





9 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Sans titre

oil on canvas, on verso inscribed with an arrow [indicating the top] and *MJ/KB*, circa 1954
38 x 51 ¼ in, 96.5 x 130.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, France
Galerie Applicat-Prazan, Paris
An Important Private Collection, Geneva

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*, online addendum to *Volume 2, 1954 – 1959*, 2004, <http://www.riopelle.ca>

IT WAS IN the early 1950s that Jean Paul Riopelle became famous in Europe. He was a successful artist when he moved from Montreal to Paris in the late 1940s, yet it was only some

years later that he perfected the signature “mosaic” style that we see in *Sans titre* and that made his name abroad. According to contemporary witness Pierre Schneider, in Paris, Riopelle was “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.”¹ His ascendance was breathtaking: Riopelle had his first solo show in the USA at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1954 (*Riopelle: First American Exhibition*). He represented Canada in the *Bienal de São Paulo* in 1951 and 1955 and at the *Venice Biennale* in 1954 and 1962.

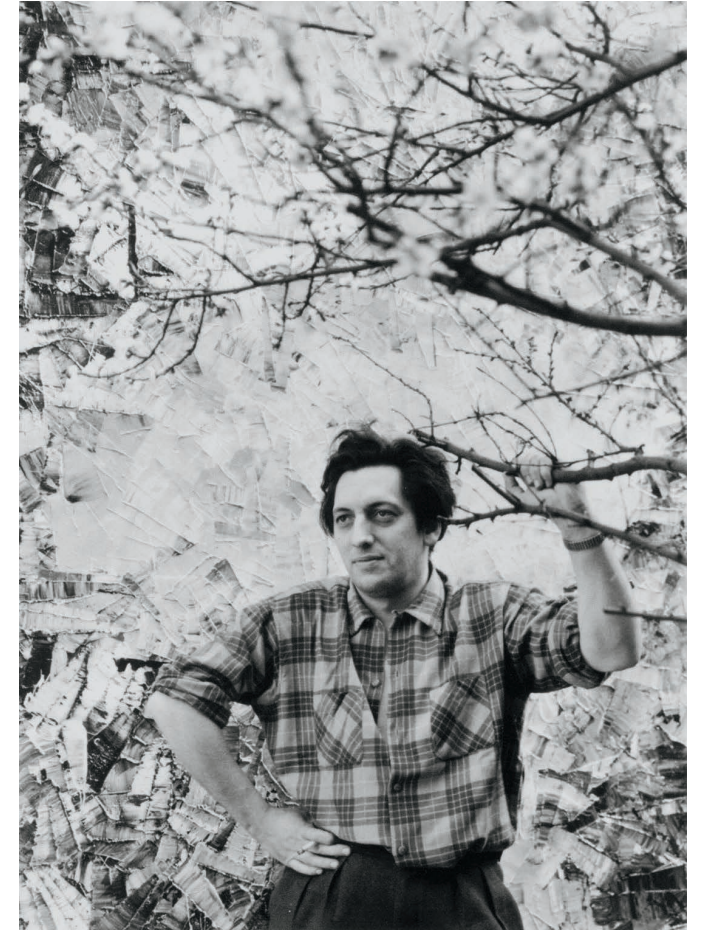
The appeal of his evolving style is not hard to understand: it displays to this day a vibrant, prismatic treatment of the painting surface without abandoning a satisfying sense of order. On the one hand, *Sans titre* fulfills one’s attraction to the textured materiality of hand work. Yseult Riopelle, daughter of the artist and author of the monumental catalogue raisonné of his oeuvre, reports that her father “used to refer to his paintings as ‘sculptures in oil.’”² At the same time, the mosaics promote a sense of cosmic expansion and implication. Contained by its frame, the

actual size of the painted surface is relatively unimportant. We fall into its expansive, even infinite orbit and have no need to be overwhelmed by literal size. If there is confusion over what we see, it is for the viewer short-lived. The painting’s “chaos” is that of a humanist.

Riopelle’s surface gestures in this work are complex yet more calibrated than they might at first seem to be. It is pleasurable to discover shapes, patterns and repetitions in the dynamic field that we see. Our eyes cannot rest—cannot become complacent—yet we might notice and linger on the coalescence of predominantly black and dark blue marks into a cross-like formation on an angle, just above and to the right of the painting’s centre. Riopelle was experimenting with black at this time (for example, *Black Bess*, 1954, in the Ludwig Museum, Cologne). In contrast to the smooth, emotionally neutral surface of the frame, the dominance of black in *Sans titre* stands out as a spectral theme. But again, Riopelle is both bold and subtle with his colour choices. We would not describe the work as black or even dark because Riopelle’s deployment of dark hues focuses through contrast the many areas of highly coloured pigment, combined with white, that are knotted together in the lower centre of the surface. His extensive palette and range of ways to put paint on the canvas encourages, allows, even commands us to see many things at once. Riopelle’s application of paint is crucial to this effect, from the topographical, sculptural ridges laid on with a knife to the diluted streams of running colour, often in grey in this painting.

No matter how often Riopelle denied the analogy, his work of the 1950s was nonetheless compared with the American abstraction of Jackson Pollock. Some critics in New York found Pollock to be the more original and inspirational artist.³ If we look closely at the liquid skeins of grey paint in the upper left quadrant of *Sans titre*, however, we might well conclude that Riopelle was right to insist on the uniqueness of his technique. These rivulets are not so much Pollock’s famous “drips” as the effects of Riopelle’s own flicking gestures. There is, however, a closer connection between the two artists, one favourable to both. A central anecdote in the lore of Abstract Expressionism is Lee Krasner’s recollection of her husband Pollock’s retort to Hans Hofmann’s advice circa 1944 that he should paint from nature. “I am nature,” claimed Pollock.⁴ The French art writer Georges Duthuit made the same declaration about Riopelle’s approach to abstraction. Asked about milestones in his career, Riopelle was given a list by his interviewer: “What for you was the decisive moment, that put you in the limelight for good? Was it when [Surrealist leader André] Breton singled you out? Your first retrospective? Georges Duthuit’s memorable words, in 1954: ‘You summoned Nature, she descended, here she is.’ In other words: Riopelle is Nature!”⁵ Duthuit, who spent considerable time in New York, may have heard of Pollock’s hubris and then redeployed it in the ongoing transatlantic competition for pre-eminence in abstract painting. Whatever his motivations, the statement captures the cosmic potency of Riopelle’s *Sans titre*.

We thank Mark A. Cheetham for contributing the above essay. Cheetham is the author of two books on abstract art: *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* and *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure since the ‘60s*. He is a professor of art history at the University of Toronto and a freelance curator and artwriter.



Jean Paul Riopelle, circa 1955

1. Quoted in François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2019), 15.

2. Yseult Riopelle, “Riopelle, the Alchemist of Matter,” Jean Paul Riopelle Foundation, para. 1, <https://fondationriopelle.com/en/artwork/>.

3. On Riopelle’s techniques, see Marie-Claude Corbeil, Kate Helwig, and Jennifer Poulin, *Jean Paul Riopelle: The Artist’s Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2011), 28ff.

4. Lee Krasner, “Interview with Bruce Glaser” (1967), in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel and Kirk Varnedoe (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 28.

5. Cited in Gilbert Érouart, *Riopelle in Conversation*, trans. Donald Winkler (Concord, ON: House of Anansi, 1995), 43.

This work is accompanied by a photograph certificate of authenticity from Yseult Riopelle and is included as an addendum to Volume 2 in the online catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work at <http://www.riopelle.ca>.

ESTIMATE: \$1,200,000 – 1,600,000