



21 **Jean Paul Riopelle**

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

**Sans titre**

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled as  
*Composition* on the Galerie Anne Abels label,  
inscribed 16/2284 and stamped indistinctly, 1952  
47 ¼ x 78 ¾ in, 120 x 200 cm

**PROVENANCE**

Dotremont Collection, Brussels  
Galerie Anne Abels, Cologne  
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, 1960  
*Contemporary Art*, Christie's Paris, June 1, 2012, lot 12  
Private Collection, New York

**LITERATURE**

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,  
*Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, reproduced pages 226 – 227  
and listed page 378, catalogue #1952.017H.1952  
*Un art autre? Artistes autour de Michel Tapié*, Christie's Paris,  
2012, reproduced pages 132 – 133

**EXHIBITED**

Kestner-Gesellschaft Museum, Hanover, *Jean-Paul Riopelle*,  
September 13 – October 19, 1958, catalogue #16  
Galerie Anne Abels, Cologne, *Jean-Paul Riopelle*, 1959,  
catalogue #1  
Christie's Paris, *Un art autre? Artistes autour de Michel Tapié*,  
January – March 2012

The artist explores. His experiments concede nothing to the facility the routine, mechanically repeated knife gesture might seem to encourage.... He's a skilled hunter, forever circling back around to the same tracks. He leaves and forgets them, returns, reworks and transforms them, with no clear break, a movement to and fro where it all comes together in the end.<sup>1</sup>

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE painted *Sans titre* in the Montmartre studio on rue Durantin that his friend Henri Fada lent him from 1952 until 1955. It was the first studio he had had of his own. It is fascinating to trace the formal evolution of the artist's works between 1949 and 1955, during his Automatist period, influenced by the French Surrealists, from which he distanced himself even in 1949 and 1950. In 1949, with *Le Perroquet vert* (collection of the Musée du Québec), and most of all in the early 1950s, Riopelle left brushes behind in favour of the palette knife. That was when he began to apply impasto. He often joked that the thickness of the paint was unintentional, he just could not do "thin painting."



Jean Paul Riopelle, circa 1955

*Sans titre* from 1952 belongs to the "mosaics" series Riopelle embarked on in 1950. At this point in his mosaic period, Riopelle criss-crossed the painted surface with filaments of bright and vibrant colour, sometimes blacks. Fine lines made with a pipette and palette knife ran across the canvas from place to place, interlaced into a grid, superimposed on the work's base. You can feel the energy and excitement Riopelle got out of his life in Paris. It is equally palpable in his other works from this time, such as *Retour d'Espagne* (1951), *15 Chevaux Citroën* (1952), and *Le Marronnier* (1952 – 1953), which portrays a chestnut tree outside the window of Riopelle's rue Durantin studio. Each painting in the cycle is emblematic of a major transition that marked him out among



his contemporaries—his gestural passion, his expressiveness, or his commitment to the principle of “total chance.” Total chance, albeit combined with a breathtaking mastery of the medium and an implacable feel for composition through rhythmic sections of colour wound round in lattices that gave these works an architectural structure and infused them with an extra jolt of energy.

Then in 1953, Riopelle dropped the interlaced threads to focus exclusively on mosaic effects. Some say this move was in part to escape comparisons to the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, which Riopelle vehemently denied. Pollock’s technique involved spreading the canvas on the floor, while Riopelle worked on his creations vertically, face to face.<sup>2</sup> As Monique Brunet-Weinmann explains: “It is in this brief interval in Riopelle’s career that his compositions seem to me to be closest to Pollock’s all-over painting...”<sup>3</sup> She continues:

Pollock’s celebrated technique involved allowing paint to drip, from a long stick or from a perforated box, onto a canvas laid flat on the ground, in a kind of horizontal choreography around and above it. The resulting scriptural arabesque effected a controlled return as the painter approached the edge, rather than extending beyond (although he did do this on occasion), which had the effect of rupturing the tracery. For Pollock, the picture plane as Kandinsky had conceived it was present inasmuch as the material frame was absent: he interiorized it. The result was a closed space, bereft of “central points,” of focal points, and thus of energizing nodes. [Brunet-Weinmann then cites the critic Thomas B. Hess:] “Riopelle, on the other hand, insisted that his canvases be stretched to respect certain dimensions or proportions that had been accepted in France for 200 years. When he placed the first point in the centre of a white surface, he knew what its boundaries would be.”<sup>4</sup>

Riopelle’s artistic idiom, founded on gestural freedom and seemingly emancipated from all figurative reference, is instantly recognizable as part of the post-war avant-garde. His first solo exhibition, *Riopelle à La Dragonne*, was in April 1949 at Galerie Nina Dausset, a favourite Surrealist haunt. André Breton and others contributed a group “private conversation” to the catalogue.<sup>5</sup> Although he was now a leading representative of the École de Paris, which in the 1950s comprised practitioners of Art Informel (Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Nicolas de Staël) and of Lyrical Abstraction (Georges Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Wols, Zao Wou-Ki), he also took part in exhibitions of American painters (including Pollock, Willem De Kooning and Sam Francis, who became a close friend). The large colour mosaics of Riopelle’s 1954 show at New York’s Pierre Matisse Gallery cemented his status as a major artistic talent whose work, for some, was part of the American abstract art tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Riopelle was at times annoyed by commentators’ preoccupation with abstraction and figuration in his work, how one or the other might be foregrounded depending on his creative inclinations at a given time. As Jean-Louis Prat wrote:

The two paths he follows are not contradictory, but undisputably complementary. They are the inevitable conclusions of his intuition and his sensibility. The painter’s approach

enables him to apprehend the ephemeral character of an ever-changing nature,...<sup>7</sup>

Riopelle often argued that he was not an abstract painter at all. He loved the natural world, claiming to depict it from the inside. The energy he brought to his work never flagged, encompassing a tremendous diversity of approaches, from the paint he spread in filaments across the surface of the canvas in the early 1950s to the mosaic effects he was celebrated for beginning in 1953 and the bestiary of figures he returned to in his sculpture, printmaking and collage of the 1960s, continuing on until the end of his artistic journey.

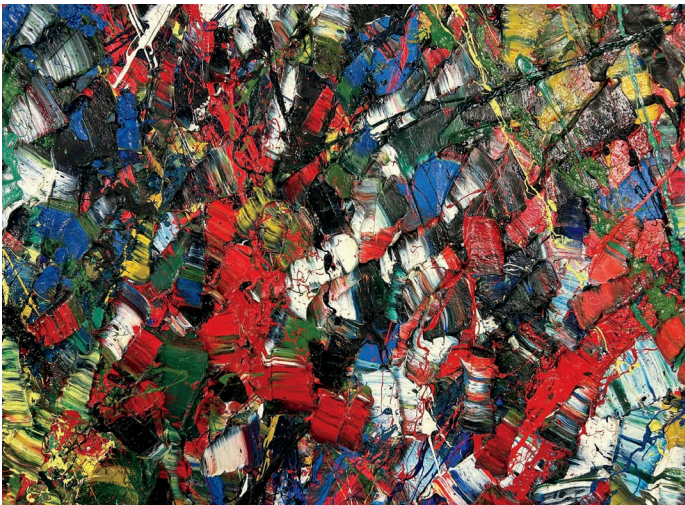
Unlike many of his contemporaries, Riopelle never let himself be locked into a school or movement. After a brief stint as an Automatist, a short association with late Surrealism and another brief period of identification with Lyrical Abstraction and the École de Paris, Riopelle’s career left its mark on the history of art with a voice and style entirely his own. He was a free-thinker of painting and “always insisted on an uncompromising, jealously guarded freedom.”<sup>8</sup> His manner of working evolved over time, showing that he was never impervious to competing currents. The diversity of artistic practice throughout his 50-year career was remarkable. He was into everything; there was nothing he could not do. Riopelle was not only an artist who created mosaics, he was a mosaic artist, multidisciplinary *avant la lettre*, exploring—besides painting<sup>9</sup>—such media as sculpture, inks and watercolour, felt pen, lithography, etching, assemblage-collage, porceliron, pastel, sanguine, charcoal, spray paint and more. In the words of Jeffrey Spalding:

Riopelle, like [Gerhard] Richter, has worked to liberate painting from the tyranny of theory and hegemony. Both bravely attempted to make grand gestures, each endeavours to create astounding paintings. Riopelle is a post-expressionist: he longed to make of expressionism something solid and lasting, like the art of the museums.<sup>10</sup>

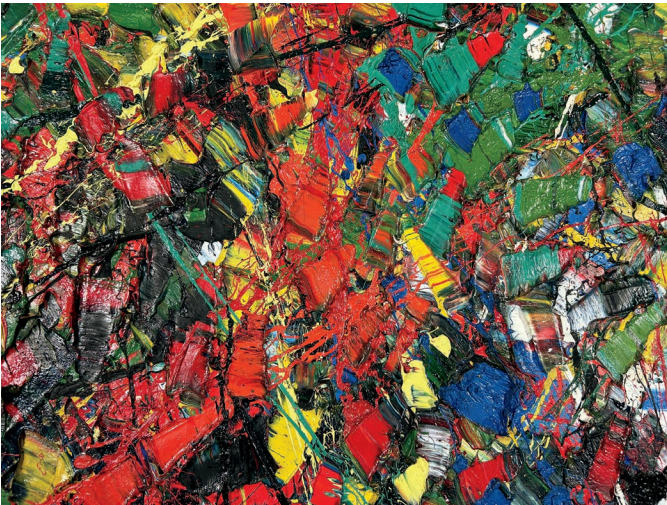
Riopelle’s works are important and part of the history of Québécois, Canadian and Western art because he always followed the path he had laid out for himself. The freedom to express himself in his own way and to experiment with diverse materials and media was the driving force behind his creativity.

We thank Dr. Sylvie Lacerte, art historian, independent curator, author of multiple books on contemporary art, and the curator of the retrospective exhibition *Riopelle: Crossroads in Time*, for contributing the above text. This major exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in 2023, traveled to the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2024, and is on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery until September 1, 2025.

1. René Viau, “Une saison dans la vie de Riopelle: Cinquante oeuvres inédites des années 60 exposées pour la première fois à Paris,” *La Presse*, June 6, 1994, A14.
2. Note that Riopelle used high-quality paint and canvas, whereas Pollock used automotive paint not known for its longevity on cotton canvas or cardboard.
3. Other observers described Riopelle’s style as “all-out,” as the paint often overflowed the frame.



details



4. Monique Brunet-Weinmann, “Birth of a Signature,” in *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 1939–1953, ed. Yseult Riopelle (Montreal: Hibou Éditeurs, 1999), 134–35, quoting Thomas B. Hess, in *Jean Paul Riopelle, peinture 1946–1977* (Paris: Centre Georges-Pompidou, 1981).
5. Elisa Breton, André Breton, and Benjamin Peret, *Riopelle à La Dragonne* (cat.), Galerie Nina Dausset, Paris, March 23 to April 23, 1949, in Y. Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, 425.
6. Georges Duthuit, Samuel Beckett (trans.), *Riopelle* (cat.), Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, January 5 to 23, 1954, in Y. Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, 427.
7. Jean-Louis Prat, “I Remember ... Yesterday and Today,” foreword to *Jean-Paul Riopelle*, ed. Jean-Louis Prat et al. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), exhibition catalogue, 11–12.

8. Michel Waldberg, “Riopelle, l’écart absolu,” in Y. Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, 22.
9. He even described his paintings as “sculptures in oil,” in Yseult Riopelle, “Riopelle, Alchemist of Matter,” preface to *Jean Paul Riopelle: The Artist’s Materials*, ed. Marie-Claude Corbeil, Kate Helwig, and Jennifer Poulin (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2011), xi.
10. Jeffrey Spalding, “Immaculate Misconception,” in *Riopelle*, ed. Guy Cogeval and Stéphane Aquin (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), exhibition catalogue, 17.

**ESTIMATE UPON REQUEST**