



## 7 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

### Sans titre

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1957 and on verso titled *Composition* and dated on the exhibition labels and inscribed variously

38 × 51 in, 96.5 × 129.5 cm

### PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist in Paris by

G. Blair Laing, Toronto, circa 1957

Laing Galleries, Toronto

Acquired from the above by a Private Collection,

Toronto, April 15, 1958

By descent to the present Private Collection,

Toronto

### LITERATURE

*One Hundred Years of Canadian Painting: A Loan Exhibition*, Laing Galleries, 1959, page 31

Evan H. Turner and William J. Withrow, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, Museum of Modern Art, 1962, listed, titled as *Composition*, unpaginated

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 2, 1954 – 1959*, 2004, reproduced page 256, catalogue #1957.043H.1957

### EXHIBITED

Laing Galleries, Toronto, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Painting: A Loan Exhibition*, January 27 – February 8, 1959, catalogue #45

International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, 1963, traveling in 1963 – 1965 to the Hunter Gallery of Art, Chattanooga; Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester; Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter; University of Texas, Austin; Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, DC; Mercer University, Macon; Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; San Francisco Museum of Art; Saint Louis Art Museum; and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts

THIS YEAR MARKS the 100th anniversary of Jean Paul Riopelle's birth in Montreal on October 7, 1923. What a wonderful occasion to celebrate the work of a Canadian artist who earned such exceptional acclaim at home and abroad. There is also the fact that, in the past decades, and especially after the artist's daughter Yseult Riopelle published the monumental catalogue raisonné of his works, a number of exhibitions, publications, and events about and surrounding Riopelle have led to new interpretations of his practice and a better understanding of his varied, experimental approach to art, in all its manifestations.

Riopelle was a member of Montreal's Automatists, a constellation of avant-garde figures that gravitated around Paul-Émile Borduas, and signed their 1948 manifesto, *Refus global*. During his first stay in France, in 1947, Riopelle met André Breton and

joined the Surrealist movement. By the early 1950s, he had developed a form of "all-over" gesturalism that involved the use of spontaneous brush-strokes, while also relying on his perfect mastery of the medium. Associated with Informalism (an open concept posited by theoretician Michel Tapié to describe the various non-figurative approaches to painting), Riopelle quickly found himself a leading figure in the abstract movement of the Paris School, thanks in no small part to the majestic mosaics he painted in the first half of the 1950s, and with which he remains closely identified. As early as 1953, Riopelle was included in *Younger European Painters: A Selection*, an exhibition mounted by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York that later toured to other US galleries. Critics were quick to praise the calibre of his work, along with that of Pierre Soulages and Georges Mathieu, and the museum even acquired one of his paintings, *Blue Night*, 1952.

In 1955, Riopelle met Joan Mitchell, an American painter of New York's Abstract Expressionist school. The two quickly launched into an intense, tumultuous relationship that would play out over the next 25 years. Riopelle had just finished a series of white paintings, for which he again used his signature palette knife technique, applying dab after dab of paint in a sustained burst of expression. In these vast, pale compositions, he was forgoing colour and evoking unknowable spaces filled with light. Such an investigation naturally interested Mitchell, who was similarly fascinated by the power of white and its tendency to undo the illusion of depth as it interacts with other colours.

It was also at this time that Riopelle temporarily abandoned oil on canvas in favour of oil on paper and, increasingly, gouache, a more versatile medium that can range from transparent to opaque (for example, *Eskimo Mask*, 1955, Albright-Knox Art Gallery Collection, Buffalo), depending on the desired texture. The result is a kind of unbridled calligraphy of contrasting colour dabs, kept in a certain compositional order by the unifying action of white passages. Of course, Riopelle, in his correspondence with Mitchell, was quick to recognize the parallels between his new work and a resonance that the artist would assimilate and reinterpret with his characteristic energy and immediacy. Riopelle's *Sans titre*, 1957, is an eloquent example of these developments.

This transformational and, to an extent, transitional piece, ostensibly a landscape, becomes a rich, dense garden of painted experience. From the general composition to the harmonious waves of colour sliding towards and into one another to the complex textural effects, Riopelle, here as everywhere, freely transgresses the notion of "good technique," transforming the painting into a vehicle of sheer, bold expression. That, at least, is the underlying energy emanating from the white entity that visually occupies almost the entire surface of the composition. That white entity follows an ascending curve from left to right that is hedged in, on one side, by a dark, ambiguously defined—and thus complex—border, and on the other side, by another border made formally imposing by the staunch verticality of an opaque band of unabashed red that seems to find echoes in the top right and





centre sections of the painting, thus affecting the entire composition. Clearly Riopelle is pushing the edificial power of impasto to extremes, using an explosion of knife-strokes, interlacing, and incisions as structural vectors that dominate and organize the dynamic order of the composition.

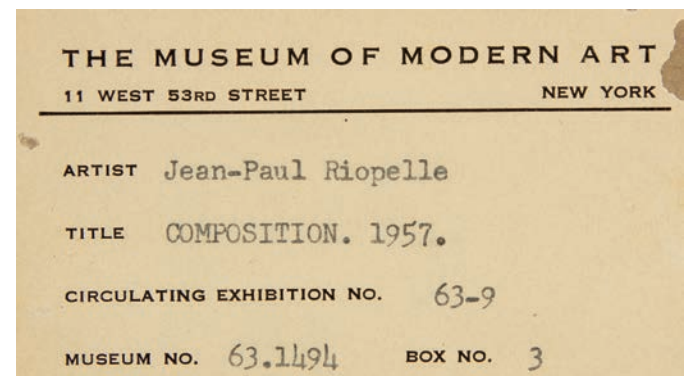
Thus, Riopelle forges ahead along his chosen experimental path, investigating the possibilities of a physical object created through elated movement born of the process of perception. When one attentively scans the sloping line of the mass unfurled in the centre, the eye is drawn to an enigmatic, intensely black curvilinear stroke, like a hook emerging out of the red background that seems to slice the composition into two distinct parts that diverge in appearance and scope. The one on the right seems to have been assembled from the inside out around a charged core, readily capturing our attention with its imposing, uniform composition. The ensuing gravitational force seems to have drawn multiple elements together into a physical object whose definition in space relies on the mechanism of perception that is the very fount of the relationship between shape and substance. Riopelle would pursue this investigation and these questions regarding the relationship between an objective entity and its place in a given space in an even more systematic way in the early 1960s, even as he turned his attention to sculpture.

Held in a private collection since 1958, *Sans titre* (initially *Composition*), 1957, has appeared in two major exhibitions as a kind of snapshot of the state and progression of Canadian art at a given period. The first, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Painting*, organized by Toronto's Laing Galleries in 1959, is notable for being a historic retrospective of a century of Canadian painting that roughly corresponds to the first 100 years of Canadian confederation; Riopelle eloquently concludes the exhibition with this work, which appears as #45 in the catalogue. The second, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, 1963, was curated in Canada by a group of leading experts of Canadian contemporary art in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. It was the first major exhibition of contemporary Canadian paintings in the United States and toured to multiple American cities over a two-year period; the painting is #3 in the list of works by Riopelle.

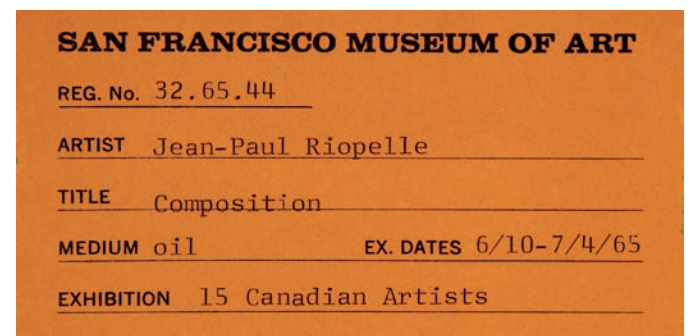
We thank Michel Martin for contributing the above essay, translated from the French. Martin is a former curator of contemporary art at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (1978 – 2008) and was curator of the exhibition *Mitchell / Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*, organized by the MNBAQ in 2017.

The Jean Paul Riopelle Foundation, co-founded by Michael Audain, André Desmarais and Pierre Lassonde, is involved in many events related to Riopelle's centenary. All through 2023, there will be numerous exhibitions, artistic events, performances, premieres and major projects related to Riopelle happening throughout Canada and internationally. Construction begins in 2023 for Espace Riopelle at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, a pavilion dedicated to Riopelle that will be part of the existing museum. Five of the Foundation's founders, Michael and Yoshi Audain, André and France Desmarais, Lassonde and Yseult Riopelle (the artist's daughter) plan to donate \$100 million in art to Espace Riopelle, as well as \$20 million dedicated for construction.

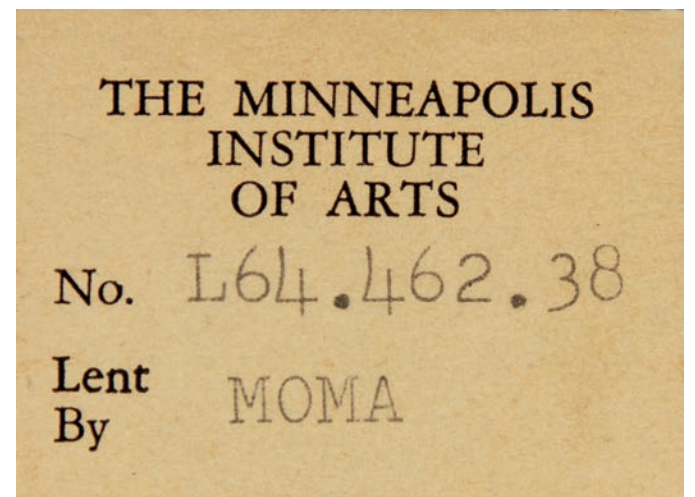
**ESTIMATE: \$400,000 – 600,000**



Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, 1963, exhibition label on verso



San Francisco Museum of Art, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, 1965, exhibition label on verso



Minneapolis Institute of Arts exhibition label on verso