



38 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

La ligne d'eau

oil on canvas diptych, signed and on verso titled on each stretcher of the diptych, 1977
118 ¾ x 158 in, 300.7 x 401.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Prominent Corporate Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

Andrée Paradis, *16 Quebec Painters in Their Milieu, A Survey of Creators*, 1978, reproduced page 145
Georgiana Oliver, "Riopelle, le trappeur traqué. Avec Riopelle, la glace a son nouveau chantre," *Nouvelles littéraires*, no. 2673, January 1979, page 14
Jean Paul Riopelle, Peinture 1946 - 1977, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981, reproduced page 54
Guy Robert, *Chasseur d'images*, 1981, a detail reproduced page 275
Jean Paul Riopelle, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1991, pages 148 and 149
Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 1, 1939 - 1953*, 1999, reproduced page 435, catalogue #1977.011H.1977
Guy Cogeval and Stéphane Aquin, *Riopelle*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2006, reproduced page 119 and listed page 146
Michel Marin et al, *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2017, page 36, reproduced page 133
Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 5, 1972 - 1978*, 2020, reproduced page 219

EXHIBITED

Musée du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, Chicoutimi, *Riopelle 80*, November 22 - December 14, 1980

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, *Jean Paul Riopelle, Peinture 1946 - 1977*, 1981, catalogue #48, traveling in 1982 to Musée du Québec, Quebec City; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Musée des beaux-arts de Caracas, Venezuela, catalogue #37; and Instituto, Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, catalogue #41

Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, 1991, catalogue #100

The State Hermitage Museum, Russia, *Riopelle: Works from the Collection of Power Corporation of Canada and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, June 16 - September 17, 2006, traveling to Musée Cantini, Marseille, November 3, 2006 - February 4, 2007, catalogue #42

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*, October 12, 2017 - January 7, 2018; traveling in 2018 - 2019 to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc, Landerneau, France, catalogue #53

IN THE EARLY 1970s, having lived in France for almost 30 years, Jean Paul Riopelle was spending more and more time in Quebec, hunting and fishing as far east as New Brunswick and as far north as James Bay. In 1974, he began construction of a studio in Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson, north of Montreal, which would become not only a base for his hunting and fishing excursions, but also a comfortable living space and a well-appointed studio where he could do large-scale works often inspired, as their titles suggest, by what he had seen and experienced in the north woods.

Perhaps the single most important of these excursions was one taken to Baffin Island in the summer of 1977. It was apparently organized by Theo Waddington, of Waddington Gallery, and it involved Riopelle's old friend the radiologist, pilot and fellow outdoorsman Champlain Charest as well as Claude Duthuit, son of the famous art historian and critic Georges Duthuit, who had been so instrumental in launching Riopelle's career in France.



Jean Paul Riopelle in his studio in Sainte-Maguerite-du-Lac-Masson with *La ligne d'eau*, 1977
 Photo: © Basil Zarov
 Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, e011205146

Both Charest and Duthuit later spoke in interviews with Hélène de Billy of their fascination with the landscape of Baffin Island and with the massive ice flows rushing in and out on the tide, a fascination shared by Riopelle. Photos by Duthuit show the artist as a tiny dark figure on a dark shore, standing behind and among immense, naturally sculpted, pure white monuments of ice. His Pangnirtung experiences were the inspiration for an important new direction in Riopelle's work: the *Iceberg* series, paintings of various dimensions, some very large, with imposing forms mostly in shades of black, white and grey, the pigment applied strenuously in thick impasto that suggests both rough texture and the shifting of matter and light. Work on this series started in the studio at Sainte-Marguerite.

The *Iceberg* paintings were received with enthusiasm by French critics when they were shown at the Galerie Maeght in January

1979. Georgiana Oliver, writing for *Nouvelles littéraires*, called Riopelle the new “*chantre*” (cantor, bard, poet) of ice, and provided this cool quotation (my translation):

For sure, if I'd gone to the Mediterranean, I wouldn't have come back with paintings like these. But in the Arctic, nothing is straightforward. The sky seems black, really black. If I painted a sky as black as that, nobody would believe me. And on the ground, it's not even snow, not even white snow. It's grey, transparent ice. If I painted snow like that, nobody would believe me.

Riopelle's icebergs are not the serene, motionless, glowing blue monuments that we see in a Lawren Harris painting of the 1930s. Yseult Riopelle has talked about her father's absolute need to

watch the sun rise, his obsession with light in all its forms and movements, from the stars to the aurora borealis, from sunset to the midnight sun (see the monumental painting *Quartet in White* or *Midnight Sun*, also done in 1977). It is a paradoxical, black and white, dynamic, brutal light we see in the *Iceberg* series.

La ligne d'eau was not at the Galerie Maeght in 1979 when 30 “icebergs” were shown, but it was composed at the same time and place as those paintings were, and is obviously related to them through its subject matter and its bold, black/white dynamic. It was first shown in Chicoutimi in 1980, and may not have left Canada before then. But in 1982 it was exhibited at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and traveled that same year back to Quebec and to Latin America. More recently, it was hung along with the *Iceberg* paintings in major exhibitions, including the *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation* celebration of Joan Mitchell and Riopelle in 2017 to 2018.

This painting, like those in the *Iceberg* series, is much about natural phenomena and the effects of light. The tide mark is the line indicating the limit of the ebb and flow of tides; the waterline is the axis of balance of a watercraft (or an iceberg) as well as (and most importantly for this painting, in my opinion) the point where water meets the shore and where land and sky are mirrored. In both of its panels, *La ligne d'eau* shows a vertical movement delineated into three areas, with a strong suggestion of reflection in the lower sections, as if, in effect, the line nearest the bottom is the waterline. But there is also a horizontal reflection because the basic structure of each panel echoes, not perfectly but unmistakably, the other.

Is it possible that *La ligne d'eau* was composed in a similar manner to *Micmac* (1975), where, as Michel Martin explained in the catalogue to the *Mitchell/Riopelle* exhibition, an impression of one painting is taken on the blank canvas of another, giving two mirror images that are both then reworked? This technique of *décalcomanie* was popular with Surrealist painters such as Óscar Domínguez and Max Ernst, but they used it to produce unexpected, uncontrolled effects that they would then develop into a single, fantastic, more-or-less figurative composition. If he used that method for *La ligne d'eau*, Riopelle has reworked the surface of both panels so vigorously it is difficult or impossible to tell. But he was certainly attracted by the mirror effect produced by the technique, in the possibilities of similarity and difference in colour and structure.

He was not interested in the kind of depiction (however “abstracted”) that we see in the Harris icebergs: he was more interested in what I would call evocation. It is astonishing how he conveys such an impression of movement—of physical mass as well as light—using many of the techniques of his early gestural abstractions. In some sections, the pigment is obviously mixed and manipulated with a brush; in others there are clear signs of the pallet knife, perhaps in a second movement, tending upwards, but at all angles. These gestures break up the surface, reflecting light in different ways, even from stripes of deep black. The pigment is thick, and there are small peaks made by the edge of the knife as it was lifted, particularly in the white areas. It is a lively place, this interface where land and water (frozen or not) meet and scramble the light from the sky.



details

We thank Ray Ellenwood, author of *Eggregore: A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement*, for contributing the above essay.

We thank Yseult Riopelle for her generous assistance in cataloguing and researching this lot. *La ligne d'eau* will appear in the fifth volume of the catalogue raisonné of Jean Paul Riopelle being published this fall, covering works from 1972 to 1978, catalogue #1977.011H.

Please note: the dimensions of each canvas are 118 3/4 x 79 inches.

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: \$800,000 – 1,200,000