Photo : François Brault

A simple building

The church of Saint-Joachim in Châteauguay is striking due to the simplicity of its layout. Both the interior and exterior show a lack of decoration which is mainly due to significant changes made to the building at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties. The exterior forms are well-defined. The absence of a transept, the presence of a sacristy directly behind the high altar and the rather squat bell-towers all combine to give to the whole building a general air of solidity.



Lateral view of the nave
Photo : François Brault

As regards the ornamentation, a few very discreet elements add a touch of refinement to these otherwise slightly austere blocks. The masonry is characterised by the rough-hewn stone walls, and the thick jointing gives it a rustic appearance. However, some interesting chain-work in the angles of the towers and the simple sculpting around the portals and windows of the façade combine to give one the impression that some care has been taken in the design of the front elevation. A major transformation took place in 1961 when it was decided to add aisles and thus widen the nave to the dimensions of the façade.

Something of the same air of simplicity is to be found inside the building. On the other hand, one should try to imagine it as it was before its recent, drastic renovations. Today the central nave stretches out somewhat monotonously as far as the high altar. Most of the painted wall decorations along the nave and the scenes which adorned the wooden vaulting, including three paintings in the semi-dome of the apse, disappeared when the dark panelling around the choir was replaced by the existing light wood.

When all is said and done, the sanctuary is really the only part of the interior which now attracts attention. Philippe Liébert carved the reredos and cornice in 1802-1803 and the high altar, built around 1840, has now become the centre of interest in what is otherwise almost empty space.

One of the rare 18th century structures in the diocese of Châteauguay

The building of the present edifice began in 1774. It replaced the first church which was erected on the site in 1735. Châteauguay is the main village of the seigneurie of the same name. It was felt necessary during the first half of the 18th century to build the first parish church in order to provide a more appropriate place of worship for the growing population than the simple seigneurie chapel. The construction of a new building at the end of the century and the arrival of a resident priest are signs of the continuing increase in population.



General view
Photo : François Brault

This project, however, was to take rather a long time. The 1775 American invasion interrupted the work until 1778. The first façade of the single bell-tower was only built in the seventeen-nineties, and this was then replaced by the existing tower between 1837 and 1840. At the same time the nave was lengthened by eight metres. Once more, the work was halted due to political problems; this time it was the Patriots' revolt which interrupted the work between 1837 and 1838.



The high altar
Photo : François Brault

The building was classed as an historic monument in 1957 because of the high quality of some of the furnishings, and also because of the general age of the construction. The church of Saint-Joachim does, in fact, seem rather isolated among the generality of churches in the Montréal diocese where the oldest religious buildings tend to date from the beginning of the 19th century.

A vernacular adaptation of a classic vocabulary

The traditional ecclesiastical architecture which has been passed down to us from the French Regime often has about it a certain vernacular character that show a simplification of the classical vocabulary of the style of the reign of Louis XV. In the Montréal Diocese, the influence of the church of Notre-Dame de Montréal and of European architecture adapted to a colonial context by the Sulpicians has engendered a rather individual form of traditional architecture.

This is patently obvious in the case of the church in Châteauguay, especially looking at the façade. Its portal, crowned by a triangular pediment, was designed in the Doric style. The gable, however, shows the drastic simplification of the classical style. One would expect the pediment to be Doric.



Oculus
Photo : François Brault

Instead, it seems to betray an almost simplistic preoccupation on the part of the architect. The central part was finished in the style of the former church of Notre-Dame de Montréal, which had been destroyed at the time of the construction of the Châteauguay façade, using motifs more applicable to wood carving than stonework. Two wave-like shapes resembling cavettos meet in the centre of the composition where there is a small pedestal on which a statue may be placed. The integration of an English-style oculus under the gable demonstrates the incongruity of the general stylistic treatment and serves to emphasise the vernacular character of the overall aspect of the exterior.



The high altar in detail
Photo : François Brault

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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