



21 Paul-Émile Borduas

AUTO CAS QMG RCA 1905 – 1960

Untitled Abstraction with Green

oil on canvas, on verso signed, titled on the gallery label, inscribed with the Dominion Gallery inventory #A2758 on the gallery label and stamped with the Dominion Gallery stamp, 1959
36 ¼ x 28 in, 92.1 x 71.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by a Prominent Montreal
Collection, 1960

Sold sale of *Canadian Art*, Joyner / Waddington's,
June 3, 2003, lot 70
Private Collection, California

THE MERE MENTION of an artist's name can conjure in the mind a prototypical image-type. Such is the case with Paul-Émile Borduas. He was the esteemed leader of the Automatists, an inspirational teacher and the principal driving force behind the game-changing manifesto the *Refus global*. His works are a ubiquitous presence in exhibitions, public collections and museum permanent installations and are recounted in every art historical text concerning the art of the period. We can thereby be excused

for presuming that we know well his major achievements and the developmental path of his all-too-brief mature career. Borduas was a restless, inventive spirit, constantly evolving and taking significant stylistic leaps. This will have some bearing upon our appreciation and contextualization of the work *Untitled Abstraction with Green*.

Borduas's impact upon the younger members of the Automatists is a matter of public record. However, the production of his own artworks is surprisingly scant from 1941 to 1953. This is usually attributed to his heavy teaching schedule. Things would further deteriorate—he lost his job amidst the fury produced by the revolutionary nature of *Refus global*, and went through a divorce. It has been remarked that due to poor health, he turned increasingly to the less physically demanding medium of works on paper, although this is not an entirely satisfactory explication of this choice. In 1947 he began to develop and exhibit the first of his signature-style palette knife abstractions.

In the absence of vibrant commercial galleries, it was difficult for Borduas to make a living through the sale of his art alone. He was disheartened by the lack of support for progressive art in Montreal. He sought entry to the United States but was denied by McCarthy-era America. However, he won his battle with the FBI, and in 1953 Borduas left Quebec and spent the summer working at the seaside town of Provincetown, Massachusetts. He never again returned to take up residence in Canada. One presumes that Borduas met renowned German Expressionist Hans Hofmann, who conducted a legendary school at Provincetown which was a mecca for distinguished artists such as Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell and Canadians Alexandra Luke, Jock Macdonald, William Ronald and Takao Tanabe. In fall of 1954 Borduas moved to a Greenwich Village studio in New York. It is legend that he met at the Cedar Bar with leading Abstract Expressionists Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline.

It was in America that Borduas created his stellar all-over abstractions. He had a 1954 solo exhibition at Passedoit Gallery. Although it is recorded that it was not a financial success, Robert Motherwell commented favourably on his work and a 1953 oil was sold to Roloff Beny, at that time a respected Canadian abstract painter. Thereafter, he established a lifelong relationship with the Martha Jackson Gallery.

In 1954, works by Borduas, along with B.C. Binning and Jean Paul Riopelle, represented Canada at the *Venice Biennale*. In 1955 he represented Canada at the *3rd Bienal de São Paulo*. Despite his many exhibition inclusions, Borduas was dissatisfied by the response to his work in America. He speculated that things might be better in Paris and he set sail for the city on September 21, 1955. Once there, he began to reinvent his art. Borduas reintroduced figure-ground, part by part and asymmetrical composition. He limited his palette to primarily black and white. In 1959, credited to his admiration for Piet Mondrian, the preponderance of his new work adopted a geometric, rectilinear format.

Yet Borduas, Canada's most celebrated exponent of impasto palette-knife constructed works, continued with his lifelong commitment to make and exhibit watercolours, gouache and ink drawings. Axiomatically a brush, not a palette knife, is the necessary tool. One might surmise that he began to seek a way to emulate the organic, free-form results of his works on paper in his oils on canvas.

In May 1959 the Galerie Saint-Germain hosted his first solo exhibition in Paris. The list of 17 works is now lost, however, it



PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS

Composition 44

oil on canvas, 1959

36 ¼ x 28 ¾ in, 92 x 73 cm

Collection of Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994.4

In 2005, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the museum's

Association of Volunteer Guides, the museum dedicated this work

to all association members as a token of its gratitude.

Photo: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Not for sale with this lot

did include *Abstraction en bleu*, 1959 (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario). Might it also have included other works near-identical in compositional construction, such as *Composition 44*, 1959 (collection of the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal) and *Untitled Abstraction with Green*, 1959? These late-career works channel his interest in Japanese calligraphy, as well as the declarative flamboyant brushwork of Motherwell and Kline. He was looking to the future, not to his own past. Ten months later he died of a heart attack, on February 22, 1960.

This is a rare work from the final year of his life; the other two known related works reside in prestigious public collections. The work of Borduas is in nearly every significant Canadian public collection, as well as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. The Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas is named in his honour.

We thank Jeffrey Spalding, CM, PRCA for contributing the above essay. Spalding has contributed many exhibition catalogue essays concerning the art of Quebec and abstraction, among them *Jean Paul Riopelle* (for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which traveled to the Hermitage); *Françoise Sullivan* (Musée d'art contemporain de Baie-Saint-Paul); *Jacques Hurtubise* (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia); *Max Ernst* (traveled to the Phoenix Art Museum); and *Takao Tanabe* (Vancouver Art Gallery).

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

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 500,000