

14 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Self

oil on canvas, signed and on verso signed,
titled, dated 1959, inscribed 3906 and 1773
and stamped indistinctly
51 x 38 in, 129.5 x 96.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Jacques Dubourg, Paris
Galerie Ariel, Paris
Private Collection, Montreal
By descent to a Private Collection, USA
Canadian Post-War & Contemporary Art, Heffel Fine Art
Auction House, November 19, 2008, lot 28
Acquired from the above by an Important Private Collection,
Montreal

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,
online addendum to *Volume 2, 1954 – 1959*, 2004,
<http://www.riopelle.ca>
Michel Martin et al., *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*,
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2017,
reproduced page 58

EXHIBITED

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City,
Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation, October 12, 2017 –
January 7, 2018, traveling in 2018 – 2019 to the Art Gallery
of Ontario, Toronto, and Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc,
Landerneau, France, catalogue #19

ESSAY BY FRANÇOIS-MARC GAGNON

WE ALL KNOW the face of Jean Paul Riopelle. He has been photographed so many times: as a child, as a young man sure of himself, as a mature artist and as an old man, disheveled and pointing his finger, with a glass of wine in front of him. However, there are very few self-portraits by Riopelle. In fact, we know of only three: a 1945 work on paper often reproduced; another one, also on paper, from 1989; and this one, the only one on canvas, discovered in a private collection and dated 1959. Of the three, this is the most disquieting, the most extraordinary and the most fascinating.

A face reveals itself in the apparent disorder of the painting after a few moments of contemplation, even better discerned with half-closed eyes. From the oval of the face on a white background,

two eyes—too close-set—look in our direction. A nose, a chin and, on the left, a part of the contour of the head can be made out. But at the same time, all this seems to have been slashed by long strokes of white, red and brown, as if the painter tried to conceal what he revealed, negate what he expressed, maybe repressed what he became aware of in a kind of rage. Only in the 1973 series *Les rois de Thulé* will one find in Riopelle's oeuvre the same intensity when considering the human face, or the same erasure of the features of the face.

Self-portraits by a painter are always important, especially when they are as rare as in Riopelle's case. In Riopelle's oeuvre, one feels a constant need to reaffirm the self, to awaken the consciousness in the very act of painting, perhaps because he himself felt threatened. Monique Brunet-Weinmann has revealed that, on November 8, 1930, when Riopelle was seven years old, his younger brother Pierre died.¹ We cannot fathom the meaning of such a traumatic experience at this early age. Suffice it to say that Riopelle had to confront death, this great reaper of the self, very early in his life.

Let us bring our attention now to an aspect of his apprenticeship as a painter when, while still an adolescent, he took lessons from Henri Bisson. "We wanted to copy Nature," Riopelle said of that period. In the end, their paintings looked so much alike that it was impossible to know who did what, as if the process of immersing themselves in the motif had erased from each of them their individual subjectivity. Later, after his registration at l'École du meuble, Riopelle worked with Marcel Barbeau and Jean-Paul Mousseau in the studio of the former. There, he experimented with Automatism and abstraction for the first time. In addition, he suggested that they should intervene in each other's paintings as if, again, one could ignore the personality—or even the unconscious—of each individual. Needless to say, not many examples of such collaborative works exist!

How troubling, then, is this sudden affirmation of the self at the end of the fifties, a formidable decade of production and of recognition of his importance to the art scene, both in Paris and New York. Not only did Riopelle not paint a triumphal image of himself, he rather did the opposite, producing in *Self* a tormented, desperate image. One feels the struggle between the affirmation and the negation, the building up and the deconstruction. In short, we have here a great self-portrait of the twentieth century and the most intimate portrait that Riopelle ever did.

We thank the late François-Marc Gagnon of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, Concordia University, for contributing the above essay in 2008.

1. Monique Brunet-Weinmann et al., *Jean-Paul Riopelle: des visions d'Amérique* (Montreal: Les Éditions de l'Homme, 1997), 12.





ESSAY BY MICHEL MARTIN

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE was a member of the Montreal artist group known as Les Automatistes and signed on to its *Refus global* manifesto in 1948. Soon after, Riopelle moved to Paris, where he pursued a prominent career, particularly among European artists associated with Lyrical Abstraction, a term encompassing the new abstract practices emanating from the Paris School in the 1950s. Against this backdrop of cultural emulation, a community of American artists also came to Paris to study, hone their skills, or simply immerse themselves more deeply in French existentialism. After forging a deep friendship with Californian Sam Francis, Riopelle became particularly close to American painters, sculptors and literary figures, mainly from the East Coast. Riopelle met Joan Mitchell, a young American painter associated with New York Abstract Expressionism, at a party in the summer of 1955. The two artists soon embarked on a stormy affair that lasted until they broke up in 1979.

Their first years as a couple were intense, both personally and professionally. Riopelle and Mitchell admired each other's work, and signs of this mutual influence became more or less evident in each artist's approach. Riopelle made no secret of this fact in his letters to Mitchell, who continued to spend much of the year in New York. "I'm in the studio and I've been experimenting with gouache. I don't know if it worked, but I'm happier because all these big three-by-three-foot gouaches look like your paintings, my love," he writes.¹ Of course, echoes of all this gouache or oil-on-paper work, which Riopelle admits is perfectly aligned with Mitchell's production at that time, also resonate in his painting, leveraging the dualistic efficiency of the white field in both background and foreground so as to thwart any possible perception of spatial depth.

Although *Self* was painted in 1959, practically on the heels of Riopelle's latest experiments, it still appears enigmatic, like an aside in the painter's artistic journey. Almost 15 years after the first self-portrait in ink on paper glued to cardboard, with its Cubist-influenced modeling, this new self-referential work (if its unequivocal title is anything to go by) seems to reaffirm his incisive, expressive way of painting with a spatula, enriched by a heightened attention to the relationship between form and space. Like Mitchell, Riopelle exploits the impact of the luminous whitish environment in showcasing the broad yet very dense mass of colour, which he sets off with an imposing "lattice" that skews down and to the right, seemingly as the crux around which this possibly portrait-like composition unfolds.

During this period, in addition to his painting, Riopelle returned to sculptural work, a discipline he had briefly practised in his Automatist years. In this favourable setting, *Self* subtly addresses the flexible boundary justifying Riopelle's free passage



Jean Paul Riopelle, 1965
Photo: Yousuf Karsh
© Estate of Yousuf Karsh

back and forth between the abstract and the figurative. In this regard, the artist has always refuted the abstract/figurative dialectic, the question of reference being for him more a matter of vision, or even interpretation. Fully embracing this openness, Riopelle would go on to constantly play on both sides of the divide, with equal virtuosity—whatever his preferred medium, be it painting, sculpture, engraving, etc.—right up to his final works, identified particularly by an ever-present goose.

We thank Michel Martin for contributing the above essay, translated from the French. Martin is a former curator of contemporary art at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (1978–2008) and was curator of the exhibition *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*, organized by the MNBAQ in 2017.

1. Jean Paul Riopelle to Joan Mitchell, January 10, 1956, Mitchell archives at the Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York.

This work is accompanied by a photograph certificate of authenticity (#268-CA-MH) from Yseult Riopelle and is included as an addendum to Volume 2 in the online catalogue raisonné of the artist's work at <http://www.riopelle.ca>.

ESTIMATE: \$600,000 – 800,000