



## 18 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

### Incandescence

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1953 and on verso signed, titled on the Pierre Matisse gallery label, dated, inscribed *Cat. No. 6* and *H* and numbered 4856 on a label  
35 × 57 ¾ in, 88.9 × 146.7 cm

### PROVENANCE

Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York,  
inventory #St 2974  
Acquired from the above by Elliot Fish,  
March 4, 1954  
Sold sale of *Contemporary Paintings, Drawings  
and Sculptures*, Sotheby's, Madison Avenue  
Galleries, New York, May 4 and 5, 1982, lot 22  
Collection of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,  
Montreal, acquired from the above  
Estate of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,  
Montreal

### LITERATURE

Georges Duthuit, *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*,  
Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1954, listed, unpaginated  
*Jean Paul Riopelle*, Svensk-Franska Konstgalleriet,  
1959, listed page 7  
Gilbert Érouart, *Riopelle in Conversation*, 1995,  
pages 4 and 10  
Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,  
*Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, listed page 382 and  
reproduced page 357, catalogue #1953.004H.1953  
Marie-Claude Corbeil, Kate Helwig and Jennifer Poulin,  
*Jean Paul Riopelle: The Artist's Materials*, Getty  
Conservation Institute, 2011, page 9

### EXHIBITED

Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, *Riopelle:  
First American Exhibition*, January 5 – 23, 1954,  
catalogue #6  
Svensk-Franska Konstgalleriet, Stockholm,  
*Jean Paul Riopelle*, 1959, catalogue #6



detail



detail



Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*, 1954, catalogue cover



Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*, 1954, catalogue interior



**GUSTAVE COURBET**  
**The Source of the Loue**  
 oil on canvas, 1864  
 39 ¼ x 56 in, 99.7 x 142.2 cm  
 Collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York,  
 H.O. Havemeyer Collection, #29.100.122  
 Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929  
 Not for sale with this lot



detail

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE’S compelling paintings are at once classics of mid-twentieth-century modernist abstract art and the object of fascination for new generations. The 2018 exhibition *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*—originating at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ) and seen at the Art Gallery of Ontario—for example, presented the sweep of Riopelle’s painterly career alongside that of his life and painting partner’s—American Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell, whom he met in Paris in 1955. While we are sometimes encouraged to look at and ponder only what we can see on the canvas with painting of this sort, institutional contexts—especially a work’s exhibition, collecting, and thus reception history—are also important to our full appreciation of a given work. This is especially the case with *Incandescence*, which was part of *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*, seen at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City in 1954. While Riopelle was included in the *Younger European Painters* exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1953 (the Guggenheim purchased a work from this show, *La nuit bleue*, from 1953), the commercial exhibit in which *Incandescence* appeared was indeed his first American solo exhibit. Riopelle was at the height of his painterly prowess, so this was the time to challenge the US market, with its many influential painters and critics.

Riopelle’s New York dealer, the renowned Pierre Matisse, was the younger son of Henri Matisse and his wife Amélie; he established his New York gallery in 1931. Riopelle has reflected that it was important to him to be close personally to his art dealers, to share values on art and in life more generally. “When my dealers’ opinions changed, I changed dealers,” he quipped. Riopelle and

the younger Matisse shared interests in sailing and cars (Riopelle raced cars and prized his sailboat, the *Serica*) as well as abstract art. Matisse also represented Mitchell. Importantly, too, Riopelle admired the Matisse family’s resistance activities in World War II France. He came to know Pierre Matisse through art historian and critic Georges Duthuit, whose memorably vivid essay on Riopelle accompanied the 1954 New York exhibition. Duthuit had married Henri Matisse’s daughter and was thus the art dealer’s brother-in-law. This circle of powerful cultural figures also included Duthuit’s frequent interlocutor Samuel Beckett, who translated the Duthuit essay for the 1954 exhibit and became, in turn, a friend of Riopelle’s. “We would talk for hours,” the painter reported. This circuit of friendship and commentary continued to the next generation: when Riopelle traveled to the Canadian Arctic in 1977, he was accompanied by Claude Duthuit, an underwater archaeologist and the son of Georges Duthuit and grandson of Henri Matisse.

This institutional history must include reference to Duthuit’s important essay “A Painter of Awakening: Jean-Paul Riopelle,” begun in 1951. His memorable opening sentence sets the tone for our engagement with this passionate painting: “Like a trapper fresh from the Canadian solitudes measuring his stride to our narrow pavements, Jean-Paul Riopelle seems hardly to contain the flooding energies of youth...” Playing a stereotype, André Breton, “Pope” of the Surrealists according to Riopelle and other artists, had dubbed Riopelle a “master trapper” in the 1940s. What might seem in Duthuit’s reiteration like a primitivist stereotype of the northern woodsman as naive was actually true of Riopelle, the lifelong hunter and lover of northern climes.

Duthuit’s incandescent essay is replete with new ways to understand Riopelle’s painting. For example, buttressing the intuition that these abstracts are akin to landscapes, he also justifies abstract art with an unexpected and striking comparison between Riopelle and Gustave Courbet, stating, “Or as though Courbet, for the dark patch that he needs, had no longer to seek the justification of a bundle of sticks.” Suggesting that Riopelle’s works in the 1954 exhibition—including *Incandescence*—show us a primordial landscape, not a figurative depiction of anything, Duthuit emphasizes the artist’s ability to work as Nature. Perhaps he is competing, on Riopelle’s behalf, with Jackson Pollock’s purported claim “I am nature.” The trope was common at the time; Riopelle claimed that Ozias Leduc was “nature incarnate.” Duthuit continues with a reference to one of the French nineteenth-century master’s best-known motifs: “And in truth, before certain canvases of Riopelle, we are tempted to exclaim: The source of the Loue, in its first infancy!” For Duthuit, Riopelle’s canvases can be seen as the even more primordial source in this landscape.

Such art historical analogies deployed by a writer orient readers to a way of seeing; they also reveal much about the writer’s priorities. Duthuit (and Pierre Matisse in using the essay for Riopelle’s inaugural exhibit) could assume that New York audiences knew Courbet’s *Source of the Loue* landscapes—an example from 1864 is in the Metropolitan Museum—and that these profound paintings would function to Riopelle’s advantage as markers of European lineage, status and technical accomplishment. The analogy implies, for example, that unlike his New York contemporary Barnett Newman, Riopelle was not about to abjure such associations with high culture and start over in an abstract

idiom that claimed no history. Yet despite this subtle invocation of European roots, for Duthuit, abstraction is essentially linked to Nature in Riopelle’s work.

To what aspects of *Incandescence* are we alerted by Duthuit’s analogy with Courbet? Riopelle typically laid down his vibrant colour thickly and quickly with a palette knife. Red, yellow, black, white and especially green predominate. Shards of sapphire blue accent the welter of gestural activity. Duthuit’s cue to think in terms of Courbet’s *Source of the Loue* landscapes can transport us to what is central in these nineteenth-century works, the emergence of the river from a dark grotto in the centre of the image and the contrasting white of the cascading water. Duthuit does not claim that Riopelle was thinking about or influenced by Courbet, or that *Incandescence*, for example, looks like a Courbet. The connection he evokes can only form in our minds and eyes. While he argues that the artist “must be constantly on the watch lest something of conscious logic steal into the picture, which the least of its incursions would render null and void,” viewers can see the underlying “logic” of abstraction as it embraces natural phenomena before they coalesce into a landscape such as Courbet’s. Abstraction, Duthuit implies, precedes figuration.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure since the 60s*, for contributing the above essay.

**ESTIMATE: \$1,500,000 – 2,500,000**