

26    **Jean Paul Riopelle**

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

**Sans titre**

oil on canvas, on verso signed, dated 1950  
and inscribed *Garçon*  
28 7⁄8 × 13 5⁄8 in, 73.3 × 34.6 cm

**PROVENANCE**

Paul Garson, Paris  
By descent to a Private Collection  
Private Collection, Europe  
*Post-War & Contemporary Art 1*, Artcurial,  
December 3, 2019, lot 29  
An Important Collection, London, United Kingdom

**LITERATURE**

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,  
*Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, reproduced page 372,  
catalogue #1950.028H.1950

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE is very much talked about these days, just over one hundred years after his birth. His ongoing topicality is in part thanks to the large exhibition *Riopelle: Crossroads in Time / À la croisée des temps*—organized by the National Gallery of Canada to celebrate the Riopelle centenary and curated by Sylvie Lacerte—which is touring nationally (and can be seen at the Vancouver Art Gallery to September 1). Not only are those familiar with Riopelle’s prodigious art-making over a 50-year span able to see his work anew; the exhibition also explicitly puts Riopelle in visual conversation with significant painters of his generation and with a number of contemporary artists.

Riopelle’s name means much more than a vibrant and memorable style of painting. His reputation as a leader of the avant-garde in his home province of Quebec, as well as in Europe and the USA, is unequaled by any other mid-twentieth-century painter from Canada. Riopelle was a quintessential artist-rebel: a prominent follower of Paul-Émile Borduas in Montreal and instrumental in the transformative cultural manifesto *Refus global* (1948), his commitment to the then-dominant practices of

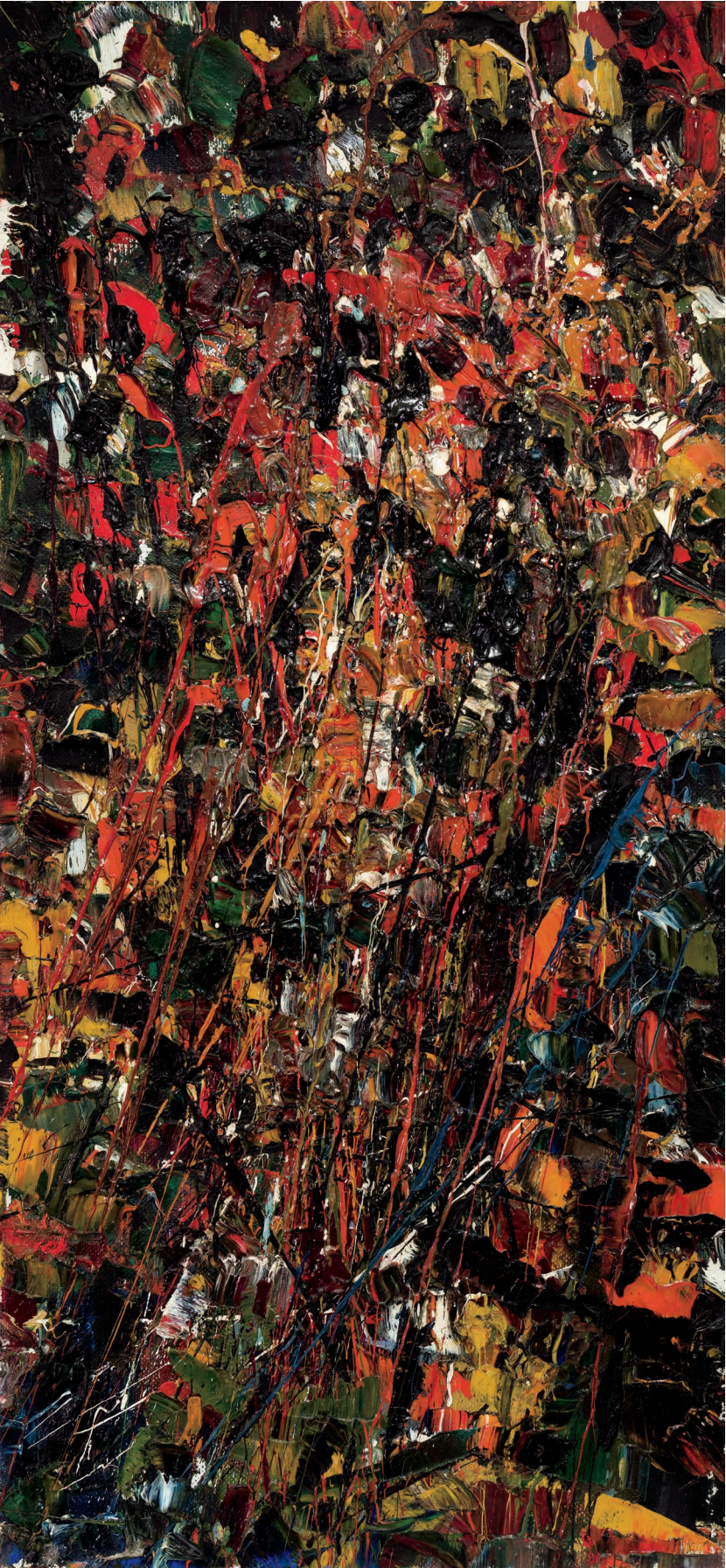
abstract painting was exceptional. He extended his early interest in Surrealism at its source when he moved to Paris in 1947. André Breton—the leader of the Surrealists—included him in the landmark sixth international exhibition of Surrealism at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1947, in which Riopelle was the only Canadian. Yet while the creative energy of the unconscious seen at this time remained important for Riopelle, as *Sans titre* of 1950 shows, his signature work of the 1950s moved away from the look of Automatism and abstract Surrealism.

*Sans titre* works on two scales, the physical and the conceptual. It is traditionally framed and with specific dimensions. But it is easy to forget this border and enter the space created by Riopelle. We can think of this dimension as infinite, or more metaphorically, as cosmic.

*Sans titre* presents a vertical wall of colour in motion. We are not blocked by this dimension but instead pulled into its orbit. The dramatic surface seems at first to be completely covered by an effusion of pigment. Yet the unique vertical format—unusual for Riopelle—itself suggests an upward movement that he exploits to create a temporary order.

In the lower centre, we see an intensely painted, fine-lined concentration of marks and shapes. Skeins of red and orange are thrown vertically from this core, at first overlapping and then melding with the underlying layers of pigment. These form a net that seems to erupt from near the bottom of the canvas but never coalesces into a recognizable entity. The overall effect is dramatic, yet as always with Riopelle, it is the detailed passages that most reward close attention. For example, there is a noticeable difference in the weight of the strokes that constitute this gushing focal point as opposed to its surrounds, where the strokes are more broadly applied. The darker forms near the frame form an internal border that is stiller, quieter, and above all more open spatially.

From his neutral title, we can surmise that Riopelle is not going to tell us what we see or how to look. He did not like categories, especially the term “abstract” and its cognates. In an interview he claimed, “ ‘Abstraction,’ ‘to abstract,’ ‘to extract from,’ ‘to derive from’ ... My approach is the exact opposite. I don’t take anything from Nature, I move into Nature.”<sup>1</sup> In the same interview,







Riopelle comments on the French critic Georges Duthuit's memorable words in 1954: "You summoned Nature, she descended, here she is. In other words: Riopelle is Nature!"<sup>2</sup> Duthuit's vivid essay on Riopelle accompanied *Riopelle: First American Exhibition*, shown at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City in 1954, not long after *Sans titre* was painted and when Riopelle's international reputation exploded. Riopelle later explained: "In its organization, nature is my source. But others can see what they want. In general, I think that things when they are organized are part of nature, that's what I mean by nature."<sup>3</sup>

That nature is Riopelle's constant reference and inspiration—not in the sense of a recognizable object or being, but as an organizing system and source of energy—is readily evident in this painting from 1950. Stemming in part from nationalistic competition and commercial hype, Riopelle's work was often linked in the 1950s to both European Surrealist-inspired abstraction and American Abstract Expressionism (especially that of Jackson Pollock—however disparate their approaches were, given that Riopelle worked with a palette knife rather than brushes and did

not paint his works on the floor). For his part, Riopelle denied that he worked with abandon, a salutary correction that sends us back to the details of this work. Passionate and expressive, it is also under his control and carefully executed. Like nature perhaps, it has structure and is never random.

We thank Mark A. Cheetham for contributing the above essay. He 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.

1. Gilbert Érouart, *Riopelle in Conversation*, trans. Donald Winkler (Concord, ON: House of Anansi, 1995), 25.

2. Quoted in *ibid.*, 43.

3. *Ibid.*, 85.

**ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000**

