

## **Track 1 – Introduction**

At the end of the 19th century, the City of Montréal was in the midst of an intensive period of growth and economic development. In the wake of the construction of the Lachine canal, the Port of Montréal became one of the most important ports in America. Railroad lines established by The Grand Trunk Railway and the Canadian Pacific, as well as the construction of Victoria Bridge, strengthened trade between Montréal and the major economic centers of Canada and the United States. Firms were prospering, managed by a rising, primarily English-speaking, upper middle class. This context was also profitable, both economically and politically, for the increasingly prominent French-speaking bourgeoisie. On February 2, 1901, a bilingual Catholic parish was established in the young municipality of Westmount. This new parish was placed under the patronage of Saint Leo I, Fifth Century Pope and Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. The parish blossomed in the heart of an area inhabited, for the most part, by an influential English-speaking, Protestant population.

During the next hour, we invite you to discover Saint-Léon of Westmount Church, its architecture and the works of art within. During the first segment of the visit, conducted outdoors, we will present the history of the parish and construction of the church. We will go back in time to the onset of the 20th century when the English- and French-speaking Catholic communities joined forces to build this church. After the expansion work completed in 1920, the communities split up in 1926, a short time before the official start of the great interior decoration project. During the second segment of the visit, you will be invited to learn more about it. The restoration, lasting more than 30 years, was organized by influential parish priest Father Oscar Pierre Gauthier. It was carried out by an artisan accomplished in the tradition of the Renaissance, Guido Nincheri, a prolific painter, stained-glass master and fresco painter.

*To start your visit of the exceptional site of the Saint-Léon of Westmount Church and learn about its history and tradition, walk to Maisonneuve Boulevard in front of the church property and select track 2.*

## **Track 2 – Foundation of the Parish**

In the mid 19th century, the Catholic Church of Montréal experienced a stellar period of its history with Msgr. Ignace Bourget, Bishop from 1840 to 1876. During his reign, all efforts were directed at asserting the authority and the influence of the Church over political and economic powers. This way, the Church could secure a closer presence amid the population. Bishop Bourget invited several religious communities from Europe to come to Montréal to meet the educational needs and health services of the faithful. In 1870, he had a new cathedral built in the middle of what would become the economic and English-speaking center of the City of Montréal. Christened Saint James the Great at the time, it is now Mary Queen of the World, and the cathedral is a scaled-down replica of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Msgr. Paul-Napoléon Bruchési, Archbishop of Montréal between 1897 and 1939, loyally pursued the undertakings and ultramontane tradition of Bishop Bourget. As early as 1899, he commissioned Father Philippe-Joseph Brady to find a piece of land, ideally offered in the form of a gift. The land would serve to establish a parish and the first Catholic church in the City of Westmount. Archbishop Bruchési wanted to respond to the needs of the Catholic faithful in the area. He also wanted to consolidate the authority of the Church with the English-speaking Catholic bourgeoisie and the French-speaking bourgeoisie in particular. The mounting

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influence of the bourgeoisie at the political level and a tendency towards liberalism were often criticized by the Vatican.

In Westmount, land was very valuable and Father Brady had a hard time finding a generous donor. In November 1900, the Sisters of Charity of the Montréal General Hospital, commonly known as the Grey Nuns, agreed to an arrangement. On February 2, 1901, a decree allowed the foundation of a bilingual Catholic parish on the territory of the City of Westmount, under the patronage of Saint Leo I. Father Joseph-Antoine-Stanislas Perron was appointed parish priest and, a few months later, Father Oscar-Pierre Gauthier was appointed curate. On October 3, 1901, land was purchased from the Grey Nuns for the sum of \$22,531.81. Immediately thereafter, the Grey Nuns donated back half the amount to the parish. At last, a piece of property was available and construction could start.



The original church in 1904  
© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

The presbytery was built between October 1901 and May 1902. Its architecture is quite simple: the exterior cladding is red brick similar to that adorning a few nearby residences, especially those beyond Kitchener Avenue. The presbytery, based on the plans of Georges-Alphonse Monette, was originally integrated harmoniously with the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the large apartment complex built facing the parish grounds in 1960 has destroyed the architectural unity of the ensemble. Construction of the church took place between October 1901 and October 1903, also based on the plans of architect Georges-Alphonse Monette.

*To learn more about architect Georges-Alphonse Monette, select track 3. To continue the visit with the description of the exterior architecture of the church, select track 4.*

### Track 3 – Georges-Alphonse Monette

Born in Montréal in 1870, Georges-Alphonse Monette apprenticed as an architect with Alexander Francis Dunlop. In the early 1890s, he was workshop supervisor of the important architectural firm of Perrault and Mesnard. In 1895, he resigned and opened his own firm. Between 1918 and 1925, he presided over the Association of Architects of the Province of Quebec. Renowned for his efficiency and versatility, Georges-Alphonse Monette was entrusted with several residential, institutional and commercial projects. In Westmount, he prepared plans for a few buildings, including, among others, the residences of Jérémie Décarie and Adolphe Mongeau on Côte St. Antoine in 1897; Saint-Léon Church in 1903 and, in 1914, an apartment building located at the corner of Greene and Sherbrooke West. He also collaborated in the lot division for a housing project in



Sainte-Julie Church  
© Jean Vincent

Montréal-East under the aegis of promoter Joseph Versailles, his brother-in-law. The latter's name remains in our collective memory as the name of the famous shopping center in the east end of Montréal. Georges-Alphonse Monette was also involved in projects for several places of worship. He signed the plans for the Sainte-Julie church (1899-1902) in Saint-Julie and the Saint-Gérard-de-Magella church (1907-1910) in L'Assomption. He drew up plans for the presbyteries of Sainte-Anne parish (1904-1905) in Varennes, La Nativité de la Sainte-Vierge (1909-1910) in La Prairie and Saint-Joseph (1924) in Chambly. In Montréal, he was the designated architect for the monasteries of the Soeurs du Précieux-Sang (1899-1902) in the district of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce and the Soeurs Marie Réparatrice (1910-1911). These two monasteries have since been converted into residential buildings. Finally, Georges-Alphonse Monette was appointed architect for the construction of the Saint-Pascal-Baylon church (1916-1917) in the Côte-des-Neiges borough and for the rebuilding, after its destruction by fire, of the Saint-Léonard-de-Port-Maurice church (1930-1931), in the district of Saint-Léonard.

Monette's architecture stands apart for its simplicity and the balance of its lines. His eclectic approach is easily recognizable in building facades characterized by the sober composition and delicate integration of decorative elements. In architecture, eclecticism is defined by the organization in the same construction of elements borrowed from different architectural styles. In his book<sup>1</sup>, art historian Paul Racine draws attention to the fact that a number of architects, like Monette, subscribed to this architectural style, considering it to be the reflection of a prosperous population that owed its good fortune to progress and industrialization. Lacking a style of its own, this new, emerging bourgeoisie looked to a culturally shared past in order to develop a style and forms to embrace as its own. The places of worship designed by Georges-Alphonse Monette are characterized by the use of an eclectic style tempered by more classical lines.

*To continue the visit with the description of the architecture of the church exterior, please select track 4.*

<sup>1</sup> Paul Racine. « L'église Sainte-Julie, son histoire, son architecture », *Sainte-Julie, 150 ans, 1851-2001 : un tourbillon de gens et de passions*, Montréal, Société de recherche historique Archiv-histo, 2001, p. 49-54

## Track 4 – The Church, Its History and Its Architecture

Saint-Léon Church, as it is today, is the result of an extension built in 1920. Before the extension, the church was more modest in size, as may be seen in the plan of Saint-Léon in your brochure. A centered plan was adopted. The use of a centered plan for Christian churches was common in the Byzantine Empire and, later on, in European Romanesque architecture. The architecture of Saint-Léon Church is of Neo-Roman style, with references to the characteristics of the Romanesque period. This style is recognizable through the use of a round arcade arch above the openings and scrolls in lighter-colored stone. The transept corners inside the place of worship are occupied by absidioles housing open chapels.

In January 1920, a consensus was reached that the church was too small to meet the needs of the community. A committee suggested building an extension or creating a new parish to serve the English-speaking Catholic population. It was considered more advantageous to extend the nave, building three bays. Once again, the preparation of the plans was entrusted to Georges-Alphonse Monette. Construction began in the spring of 1920 and was completed by the end of 1921. The Neo-Roman style of Saint-Léon Church, borrowed mainly from constructions of Italian origin, is emphasized by the addition of a narthex and a bell tower. The construction itself was entrusted to the firm John Quinlan & Company, owned by a parish resident.



Exterior architecture detail  
© Valérie-Couet-Lannes

When the extension was built, the original facade was moved forward and modified. A large square stands in front, allowing entrance to the narthex added to the original facade. The narthex is surmounted by a balustrade with blind arches reminiscent of Lombardy, another characteristic element of Romanesque architecture. The main doorways are accentuated by small columns surmounted by Roman arches. Note the checkered pattern made of smooth and rough blocks, as well as the alternating brushed and roughened stones. This decorative element, rather uncommon in religious architecture in Quebec, may also be found on the facade of the Sainte-Julie Church, also designed by Georges-Alphonse Monette, and on the facade of Saint-Lambert Church. The plans of the latter, built originally in 1889 and rebuilt identically after the fire, were prepared by Perrault and Mesnard, the firm where Monette was workshop supervisor between 1890 and 1895.

One of the most impressive architectural elements of Saint-Léon Church is the bell tower to the right of the main facade. It houses four bells of a group of five made by Maison Paccard. The bells come from the Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix Church located in the borough of Rosemont-La-Petite-Patrie, converted into a residential building in 2004.

*To view the architecture of the church from a different angle, please go to Clarke Street. Stop opposite the east side façade of the church.*

*During your move, you will also be able to gain a better understanding of the architecture of the bell tower, whose description will follow.*

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The bell tower is clearly the element confirming the Italian Neo-Roman style of architecture. Indeed, the first round and square bell towers to house bells were built in Italy around the 6th century. The French word for bell tower is “campanile,” derived from Italian word, *campana*, meaning bell. These towers often exhibit very fine craftsmanship and may be annexed to the main building or fully free-standing. Such is the case of the tower of the Pisa Cathedral.

Saint-Léon’s bell tower is a fine, elegant square tower of modest height. The architect repeated the decorative elements of the main facade, with the ornamentation of the openings, the checkered pattern and the string course with saw-tooth dentils. Note the gargoyles above the bell chamber, an element seldom seen on bell towers on the island of Montréal. This bell tower is reminiscent of the towers found in Italy, for example the *Santa Maria del Fiore* cathedral in Florence. It features some similarities with more modest bell towers of a few Romanic Catalan churches of Lombard influence, such as Saint-Clément de Tahull. Monette’s original project included a spire on the top of the Saint-Léon bell tower, but none was added due to a lack of funds.



The enlarged church in 1920 © Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

Now, view the side facade. Note the variation in the masonry between the first and second window of the nave, starting in the church transept. Note also the different height of the foundations. This is where the main facade was located before the 1920 extension. Observe the interesting volumes created by the presence of the absidioles accentuating the transept. The back of the church is marked by a semi-circular apse where the sacristy, the baptistery and the marriage chapel are located.

*To continue the visit, please select track 5*

## Track 5 – Division of the Parish, Environment and Designation

At the onset of 1926, the English-speaking Catholics presented a request to the archdiocese expressing their wish to establish their own parish. On July 5, 1926, they were authorized by Msgr. Georges Gauthier, Coadjutor Archbishop of Montréal, to found a distinct parish under the name of *Ascension of Our Lord*. The Anglophones’ decision to leave Saint-Léon caused some friction, considering that barely six years earlier, the church extension project had been voted on by common agreement. The *Fabrique* of Saint-Léon Church had to contend with loans taken out for the extension, as well as diminishing revenue.



Ascension of Our Lord Church  
© Conseil du patrimoine religieux du Québec

The *Ascension of Our Lord* Church was built on the same land strip as Saint-Léon, with its main facade on Sherbrooke Street. It is near Westmount City Hall, Selwyn School and the former Saint Paul Academy. The piece of land on which the Saint-Léon and *Ascension of Our Lord* churches are located, with Saint-Léon school in between, is part of the institutional life of the municipality and its architectural heritage.



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In 1997, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated Saint-Léon of Westmount Church a National Historic Site. This governmental recognition is conferred upon sites of great value with exceptional characteristics viewed as major testimonials to the knowledge and celebration of our national history. Saint-Léon Church distinguishes itself by its painted decor in the fresco technique used rarely in Quebec, yet mastered by artist Guido Nincheri. The interior decor is one of Nincheri's best large-scale achievements. He not only designed the frescoes, but also the stained-glass windows and all the decorative elements. They consist of marble, bronze and remarkably carved wood pieces. Saint-Léon's decoration also distinguishes itself by the originality of the materials used, the quality of execution of the work and the fame of the artisans involved.

*We invite you to discover this magnificent decor. To begin the visit of the interior of the church, enter the narthex and select track 6.*

*You can use the passage along the bell tower. You will see a commemorative plaque installed by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to draw attention to the heritage value of the church and the remarkable work of Guido Nincheri.*

## Track 6 – Narthex

You are now in the narthex. Originally, this element was a transition space, outside a church's sacred premises. Religious services could be heard by the catechumens, the penitents and the onlookers, possibly in the conversion process to Christianity. Sometimes, ornamentation is very elaborate and impressive, a replica of small churches with devotional altars. Here, Saint-Léon's narthex is mainly a passage introducing the visitor to the symbolic universe of the church.

The wooden doors separating the narthex from the church were sculpted by Aviero Marchi from Nincheri's drawings. The same sculptures are reproduced on the two faces of the doors. The themes of the lateral doors are vices and virtues. The central doors bear the effigies of Saint George, patron saint of the English, and three archangels, Gabriel, Michael and Raphael. Guido Nincheri's stained-glass windows installed in 1954 feature Saint George and Saint Michael, patron saint of the Catholic Church. Above them is the figure of God, a dove (symbol of the Holy Spirit) and a monogram of Christ, all representing the Holy Trinity.



Narthex door detail  
© Valérie-Couet-Lannes

*A priori*, everything appears to promote a certain duality, evidenced in the dialogue between the sacred and the profane, vices and virtues and, on the sociocultural level, by the side-by-side presence of Saint George and Saint Michael. This duality is found unified in the church, where the elements are assembled and linked together in the expression of the central theme initiated by the figure of Leo I. The reign of the latter was characterized, among other things, by a desire to strengthen harmony between all Christians recognizing themselves through the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Now, please enter the church through the central doors. Above, under the organ gallery, are paintings of the coat of arms of the parish with the motto "*Vicit Leo*," accompanied by the coats of arms of the City of Westmount, Pope Pius XI and Msgr. Paul Bruchési. On the floor, at the threshold of the central aisle, is the inscription "*Haec est domus domini*," meaning "This is the House of God."

*In order to admire the decor of Saint-Léon Church in its entirety, please sit in one of the front pews in the middle of the church in the space created by the junction of the nave, the chancel and the transepts. Before proceeding with the visit, we invite you to take time to admire the many works of art surrounding you.*

*You can accompany this pause by selecting track 7 to listen to a musical excerpt, Agnus Dei, from the mass of Saint-Léon, composed and interpreted by organist Denis Bédard.*

*To begin the visit of the church interior, select track 8.*

## **Track 7 – Musical Excerpt**

## **Track 8 – The Apse Fresco: Leo I, Pope and Doctor of the Church**

Facing you is the chancel. Access to it is controlled by the marble communion table. Its alcoves are decorated with statuettes representing the twelve apostles, with Saint Paul replacing Judas. Sculpted representations of the Fathers of the Church of Occident and the Church of Orient surmount the wooden stalls. The stained-glass windows to the right bear the symbol of Judaism, and the windows to the left Christianity. These elements are a reminder of the foundations of the history of the Church and of the importance, through the centuries, of those who contributed to the protection and dissemination of the Christian doctrine. One of the most important contributors was Pope Leo I, glorified in the fresco of the apse.

As a result of his prolific writing, Saint Leo the Great, Pope of Rome from 440 to 461, is recognized as one of the most important Doctors of the Church. He reigned during a stressful period when groups of Christians from the Occident and the Orient each championed ideas that were, at times, contrary to the foundations of Christianity. The soundness, faith and profound coherence of his views expressed on the dogma and on Christian doctrine became the archetypes for the education and comprehension of the great mysteries of Christendom. Saint Leo established several dogmas, such as the double nature of Christ, intimately linked with that of the Immaculate Conception, during the Chalcedonian Council held in 451. He may have defended Rome against the barbarian invaders. It appears that he convinced Attila, King of the Huns, to refrain from sacking Rome. Moreover, despite his failed attempt to deter Gaiseric, King of the Vandals, Saint Leo may have prevented a massacre of the Roman citizens despite the sacking of the city. It seems that the sacking of Rome by the Vandals in 455 was carried out without fires or murders. However, Gaiseric left Rome with a significant ransom, Empress Eudoxia and her two daughters, Eudoxia and Placidia. The individuals at the bottom of the fresco represent persons who stood out in the historical life of Leo I. The group on the left includes Attila on his horse and the Huns, Emperor Valentinian III, Theodosius II, as well as monks from Palestine and Africa. The group on the right features Empress Eudoxia and Gaiseric, King of the Vandals, under the Roman standard, the Empress' daughters, some bishops and theologians as well as the faithful.

In this fresco, Saint Leo the Great is presented in full glory in his papal dress, surrounded by six groups of angels. Behind him, Saint Peter spreads his arms as a presentation sign. He holds in each hand two keys, one opening the door to Paradise, the other closing it. Above them, a dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit. By its composition, this fresco affirms the legitimacy of the pope and the Roman Catholic Church through the presence of Saint Peter, the one chosen by Christ as the chief of His Church on earth. This work illustrates the

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argument advocated by Leo I that has made the Pontifical See sacred by upholding the fact that the pope is a direct descendant of Saint Peter. The essential premise of this argument can be seen in the inscriptions of the fresco. The inscription at the feet of Saint Leo may be translated as follows: "He took the reins of the Church from Blessed Peter." The inscription at the bottom of the fresco means: "Whatever Christ has willed to be shared in common by Peter and the other leaders of the Church, it is only through Peter that He has given to others what He has not refused to bestow on them."

It is not by chance that Msgr. Bruchési elected to place the first Catholic parish in Westmount under the patronage of Leo. The Church affirmed its presence and its authority over all other Christian churches of Protestant or Anglican persuasion. Saint-Léon Church united the English- and French-speaking Catholics under its aegis, demonstrating a position of strength towards Protestants who challenged, among other things, papal authority.



Saint-Léon le Grand, fresco apse detail  
© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

*For the continuation of the visit and the architectural description of the church interior, please select track number 9.*

## Track 9 – Interior Architecture



Interior view © Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

You have already ascertained the scope of the 1920 extension while viewing the outside of the church. Turn around now and face the back of the church to appreciate the extension from indoors. Before the construction, the space ended after the first bay, in other words, between the first and second window of the nave, starting from the transept. Now the church has a Latin cross plan. The large nave is covered by a barrel vault resting on robust pillars framing the side aisles. The transverse ribs of the vault rest on attached columns running alongside and reinforcing the pillars. The tops of the walls of the entire church feature a rhythmical scansion of round arches, also referred to as blind arcatures.

This upper section of the walls is covered with casings of Savonnières stones imported from Savonnières-en-Perthois, in France. Blocks weighing 5 to 7 tons (about 11,000 to 15,000 pounds) were transported and then cut on the church premises. The physical property of this stone is its relative softness when cut, followed by hardening on contact with air, allowing the sculpting of elaborate reliefs. As an example, notice the lamb in the middle of the apse and the monograms surmounting the chapels.



Above, the structure of the central vault is divided into four contiguous shells by the barrel vaults of the transept, creating an interesting effect of line and volume. The inside of Saint-Léon Church amazes with its amplitude and complexity, all the while preserving a beautiful unity. This impression is attributable to a cleverly designed decor harmoniously integrating all elements of the church architecture.

*To learn more about the extent of the great project of the interior decor, please select track 10.*

## Track 10 – Extent of the Work

The achievement of the present interior decoration of Saint-Léon Church took more than 30 years. The first elements of the new decor were the pulpit and the high altar, ordered in 1925 from *Arte del Marmo* (the marble studio) in Florence and installed in 1927. Early on in 1930, the church wardens decided to make the site fireproof. The wooden floors under the pews were replaced with concrete slabs covered with terrazzo. The floor in the chancel was replaced with marble parquet integrating a lion design framed by geometric elements repeated in the aisles also covered with marble. In the 1930 annual report, the Book of Deliberations records that the parquet in the chancel "has been praised by everyone" and "the wish is expressed that the work be carried on....." (Book of Deliberations, Fabrique of Saint-Léon, January 18, 1931, p. 106).

It appears that within the scope of work required to fireproof the church, Father Gauthier took advantage of the situation to substitute replacement materials with materials of remarkable esthetic quality. Between 1932 and 1933, the walls were covered with Savonnières stones and wall panels by Florentine mosaic. During the same period, the decoration of the side chapels of the chancel was completed by the frescoes and stained-glass windows by Nincheri and the sculpted statues by Pasquale Sgandurra. Several parishioners made donations to the decoration project, including Noah A Timmins, who financed the completion of the chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph. The lateral chapels provide examples of decoration possibilities for the entire church if embellishment work were to be pursued. Placing their faith in the financial and artistic intuition of Father Gauthier, their parish priest, the church wardens authorized him to continue the restoration.

Between 1933 and 1937, Nincheri worked on the frescoes. In 1937 and 1938, two confessionals were installed, surmounted by statues of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Ann. The communion rail was installed in 1939. Between 1935 and 1945, then 1953 and 1956, Alviero Marchi completed cabinetwork and wood sculptures in the church, sacristy and the marriage chapel. From 1930 until the mid-fifties, stained-glass windows were installed, not only in the church, but also in the baptistery and the marriage chapel. Nincheri painted decorations in these areas. The decoration of the narthex was completed around 1955. Finally, and despite the departure of Father Gauthier in 1953, work continued under the supervision of Nincheri, ending with the arrival of the two stoups in 1958.



The pulpit

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

*To find out more about Father Oscar Pierre Gauthier, please select track 11.*

*To learn more about artist Guido Nincheri, please select track 12.*

*To continue the visit with the presentation of the fresco painted decoration, please select track 13.*

## Plage 11 – Le curé Oscar Pierre Gauthier



Father Oscar Gauthier, drawn by G. Nincheri  
© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

Oscar Pierre Gauthier was born in Montréal in 1873. He was ordained a priest in 1895 after his studies at the Theological Seminary of Montréal. Thereafter, he traveled to Rome and Paris to pursue studies in theology and philosophy. Upon his return to Montréal in 1898, he taught logic and metaphysics at the Theological Seminary until 1902. As early as 1901, he was appointed curate at Saint-Léon, the year the parish was founded; he was named parish priest in 1904. After devoting more than 50 years to the same parish, he retired in 1953, and died on February 17, 1964.

At the time of his departure, the church wardens credited him with the sound financial situation of parish affairs, a fact admired by everyone. They also recognized early on the importance of the heritage he was passing on. In a testimonial excerpt from the minutes of the parish: "After expanding the church, you decorated it with sound artistic taste, made it a unique church in Montréal. This monument will remain one of your accomplishments, permanent proof for future generations of the gifted devotion of a parish priest to his church and parishioners."<sup>2</sup> In 1995, Father Gauthier was posthumously named citizen emeritus of the City of Westmount for his eminent influence in the renovation of Saint-Léon Church, one of the outstanding monuments in the architectural heritage of the city.

Father Gauthier wanted his church to mirror the most beautiful Italian churches he had admired during his studies in Europe. He was impressed by the richness of the decoration of the Romanesque and Renaissance churches, the abundance of mural ornaments, frescoes and mosaics and the diversity of motifs inspired by Roman and Byzantine art. For the duration of his work, Father Gauthier was also guided by another principle. He had noted the importance placed on the quality of materials used and the employ of skilled artisans to impart a rich decor characterized by simplicity, noble refinement and continuity. These qualities contrast starkly with the flashy appearance of plaster statues, veneering and faux finis, admittedly less costly, but of poorer taste, in the opinion of Father Gauthier.

The parish priest was always rousing interest in order to continue his work, convincing the church wardens to authorize the expenses, which were numerous. Year after year, Father Gauthier received the support of his church wardens to bring his undertaking to a successful conclusion. Artistic endeavours were entrusted to Guido Nincheri, a Florentine artist established in Montréal, whose training was in line with Father Gauthier's ideal. This is an extract from a booklet published in 1938 in which Father Gauthier introduces Guido Nincheri:

"It was truly fortunate for us to meet a real master in the person of Mr. Guido Nincheri. He embodies the tradition of the great Italian artists, at once architects, sculptors and painters, portrait painters, decorators, fresco painters and even stained-glass artists. Nincheri is a master of the style chosen for Saint-Léon. As a native of Florence, he can put us in contact with Florentine artists for work that could not be done here. He is highly intelligent, incredibly active, fair-minded and very conscientious. He has poured all his talent and heart into an enterprise that he considers as the greatest work of his life with devotion far beyond our expectations. He certainly deserves all the credit for the beautiful things that have been done to our small church. "<sup>3</sup>

*To learn more about artist Guido Nincheri, please select track 12.*

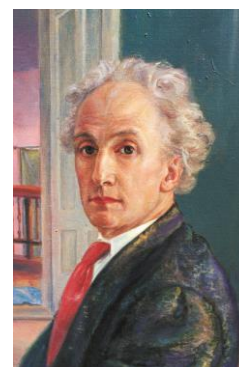
*To continue the visit, with the presentation of the decoration painted in fresco, please select track 13.*

<sup>2</sup> "Address presented to Father Oscar P. Gauthier by the parishioners of Saint-Léon of Westmount on the occasion of his retirement as parish priest and pastor of the parish, during a special assembly of the church wardens, present and past, held at the presbytery of Saint-Léon of Westmount on September 9, 1951." Parish document, Saint-Léon of Westmount.

<sup>3</sup> "Saint-Léon de Westmount near Montréal, Canada, Imprimerie Papineau, p. 5.

## Track 12 – Artist Guido Nincheri

Guido Nincheri was born in 1885 in Prato, Italy. He studied at the Florence Academy of Arts specializing initially in ornament design. Thereafter, he studied architecture. In 1913, he left Italy for America, settling in Montréal in 1914. At the time, he was a polyvalent artist with expertise backed by a solid background in literature, mathematics and techniques. He used these skills in his work at the side of decorator Henri Perdriau (1877-1950), from whom he learned the art of the stained-glass window. He was quickly recognized for his talent and sought after for his style, influenced strongly by artists of the Italian Renaissance such as Giotto, Botticelli, Masaccio, Michelangelo and, sometimes, British Pre-Raphaelite artists of the end of the nineteenth century, such as Edward Burne-Jones.



Guido Nincheri, self-portrait, 1952  
© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

Guido Nincheri's career reached a turning point in 1925, after he completed the painted decoration and designs of the stained-glass windows for Saint-Viateur Church in Outremont and the plans for Notre-Dame-de-la Défense Church in Little Italy. The Dufresne brothers, Oscar and Marius, prominent members of the Montréal bourgeoisie, offered him the use of a room in their office located on Pie IX Boulevard in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. The room was transformed into a glass work studio, the Nincheri Studio, now open to the public. It is estimated that more than 5,000 stained-glass windows were produced for various places of worship, not only in Quebec, but also in Ontario, the Maritime Provinces, Western Canada and Massachusetts and Rhode Island, where Nincheri died in 1973.

Nincheri's art and versatility were very much appreciated by the clergy, and he participated in the decoration of almost 200 places of worship across the country. Nincheri's work is acclaimed by art historians who recognize the artist's concern for harmoniously integrating his work with architecture, the originality of his compositions and subject interpretation, his great skill in portraiture, as well as his detailed realism, from the postures and garments of the individuals to the landscapes and architectural elements illustrated in his work. As you can well imagine, one man, even as prolific a man as Nincheri, could not possibly have crafted nearly 5000 stained-glass windows and participated in the decoration of approximately 200 churches in a lifetime. Nincheri knew to surround himself with competent artists, for the most part trained as he had been at the Florence Academy of Arts. He chose artists with the talent and knowledge to carry out the work that he designed so meticulously.

Specialists of Nincheri's works have also noted variations in the quality of his undertakings. These differences are attributable to the particular context of the artist's responding to the requests of his clients, especially those from parishes where financial means and time constraints were ever changing and unreliable. For the decoration of Saint-Léon Church, one of the first of Nincheri's large-scale contracts, it appears that all the elements were assembled to enable Nincheri to produce exceptional work.

*To continue the visit with the presentation of the decoration painted in fresco, please select track 13.*

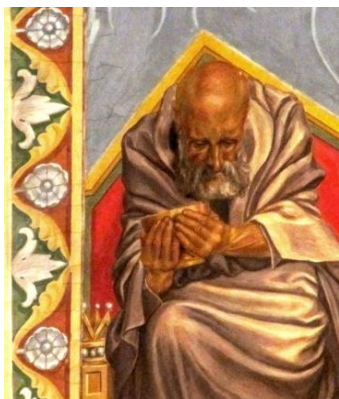
## Track 13 – The Frescoes: Technique and Themes

The whole painted decoration that you can see in the church was executed according to the traditional technique of the fresco, a term originating from the Italian "affresco", meaning "in fresco". Paint is applied on a fresh coating of plaster or lime. While drying, the plaster or lime absorbs the pigments of color that will last, unchanged, for years. However, very few artists use this technique because it entails many obstacles that can only be overcome by quick execution, expertise and precision, as the talented Guido Nincheri could.

As the coating absorbs the pigments and is in contact with the air, a fine layer is formed on the surface. The artist must work quickly, because it will not be possible to modify the work of art after crystallization and the coating has dried. Time is of the essence. There is no room for error or long coffee-breaks. The artist must also take into consideration that the color will be different once the coating is dry and adjust the quantity of pigment accordingly. To help with this monumental task, Nincheri prepared scale drawings on large pieces of cardboard that he installed on the wall before the final application of coating. Small holes were pierced on the main lines and the drawing was tapped on gently with a small bag of coal. When the cardboard were removed, all that remained on the wall to guide the artist was a stippled drawing visible through the fresh coating.

It is possible to see what corresponds to a day's work, a *giornata*, in observing the marks resulting from the juxtaposition of the coatings from one day to the next. Please note that Nincheri, a skilled fresco painter, was able to greatly reduce the visibility of these inevitable delimitations. As an example, in the fresco above you, the angels are separated by stylized beams of light. It is probably a strategy to soften the marks left by work, day after day, more easily visible on a solid background. Now, observe Saint Leo's fresco in the apse of the chancel. Note the clearer vertical lines above the individuals at the bottom of the fresco. The space between these lines corresponds to work done in one day. Despite the constraints, note the precision of the faces, the richness of the colors in the draping and the complexity of the decorative elements. Today, Nincheri is recognized as one of the great masters of the art of the fresco, irrespective of the era.

The themes depicted in the frescoes of Saint-Léon Church are not very common in Quebec religious art. We have already presented the fresco of the apse representing the glorification of Saint Leo and the affirmation of the authority of the Pope of Rome. Above you, similar to a dome opening onto the sky, is the vision of celestial



Fresco detail, one of the 24 Ancients  
© Valérie Couet-Lannes

Jerusalem as described by Apostle Saint John in the Book of the Apocalypse. The center illustrates God holding the Book with Seven Seals, the lamb symbol of Christ sacrificed and risen, and the 24 Ancients, counsellors of the throne. The groups of Ancients are surmounted by the Evangelists represented by their attributes, the "Four Living Creatures": a lion for Mark, an eagle for John, a man for Matthew and a steer for Luke. There are two groups of angels on the walls of the transept above the stained-glass windows. On the left side of the chancel, the angels are pouring cups of divine wrath onto Earth. On the right side, seven angels with trumpets are launching different cataclysms and curses. Finally, in the vaults of the transepts, note the four riders of the Apocalypse, accompanied by inscriptions and medallions symbolically supporting the function of each. They are also recognizable by the color of their hair. White is associated with victory and the divine; red with war; black with plague and famine; and the light brown horse, with death.

Guido Nincheri remained faithful to the text, yet added a few personal interpretations. Note the face of the black rider in the vault of the right transept. It is a self-portrait of the artist, and it is not the only place where Nincheri portrayed himself. In the fresco of the apse, in the first group of individuals at the bottom and to the right of the



composition, is Nincheri's profile behind a woman and a child. It is his wife Giulia and one of his sons, Jacques, deceased at the age of five. It is possible that Nincheri was making a veiled reference to his artistic heritage, whereby Renaissance artists may take advantage of a work including several individuals to insert a self-portrait, like Botticelli in the *Adoration of the Magi* painted in 1475.

Father Gauthier mentioned in his writings that the artist was experiencing difficulties finding good models for the Saint-Léon of Westmount Church. He relates that one day Nincheri saw a man on the street with a very nice beard, a perfect model to represent God. He made an appointment with the man for two days later; the man was living in an old person's home, a shelter for destitute persons. On the given day, Nincheri went to the shelter and was greeted by a well-dressed man, hair combed and.....clean shaven. The man was all spruced up and had cut the beard that Nincheri had noticed. According to the story told by Nincheri's grandson, despite the fact that the artist was frustrated and had called him a poor soul, the man nevertheless served as a model. From memory, Nincheri had to add a beard to his preliminary drawings.

We invite you to observe the frescoes that decorate the vault of the nave. Represented in almond shaped medallions, also referred to as mandorla, are individuals chosen among the patriarchs, prophets, martyrs, and male and female founders of religious communities. Here, it is likely that Nincheri drew his inspiration, not from live models, but from small holy or devout pictures, widely distributed by the religious authorities to kindle the devotion of the faithful. The images with their standardized, controlled illustrations enabled the faithful to quickly identify the subjects. Finally, note Nincheri's meticulous work on the decorative designs that fill the spaces between the medallions.

This is how the iconographic program of Saint-Léon Church frescoes is displayed. The faithful who enter the church recognize, in the vault of the nave, men and women whose devotion and spirituality enabled them to achieve sainthood. They are models to be imitated. At the center, the invisible Church dominates, as revealed by the Apocalypse. Finally, a return towards mankind takes place in the chancel through Saint Peter and Saint Leo the Great asserting the authority and legitimacy of the Catholic Church on Earth.

*To continue the visit with the presentation of the stained-glass windows, please select track 14.*

## **Track 14 – The Stained-glass Windows: Technique and Themes**

The stained-glass windows of Saint-Léon Church are among the most beautiful produced by Nincheri for a church on the island of Montréal. The iconographic program is inspired by the linear history of the Bible. It starts in the east transept with an excerpt from Genesis, the original sin; it continues with scenes from Jesus' childhood and Christ's public life in the nave; it ends with the resurrection, represented in one of the windows of the west transept.

*Proceed towards the stained-glass window located in the east transept, to the right of the chancel.*

While passing the chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph, we invite you to observe the saint's statue. It is surprising to see the infant Jesus sleeping in the arms of his protective father. This original approach may be attributed to Father Gauthier's desire to show that the creative work of a committed artist such as Nincheri can beautify a church through works of great sensibility and exclusivity, enabling a parish to stand apart quite naturally from all others.

The three-part window or triptych decorating the east transept depicts an episode from Genesis where Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are driven from the Garden of Eden. As for the frescoes, many preparatory drawings enabled the artist to achieve an ideal composition despite the architectural constraints created here by the window frame. Nincheri provided his apprentices and colleagues with a scale model of the window to be executed. The water-color scale-models represented small works of art. Several were kept at the Nincheri Studio. Thereafter, the scale-model was scaled-up, down to the smallest detail, on cardboard. The glass was selected and cut. The pieces were assembled on a frame and glued temporarily with wax, like a suspended puzzle. Then, Nincheri or his helpers completed the design, mainly using the grisaille technique.

Look closely at the bodies of Adam and Eve. They are made from a single color glass. A diluted pigment, dark brown or ochre, creates the shadow effects with wash paint. The same technique was used to achieve the details of the faces, hands, clothing and architectural and floral elements. In addition to the grisaille technique, other methods were used in order to reduce the color density of the glass. An acid, whose composition was selected according to the color to be modified or removed, was applied on the glass and then scraped with bits of wood. The result of this technique is obvious in the light beams around the face of God in the central stained-glass window, and of Archangel Gabriel in the window at right. The outside light accentuates the radiance and transparency effects obtained by the modification of the glass.

The pieces of the window were then taken apart and fired to definitely fix the pigments. Sometimes, Nincheri would do up to four firings before being satisfied, each time involving assembly, touch up, dismantling and firing. Do you see the horizontal lines that divide the window into equal parts? The strips correspond to the width of the oven used by Nincheri to fire the pieces.

*We now invite you to go to Saint Ann's chapel, located on your right.*

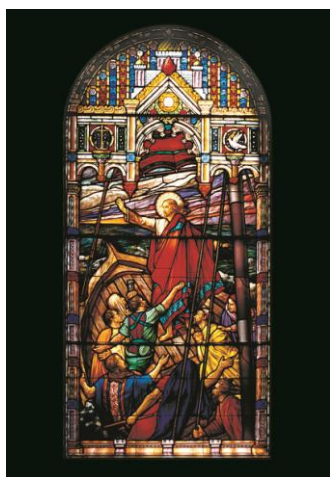
The stained-glass windows decorating this chapel, as well as the two on the main facade, were installed before 1930. They were made by Bernard Leonard's studio in Québec City and designed by Wallace J. Fisher. The quality of the glass and the techniques used are different from the ones produced by Nincheri. Note that the shades are duller and the comprehension of three-dimensionality is less evident than in Nincheri's windows. Father Gauthier was severely critical of these first windows: "Too often, we are anxious to pay only one or two dollars per square foot to have color in all the windows of our churches. To meet these conditions, some manufacturers order glass reproductions of known paintings of colored images (similar to the students in our

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convents who copy images from the calendar)." After having described the creative work of Nincheri, he added, "Of course, we are forced to pay more, but come to Saint-Léon to compare the two types of stained-glass windows and you will quickly see the difference".<sup>4</sup>

At the time that Father Gauthier wrote this text, we must point out that the only stained-glass windows in place were those in the chancel and the chapels dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. This text resembles a plea to justify the cost of replacing Leonard's windows. After Father Gauthier retired, work continued on, in compliance with his demands. However, it seems that the replacement of the two windows in question was not approved, as is the case of the two windows of the façade representing Saint Paul and Saint Peter, also made by Studio Bernard Leonard.

*To continue the visit, we invite you to discover the stained-glass windows of the nave by walking from window to window to arrive in front of the windows in the west transept.*



*Jesus Calming the Tempest window*

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

Take time to admire these works of art. Pay attention to the way the artist succeeded in creating living works of art, including several elements (individuals, buildings, landscapes, framing of scenes) arranged harmoniously. Observe the effects of perspective and the use of architecture that frames the individuals, allowing the achievement of realistic proportions, sometimes amazing, considering the limited space that Nincheri had. Also note the colors and details of the clothing, the play on light and shadows and especially the faces depicted with touching sensitivity.

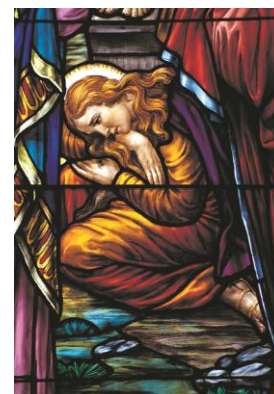
The scenes selected to illustrate the childhood of Jesus are: *The Adoration of the Magi*, *The Presentation at the Temple*, *Jesus Among the Doctors* and *The Shop in Nazareth*. The west side features the following scenes: *Jesus Calming the Tempest*, *The Sermon of the Beatitudes*, *Caesar's Tribute* and *Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem*.

*Please proceed to the front of the stained-glass window in the west transept and select track 15.*

<sup>4</sup>*Saint-Léon of Westmount, near Montréal, Canada, p.20*

## Track 15 – The Stained-glass Windows: Technique and Themes (continuation)

The west transept windows show *The Crucifixion*, *Christ the King* and *The Resurrection*. Those windows are also of a great chromatic complexity and demonstrate Nincheri's ability to use light in the glass pieces and display the mastery of his skill for the portrait. Let us linger for a moment at the central window, the homage to Christ the King, installed in 1941. Represented are different categories of the faithful (sick persons, workers and members of a religious community), as well as personalities representing the various powers, religious, judiciary and civil. All are present in order to acclaim the greatest of all men and the greatest of all authorities, Christ crowned, glorious and sovereign. Several contemporaries of this work of art can be recognized in this window: in the middle, Msgr. Joseph Charbonneau, Archbishop of Montréal at the time, and on the right, King George VI and his daughter Elizabeth, crown princess. We can also see some distinguished parishioners of Saint-Léon such as the honourable Pierre-François Casgrain, Judge of the Superior Court of Quebec, Deputy and Senator, Ernest Lapointe, Federal Deputy and Minister, as well as Ernest Loranger, Magistrate.



*The Crucifixion (window detail)*

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

*Please select track number 16 for the presentation of the Stations of the Cross.*

## Track 16 – The Stations of the Cross

The layout of the Stations of the Cross at Saint-Léon Church is exceptional. Traditionally, the stations are spread out over entire walls of a church, excluding the chancel. Here, however, the stations are clustered in groups of seven at the far end of the transepts. This layout, inspired by European models, allows the faithful to perform their devotions discreetly, without moving to the rear of the church where there is more traffic.

The stations, entirely cast in bronze, were installed in 1935. Federico Sciortino, the artist, designed the moulds from Nincheri's drawings. Once again, observe the originality of the poses and the facial expressions given by Nincheri to each of the stations. Federico Sciortino also created the moulds for the doors of the communion table installed in 1939, as well as the doors of the confessional.



*A station of the Cross*

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

The moulds were made in Montréal and sent to a foundry in Florence. The moulded pieces returned by boat, with everyone praying that things would go smoothly. In fact, there could have been numerous incidents, given the weight and value of the pieces. For example, one confessional door weighs 300 pounds (136 kilograms).

*Proceed now to the chapel dedicated to Saint John the Baptist on your right, where you will be able to see one of these doors. For the continuation of the visit and to find out more about the church's confessionals, please select track 17.*



## Track 17 – The Confessionals

As you have seen already, nothing was left to chance in the design of the decor of Saint-Léon Church. Consequently, the confessionals were skillfully integrated into the premises so that they would not appear as a compulsory, added piece of furniture. The confessionals are impressive in terms of their size and the many details that make them unique. Installed in 1937 and 1938, they are made entirely of marble, except for the bronze doors. Even the grille separating the penitent from the confessor is made of marble with openings finely sculpted. The interlacing surrounding the openings was crafted with care. Various symbols related to Christianity can be seen, such as bunches of grapes, vine leaves and birds.



Confessional detail with *pietra dura*  
© Valérie Couet-Lannes

The symbols and scenes decorating the chapels were selected according to the saint to whom they were dedicated. Note the decorative strips on the walls of the Saint John the Baptist chapel and the shellfish, a symbol of baptism. These strips were completed in Florentine mosaic, also called *pietra dura*. This mosaic is a very original element, rarely, if ever, used in the decoration of a church in North America. Note that the lower part of the walls and the columns in the entire church are covered with this mosaic. The top section of most of the marble panelling is made of stripes decorated with Eucharistic designs alternating between grapes, a sign of the bloodshed of Christ, stalks of wheat, a sign of the Body of Christ handed over, and doves, possibly evoking the more modest offerings to the parents of Jesus for the redemption of their first-born. Take a closer look at them on the transept wall. Examine them carefully. They are not paintings on stone, but real and natural pieces of marble, skilfully assembled.

*Move to the front of the representation of the lion, under the Stations of the Cross seen previously and select track 18 to find out more about the technique of this mosaic, an exceptional decorative element of the Saint-Léon Church.*

## Track 18 – The *pietra dura*

The *pietra dura* is a very ancient technique, fully distinctive and very different from the mosaic, which is more contemporary. The latter is made up of fragments of glass, ceramic and stone, called tesserae, assembled to form the desired design. In the 16th century, Count Francesco di Medici established the studio *Opificio delle Pietre dure* with the best stone-cutters. In setting up this guild, he wanted to exploit the art of *pietra dura* for the decoration of walls, pieces of furniture and even silversmithing. They are real works of art made of marble and can also integrate semi-precious stones such as lapis-lazuli and jade. Prized by high society as objects of curiosity and prestige, the *pietra dura* enabled the Florentine artists to be welcomed to the highest courts. For example, the facade of the Taj-Mahal, built in the middle of the 17th century, is decorated using this technique.

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The *pietra dura* is made of pieces cut from slabs of stone, marble or semi-precious stones. Each piece is selected specifically for its colors and natural variations in order to respect the original design. The pieces cut and carefully sanded are inset into each other like a puzzle on a slab of marble, or inlaid in a marble support precisely hollowed out so that the pieces may be fitted perfectly in place. The most beautiful works of art in *pietra dura* are recognizable by the complexity of variations in tone, the volume of the design reproduced, the quality of the marble pieces that may even play with transparency to produce a realistic effect of depth and, especially, the absence of interstices between the stones. This last characteristic means that the chiselling and assembling work, also known as glyptic, has been done so well that it is hard to imagine that what is portrayed before us is an assembly of several natural marble pieces, without any medium other than the stone creating the design. The *pietra dura* can be compared to marquetry in cabinetwork.



*Pietra dura* (detail)

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

The lion in front of you is a very good example. See the shades in the pieces of marble creating an effect in the animal's fur and head. Note the subtle assembly, so fine that in some areas it is very difficult to distinguish between the pieces. It is an absolutely remarkable decorative element in Saint-Léon Church. This creative work required exceptional talent and a monk's patience to select the pieces one by one and cut, file and assemble them with disconcerting precision.

*We invite you to approach the chancel to admire the liturgical furniture made of marble and the woodwork. Afterwards, please select track 19.*

## Track 19 – The Chancel Furniture

Made by *Arte del Marmo in Florence*, under the leadership of *Enrico del Bono*, the communion rail was installed in 1939. It was considered a masterpiece by all the parishioners, who were overjoyed when it arrived. It is made of marble panels with an open work design, featuring complex interlacing in which Christian symbols are set, reflecting the other pieces of furniture of the church. The panels are separated by niches where statuettes representing the twelve apostles are located, works of Pasquale Sgandurra.

The pulpit impresses with the fineness of its ornamentation and its composition. It is made of five massive blocks of marble. The columns, the garlands, the base of the pulpit cage adorned with patriarchs' heads, the cage itself and the staircase were assembled without vertical joints. The staircase was ordered in 1939, but could not be installed until 1946, after the end of World War II. The colored motifs decorating the cage and the staircase of the pulpit were made according to the *pietra dura* technique, like the designs on the high altar. The high altar is an imposing piece, rich with detail. It is also made of massive pieces sculpted from large blocks of stone. The tabernacle is hollowed out of a single block, like the canopy above it. Once again, imagine the scope of the artisans' work, the great skill needed to hollow out, turn and polish the marble to give it the look of lace or decorate the outline of the tabernacle's door to resemble a church gate.

Now, let us examine the remarkable work of Alviero Marchi. He devoted 15 years of his life to the wood sculptures of Saint-Léon of Westmount Church. He spent 10 of those years producing the stalls of the chancel, the president's bench and the organ gallery balustrade.



The stalls (detail)

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

In the wake of his arrival from Florence in 1935, Marchi worked at Saint-Léon creating wood sculptures that are absolutely amazing in terms of their finesse and the technical difficulties that they represent. Woodwork in Saint-Léon Church is made with Honduras walnut. This species, prized for its quality and the uniformity of its grain in particular, has now disappeared. You have been able to appreciate Marchi's talent in the sculptures of the narthex doors. The doors in the chancel stalls are even more amazing. Each seat is decorated according to a theme repeated on both sides of the chancel, creating a mirror effect. The stalls are surmounted by statuettes representing the Doctors and Fathers of the Church. The backs, armrests and front of the panel are meticulously carved out in high relief. What seem to be sculptures nearly separate from their base are simple reliefs, where the depth effect is handled with realism.

*Move to the center of the church to admire the organ-loft balustrade and learn more about the parish organ. Please select track 20.*

## Track 20 – The Gallery: Balustrade and Organ

Alviero Marchi crafted the balustrade between 1942 and 1945, always following Nincheri's drawings. The theme guiding the choice of the sculpted subjects was sacred music and liturgical hymns from the world of Catholicism. The panels represent musicians and choristers at work. The statuettes bear the effigy of important individuals such as Guido d'Arezzo, recognized as the inventor, around the year one thousand, of the notation system on a staff; Pope Gregory I, for Gregorian chants; Saint-Ambroise for the Ambrosian (Milanese) chants; David, the author of Psalms in the Old Testament; Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians; and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, 16th century Italian composer recognized for works created for polyphonic singing.



The organ

© Paroisse Saint-Léon de Westmount

Three organs have resided in Saint-Léon of Westmount Church. The first organ, with two keyboards and 16 organ stops (opus 384) was purchased in 1909 from Maison Casavant Frères. In 1941, the purchase of a new organ became necessary. The second organ was installed in 1941 and came from Maison Odilon Jacques. It had three keyboards and about 40 organ stops. In 1992, the decision was made not to proceed with needed repairs to the instrument. The Church Council, supported by the *Organ Committee*, determined that the exceptional acoustics of the church were not fully exploited with the Odilon Jacques organ. The parish looked for an instrument adapted to the liturgy that would also allow the organist to draw on German, Italian, Spanish, Flemish and French classical repertoires for eventual concerts. The Construction and Sacred Art Committees of the Archdiocese of Montréal suggested that the parish purchase an instrument from the Maskoutain organ builder, Guilbault-Thérien, which would not only meet the needs of the parish, but also contribute to the variety of instruments found in the Montréal region.

In October 1995, an opening recital was given by Mrs. Lucienne L'Heureux-Arel, senior organist at Saint-Léon. Following is a description of the new Guilbault-Thérien organ provided by Guy Thérien, the builder: "It has 32 organ stops distributed over two keyboards and one pedal-board. The transmission is mechanical and the registers are activated by electric motors. The organ-chest, designed in collaboration with architect Alain Fournier, is made of painted solid poplar. The facade pipes, in polished tin, belong to the *montre et prestant* of the great organ, and to the pedal flute. The trumpets (*en chamade*) of the great-organ section occupy the center of the instrument, and are placed horizontally".<sup>1</sup>

*You can appreciate the musical quality of this organ by selecting track 21 and listening to the Ave Maria from the Saint-Léon Mass, composed and interpreted by organist Denis Bédard.*

*To conclude the visit, please select track 22.*

<sup>1</sup> "Église Saint-Léon, Westmount, QC", *Orgues au Québec*, Online:  
<http://www.quebec.ca/musique/orgues/quebec/sleonnw.html#Liste>



## Track 21 – Musical Excerpt

## Track 22 - Conclusion

Since the onset of its construction in 1901, Saint-Léon of Westmount Church has been subject to numerous improvements over the years, starting with the extension in 1920 and the restoration of the interior decoration between 1927 and 1957. During this period, several important historical events shook Quebec and the world. One need only think of the two World Wars, the stock market crash in 1929, Maurice Duplessis' political hegemony and the entry of Quebec society into modernity with, amongst others, the publication of the *Refus global* in 1948. There were the premises of the Vatican II Council and the integration of modern art, an altogether different virtual language for the Catholic churches in Quebec.

While the world was changing rapidly, a colossal undertaking was underway at Saint-Léon, inspired by centuries of religious history and an Italian artistic tradition based on a certain model, using techniques that have now practically disappeared and employing devoted artists for periods of several years. As Pope Leo resisted different invasions, Saint-Léon Church seems to offer resistance to the passage of time and different fashions. *Domus domini*, the House of God, as presented here, appears immutable, incomparable and imperturbable.

The magnificent decor of Saint-Léon Church features exceptional frescoes and stained-glass windows; marble, wood and bronze furniture sumptuously sculpted; and *pietra dura* marble wall panels, artistic jewels in their own right. These characteristics, along with the fact that the undertaking was achieved and designed entirely by artist Guido Nincheri, make Saint-Léon Church unique in Canada, and possibly in North America. Recognition of this church may perhaps exceed the expectations of the architect behind this great achievement, Father Oscar Gauthier. Saint-Léon's artisans have handed down more than beautiful works of art: they have left as heritage a reference monument, a witness, a site of exception, a history and a tradition.

## Production credits

This project was produced by the Conseil du patrimoine religieux du Québec in close collaboration with Saint-Léon of Westmount parish.



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- Louis Brillant, L'Étude Louis Brillant, architect
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