



### 35 Paul-Émile Borduas

AUTO CAS QMG RCA 1905 – 1960

#### Miniatures empesées

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled and dated 1955 on the artist and exhibition labels, inscribed *Laing-4* and *H* twice, numbered #1455 and #2000 and stamped Douane Centrale

57 ¼ × 44 ¾ in, 145.4 × 113.7 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by Laing Galleries, Toronto, October 20, 1958

Private Collection, Toronto, 1959

By descent to the present Private Collection, Toronto

#### LITERATURE

*One Hundred Years of Canadian Painting: A Loan Exhibition*, Laing Galleries, 1959, reproduced page 25

François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre*, 1978, listed pages 454, 502 and 533

Karen Wilkin, *The Automatists: Then and Now*, Galerie Dresdnere, 1986, reproduced page 52

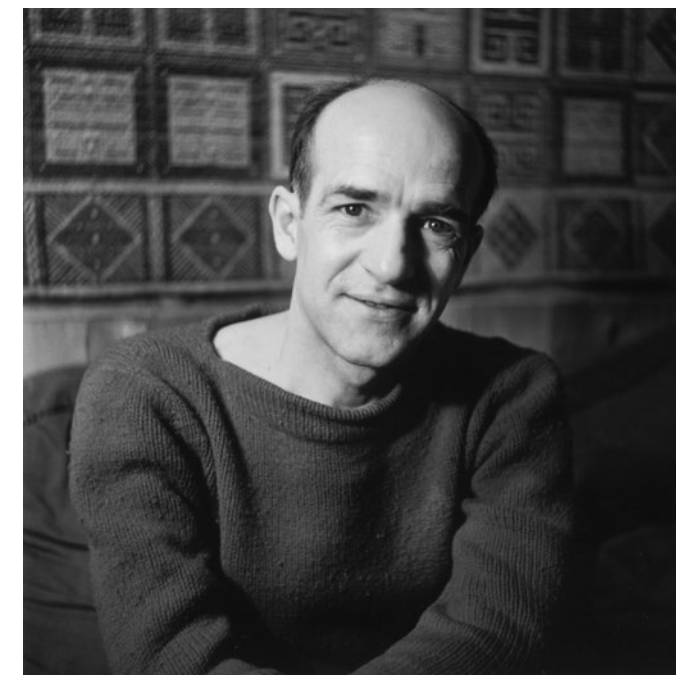
François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography*, 2013, listed page 448

*Borduas Online Catalogue Raisonné*, Concordia University Fine Arts, catalogue #2005-1182, <https://borduas.concordia.ca/catalog>

#### EXHIBITED

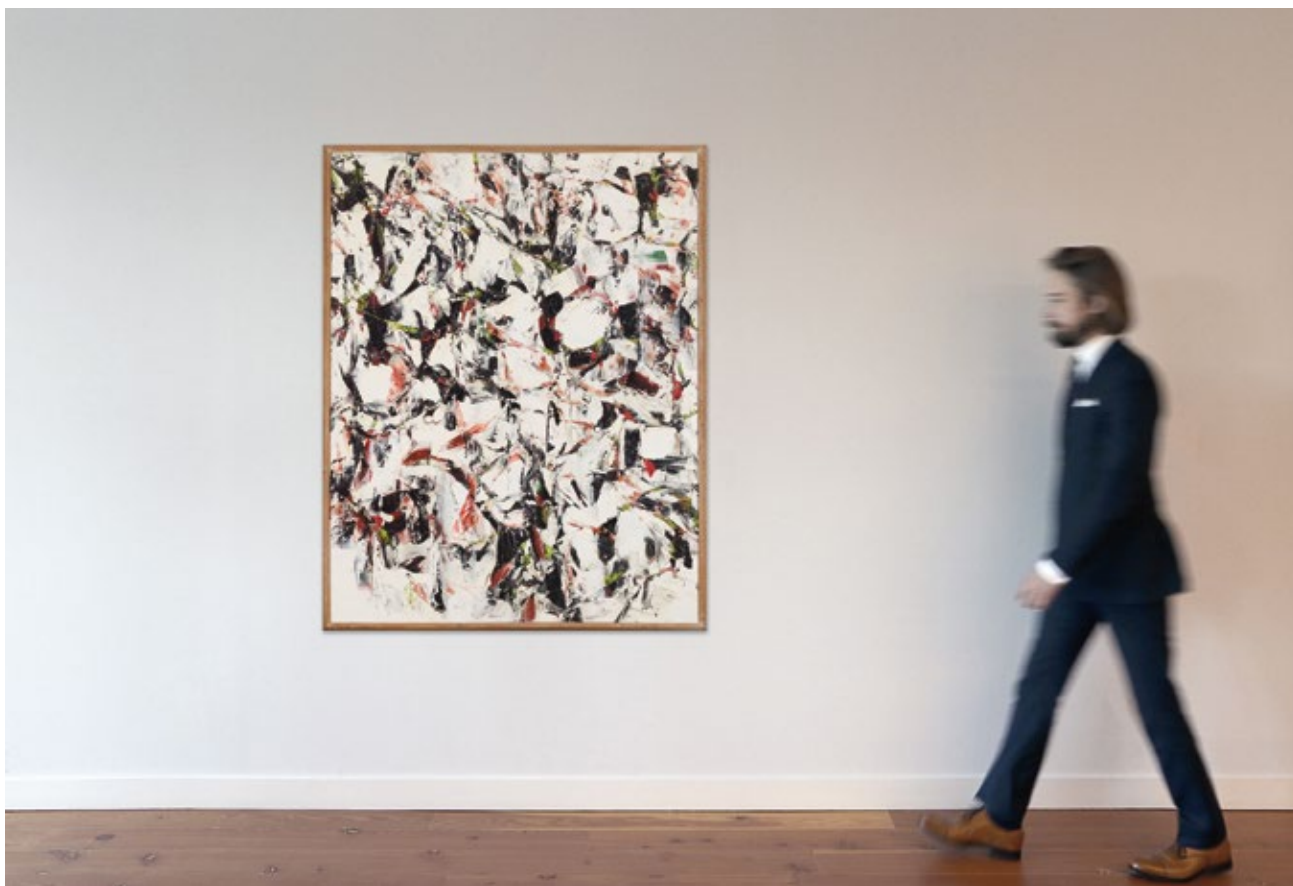
Laing Galleries, Toronto, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Painting: A Loan Exhibition*, January 27 – February 8, 1959, catalogue #37

Galerie Dresdnere, Toronto, *The Automatists: Then and Now*, May 1 – 21, 1986, catalogue #4



Portrait of Paul-Émile Borduas in his Saint-Hilaire studio, 1951  
Photo: Maurice Perron  
Collection of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec  
Courtesy of Line-Sylvie Perron





IN 1958, PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS had been living in Paris for three years. Being in the “City of Light” put him in the path of many Canadian art dealers, who regularly stopped by his Rue Rousselet studio. In the summer of 1958, however, he learned that Max Stern, of Montreal’s Dominion Gallery, would be busy with additions back home and could not make it to Paris. Fortunately for Borduas, Stern’s place was then filled by Toronto gallerist G. Blair Laing, who appeared at his door a few weeks later.

Laing, an enthusiastic promoter of James Wilson Morrice and the Group of Seven, had been visiting Borduas regularly since 1954, when he had first come across Borduas’s work in New York City. Although generally indifferent to non-figurative art, Laing was utterly floored by the exiled painter’s works, in which “classically ordered” forms, he wrote, “seemed to float majestically on the surface of the canvas.”<sup>11</sup> In his *Memoirs of an Art Dealer*, he describes Borduas, the one-time Automatist master, gloomy and in the twilight of his life. “A curious aura of both pride and pathos surrounded this tiny figure of a man,” he writes. “Yet in all he was a delightful person, possessed of great Gallic charm, and we became good friends.”<sup>12</sup> And so it was that in 1958 Laing acquired *Miniatures empressees* (Bustling Miniatures), along with seven other canvases, on particularly favourable terms.<sup>3</sup> They were shipped off to Canada a week later.

The sale not only enabled Borduas to meet his immediate financial needs; it also gave him something with which to reassure Martha Jackson, his New York gallerist, who, struggling to move his paintings, had complained of having nothing to promote them with. Fed up, Borduas could no longer contain himself. “In Canada, I’m as famous as Picasso could be,” he wrote in late 1957, “but you promote me as a painter nobody has ever heard of.”<sup>4</sup> She took that personally. “If you are the Picasso of Canada,” she wrote back, “where are the [buyers]? Why don’t they come here to buy paintings from me?”<sup>5</sup> Now, with Laing’s big purchase under his belt, Borduas had something to tell his New York dealer. “I’ve sold a lot since your visit to the studio,” he wrote, perhaps a little smugly. “I only have six or seven New York canvases left. Selling eight pictures<sup>6</sup> this week has me a little panicked and I have had to review my prices—at least for the NY period—perhaps even take them right off the market, as I did earlier with my Saint-Hilaire paintings.”<sup>7</sup>

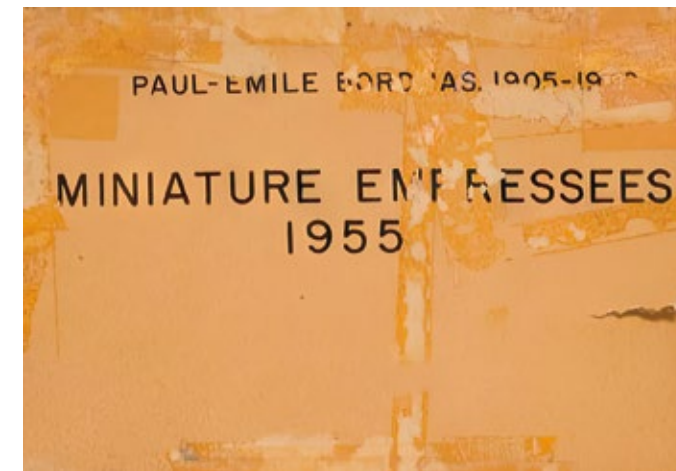
He was back at it a few weeks later. “I told you previously that I had only a few pieces from that period left,” he wrote. “They are highly sought after in Canada. In two or three years they will be rarities. In fairness, I should get something out of that. To date I have hardly been spoiled by excess profits!”<sup>8</sup> “I would pay more promptly,” Jackson wrote in a gently mocking tone, enclosed with a cheque he had requested, “if we could sell anything.”<sup>9</sup> Scarcely

two months later, Laing, benefiting from outstanding terms of sale, acquired six more of Borduas’s paintings. Looking back on it all in the second volume of his memoirs, he was pleased to have been able to support Borduas during the artist’s critical post-*Refus global* period in France. “He was,” writes Laing, “one of the few abstract artists whose work I really liked and struck a chord within me. Over the next four years we bought so many paintings from Borduas that we probably were the main source of his livelihood.”<sup>10</sup>

Laing may have been a bit hasty in dismissing the energetic competition for those works put up by the Dominion Gallery and collectors Gisèle and Gérard Lortie. In any case, Laing kept on scooping up Borduas’s paintings at fire-sale prices for a while after Borduas’s death, shuttling between Arthur Tooth & Sons in London and the Martha Jackson Gallery, where he acquired four of the artist’s major works. As Borduas had foreseen, Laing was onto something, as the demand for the New York-period works kept growing as the years went by.

*Miniatures empressees* shows signs of Borduas’s recent encounter with American painting. The dichotomy between object and ground in his Automatist paintings is undermined. *Miniatures empressees* is part of that period of renewal in which objects are no longer suspended against a ground of infinite extension. It is painted in what is known as the all-over style, without hierarchy or focus on a particular subject or spot of paint. As in many of the works painted towards the end of his time in New York City, white has lost the quality of ground and has been moved up front. Although it dominates the surface, there are the quick dabs of green and red here and there contributing material and textural effects, “bustling” (*empressees*) shapes painted vigorously with the palette knife, as the title suggests.

Borduas, we know, assigned titles to his works only after their completion, and the term *Miniature* may well allude to the delicacy of the pictorial signs (like the hand-painted miniatures of olden times). Among the formal data structuring the composition, the blacks too are notable, seeming to open up holes in the pictorial surface. Asked about the move away from colour in an interview with Judith Jasmin on May 2, 1957, Borduas said that it “had occurred gradually on the way to a greater efficacy, a greater visibility, a greater objectivity of contrast.”<sup>11</sup> The black’s function is to accentuate those contrasts, and like some of the other paintings from his New York period, *Miniatures empressees* prefigures, in the underlying plastic tension of black and white, the new order of composition that Borduas was going to pursue in the future. Before the so-called cosmic blacks and whites of his Parisian period, Borduas takes a summary look back at some of the formal concerns he would refine and explore in greater depth in his Paris years. From a technical perspective, *Miniatures empressees* is magnificently wrought and exudes that sense of heightened reality that Borduas sought to infuse into his works. It can be no accident that after his latest transaction with Laing, Borduas alerted Jackson to the complete transformation his style had undergone. “A new wave has begun,” he wrote, “stricter, more mysterious, it is coming! Nothing more is left of tachism, of action painting, for me.”<sup>12</sup> For Borduas there was no going back. A decisive step had been taken.



Artist's label on verso

We thank Gilles Lapointe, associate professor in the Department of Art History at the Université du Québec à Montréal and author of several publications dedicated to Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatist movement, for contributing the above essay, translated from the French.

1. Gilbert Blair Laing, *Memoirs of an Art Dealer* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 212.
2. *Ibid.*, 213.
3. Laing explained that, because he had acquired more than six paintings, Borduas gave him a volume discount of 60 per cent off the regular price.
4. Borduas to Martha K. Jackson, December 3, 1957, in Paul-Émile Borduas, *Écrits II*, vol. 2, 1954-1960, ed. André-G. Bourassa and Gilles Lapointe (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1997), 951.
5. Jackson to Borduas, December 8, 1957, Borduas archive, T.204, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.
6. They were *Gris sonores*, *La Naissance d'un étang*, *Libellules égarées*, *Miniatures empressees*, *Souriante*, *Réunion continue*, *Ronde éveillée* and *Légers vestiges d'automne*.
7. Borduas to Jackson, October 24, 1958, in Borduas, *Écrits II*, 1016-17.
8. Borduas to Jackson, November 8, 1958, in Borduas, *Écrits II*, 1021-22.
9. Jackson to Borduas, March 7, 1959, Borduas archive, T.204, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.
10. Gilbert Blair Laing, *Memoirs of an Art Dealer 2* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), 200.
11. Radio-Canada interview broadcast May 2, 1957, in Paul-Émile Borduas, *Écrits I*, ed. André-G. Bourassa, Jean Fisette, and Gilles Lapointe (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), 632.
12. Borduas to Jackson, October 24, 1958, in Borduas, *Écrits II*, 1016.

ESTIMATE: \$900,000 – 1,200,000