

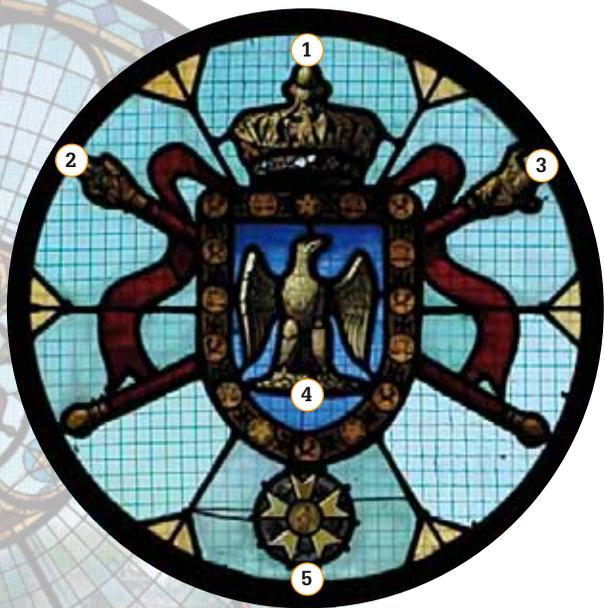
The imperial symbolism

Despite the unfinished state of the church, symbols of its imperial connections are very much in evidence in the building, from the stained-glass windows and choir pavement to the architectural ornamentation.

The coat of arms of Emperor Napoleon III

The coat of arms is visible in the centre of the stained-glass window in the east transept, as well as being sculpted in bas-relief on the vault keystone of the choir apse and on the balustrade of the bell tower on the church exterior. Comprising the imperial crown and mantle (the latter being absent from the transept stained glass however), the sceptre and hand of justice (signs of sovereign authority), the eagle (associated with military victories) and the chain of the Légion d'honneur (an institution created in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte to reward civil and military services rendered to the nation), the coat of arms of the Second Empire adopts the symbols of that created by Napoleon I in 1804.

▼ The coat of arms of Napoleon III in the centre of the rose window in the east wing of the transept.



- 1 Imperial crown
- 2 Hand of justice
- 3 Sceptre
- 4 Eagle
- 5 Chain of the Légion d'honneur

Other imperial symbols

The Emperor's monogram

Alongside the 'E' for Empress Eugenie, the 'N' for Napoleon III can be seen at the centre of the stained-glass window in the west transept. The monogram can also be found on the pavement of the choir, surmounted by the imperial crown and surrounded by bees.



◀ The monogram of the Emperor and Empress at the centre of the rose window in the west transept.

The bee

Symbolising immortality and resurrection, the bee also links the Empire to the origins of France: in 1653, small bees in gold and garnet were found in the tomb of Childeric I, father of Clovis, at Tournai in Belgium. Featuring in both rose windows in the transept where, alternating with stars, they surround the central motif, the bees also figure on the choir pavement, framing the imperial eagle and Napoleon's monogram. They appear as well on a few of the arch keystones (nave side-aisles and east chapel of the choir).



▲ Detail of the choir pavement: Emperor's monogram and imperial crown surrounded by bees.



▲ Detail of the choir pavement: Imperial eagle surrounded by bees.

The contemporary stained glass

Marcellin-Emmanuel Varcollier's overall original plan for the stained glass in Saint Joseph's church is not known. With the exception of the tower, the triforium and the transept rose windows, the church's windows were all once filled with diamond-shaped, plain white glass, most of it surrounded by a blue border. In the 1980s, significant deterioration in the stained glass made restoration essential. In 1985, the intercommune committee responsible for tourism development in the Pontivy area, with the support of the regional body for the conservation of historic monuments, launched an international competition for the design of contemporary stained-glass windows. Sixty-seven responses were received from across Europe. The winning group, comprising artists Patrick Ramette and Catherine Viollet, master glazers Sylvie Gaudin and Gilles Rousvoal, and the studios of Duchemin and Gaudin, created the existing stained glass between 1991 and 1994 on the specific theme of the four elements.

As a result of this work, the church of Saint Joseph in Pontivy today figures among the major historic monuments in France to have contributed to the contemporary renaissance, from the 1980s onwards, of stained-glass art.

The nave side-aisles: Water



▲ A stained-glass window from the west side-aisle of the nave.

(Patrick Ramette, Duchemin Studio)

The fluid, shifting nature of Patrick Ramette's artistry suggests the sun's rays reflected on water. While each window stands alone, the designs and colours of the windows running from east to west along the central section of the nave engage in a cleverly orchestrated dialogue. The presence of inset jewels*, or 'chefs-d'œuvre' as they are called in French, in the medieval tradition demonstrates, if proof were needed, how the techniques of traditional craftsmanship are perfectly compatible with contemporary art.

The clerestory windows in the nave: Air



▲ A clerestory stained-glass window to the upper east side of the nave.

(Gilles Rousvoal, Duchemin Studio)

Less colourful than the previous ones, the stained-glass windows by Gilles Rousvoal seem to melt into the surrounding sky. Grey scallop shapes evoke clouds and sharp-edged yellow lines suggest the rays of the sun. Fragments of blue borders here and there are a reminder of the original stained glass, as well as evoking a cloudless sky. Whilst the windows by Patrick Ramette and Gilles Rousvoal constitute two separate collections of stained glass, they combine to fill the nave with a depiction of gentle, fluent, tranquil movement.

* Inset jewel: A piece of glass fixed in place with lead and set in the middle of another, larger piece of stained glass.

East and west transepts: The Gates of Heaven

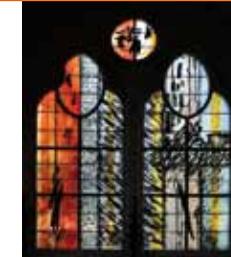


▲ A stained-glass window from the east transept.

(Sylvie Gaudin, Gaudin Studio)

Complete mastery of the way light works on glass and of the techniques available to the stained-glass artist has enabled Sylvie Gaudin to depict the gates as suspended architectural features which luminous rays attempt to penetrate. The obvious similarity between the stained glass in the four Gothic-arch windows heightens the sense of a unified, homogeneous space, a moment's repose before the dazzling stained glass of the choir windows.

The choir chapels: Earth



▲ A chapel stained-glass window on the east side of the choir.

(Sylvie Gaudin, Gaudin Studio)

Stark black scores and brightly coloured flat tints alternate and combine in a succession of apparent bursts of energy and periods of repose, as if evoking the times of adversity and abundance that earthly life can bring. Sylvie Gaudin's delicate artistry is perfectly suited to the relatively limited dimensions of the chapel windows, some of which have a more elaborate outline featuring paired window openings with oculus* above, and to the more intimate nature of these two architectural spaces.

The clerestory windows in the choir: Fire



▲ A stained-glass window from the choir clerestory.

(Catherine Viollet, Gaudin Studio)

The apse window openings are filled with the leaping, rhythmic movement of the flames created by Catherine Viollet. In an explosion of pure colour, the stained-glass windows emphasise the soaring Neo-Gothic architecture and carry the eye upwards to the next world. The orientation of the choir towards the south and the inclusion of the triforium windows in the programme of creative contemporary stained-glass (the only example in the church) magnify the play of light that changes with the hours and days.

* Oculus: A small circular or oval window.



The Church of Saint Joseph



Square Lenglier
rue Jullien
56300 Pontivy

The men behind the building

The Parisian architect, **Marcellin-Emmanuel Varcollier** (1829-1895), recommended by a cousin of Napoleon III, Princess Bacciochi, who had recently settled at Colpo in Morbihan, was chosen to oversee the project, over the head of Mr Marsille, a local architect who had originally been approached. A pupil of Victor Baltard and known today particularly for his architectural works in Paris (the synagogue in the Rue des Tournelles and the town hall of the 18th arrondissement), at the time Varcollier was a young 29-year old architect faced with his first major building project.

Signature of
Marcellin-Emmanuel Varcollier.
AMP, 521.



The architectural sculpture was created by **Joseph Le Goff** (1832-1890), a stonemason-turned-sculptor from Pontivy, who had a rich and varied career. Le Goff worked particularly in Pontivy (Breton-Angevin federation monument) and Sainte-Anne d'Auray (basilica), as well as in Paris (Hôtel de Ville, or city hall, and Sainte-Chapelle restoration), Albi and Auch (cathedral restoration work).



The site initially chosen for the church was to the south-east of its present location. In 1859 however, the Orleans Railway Company sought to secure the land for the railway line and the erection of a station. There was some hesitation before the site for the future church was chosen at the extension of the Rue d'Austerlitz, behind the Hôtel de Ville and Sous-préfecture (town hall and government offices). The traditional orientation* in the first plan was altered and the choir of the present-day church points south.

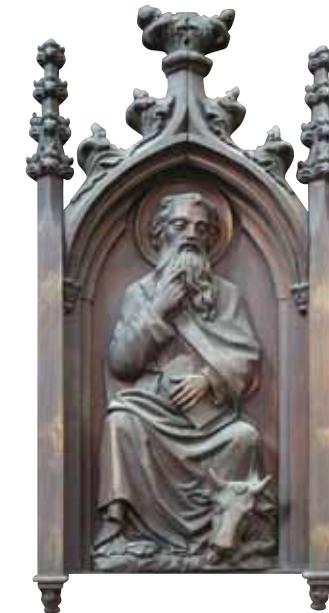
* Orientation: The traditional orientation for a church is with the choir pointing eastwards.

A Neo-Gothic church



◀ Interior elevation of the nave.

The panels for the choir screen, stalls and pulpit were created in the 1870s by Le Brun, a sculptor from Lorient, who is particularly renowned for having carved the wood panelling in the chapel of Notre-Dame de Quelven at Guern in Morbihan.



▶ Saint Luke and the bull, detail from the body of the pulpit.

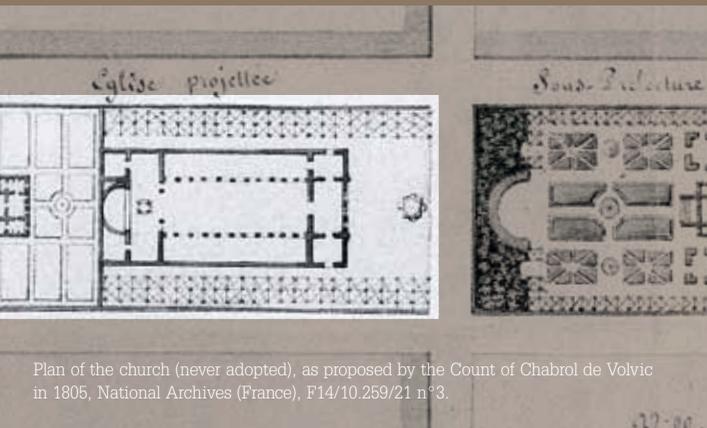


▲ Photograph and watercolour depicting a steeple planned for the bell tower. AMP, 522.

The organ currently installed in the church was built at the beginning of the 20th century for the church at Ermont (Seine-et-Oise) by the Parisian firm Mutin-Cavaillé-Coll. In 1972, the organ was restored and installed in the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Michel de Kergonan at Plouharnel in Morbihan. At the beginning of the 1990s, the abbey nuns wished to dispose of the instrument. At the suggestion of Pontivy town council, the intercommune committee responsible for tourism development in the Pontivy area purchased the organ and it was installed in the church of Saint Joseph.



◀ The Mutin-Cavaillé-Coll organ.



Plan of the church (never adopted), as proposed by the Count of Chabrol de Volvic in 1805, National Archives (France), F14/10.259/21 n°3.

A religious edifice featured on various plans for Pontivy's Napoleonic quarter from the beginning of the 19th century. It was not until the 1860s, however, that a church finally took shape.

In 1853, the church council, known as the 'fabrique'*, highlighted the cramped and decaying conditions of the parish church of Notre-Dame-de-Joie (Our Lady of Joy). But it was discovered that the town's funds were insufficient to remedy the situation.

On 16th August 1858, while on a tour of Brittany accompanied by Empress Eugenie, Napoleon III stopped at Pontivy, which at the time was called Napoleonville. The parish priest, Reverend Le Breton, seized the opportunity to ask the Emperor for a financial contribution towards building a new church.

The Emperor was enthusiastic about the idea and decided to bestow 400 000 francs to cover construction costs. He drew up a list, however, of what he wanted in return: the new church was to be built in the Gothic style, it was to feature an open-work steeple of the type he had seen on his travels in Lower Brittany and it was to be dedicated within two years.



▲ The church in the process of construction. AMP, 523/1.

but it remained unfinished. Final acceptance of the work took place in 1869 and the building was formally handed over to the church council as an 'auxiliary church' of the parish church in 1873. It was dedicated to Saint Joseph on 12th April 1876.

* 'Fabrique': Council of clerics and lay persons at one time responsible for managing the upkeep of parish property.

* Triforium: A series of openings situated above the grand arcades and giving on to the central nave of the church.

* Clerestory: Upper storey, above the triforium, with its own row of windows.

* Gable: A structure, generally triangular in shape, over the top of a window

* Pinnacle: Slender, topmost ornament on a building ending in a pyramidal or cone shape.

* Rubble masonry: Roughly hewn stone that has not yet been shaped or sculptured.