



113 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Sans titre

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1959 and on verso titled *Abstraction* and dated on the gallery label and inscribed *x140* (twice)/*No 9* and variously 25 5/8 x 31 3/4 in, 65.1 x 80.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Albert White Gallery, Toronto
Lillian Mayland McKimm Collection, Calgary
then Vancouver Island

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2, 1954–1959, 2004, reproduced page 335, catalogue #1959.074H.1959

A 1956 PHOTOGRAPH by Robert Doisneau shows an appropriately Promethean Jean Paul Riopelle “plunged into a world of paint” during the genesis of his signature triptych *Pavane (Hommage aux Nymphéas)* (1954), now a keystone of the National Gallery of Canada’s permanent collection.¹ The adventurous palette and textures of *Sans titre* (1959) likewise testify to the bold material explorations of this phase in Riopelle’s evolution. Its audacious abstraction carries forward the artist’s experimentation with the physical properties of paint in his earliest works inspired by the spontaneity of Quebec Automatism. At the same time, *Sans titre* crystallizes what set Riopelle apart from the Montreal movement’s charismatic leader, Paul-Émile Borduas.

Riopelle’s abstractions emerged from a milieu of collective discovery that coalesced in late 1945, when fellow future Automatist Marcel Barbeau rented a modest shed on the alley running between the Montreal streets of Saint-Hubert and Resther. Both Riopelle and Jean-Paul Mousseau—then a clerk at the Librairie Tranquille, the bookstore where the Automatists’ incendiary manifesto *Refus global* would be launched in 1948—were invited to share this improvised studio. In a striking instance of necessity acting as the mother of invention, the trio would investigate the unique characteristics of enamel in the absence of adequate resources to purchase traditional artists’ supplies. Notably, they experimented with dripping commercial paints to produce “all-over” compositions whose originality was only matched by the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock—who was, however, unknown to Riopelle at the time.²

After relocating to Paris in December 1946, Riopelle would extend this exploratory ethos in works of increasingly ambitious scale that, after 1949, were executed with the use of spatulas in lieu of the brush. While enhancing the artist’s manual control, these knife-like implements generated unpredictable colour harmonies. In utilizing the spatula to flatten masses of paint applied directly to canvas from the tube, chance consequently came to play a decisive role in these “mosaic” paintings—so named for their tile-like blocks of colour. *Sans titre* is a powerfully argued

example of this signature phase, which art historian François-Marc Gagnon described as “the period most prized by collectors to the present day.”³

The spatula’s aleatory effects boldly broke with the Surrealist-inspired concerns of Quebec Automatism as articulated by Borduas, for whom even unpremeditated acts of painting unfolded an unconscious logic that was never purely based on chance. Such methodological tensions had already characterized Riopelle’s student days as a pupil of Borduas while attending the storied École du meuble de Montréal. From the start, Borduas was resistant to the plastic orientation of Riopelle’s experiments, which was at odds with the psychological wellsprings of his own art. Nonetheless, the two artists would find common cause in the aforementioned defining document of Quebec Automatism, *Refus global*—a publication initially proposed by Riopelle in answer to the competing manifestos of post-war Surrealism that he encountered in Paris.⁴ The only Canadian signatory of the André Breton-aligned, anti-Stalinist *Rupture inaugurale* (1947), Riopelle still cautioned his Canadian colleagues against simply adding their names to this Surrealist statement of principles, instead urging the group to “make a manifesto of our own.”⁵ Championing this vision of an independent manifesto, Borduas contributed the titular essay while Riopelle supplied its vivid cover art.

Whereas Borduas preferred the term “non-figuration” to describe the residual spatial cues characteristic of his own abstractions,⁶ *Sans titre* is typical of Riopelle’s more radical break with pictorial convention. In contrast to the fan-like impasto of *Pavane*, Riopelle’s homage to the late *Water Lilies* of Monet (in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada), the loosely orthogonal application of paint in *Sans titre* evokes that paragon of total abstraction, the grid. While Borduas rejected the rationality associated with that figure, Riopelle’s forceful spatula marks achieve a subtle equipoise of expressionism and impersonality that anticipates the “collapsed” grid art historian Briony Fer invokes when describing the contemporary abstractions of Gerhard Richter.⁷

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 103.

2. See *ibid.*, 174–75, 181.

3. *Ibid.*, 157.

4. See *ibid.*, 64–66.

5. Riopelle quoted in Lise Gauvin, “Entretien avec Riopelle: Les artistes sont-ils révolutionnaires?” *Vie des arts*, no. 161 (Winter 1995): 15.

6. See François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 200.

7. Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 158.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000