





16 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Sans titre

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1953 and on verso dated on the Marlborough-Godard label and with the Arthur Lenars & Cie, Paris shipping label
31 7/8 x 39 1/2 in, 81 x 100.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Marlborough-Godard, Toronto
Acquired from the above by the present Private Collection, British Columbia, on September 13, 1978

IF WE WERE to nominate one year to encapsulate the brilliance and importance of Jean Paul Riopelle's painting, 1953 would be a good choice. Though he was a successful artist when he moved to Paris from Montreal in the late 1940s, it was in the early 1950s that he perfected his autograph "mosaic" style. As we see in *Sans titre*, the mosaics involved both a highly active treatment of the painting surface and an emerging order that feels cosmic. The variety of forms and colours is extensive, yet the areas of blue, green, red and yellow, and webs of white, black and dark green, do not compete for dominance. Aptly described as "extraordinary masonries of color," they *are* structured energy, not a representation of it.¹

Dealers and collectors on both sides of the Atlantic applauded this type of painting. Riopelle showed in the *Younger European Painters* exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1953 (the prestigious museum purchased a Riopelle from this show, *La nuit bleue*, also from 1953). He had signed on with the Pierre Matisse Gallery (operated by the younger son of the famous artist) in New York City in this year and was included in a group exhibition in the fall of 1953. He had his first solo show in the USA there in 1954, titled *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*. The many virtues of his earlier and later work notwithstanding, then, it is still the painting of the 1950s that defines Riopelle. His worldwide recognition included showing at the *Bienal de São Paulo* in 1951 and 1955. He represented Canada at the *Venice Biennale* in 1954 and 1962.



Jean Paul Riopelle in work clothes leaning on his easel, 1953
From the series *Portraits of Artists*
Photo: Denise Colomb (1902 – 2004) © Denise Colomb—RMN
Courtesy of Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine
Dist. RMN / Art Resource, NY



Jean Paul Riopelle in his studio with two stretchers, 1953
From the series *Portraits of Artists*
Studio of Jean Paul Riopelle, 52 rue Durantin, Paris 18e
Photo: Denise Colomb (1902 – 2004) © Denise Colomb—RMN
Courtesy of Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine
Dist. RMN—Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Jean Paul Riopelle's shoes, 1953
From the series *Portraits of Artists*
Photo: Denise Colomb (1902 – 2004) © Denise Colomb—RMN
Courtesy of Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine
Dist. RMN—Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

The photographs of Riopelle in his Paris studio in 1953 included here are much more than the documentation of an artist on the rise: they help us to understand the structure of *Sans titre*. We should not take the fact that Riopelle *had* a studio for granted. Only his increasing success in Paris allowed him to obtain this space. In his monograph, the late eminent Riopelle scholar François-Marc Gagnon quoted contemporary sources and Riopelle's own testimony to make this point:

In 1952 Riopelle's friend Henri Fara lent him his studio on rue Durantin in Montmartre. "This is the first time I've had a workshop of my own," the artist confessed. Having the creative space enabled him to exhibit at the Galerie Pierre Loeb from May 8 to 23, 1953. For Pierre Schneider, this decisive exhibition was the starting point for Riopelle's Paris celebrity: "Unknown in 1947, exhibiting only in small galleries on the Left Bank, he gained some fame only around 1953, while he was exhibiting at Pierre Loeb's."²

Denise Colomb's evocative photographs proclaim the arrival of a confident young artist in this working space in 1953. More specifically, she accentuated exactly what the artist emphasized: the importance of the frame and stretcher to his work.

Positioned as part of a struggle between European and American post-war abstraction—a partisan antagonism that we no longer need to negotiate, except historically—Riopelle was promoted by Pierre Matisse as a contemporary European artist who nonetheless extended well-tested School of Paris conventions, such as the use of the prepared, stretched canvas. It is not a coincidence that Riopelle, in Colomb's photo, leans on the two most conventional stretcher sizes and formats produced in France for as long as anyone could recall: portrait and landscape, *figure* and *paysage* in French. Some American critics at the time of the Guggenheim exhibit in 1953 implied that he "leaned on" such traditions too much. They compared his work with the drip paintings of the quintessential American Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. But the two artists' approaches are more divergent than similar; the comparison detracts from our understanding of them both. We can see that the electric white jolts of pigment on the surface of *Sans titre*—as well as those in black and green, for example—are not dripped onto the painting (Pollock's famed technique) but rather thrown against a *standing* canvas such as the one we see in another photograph by Colomb. Pollock famously painted on an unstretched canvas on the floor; Riopelle remained an easel painter. The ambient results are clear on the studio floor and on Riopelle's shoes.

Sans titre displays an almost indescribably complex surface. If one looks closely—one of the great pleasures with Riopelle's work—the alchemy of transmuting pigment into energy is palpable. The detail that shows Riopelle's signature in black floating atop a miniature lagoon of greens, blues, yellows and reds is a case in point. Pigments of different hues pile up to create local landscapes. Deploying one of his favourite techniques, he varies

the gloss of individual passages, with the result that some zones seem to stand still while others flow. As we note in the two details of the painting reproduced here, there is more sheer activity and more variation in form and colour than Riopelle, with his roots in the automatic techniques of Surrealism, could ever plan or control.

Riopelle looks straight at us in one of Colomb's back and white photographs. He is not seen in the act of painting, but pictured as the epitome of the avant-garde painter. Pipe in mouth and wearing clean shoes and a sports jacket, he reveals where and what he paints. Frames exist within frames: those of the stretchers, completed paintings and even the outside limits of the photograph itself. *Sans titre* is bounded by its frame too, yet as a field of activity for Riopelle and for viewers' eyes, it readily transcends its "landscape" format.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Canadian Art, 1970 – 1990*, for contributing the above essay.

1. Marie-Claude Corbeil, Kate Helwig, and Jennifer Poulin, *Jean Paul Riopelle: The Artist's Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2011), 28.
2. François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2019), 15.

This work is included as an addendum in Yseult Riopelle's online catalogue raisonné on the artist's work at <http://www.riopelle.ca>.

This work is accompanied by a photograph certificate of authenticity from Yseult Riopelle.

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is holding the exhibition *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures* from November 21, 2020 to March 21, 2021, which will travel in 2021 – 2022 to the Audain Art Museum, Whistler and the Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

ESTIMATE: \$1,200,000 – 1,800,000



details