

Ascension of Our Lord Church

The Middle Ages in the Heart of Westmount

An exceptional church

Of the eleven buildings representing nine different confessional denominations, the Ascension of Our Lord Church stands out as a cherished jewel in the rich architectural landscape of the City of Westmount.



But what is it that makes the Ascension of Our Lord Church so distinctive?

Were it possible to blank out for a moment the buildings nearby, one could imagine that the construction of the Ascension of Our Lord Church dates back to the 13th or 14th century, so striking are the analogies with the European cathedrals of that period: a very tall nave lit by high windows and framed by aisles, as well as the bell tower at the crossroads of the transepts. The truth is that the church is relatively modern as it was built between 1927 and 1928.

No less magnificent than the Ascension of Our Lord's exterior architecture are the grace, sumptuousness and refinement of the interior decor of the church. It is, to a certain degree, an anachronistic element in the history of Quebec church architecture in the first half of the 20th century, where orthogonal forms of Art Deco and the purified or avant-garde compositions of the modernist movement are more prevalent. In contrast to the Catholic churches built at that time, the decoration of the Ascension of Our Lord Church is as stylized as it is refined and highlighted by the delicacy and abundance of its ornaments.



A pure expression of the Gothic style

Ascension of Our Lord Church is undoubtedly one of the purest and most important expressions of 20th century Gothic religious architecture in Quebec – and one of the last ones as well!

Whether gazing at the exterior of the church or entering and looking around the interior of this sacred sanctuary, the most observant eye will notice the omnipresence of components from the Gothic period.

The architects commissioned to design the church, Maginnis and Walsh (Boston, Mass.) made extensive and abundant use of the “treasure chest” of Gothic components in establishing their decorative program. Among these are porches with a decorative tympanum, buttresses, pinnacles, niches housing monumental statues and networked windows. Most impressive is the huge bell tower which, at the crossroads, replaces a spire and from which pinnacles decorated with typically Gothic fleurons surge towards the sky.

Maginnis and Walsh also made extensive use of the broken arch, also known as the ogival (warhead-shaped) arch. This specific characteristic of Gothic architecture is omnipresent, from the shape of the openings, to the vault, to the large arches separating the nave from the aisles to the entrance to the church.

In effect, everything has been designed and shaped in the Gothic style: the composition of the church, its windows, its furnishings, its interior and exterior decoration, the partition separating the nave from the entrance hall, the organ case and even the lamp holders!

As expected, the main and side altars of the church are full of openwork interlacing and finely crafted neo-Gothic bas-relief or round-hump sculptures.

The pulpit stands out in and of itself, given its dimensions, aesthetic qualities and openwork neo-Gothic motifs. A true work of art, this liturgical piece of furniture also contains exceptional sculptures in the round of pelicans standing vertically. The lectern dedicated to the reading of the Epistle also includes neo-Gothic ornaments. The same applies to the chairs reserved for the celebrants and the confessionals, magnificent pieces of furniture topped with crowns of carved and cut-out panels.

Such a prevalent presence of Gothic style is truly exceptional for a church of this period. The Ascension of Our Lord Church is truly the quintessence of Gothic in modern religious architecture in Quebec.

An impressive glass partition

Entering through the exterior front doors, one is immediately impressed by the finely crafted wooden glass partition that separates the entrance hall from the nave of the church.

Composed of two rows of windows, in the spirit of a Gothic clerestory, the partition impresses by its quality and the detail of its finish. Recurring motifs such as the broken arch, moulded panels, neo-Gothic wall lights and cut-outs enliven this exceptional “wall work of art”. A statue in bas-relief marks the centre of the partition and a curved cornice crowns the whole.

Upon entering the nave, its beauty and grace become evident. The eye is drawn to the exposed structure very high up that creates a majestic space above the nave and to the curved consoles supported that rest on the capitals of the tall and slender engaged collonettes. These curved consoles are inspired by 15th century churches in England.

The organ and its impressive case

A look back towards the choir loft allows one to appreciate the monumental organ case. This case is certainly one of the most distinctive ornaments of the Ascension of Our Lord Church. In fact, it has the distinction of being made up of two parts arranged at an angle towards the back of the choir loft, thus framing the organ console. The Casavant Frères designers decorated these two cases in the spirit of the church's furniture with openwork panels, carved wall lights and neo-Gothic style cut-outs, with which the imposing canons blend. A true work of art!

In describing the interior decoration of the Ascension of Our Lord Church it is absolutely essential to mention the importance of the stained glass windows. These beautiful artistic expressions elevate the windows along the aisles, the choir loft, the transepts and the back of the church. Those depicting the Ascension of the Lord are particularly representative of the quality of these works. Created between 1928 and 1960, the stained glass windows are the result of the meticulous work of four artists or studios of master glassmakers and other stained glass artists.



Exceptional architectural integrity

Important as is the harmony of the main theme of the decorative scheme, structured around the Gothic style, what truly distinguishes the Ascension of Our Lord Church is its perfect authenticity. Every element of this authenticity has been carefully preserved, despite the years that have passed and the changes that have taken place in the Catholic Church, especially those resulting from the Second Vatican Council. In essence, the church is very close, if not identical, to its original state.

A rare and important value

If authenticity represents a major value of the Ascension of Our Lord church, so does its rareness, or exceptionality, which is very uncommon for such relatively recent places of worship on the Quebec religious heritage timeline. Indeed, few 20th-century Catholic churches have a complete decorative scheme based entirely on the Gothic style, a style more favoured by the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church in the 19th century.

The construction of the Ascension of Our Lord church was completed one year before the 1929 stock market crash. Begun a year or two later, the construction of this monumental place of worship might never have been completed. It is therefore important to protect this exceptional church and to ensure its sustainability and the integrity of its components for the benefit of future generations not only in Westmount but also throughout Quebec as a whole.

Acknowledgment of other religions, other cultures, and symbols of ecumenism

The atmosphere created by the interior of the Ascension of Our Lord church transcends the Catholic religion. Undeniably a place of Catholic prayer and devotion, the sanctuary nevertheless lends itself to meditation, to reflection, regardless of one's beliefs, one's faith or spirituality.

Also interesting to note is the frequency of the clover in the church's decoration, symbol of the Trinity. This is a very popular element in Anglican architecture, as are the dark varnishes applied to the wooden components. Perhaps there is an interesting connection with the Irish, associated with both Catholicism and Protestant religions, a community that is among the founding pioneers of the parish. Also, consider the six icons on the main altar representing six saints associated with so many countries.



A church of national interest

The rarity, authenticity, quality and craftsmanship of the stone sculptures, woodwork and religious furniture of the Ascension of Our Lord Church place it in a very high rank among the churches of Westmount and the province at large. The value of the Ascension of Our Lord goes beyond Westmount and the Island of Montreal, since it is of interest to Quebec as a whole.

If we had had to carry out an evaluation of the heritage value of the Ascension of Our Lord Church based on the most recent parameters of the Ministry of Culture and Communications, the overall rating would be at least “B” or most probably an “A” in the Répertoire du patrimoine religieux du Québec.

— Claude Bergeron,
conseiller en patrimoine senior et président

Casavant Opus 1344

Jacquelin Rochette, Directeur Artistique, Casavant Frères, conducted an exhaustive study of the Casavant organs built during the same period as the Opus 1344 at the Ascension of Our Lord Church.

More specifically, his report details the 17 organs built by Casavant Frères between 1927 and 1929 that are similar to or larger than the Ascension’s Opus 1344.

As to their current status, Rochette informs us that:

- 3 were in Quebec, of which 2 are either no longer existent or non-playable and the one remaining has been modified.
- 3 were in other parts of Canada, of which 2 are no longer existent and the one remaining has been modified.
- 9 were in the United States, of which 6 are either no longer existent or non-playable and the 3 still in use have been modified.
- 1 was moved from Montreal to Australia.

The 17th organ in this inventory is at the Ascension of Our Lord Church and here is what Rochette reports:

“... Opus 1344 is one of a few Casavants of this period still in existence in the world, and is unique in Montreal. Such an instrument, once restored, will be a great asset in the city, allowing the practice of the great art of playing as developed by Lynnwood Farnam, typical of the English tradition. This instrument could be of great use in the Canadian International Organ Competition, and could become the site of specific performances of organ transcriptions, and major symphonic works.”

Rochette then adds the following technical details:

“Other particularities that make this organ really unique:

- It has four expressive enclosures controlled by four swell shoes. A fifth shoe is for the Crescendo.
- It is built in English style.
- It has 73-note compass on all manual chests, except 68 on Great.
- It has an English solo division with “string” stops, Viole d’Orchestre, Violes Celestes, Octave Viol and Cornet de Violes that bring colour to the orchestral ensemble.
- It has many fundamental voices, five 16’ flue stops and two 16’ reed stops, twenty 8’ flue stops and seven 8’ reed stops, providing a rich tonal palette that the organist can modify in endless combinations.
- It has percussion stops: Chimes, Harp and Celesta.”

Having commented on its technical characteristics, Rochette goes on to describe why the Opus 1344 is unique and worthy of restoration:

“The Ascension of our Lord instrument has stops in expressive enclosures on all the manual divisions, which make the instrument very flexible, and particularly suitable and effective in accompaniments, and rendering of organ pieces, oratorios, and orchestral transcriptions. The current generation of organists is looking for such flexibility and expression.

The specification, the musical concept, its installation, the church acoustics and the sound projection in the building are all part of what makes this instrument unique. This is an instrument with unique qualities that has fortunately reached us in its original conception. Once restored, its voice will rank among the other

major pipe organs in the city, and will assure the continuity of the church musical program.”

In a separate document, Rochette provides some interesting historical data concerning the personalities and artists that were involved in the design of the organ and who performed on the church's Opus 1344 when the parish formally opened its doors to worshippers in 1929.

The Organ

Paul de Marky, classical pianist of Hungarian origin, became a Canadian citizen in 1931. De Marky has acted as a consultant and finalized the organ stop list and the console layout. We have in our files his stop list and console requirements. Interestingly, he was one of Oscar Peterson's teachers.

The organ, installed the same year as the new church was completed, was built by Casavant Frères Ltd. The inaugural concert was played on January 13, 1930, by Lynnwood Farnam who was at that time organist at the Church of the Holy Communion in New York City. A second recital was given by Pietro A. Yon, organist at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

We believe that Claver Casavant was at Farnam's concert. We do not have any program in our files. Unfortunately, his brother Samuel Casavant passed away on November 29, 1929. Lynnwood Farnam died of cancer on November 23, 1930, some ten months after his inauguration of the new organ at Ascension of our Lord. Claver Casavant died on December 10, 1933.

Ascension of Our Lord is one of the last instruments overseen by the Casavant brothers themselves. It has been noted that the instrument is a highly flexible one with a very great range for tone colouring.

The Stained Glass Windows

The stained glass windows contribute to the overall spiritual atmosphere of the church. Depicting Bible stories, lives of the saints and Catholic devotions, they encourage reflection and contemplation, and enhance the beauty of the church. Most of the windows are memorial windows donated by parishioners in memory of loved ones. Memorial inscriptions can be found at the bottom of most of the windows.

The church's windows will be documented for the Registry of Stained Glass Windows in Canada.

East Aisle (to your left as you enter the church)

Window 1

Scenes from the life of Christ are represented in medallions: (Left, bottom to top): Mary Magdalene Anointing Christ's Feet, Christ Healing Lazarus; (Right, bottom to top): Christ Blessing Little Children, Christ Healing the Blind Man.

Window 2

Saint John the Apostle. A youthful Saint John is represented as an Apostle. In the scene below, an elderly Saint John as evangelist is writing his gospel. Though it is barely visible, the eagle, Saint John's symbol, is depicted in the background.

Saint Jude (Thaddeus) the Apostle. Two small medallions below his figure depict his martyrdom and the weapon used in his death.

Window 3

The Immaculate Conception. The medallion below depicts the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Bernadette at Lourdes.

Saint Anne. Below the figure of Saint Anne, a portrayal of The Education of the Virgin.

Window 4

Saint Elizabeth; In the medallion below, The Visitation.

Saint Thomas the Apostle; below, Christ appears to Saint Thomas after the Resurrection.

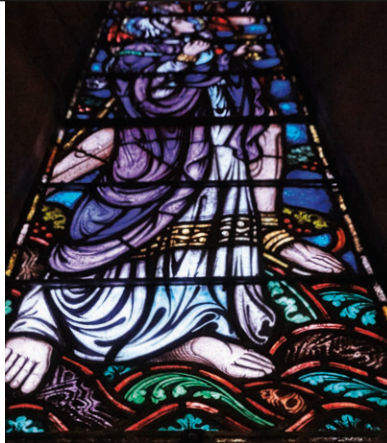
West Aisle (to your right as you enter the church)

The Chapel in honour of and in memory of the parishioners who served and died in World War II. The windows: left, the archangel Gabriel; centre, the archangel Michael; right, the archangel Raphael.

Window 1

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. The scene at his feet depicts the vision he had of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the Christ child.

Saint Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscans. Below, Saint Francis preaches a sermon to birds.



Window 2

The Sacred Heart of Jesus. The two scenes at the base of the window represent (left) Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque's vision of Christ's Sacred Heart and (right) the Blessed Virgin Mary supporting Christ after his Crucifixion.



Window 3

The Blessed Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven and Saint Joseph. This window is rendered in a more realistic manner than its neighbours.

It is the work of Charles William Kelsey of Westmount, 1940s.

Window 4

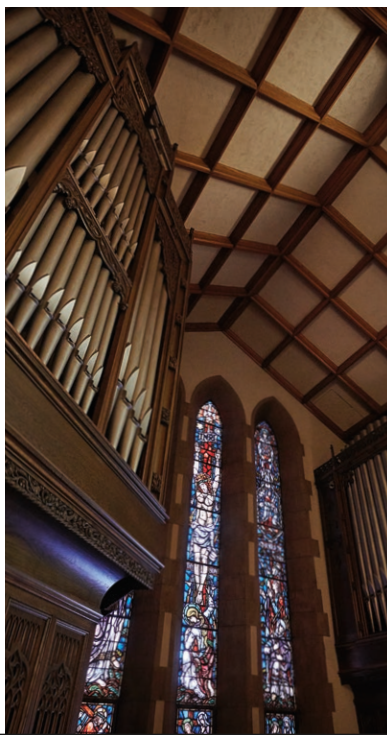
Scenes from the Life of Christ.

Left, bottom to top:

The Presentation of Jesus in The Temple, the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt.

Right, bottom to top: Finding in the Temple, the Baptism of Christ, Christ Calling the Apostles.

The aisle and chapel windows, except for the Mary Queen of Heaven and Saint Joseph window, are by Yvonne Williams and Esther Johnson of Toronto, 1941–44.



East transept window (to your left, in front, as you face the altar)

Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

The Blessed Virgin Mary holds the infant Jesus in her arms.

West transept window (to your right, in front, as you face the altar)

The Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Christ is flanked by the archangel Michael and the archangel Gabriel.

Two windows by Vincent Poggi of Westmount, 1960.

Large window above the altar

The Ascension.

Christ ascends into heaven as the Apostles and the Blessed Virgin Mary gaze in awe.

Large window above the gallery at the entrance to the church

The Crucifixion.

The death of Christ on the cross is presented as an image of contemplation. A grieving Mary Magdalene mourns at Christ's feet.

Two windows by Earl Sanborn of Boston, installed in 1930.



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