

# The Church of Sainte-Jeanne-de-Chantale de l'Île-Perrot

## Small transepts in Québec



Extérieur vu du cimetière  
Photo : Germain Casavant

### A church by the river

The Île Perrot is at the western end of the Île de Montréal. Thanks to its enviable situation, it overlooks the Lac des Deux-Montagnes to the north, the Lac Saint-Louis to the east and the Saint Lawrence river to the south. The church of Sainte-Jeanne-de-Chantal has greatly benefited from this riverside location. It was built right on the bay of Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot, and it is easy to imagine some of the original worshippers making their way to Mass by boat.



Ensemble intérieur vers le chœur  
Photo : Germain Casavant

Although the church was planned as early as 1753, the structural work was only begun in the seventeen-seventies, to be completed in 1786. A single nave with a relatively narrow transept opens on to a choir with a flat chevet. This organisation of space is a variant of the non-semicircular apse as in the Recollet plan very popular at that time. The style is similar to that in Sault-au-Récollet or Verchères in the Montréal area.

### An interior which gives prominence to the woodwork

The panelling and construction of the wooden false-vaulting are by Joseph Turcaut who worked on the building between 1812 and 1819. However, when one studies the altars and tabernacles one becomes aware of the imprint of an artist from the Quévillon school, especially when one realises that these items date from the same era. It is thought that the church council may have acquired these artefacts while Turcaut was working on the structure of the interior. The distinctive ornamentation on the vaulting is more well-known. Louis-Xavier Leprohon, an artist trained by Quévillon, is known to have supervised the work in 1828.



Détail de la croisée  
Photo : Germain Casavant

The carved wooden volutes which adorn the groins of the cross-vault come as something of a surprise to the informed visitor. All the colouring in the building is in keeping with the natural warmth of the wood. This method of uniting blue, wood and gilt differs from the normal practice in interior décor where gilt and white backgrounds are united to create an effect of serene gentleness. The vaulting which is otherwise rather plain, enhances these rich adornments. The reredos, installed against the flat wall of the chevet, completes the overall effect. It reminds one of Leprohon's other achievements like Saint-André de Kamouraska in 1833.

"The style of triumphal arch reredos in the church of Sainte-Jeanne-de-Chantal is borrowed from the art of the French Regime which survived for thirty years after the conquest. After 1790, the reredos was generally built against the flat chevet at the end of the church. The handling of architectural forms by Quévillon and his pupils now shows a good deal more of his recognisable mannerisms than it did before. By constructing the reredos with an arrangement of pillars one on top of the other, the sculptor has managed to achieve the total height without recourse to the use of a monumental colonnade." (Luc Noppen, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 345.)

A final project was undertaken in 1848. This stage in the completion of the interior is not very well documented. Doubtless it was to do with certain particular features such as the doors to the sacristy, the pulpit or even the floors. Further analysis of the building could help us to gain a more precise knowledge of this work.



Le chœur  
Photo : Germain Casavant

### A new façade in 1901

The 18th century façade doubtless already had a single bell-tower because major repairs were carried out in 1842 and 1863. In spite of this, in 1901 it was decided to proceed with a complete reconstruction of this part of the building. The plans were provided by the architect, Alcide Chaussé. Like many parish church façades in Québec, it was built in three tiers and thus remained firmly established in the tradition. However, the regular chain-work and the angular form of the spire seem to be more in keeping with the building styles of the industrial era.

### Transepts in rural Québec

The crossing and transept in Sainte-Jeanne-de-Chantal are particularly interesting and pleasing to the eye. They represent a good example of the structure of transepts in Québec. This transverse architectural structure in the longitudinal part of the church appeared in the first Christian buildings of the 4th and 5th centuries. Throughout the ages it always remained as one of the options. Whether in the 5th, 10th, 13th, 15th or 18th centuries, it has always been considered valid to have a variety of plans and styles. In Québec, the Maillou plan is without transept while the Jesuit plan emphasises it, and the Recollect plan creates a space which brings together the advantages of a transept and the unity of the Maillou plan.

In the traditional European concept, the transept has two main functions: acting as a secondary holy place where additional chapels can be constructed, or acting as an alternative access to the choir, the main entrance in the façade being used principally for special occasions. In Québec, the transept rarely serves as an entrance. Even in the more important buildings such as the Cathedral of Québec, Notre-Dame de Montréal, Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Québec and Saint-Antoine-de-Padoue de Longueuil, the side entrances always appear secondary, almost unnecessary, and are not even placed on the transept façades. The *raison-d'être* of the transept seems in the main to do with structure or space or for some sacred function.

"Construction costs are increased when the plans suggest additional recesses, openings and ornamentation." (Raymonde Gauthier, *Construire une église au Québec. L'architecture religieuse avant 1939*. Montréal, Libre Expression, 1994, p. 59). Nevertheless it is clear that on "the structural plans, these additions also have the function of making the long nave wall more solid by providing a means of support other than the façade" (Raymonde Gauthier, *Construire une église au Québec. L'architecture religieuse avant 1939*. Montréal, Libre Expression, 1994, p. 63.). However, the most interesting point for parish life is the addition of side chapels which, in the case of a church with transept, become more intimate places where the faithful can quietly reflect and pray in front of the altar of their choice. Any use of the transept as an entrance would contradict this isolation of the transversal space. This concern about space in the transept becomes understandable when one takes into consideration examples such as Saint-Jean-Port-Joli where the side recess of the transept arm becomes almost symbolic when you consider how little space there appears to be.

**Charles Bourget**

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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