

The Church of Saint- Mathias-sur-Richelieu



Aerial view of façade
Photo : François Brault



Balcony
Photo : François Brault



Detail of frieze on balcony
Photo : François Brault

As with the main construction, the interior was dealt with in two main phases. In 1794-1795, Louis-Amable Quévillon, a sculptor from the area of Montréal, created the first ceiling and the rear balcony. He also produced the altar-stone for the high altar which was probably inspired by the one which Philippe Liébert provided for the Grey Nuns of Montréal.

When the church was extended in 1817, it was necessary to refashion the ceiling completely. In 1821, this work was given to René Beauvais, otherwise known as Saint-James, and Paul Rollin, assisted by Jean-Baptiste Baret and François Dugal, all of whom were influenced by the style of Quévillon. It took them twelve years. The church council did not leave the choice of design to the artists. They were ordered to "refashion the ceiling in imitation of the one at Marieville, along with the three reredoses, the stalls and the Episcopal and curial thrones, construct four balconies like those at Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu, fashion a pulpit and a churchwarden's seat like those at Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville, create a candlestick for the Paschal Candle like that at Saint-Constant, and build pews and confessionals like those at Longueuil".



Ceiling
Photo : François Brault

The wooden chapel erected in 1739 when the parish was founded, was replaced in 1771 by a stone presbytery-chapel which served the population while they were waiting for the first parish church to be built. The building of this new stone church began in 1784 and was finished four years later. It had a shingle roof and was surmounted by a belfry with a single lantern. The ground plan was based on the form of a Latin cross with a semicircular apse to which the sacristy was added. In the centre of the façade was a huge door with an oculus above it. A second smaller door provided a side access.

Major restorations were carried out between 1805 and 1818, and gave the church an appearance typical of regional churches at the beginning of the 19th century. The round-end was demolished in order to lengthen the choir, the bell-tower was knocked down and rebuilt with two lanterns, the side door was replaced with two new ones included into the façade and surmounted with windows on either side of the central doorway, and the roof was reconstructed along with the interior and exterior facings. Furthermore, the sacristy was lengthened by a few metres. The covered passageway which had been planned for 1817, was finally built in 1834.



Canopy over pulpit
Photo: François Brault

The parish was first known under the name of L'Immaculée-Conception-de-la-Pointe-à-Olivier, and then it was dedicated to Saint-Olivier, in memory of Mgr Jean-Olivier Briand, the bishop of Québec. It was finally dedicated to Saint-Mathias in 1809. The stone wall enclosing the cemetery was built in 1818, and is one of the most elaborate and well-preserved of those which have survived until now. The church and wall were listed as historic monuments in 1957.

The ceiling is therefore based on that of Marieville and resembles the one at the first Church of Notre-Dame de Montréal, in 1808, with its lowered profile punctuated with ribs supporting a false octagonal cupola at the transept crossing. It is adorned with small lozenge-shaped coffers each including a cruciform star motif. Two bas-reliefs interrupt this décor in the choir and a fan motif spreads out above the high altar connecting to a glory decorated with clouds adorned with heads of angels in the semi-dome of the apse.

The reredos in the choir is placed well to the back of the apse and linked to the rest of the décor by the cornice which surrounds the interior of the church. Its twin columns decorated with garlands support a semicircular couronnement which is integrated into a section of the entablature. The rich ornamentation illustrates the high quality achieved by the sculptor-ornamentalist in the first half of the 19th century. Furthermore, the sculptural features were enhanced by an architectural décor painted in trompe-l'œil. The disappearance of this at the end of the nineteen-fifties unfortunately disfigures the style of Quévillon, contrasting bare surfaces with the luxuriance of the carved woodwork.



Detail on reredos
Photo: François Brault

The delicate ornamentation on the couronnement of the canopy over the pulpit with its curves and countercurves derives its inspiration from the Louis XV style. It is characteristic of the style favoured by artists influenced by the school of Quévillon.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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