

THE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE COMMITTEE OF ICOMOS CANADA

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to encourage the conservation, protection, rehabilitation, and enhancement of monuments, groups of buildings, and sites. It is UNESCO's principal advisor on matters concerning the conservation and the protection of monuments and sites world wide. ICOMOS also provides a platform for professionals concerned with the conservation and preservation of historic monuments and sites to meet and exchange information and experience. The organization was founded in 1964 in Venice by the second congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, and its constituting assembly was organized with the support of UNESCO the following year in Warsaw. The assembly brought together professionals from 25 countries, who adopted the organization's statutes and the Venice Charter, which is a universally accepted instrument promoting quality in preservation.

ICOMOS operates through national committees, which bring together professionals in each country. The ICOMOS International secretariat in Paris serves 59 countries, whose national committees represent more than 3,000 members. The Canadian branch of ICOMOS International was incorporated in 1975. Through national and international exchange, ICOMOS Canada is concerned with the development and promotion of the highest professional standard of practice for the conservation, preservation, and enhancement of our built heritage and environment.

The Religious Heritage Committee (Comité du patrimoine religieux) is one of 20 specialized committees which make up ICOMOS Canada. Established in November 1990 as an outgrowth of the 1988 ICOMOS Congress *Sacred Heritage*, the committee is made up of clergy, architects, architectural historians, interior designers, conservators, and others who are concerned with the great losses that have taken place — and are still taking place — with our religious architecture and its associated arts and crafts.

During the past millennium, a variety of styles of art and architecture pertaining to and as-

sociated with religion and its teachings have been developed. These styles of architecture, along with their associated art, sculpture, music, and painting, were brought to the shores of the New World by the pioneering generations that preceded us. Over a number of centuries, these cultural expressions took root in Canada to become part of our present Canadian culture and heritage.

In the past quarter century, however, we have seen in North America a destruction of symbolic and religious art comparable only to the fanaticism of Cromwell and the Reformation Period. Anyone with a feeling for art must shudder at the barbarous treatment which has been meted out, and that is still being meted out, to much of the ecclesiastical heritage of this country.

In the December 1992 issue of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada *Bulletin* there are two articles that document pioneer religious settlements in western and northern Canada, both of which contain evidence of religious art and symbolism. The articles show that others besides the Religious Heritage Committee are concerned about our religious heritage, and that steps are being taken not only to document these sites but to conserve what remains of these works. The seeds of concern for the history and the conservation of such works seem to have been sown, yet there are many religious authorities who trivialize these arts and who are not aware of the value such works to both faith and culture.

The full history of ecclesiastical art throughout Canada has yet to be documented, but religious art, both primitive and elaborate, exists from coast to coast. In most places, especially in earlier days, religious art was honoured and protected through the years. But in the past 50 years, and particularly in the past 25 years, many such works have been treated shabbily, at best — in many cases at the whim of those who were trusted with their care: it was and is the higher authorities, the custodians of these works, not the grass roots, who have caused the destruction. Ironically, at a time when people of all walks of life are coming to a greater appreciation of the arts and crafts of earlier

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periods, the arts and crafts of their places of worship are being decimated. There are those of us engaged in the field of ecclesiastical conservation who have come to believe that, for every situation where religious works are conserved and preserved for the next generation to enjoy and emulate, at least two or three others are treated with contempt by those in control. Such works are ravaged, obliterated or expunged, to the chagrin of many of the faithful who sit in the pews.

It is not just simple works that are at the mercy of the plunderers: works of renown have also been attacked. Let me give some examples. The Church of Our Lady in Guelph, Ontario, a large edifice which looks over the Royal City, was graced in 1907 with murals and symbolic ecclesiastical decoration by the leading church artist of his time, Peter Charles Browne (figure 1). These were recognized as being outstanding works by the Apostolic Delegate to Canada of the day, Msgr. Sbaretta, who is reported to have pronounced them “the finest example of gothic decoration in the country.” His successor, Msgr. Stagni, confirmed the judgement of the previous Ablegate. The murals and decoration graced the interior for six decades. During the 1950s, the pastor’s intention was to have these works conserved, but, unfortunately, he did not undertake to do so before being relieved of his post. The next pastor painted them away. Why were these outstanding works destroyed? A poor heating system which used soft coal and the burning of thousands of candles over the years suggests, perhaps, a restorative cleaning was in order. It is apparent, however, that the new pastor did not know, or did not care, that the works that had received so much praise from such high authority could be conserved and restored to their former splendour.

The Cathedral Church of St. Ninian in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, was decorated in 1901-02 by Ozias Leduc. Leduc is now recognized by the National Gallery of Canada as one of Canada’s outstanding muralists. Nevertheless, the local religious authorities decided to improve on his works. In doing so, much of the original work was painted away, and much of the remainder was brutalized. Early photographs show how, on the clerestory walls, Leduc had depicted the apostles surrounded with ecclesiastical designs and enclosures that tied them one to another and into the whole decorative scheme. The symbolic paintings and the enclosing decoration have now been eliminated, leaving Leduc’s saints hanging in mid-air; the format that remains means little (figure 2).

Not all works that have been defaced are works by artists of long ago. It should be pointed out that much of the alteration, mutilation, and destruction that has taken place over the past quarter century is an infringement on the moral integrity of living authors. The integrity of their work is protected, in theory, by Canadian copyright legisla-

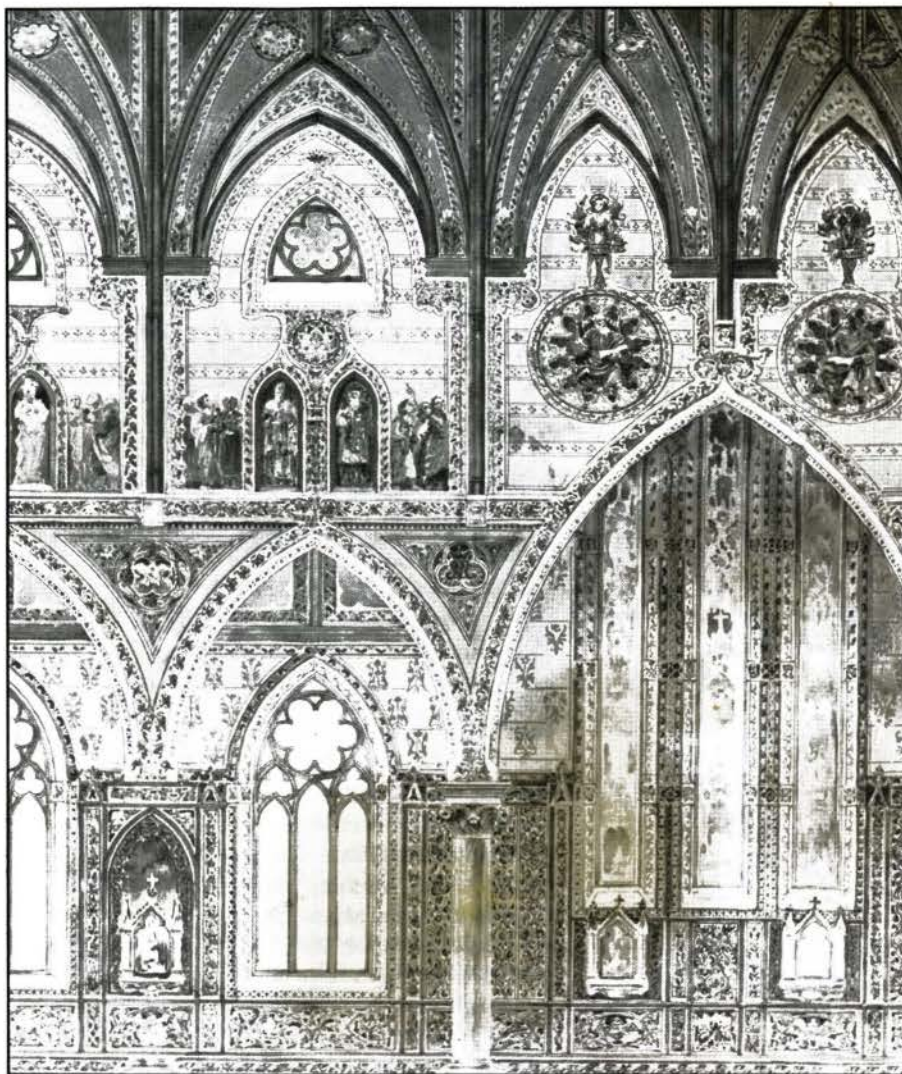


Figure 1. Original water colour sketch prepared by P.C. Browne as a proposal for the interior of the Church of Our Lady, Guelph, Ontario, in 1907. (T.G. Browne)

tion, yet we find that church authorities are rejecting the premise that their invasive intrusions are infringements of authors’ rights, or that such legislation protects their works. Is this a continuum, a further denial of moral transgressions outside and inside the church?

The Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada’s 1993 conference takes place in a city of national architectural and historic significance. Kingston has many fine buildings, not the least of which are its religious monuments. Many of these places of worship have been graced with ecclesiastical art and decoration, but few have received appropriate conservation. In fact, some decoration has received harsh and amateurish treatment in the name of conservation, and some has been destroyed. The decorative works in St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Cathedral, undertaken by renowned church artists and decorators in the first decade of this century, received conservation treatments over the years until their eighth decade of existence; then, for no announced reason, they were destroyed, causing shock and dismay to parishioners and admirers alike.

Figure 2. The interior of St. Ninian's Cathedral, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, after insensitive repainting. (T.G. Browne, 1988)



St. James' Anglican Church is graced with ecclesiastical artistic works in both nave and chancel. The spandrel art of the church nave has been subjected to amateurish treatments in the name of cleaning. This "cleaning" has seen much of the original colouring at least partially washed away. We are pleased to report that, to date, such unsympathetic treatments have not yet been applied to the symbolic artistic works in the chancel, although they are in need of conservation. The committee is also pleased to advise that proper conservation works have taken place in at least two of Kingston's churches, St. John's Anglican and St. John's Roman Catholic.

The Religious Heritage Committee is concerned with the loss of these and other works of art and decoration associated with the architecture of our religious monuments of all denominations and faiths. The fabric — the architecture of stone and brick — is also being threatened. It is a very sad state of affairs in the churches when you see, as I did, a workman using a caulking gun with a plastic compound "repairing" the stone wall of a church. The parishioners in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto are now challenging political expediency by the church hierarchy, who would see the elimination of a beautiful gothic stone church that has existed in downtown Newmarket since the 1880s so that a new, more exposed site might be obtained.

So this sad tale speaks of our experience in regard to the ecclesiastical architectural art in most of Canada. But we are encouraged by what is taking place in the province of Quebec. The Roman Catholic Archdioceses of Quebec and Montreal have had policies in place for many years that

protect the patrimony of the architectural arts in all their religious buildings. The Diocese of St. Jean-Longueuil has adopted a similar policy, and other dioceses are considering such policies. In Ontario, the Anglican Diocese of Ontario (Kingston) is the first jurisdiction, to our knowledge, of any denomination outside the province of Quebec to consider protecting the art and architecture of their buildings. While a policy is not yet in place, the fact that a policy is being considered gives hope for the future.

I ask you, the members of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, to join with us in the Religious Heritage Committee of ICOMOS Canada to help educate the hierarchy of the churches and temples of all denominations and of all faiths that when they destroy our culture and our heritage they destroy our faith, too. Our works of religious architecture and associated arts and crafts were put in place — often by very hard work, sacrifice, and great difficulty — through the faith of past generations, and have been passed on to us of this generation and into our care. To be true to the generations who sacrificed to make these monuments possible we must use our talents and our skills to conserve and preserve their works and to pass them on, in all their integrity, to the generations yet to come.

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