



ARCHITECTURE AND DÉCORATION

During the last quarter of the XIX Century, worshippers living south of the Champs de Mars, who were sent first to Saint-Pierre du Gros Caillou (1823), then to Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Grenelle (1877), wished to have their own parish church.

In 1905, French law established the separation of Church and State, and the State no longer financed the construction or maintenance of new churches; at the same time, religious leaders were allowed greater freedom of choice. In 1909, they decided to build a new votive church dedicated to Jeanne d'Arc (beatified that year); a wealthy, pious family donated a plot of land that had been previously occupied by the temporary Palais du Travail of the Universal Exposition of 1900, which was torn down in 1906.

The dioceses held a competition in 1913 to choose an architect, and selected **Émile Brunet** (1872–1952). The architect from the Monuments historiques had already worked on the restoration of Notre-Dame and had built the new neo-Romanesque church in Coulommiers in the Seine-et-Marne region. He was a student of Viollet-le-Duc's favourite disciple, **Anatole de Baudot**. De Baudot built the neo-Gothic Saint-Jean de Montmartry (1894–1904), on Place des Abbesses, which was the first church in France to be built of concrete clad in brick and ceramic. At that time, concrete was not considered to be a “noble” material, and when left uncovered it was jeered as “nudist”.



In 1913, Émile Brunet designed a church with a “skeleton” of reinforced concrete covered with bricks, in the neo-Romanesque style. The project was interrupted by the war and resumed in 1923. At that time Brunet, who had worked on the reconstruction of northern churches, replaced the neo-roman style with neo-Gothic (façade and bell tower) and later used the contemporary Art Deco style (the Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels was held in Paris in 1925). The church boldly expressed the contemporary world and its designs.

There were other factors that pleaded for replacing the vast votive church dedicated to Jeanne d'Arc with a parish church dedicated to Pope Leo the Great (Pope from 440 to 461, Doctor of the Church since 1754): urbanization of the district (allotments along the borders of the Champ de Mars as of 1904) increased the need for a new church; town planning authorities established a requirement for leaving a thoroughfare around church buildings (1924), which reduced the overall surface area; the widow **Mrs. Léon Thelier** offered to finance the nave of the church if it bore the name of the patron saint of her husband; lastly the death, in August 1920, of **Monsignor Léon Arnette**. The archbishop of Paris had played a significant role in the Union sacrée (a political truce in which the left-wing agreed not to oppose the government or call any strikes) and had worked to reconcile the French Republic with the papacy (President Poincaré called his death “a great loss for France”). In 1924, the roadway around the church was given the name Place du Cardinal Arnette and the Place Dupleix was established on land that had previously been used for manoeuvres by the cavalry from the Dupleix barracks. Thus the church building was provided with an attractive clearing that showed it off well and facilitated the celebration of outdoor ceremonies. This was a rare advantage at the time, as the municipal administration, secular and radical, rarely encouraged the visibility of religious buildings. 1st stone: 15 October 1924; 1st Mass: 15 October 1925; the parish was established on 29 October 1926.

ARCHITECTURE

The nave (1924–26) is 16 m (52.5 feet) wide, in concrete; the aisles are open to the nave and choir thanks to the thin, delicate concrete pillars (ceramic cladding); the choir has a high, square cupola forming a canopy; lovely windows supply zenithal lighting; a semi-dome apse (1929); Art Deco style doors on the façade (1932). Concrete, less expensive than stone, can be used to create more airy forms (high wide vaults of limited thickness, openings for windows).

The 54-meter (177 foot) bell tower with its weathercock (1932–33) is a visible landmark (notwithstanding the nearby Eiffel Tower), its shape resembling to top half of a spindle, with 8 convex panels.

Émile Brunet travelled to Amsterdam to study the forms and uses of brick cladding; the Dutch were leaders in the field at that time (Hendrik Petrus Berlage and Michel de Klerk of the Amsterdam architectural school. While there, he saw the building known as *Het Schip* (“the Ship”) that contained apartments for workers. **Michel de Klerk** designed it around 1916–1917. The five-panelled brick spire was perhaps inspired by a similar one on a Copenhagen building that de Klerk had seen, admired, and sketched, or perhaps by the design of Buddhist stupa, Burmese or Indonesian mausoleums (from the Dutch West Indies) as re-imagined in Art Deco style. De Klerk’s spire then inspired the architect of Saint-Léon. The half-spindle shape bears a Christian cross and a cock on the top; around the base, symbols of the four evangelists; inside, the five Paccard bells were blessed on 22 January 1933. The blessing was celebrated like a baptism, with 3,500 sachets of traditional sugared almonds handed out to children. The construction was financed by donations, collections and *Journées d'amitié* (“friends of the church”) days organized as of 1926, and the works were completed around 1935. Then the interior decoration remained to be done, while France and potential donors were hard hit by the crash of 1929 and then the hardship of the Occupation.

DÉCORATION

One of **Émile Brunet**’s great achievements was to harmonize the decoration and the architecture, rather in the way the Amsterdam school of architecture and de Klerk worked with regard to forms and colours. He chose acknowledged masters of what had become known as the Art Deco style (**Raymond Subes**, wrought iron; **Louis Barillet**, main windows; **Auguste Labouret**, mosaics and side windows of the nave; **Henri Bouchard**, sculpture). He designed some of the harmonizing elements himself: hammered iron, copper and cathedral glass chandeliers; altar in Sienna marble; pulpit in marble and hammered iron (removed after Vatican II); blond wood choir seating and confessionals; holy water and baptismal fonts clad in ceramic. The overall style is very harmonious.



BRICK



Brick was commonly used on Paris churches in the first third of the XX Century, as seen on Saint-Jean de Montmartre, Saint-Christophe de Javel, Sainte-Odile, Saint-Antoine de Padoue. The church of Saint-Léon is clad in a variety of well-matched shades (especially Caen brick, which is light yellow, used inside and outside, alternating with orange Dizy brick and pink-coloured brick for the vaults. The ceramic tiles are blue or gold, the brick in the nave is laid in a basket weave bond, the curving lines of the choir loft, the light golden colours – all of these elements bear witness to the influence of the architect's travels in the Netherlands, where brick is so present.

THE MOSAICS

The artist **Auguste Labouret** (1871–1964) is known for mosaic and stained glass works in civil architecture (St. Quentin rail station, royal baths at the Quai d'Orsay for the visit of George VI, etc.) as well as religious buildings (Saint-Ferdinand des Ternes, Sainte-Anne de Beaupré Basilica in Québec, high altar in Sainte-Odile). Mosaic decoration became fashionable with the interior decoration of the Sacré-Cœur of Montmartre, in 1901.

The first to be completed for Saint-Léon were on the façade: Pope Leo, angels, decorative and symbolic designs (1934–35). The mosaics inside the church were created as of 1941 (mostly by Labouret's team, as he himself was working in Quebec). Scenes from the life of the Virgin are found on the semi-dome apse – Lady Chapel – (Evangelists, Coronation of the Virgin with gold relief, Nativity, the Meeting on the road to Golgotha). The apostles are represented above the door. There are scenes from the life of St. Leo on the Triumphal Arch of the choir, including the representation of the Pope stopping Attila at Mantua in 452. Other features worth noting are the 452 shields wielded by Huns, the colour and form of which call to mind Nazi Germany and the swastika. In a similar vein, Hitler's features are said to be recognizable in the face of Herod on a window inaugurated in 1941 in the parish church of Montgeron; on the right hand of Christ at the Last Judgement in Louis Barillet's window (1941–42) in Saint-Anthony of Padua church in Paris XIV, the chosen one resembles Maréchal Pétain.



WROUGHT IRON WORK

The work was done by **Raymond Subes** (1891–1970), the greatest specialist in wrought iron arts (furnishings, railings and banisters for great hotels such as the Lutétia, ships including the Normandie, and for town halls); he used both wrought iron and copper. The openwork altar rails (sheaves of wheat and bunches of grapes) and pulpit (symbols of the Evangelists cut from copper sheets) provide visibility within the sanctuary. Wrought iron is also used on the confessional doors, the chandeliers (some have since disappeared), and the rails of the loft (with angel musicians). Between 1940–44 there was a problem because of the serious metal shortage and the Vichy government's requisition of copper for the German army. The priest often had to hide pieces of the church décor, or claim that they were antique, not new. To make this white lie believable, he would leave the metal items outdoors in the courtyard of the parish house, where they took on a verdigris colour.



THE WINDOWS

Louis Barillet (1880–1948) began the windows in 1928. The artist had already worked with Robert Mallet-Stevens on his Paris houses, the city of Paris pavilion at the 1925 Exposition, and the Villa Noailles. Of Christian faith, he belonged to the Catholic association Artisans de l'autel, but most of his work was for civil architecture. He was one of the craftsmen who revived the art of stained glass in the 20's and 30's, using textured, small format opalescent glass (verre blanc américain). There is a lovely series of ten sets of three windows along the aisles, in white, yellow and blue, with two figures (St. Paul and St. John) and geometric designs alongside symbols of the sacraments (left aisle), symbols inspired by the Gospels and the instruments of the Passion (right aisle). Three narrow windows (lancettes) in the Lady Chapel, neo-Medieval style in red and blue (Mystery of the Rosary) are mismatched with the mosaics and the colour scheme of the church, but they serve to attenuate the sun's morning rays.

The windows high in the nave are from **Auguste Labouret's** workshop (not by his hand). They were made under the Occupation (scarcity of quality materials and financing), and represent French saints (a patriotic and nostalgic response to the political situation); they do not have the artistic quality Louis Barillet's own work.



STATUARY



It is, in particular, the work of **Henri Bouchard** (1875–1960), Prix de Rome laureate, featured artist at the 1925 Exposition de Arts Décoratifs. He created the Virgin and Child in a mandorla, placed in the semi-dome apse in 1931. He sculpted the pediment representing St. Pierre de Chaillot (1932–35) and the seven-meter (23-foot) Apollo at the top of the Esplanade des Droits de l'Homme at the Trocadéro (Universal Exposition of 1937) before accepting various responsibilities under the Occupation. In 1937 the parish commissioned a Way of the Cross in Quilly limestone (based on works existing in other churches in various formats and materials). The work is sculpted directly on the capitals along the aisles; very stylized and pure, with a focus on the faces and hands, but poorly lit.

The sculptor was compromised by his participation in the Weimar Conference organized in October 1941 by Goebbels and Abetz, who invited collaborationist artists and writers from France (Drieu La Rochelle, Brasillach, Abel Bonnard, etc.); he was further disgraced by his declarations favourable to the Nazi regime published upon his return. Notwithstanding, the Piscine Museum of Art Deco sculpture in Roubaix has recreated the artist's studio with more than a thousand plaster models of his work. Open to the public since 2018, its intention is the purely artistic representation of a complete Art Deco studio.

Other statues in Saint-Léon were acquired over time thanks to donations and also, between 1940 and 1944, subsidies from the Vichy administration (administration des Beaux-Arts, an exemption from the 1905 law on the separation of Church and State; we accept the gifts despite the source): Christ of the Sacred Heart, St. Joseph and the Baby Jesus, Our Lady of Lourdes, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, St. Anthony of Padua. All of the sculptures, by Bouchard or other less well-known artists, have a lovely unity of style, in the Art Deco spirit of rigorous stylisation and bold straight lines.



WOOD FURNISHINGS

In light-coloured solid oak, some of the furnishings were designed by the architect Émile Brunet for greater overall harmony: presbytery chairs, benches and confessionals.

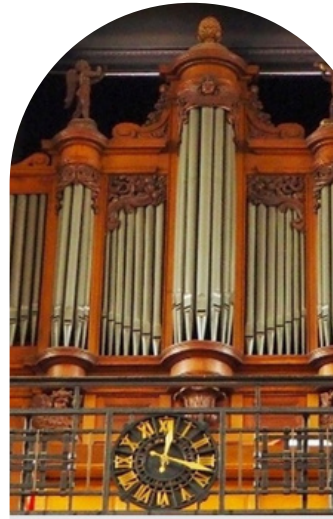
Paul CROIX-MARIE (1875–1973), wood sculptor, specialized in church furniture. He worked at the beginning of the 20th century with a group of other artists, the “Artisans de l’Autel”, composed of Paul Tournon, architect, Gabriel Dufrasne, sculptor, Jacques Le Chevalier, glassmaker and mosaicist. We owe him the confessionals, the choir seats and the stalls, the wooden altar of the chapel of the Virgin, and various crucifixes.



THE ORGAN

The organ was acquired second-hand from the director of Cavallié–Coll in Dôle (but it is not the work of the great organ builder Cavallié–Coll); the instrument is not in the Art Deco style of the church and in addition hides an interesting geometric window by Louis Barillet. It is an example of “poor taste”, rare in this edifice that is otherwise remarkable for its harmonious composition – whether or not one appreciates the architect’s choice of style.

To sum up, this monument is interesting for its perfect functionality, its suitability to welcoming worshipers and their ceremonies, and for its stylistic unity. Art Deco, contemporary to the church’s origin, has lost none of its fresh verve.



Bernard RICHARD for the church of Saint-Léon welcome committee. Sources: L’église Saint-Léon, sa construction et ses aménagements by **Françoise HAMON**, Le Lien, n° hors-série, March 2000 (basic information); Historique de la construction de Saint-Léon by chanoine **Louis MAURY**, priest at Saint-Léon from 1929 to 1963, self-published, 1960; Églises parisiennes du xxe siècle, under the direction of **Simon TEXIER**, Action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1996.



