

St-Henri church: a work in progress

It's one of the few Montreal Catholic churches sold to private interests, and the main preoccupation of its buyer is to restore the building in the belief that it will serve as a Catholic place of worship some day.

Montreal art appraiser and auctioneer Igor de Saint Hippolyte and his wife, Martine, bought a St-Henri church in mid-December for \$775,000.

Last month they moved their Sherbrooke Street office, near the Museum of Fine Arts, to buildings at 872 du Couvent, which once housed the parishes of St. Thomas Aquinas and later St-Henri. The three-steeped landmark, familiar

to commuters on the Ville-Marie Expressway, is now the North American headquarters of an art auction house.

But it's more than an art venue, Igor pointed out during an interview Jan. 18. The Russian Orthodox says it's a sacred space from which they receive inspiration and a self-imposed mandate to preserve and restore it for future generations.

Sitting in an 80-year-old oak pew, surrounded by display cases and the discreet movements of polite staff, Igor notes that the revival of the Orthodox faith in Russia began in the 1960s.

"Today in Moscow, we are

restoring old churches and rebuilding ones that have been destroyed," he remarks.

"I think the Church will come back here, just as it has in Russia," he predicts. "Humanity hungers for the pomp and ceremony that mirrors the divine. As soon as we rediscover the symbolism that we've inherited from our Church Fathers, we will rediscover our religious traditions," he says.

"I'm sure that this will be a Catholic church again one day," he adds confidently. "In the meantime, we'll restore it."

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(Photo: DONATO)

Igor de Saint Hippolyte examines an oil painting that was to be auctioned Jan. 25 in the former St-Henri church, once the home of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish. The new owners call themselves "custodians of a sacred site."

Art and faith: new role for old St. Thomas

The last of four churches that were closed in St-Henri four years ago has been sold.

The church of St. Thomas Aquinas, which housed St-Henri Parish for the last 30 years, was sold to Igor and Martine Saint Hippolyte in mid-December. The building, located at the corner of du Couvent and St. Antoine streets, reopened last month as the *Nouvel Hôtel des Encans de Montréal*, an art and antique auction house.

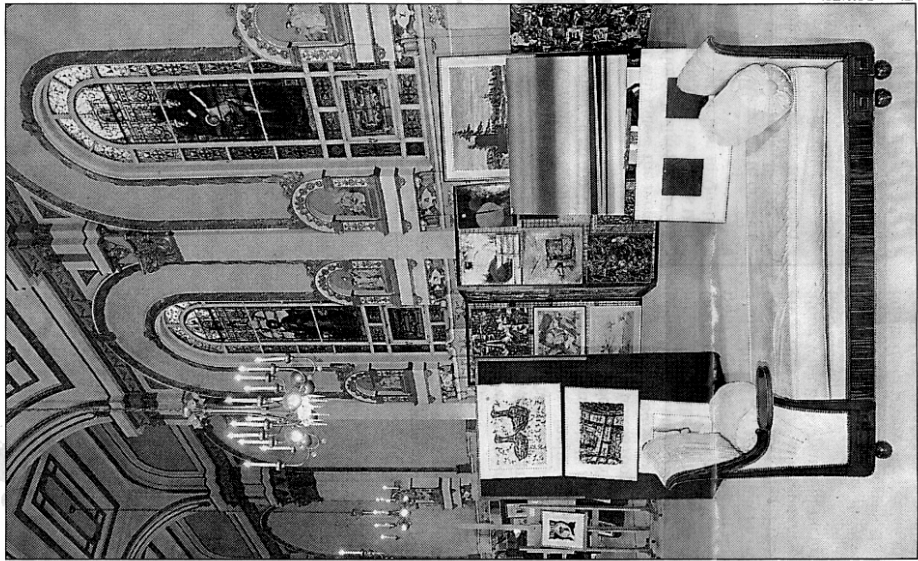
It's only the second church property sold to private interests in the last decade, Bishop Anthony Mancini pointed out during an interview Jan. 18. The vicar-general for the Archdiocese of Montréal underlined that the sale means the patrimony of two parishes will be preserved, even though the building "no longer functions as a Catholic church."

PATRIMONY PRESERVED

The new owners "have promised to maintain the ambience of the church and to preserve the religious artifacts therein," Mancini said. The archdiocese agreed to the sale because it was one way "to guarantee that the patrimonial features of the building would be preserved," he said. "The building retains its historical presence in the area, allowing the history [of two parishes] associated with that building to be acknowledged publicly," he explained.

The building, completed in 1924, was the second church built by the parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas. The English-language community worshipped there until 1972. The small congregation then sold the building to St-Henri Parish, whose historic church had been expropriated several years earlier to make way for a comprehensive high school.

In the deed of sale, the archdiocese retains ownership of the 10 stained-glass windows, which remain in place, and of the removable religious artifacts. The new owners have agreed not to make any major change to the exterior of the former parish church without consulting the archdiocese.



'DIVAN VIEW' of art and antiques set up on the spacious floor that once served the parishes of St. Thomas Aquinas and St-Henri. The new owners will preserve the building as 'a sacred site,' while operating an art and antique establishment.

Orthodox chapel, dedicated to St. Andrew.

Igor was raised Russian Orthodox but was taught by French Jesuits. His wife, Martine, is Roman Catholic. Their wedding incorporated rituals from both traditions, and he talks confidently of the one, holy, Catholic Church that includes both Roman and Orthodox expressions.

The Saint Hippolyte family has maintained a private Orthodox chapel wherever the family has resided. When the aristocratic

he'd be "very disappointed" if religious events did not take place in the building. The original oak pews remain stored in various places, ready to be set up for such occasions.

When the property was rezoned for commercial and residential use, the couple insisted that the provision to conduct religious services be maintained.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Only religious events that have been authorized by recognized religious authorities, such as the local bishop, will be held at the site, he said. Other events can take place — such as concerts, exchange of promises, memorial services — but they cannot be promoted as a religious service, he underlined.

Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis regarding which special events are held there. His abiding concern in making such decisions is "to respect the special character of the building and, by consequence, the reputation of the company."

The former church rectory will become the Saint Hippolytes' residence and administrative centre. The couple also acquired the rear property, which housed St. Thomas Aquinas Parish until the parish closed in 1988 and which is currently occupied by Birthright.

The archdiocese is assisting Birthright in finding a new location," Mancini said. The pregnancy-assistance agency will relocate by the end of June. Funds from the sale of the property go into a restricted archdiocesan fund that is used to help parishes in need.

Auctions at the *Nouvel Hôtel* are held monthly, and the public can drop by weekdays, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., to visit the building or view the lots for auction. The inaugural auctions featured art and antiques Jan. 25 and Russian art (1890-1950) Jan. 26. In line with the spirit of the sale, the only art displayed on the sanctuary floor was an oil canvas of the Virgin and Child by renowned 19th-century Quebec painter Théophile Hamel.

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family immigrated to France after the Russian Revolution, they received permission to set up a chapel there. Igor now considers this the right place and time to seek permission from the Orthodox patriarchate to establish a family chapel in Montréal.

The art appraiser, who had worked with Drouot — France's largest auction house — talks as readily about faith and ecumenism as he does about art and antiques. For the 57-year-old, they're interrelated. That's why

(Photo: DONATO)