



## 18 Paul-Émile Borduas

AUTO CAS QMG RCA 1905 – 1960

### Figures schématiques

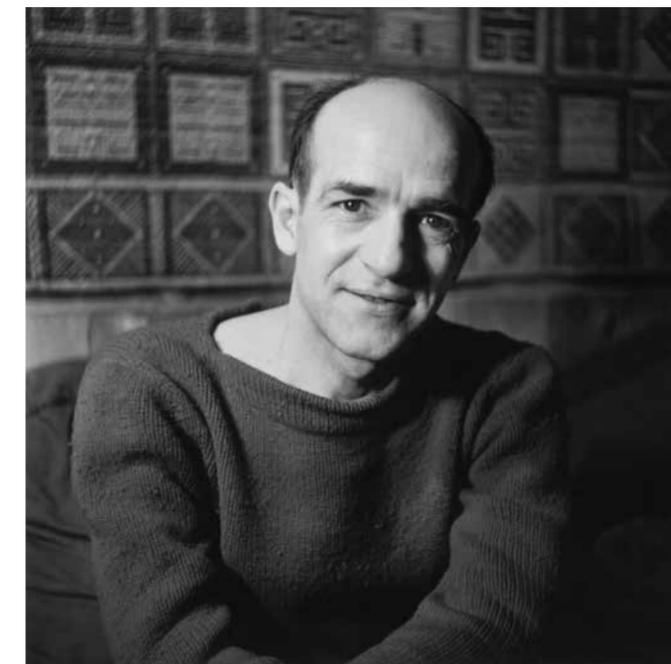
oil on canvas, signed and dated 1956 and on verso titled on the Martha Jackson Gallery label with Inventory #1911 and inscribed *MJG #1911* on the stretcher and *Dr. Mailhot* on a label  
51 1/8 x 76 7/8 in, 129.9 x 195.3 cm

#### PROVENANCE

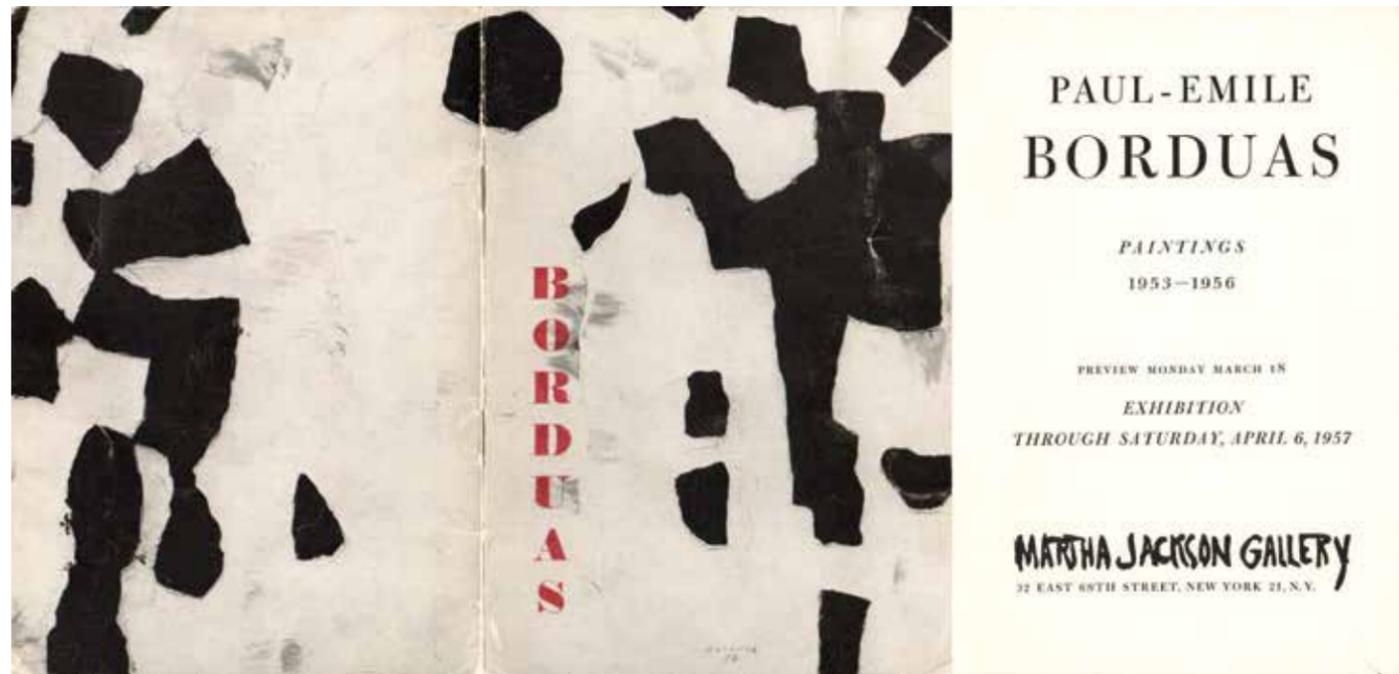
Acquired directly from the Artist by  
Martha Jackson Gallery, New York  
Gallery Moos Ltd., Toronto  
Dr. Paul Mailhot, Montreal  
Private Collection, Montreal

#### LITERATURE

Martha Jackson, *Paul-Émile Borduas: Paintings 1953 – 1956*, Martha Jackson Gallery, 1957, reproduced front cover  
Guy Gagnon, “À la galerie Martha Jackson, de New-York. Exposition consacrée au peintre canadien Borduas. Des toiles de Montréal, New York et Paris,” *Le Clairon* (Saint-Hyacinthe), March 21, 1957  
“Paul-Émile Borduas expose à New-York,” *Le Devoir*, Montreal, March 25, 1957  
*Arte canadiense*, National Gallery of Canada, 1960, titled as *Figuras esquematicas*  
Robert Élie, Jean Éthier-Blais and Louis Jaque, “Hommage à Paul-Émile Borduas,” *Vie des arts*, no. 19, summer 1960, mentioned page 31, reproduced page 30  
Willem Sandberg, *Borduas 1905 – 1960*, Stedelijk Museum, 1960, reproduced  
Jean-René Ostiguy, “Un critère pour juger l’oeuvre de Borduas,” *Bulletin de la Galerie nationale du Canada / The National Gallery Bulletin*, no. 10, May 1, 1963, pages 14 and 15  
Evan H. Turner and Truman H. Brackett, *Paul-Émile Borduas 1905 – 1960: A Loan Exhibition*, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College, 1967, reproduced figure 6  
Bernard Teyssède, “Borduas: Sous le vent de l’île,” *Bulletin de la Galerie nationale*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1968, pages 22 – 31, reproduced  
Jean-René Ostiguy, *Un siècle de peinture canadienne: 1870 – 1970*, 1971, page 49  
Paul Duval, *Four Decades: The Canadian Group of Painters and Their Contemporaries, 1930 – 1970*, 1972, reproduced page 104  
Gilles Toupin, “L’art québécois pris sur le vif,” *La Presse*, July 3, 1976, page D-18  
François-Marc Gagnon, *Borduas and America / Borduas et l’Amérique*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1977, mentioned pages 20, 23 and 43  
François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas (1905 – 1960): Biographie critique et analyse de l’oeuvre*, 1978, pages 410, 411, 414, 497, 503 and 531, reproduced as figure 109  
François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas*, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1988, page 380  
François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, pages 400, 402 and 403



Portrait de Paul-Émile Borduas dans son atelier de Saint-Hilaire (Portrait of Paul-Émile Borduas in his Saint-Hilaire studio), 1951  
Silver print, Rolleicord  
Photo: Maurice Perron  
Collection of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, courtesy of Line-Sylvie Perron



detail

#### EXHIBITED

Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, *Paul-Émile Borduas: Paintings 1953-1956*, March 18 - April 6, 1957, catalogue #8  
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Troisième exposition biennale d'art canadien / The Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art*, 1959, May - June 1959, traveling in 1959-1960 to the Elsie Perrin Memorial Art Museum, London; Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; London Public Library and Art Museum; École des beaux-arts, Montreal; Edmonton Art Gallery; Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina; Calgary Allied Arts Centre; Vancouver Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; Musée de la province de Québec, Quebec City; and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton  
 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, *Borduas 1905-1960*, December 22, 1960 - January 30, 1961  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Moderna, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, *Arte canadiense*, November 22, 1960 - February 1961, titled as *Figuras esquematicas*, catalogue #144  
 Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, *Paul-Émile Borduas 1905-1960: A Loan Exhibition*, January 6 - 29, 1967, traveling to the Jaffe-Friede Gallery, Dartmouth College, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hanover, February 3 - March 5, catalogue #20  
 Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, *Trois générations d'art québécois: 1940 / 1950 / 1960*, June 30 - September 1, 1976, catalogue #27

Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, *Paul-Émile Borduas*, May 6 - August 7, 1988, catalogue #115

IN 1956, PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS was living in Paris at 19 rue Rousselet, where he had been since September 27, 1955. He had an intense period of production a few months after his arrival in Paris, so 1956 was a great year in that respect. On November 28, 1956, Borduas wrote to his friends Gisèle and Gérard Lortie:

Did I mention that everything painted after your visit was purchased by the Martha Jackson Gallery of New York, in early September? This is by far and away my most important sale. She will be having a show in April. This show will be fateful: I'm full of anxiety or hope as my health determines. I promise to keep you up on whatever might happen...

In this letter, Borduas is referring first to the visit of the Lorties that took place in August of 1956. At this time they bought six paintings: *La Grimpée*, 3+3+4, *Vent d'hiver*, *Jeunesse*, *Signes suspendus* and *Ramage*, all recent works (dated 1956). The paintings were shipped to the Lorties on August 28. Borduas then refers to a visit by Martha Jackson that happened soon after, on September 5, 1956, when she bought nine of his most recent works: 3+4+1, *Figures schématiques*, *Froufrou aigu*, 3+3+2, *Vigilance grise*, *Le chant des libellules*, *La bouée*, *Clapotis blanc et rose* and *La boucle couronnée*,

all of them dated 1956. They were shipped soon after this visit, on September 17. We have to conclude that they were painted in a very short time, between these two visits. It is rare that we can date a painting so accurately. *Figures schématiques* is, after 3+4+1, the biggest canvas of the series.

The show mentioned by Borduas was titled *Paul-Émile Borduas: Paintings 1953-1956*, and took place from March 18 to April 6, 1957. Fifteen paintings were exhibited, among which *Figures schématiques* was number 8. On the back of the painting is a label from the Martha Jackson Gallery, indicating that the gallery was situated at 22 E. 66th St. This was the first address of the gallery, which had opened in the fall of 1953. Three years later, the gallery would move to 32 E. 69th St., and Borduas would also exhibit at this location. Borduas and Martha Jackson considered *Figures schématiques* to be especially attractive, since it was reproduced on the cover of the catalogue, which was published with a preface by the gallery owner.

Subsequently, *Figures schématiques* was acquired by Gallery Moos, Toronto, and then sold to Dr. Paul Mailhot, an important Borduas collector in Montreal (his name appears on a label on the back of the painting).

Borduas's spring 1957 exhibition in New York was well received. Carlyle Burrows published an article in the *New York Herald Tribune* on March 24, 1957, entitled "Art: Native and Foreign Features"; Stuart Preston, a more important critic, wrote "Gallery Variety," which appeared in the *New York Times*,

March 24, 1957; and two short mentions were published in *ARTnews* (New York) in April and May. The exhibition was also mentioned in the Quebec press: *La Patrie*, March 21; *Le Devoir*, March 25; and *France-Amérique*, March 31, 1957.

*Figures schématiques* was shown extensively. First, it appeared in *The Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art*, 1959, organized by the National Gallery of Canada, and traveled all over Canada (Kingston, London, Montreal, Edmonton, Regina, Calgary, Vancouver, Victoria, Quebec and Fredericton). Shortly after Borduas's death, the work was exhibited in Amsterdam, at the Stedelijk Museum, from December 22, 1960, to January 30, 1961, in the retrospective organized by Willem Sandberg, director of the museum from 1943 to 1963. It is reproduced in black and white in the catalogue.

Due to the initiative of the National Gallery in Ottawa, when Charles Comfort was director, *Figures schématiques* was included in the group show *Arte canadiense*, at the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderna, Instituto de Bellas Artes in Mexico, from November 22, 1960 to February 1961, under the title *Figuras esquematicas* (#144 in the catalogue, which was published with a text by R.H. Hubbard, a devoted and early admirer of Borduas's painting).

Following that exhibition, our painting was included in two exhibitions in 1967 in New Hampshire titled *Paul-Émile Borduas 1905-1960*, at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, and at the Jaffe-Friede Gallery, Dartmouth College, Hopkins Center for the Arts, in Hanover. Evan H. Turner, who was then the director



of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, sponsored this project and authored the catalogue published on that occasion.

Our painting was then shown in Montreal, first at the Musée d'art contemporain in 1976, in an exhibition titled *Trois générations d'art québécois: 1940 / 1950 / 1960*, and then I included it in the big Borduas retrospective in the summer of 1988 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (#115 in the catalogue).

*Figures schématiques* is a remarkable painting, and it is interesting to compare it to two important paintings of the period: *Expansion rayonnante*, 1956 (in the collection of the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal), which preceded it, and *3+4+1*, also from 1956 (in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada), which followed it. In *Expansion rayonnante*, the black shapes are well contained in the area of the painting—none of them touch the edges of the painting. In comparison, *Figures schématiques* makes a resolute attempt to use the space afforded by the canvas's lateral edges. The left side is invaded by black shapes that appear to enter from outside. On the right side, in contrast, the black shapes appear to be exiting the pictorial area. Between the two sides is

a broad area of white. One of the consequences of this arrangement is that it is not possible to read the black “figures” as shapes on a white background, as we are constrained to do in *Expansion rayonnante*, but rather we read them as shapes moving with the white and respecting the flatness of the painting. It is the critic Clement Greenberg who defined flatness, or bi-dimensionality, as specific to painting and tri-dimensionality as specific to sculpture. Any attempt to create the illusion of depth by perspective, by superposition or otherwise was condemned by Greenberg as inauthentic. It could be said that *Figures schématiques* conformed to his dictate.

In *3+4+1*, Borduas is attracted again by the periphery of the canvas, but not in a symmetrical system, as in *Figures schématiques*. The black shapes suggest a more circular approach to every side, not only to the left and right sides, as in *Figures schématiques*. The title *3+4+1* provides us with a key in how to read the painting: first the three big shapes along a broad curve in the centre, then the four shapes in the bottom left corner, and finally the little patch on the opposite upper corner. In comparison, the reading



OPPOSITE:  
**PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS**  
**3 + 4 + 1**  
 oil on canvas, 1956  
 78 3/4 x 98 3/4 in, 199.8 x 250 cm  
 Collection of the National Gallery of Canada  
 Purchased in 1962

Not for sale with this lot

THIS PAGE:  
**PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS**  
**Expansion rayonnante**  
 oil on canvas, 1956  
 45 1/2 x 35 in, 115.7 x 89 cm  
 Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1978.22  
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Max Stern

Not for sale with this lot

of *Figures schématiques* is simpler and more direct. “Schematic,” as indicated in the dictionary, means a symbolic or simplified presentation.

It is rare that a painting of this importance appears on the market, especially one from Borduas's Black and White period in Paris. This work is perhaps the largest Borduas canvas in private hands. *Figures schématiques* should give joy and pride to its next collector.

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

This work is included in François-Marc Gagnon's online catalogue raisonné of the artist's work at <http://www.borduas.concordia.ca>, #2005-0104.

**ESTIMATE: \$3,000,000 – 5,000,000**