

## 20 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

### Carnaval II

oil on canvas, signed and on verso signed twice, titled, dated 1953, inscribed variously *H12*, *NYAB 909 / Lot 6*, *13 May 81* and stamped with a Paris export stamp  
38 × 57 ¾ in, 96.5 × 146.7 cm

### PROVENANCE

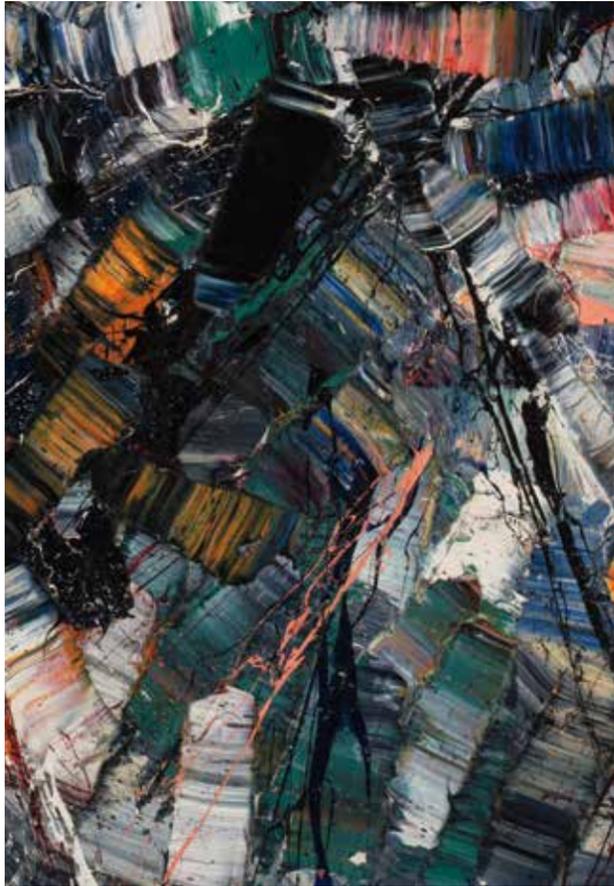
Galerie Jacques Dubourg, Paris  
Galleria del Naviglio, Milan  
Sold sale of *Contemporary Art, Evening Sale (5056)*,  
Christie's New York, May 13, 1981, lot 6  
Collection of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,  
Montreal, acquired from the above  
Estate of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,  
Montreal

### LITERATURE

Georges Duthuit, *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*,  
Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1954, unpaginated  
*Jean Paul Riopelle*, Kestnengesellschaft Gallery,  
1958, listed page 19  
Guy Robert, *Riopelle: Chasseur d'images*, 1981, page 65  
Paulette Gagnon and Yolande Racine, *L'oeil du collectionneur*,  
Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1996, listed page 58  
Robert Bernier et al., *Jean Paul Riopelle: Des visions d'Amérique*,  
1997, page 89  
Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,  
*Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, listed page 389 and reproduced  
page 343, catalogue #1953.045H.1953

### EXHIBITED

Kestnengesellschaft Gallery, Hanover, *Jean Paul Riopelle*,  
1958, catalogue #4  
Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, *L'oeil du  
collectionneur*, October 18, 1996 – January 5, 1997  
Galerie Simon Blais, Montreal, *Jean Paul Riopelle et  
Rosaline Granet*, May 29 – July 12, 2002



detail 1



detail 2



Jean Paul Riopelle and Georges Duthuit in front of *Pavane* (in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada), circa 1954

CELEBRATED IN HIS lifetime in Canada, Europe and the USA as few other Canadian artists have been, Jean Paul Riopelle was a prominent member of the pivotal Quebec avant-garde group Les Automatistes before moving to France in 1947. There he became part of the Surrealist circle, the only Canadian to exhibit with this group in a landmark 1947 exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. Paintings such as *Carnaval II* subsequently confirmed Riopelle's reputation as a leading artist of French Lyrical Abstraction, of tachisme, art informel, and most generally, of the École de Paris. These categories and descriptions set the expressive, unbridled freedom of painterly expression that we see here against the more emotionally neutral, frequently hard-edged, geometrical tendencies increasingly prevalent in both American Colour Field painting of the time and the two generations of Montreal abstractionists known as the Plasticiens.

*Carnaval II* was completed during the period of Riopelle's greatest celebrity: his wide recognition included participation in the *Bienal de São Paulo* in 1951 and 1955 and the *Venice Biennale* in 1954 and 1962. He returned to Quebec to live in 1972 and remained active until his death in 2002. Riopelle is important historically in part because his work focused debates about the increasingly wide and fractious gap between post-World War II European and American abstract painting. In Europe and

the United States, he was seen more as a French and specifically a Parisian artist than as a Canadian. By showing with the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City beginning in 1954, Riopelle embodied that gallery's explicit tactic to reintroduce then-contemporary European art into a newly dominant American post-war context. Happily distant as we now are from the partisan and nationally based polemics against School of Paris work—though not often Riopelle's specifically—of Clement Greenberg and other New York critics in the 1950s, we may better realize the visual impact of these paintings and more accurately measure their import for the abstract idiom and for twentieth-century art in general.

We may also readily understand why Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg, from whose extensive collection *Carnaval II* and *Incandescence* (1953), lot 18 in this sale, come, embraced Riopelle's paintings: they were extending an early interest in French École de Paris painters to the work of their Montreal cognates. It is equally apparent why Riopelle's large canvases from the mid-1950s are renowned. It was in 1953 that he began the working procedures that led to his works being called "mosaics." *Carnaval II* is a fine example; it is a kaleidoscope of colour and texture, a cavalcade of movement seemingly paused only for the instant of our gaze. Riopelle's inflections of paint are built

up into a self-contained geology of flat and smooth areas, edges, collisions of shapes and colours, almost innumerable forms and regions whose contrasts are underlined by his unusual deployment of both glossy and matte paint, without the use of varnish. This topography contrasts with—but is also touched by—ultra-thin, spidery streaks of black, white, red or salmon oil paint that animate the top layer of the canvas. These are not drips in the manner of Jackson Pollock—despite what American critics claimed at the time—but rather the traces of Riopelle flicking paint onto the canvas.

In his vibrant essay for Riopelle's first solo exhibit, held in New York in 1954, Georges Duthuit attempted to capture the import of the remarkable details in Riopelle's paintings from this period. His account—replete with organic metaphors—is pertinent to the fine lines we see in *Carnaval II*: "Already certain centres of agglutination foretell the formation of organs of more clearly defined function, already there is outlined a frail and rudimentary nervous system: a tracery of fibrils, ... exquisitely tenuous, casts its nets over the fluid mass." The key is his apt identification of a "rudimentary nervous system ... exquisitely tenuous," established by "a tracery of fibrils."

If we look closely at the bottom right quadrant of *Carnaval II*, for example (see detail 2, taken near Riopelle's signature), moving

from right to left, we see relatively large blocks of blue, black, orange and white pigment in several hues dragged into one another (yet maintaining their individual shapes). Overtop are the "tendrils," first of white, and further to the left, then of black and salmon (see detail 1). These fragile skeins of paint do not so much link the surface's other shapes as function as an independent "nervous system," or to extend the metaphor, as we might think today, function as ciphers of synapses firing across the restlessly animate surface of this painting. The intricate weaving together of the black and salmon-coloured lines in this detail can be seen as "nervous" in the sense of kinetic—certainly an accurate description of Riopelle's paintings from this time—and as a charge of electric energy across the whole. One of the many accomplishments of *Carnaval II* is that we may register its vitality in the most intimate, close-up looking as well as when we take in its expansive surface as a whole.

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**