



31 Jean Paul Lemieux

CC QMG RCA 1904 – 1990

Les premiers communiants

coloured felt pen on paper on linen, signed and dated 1973 and on verso titled on the Waddington & Gorce gallery label
36 ½ x 92 in, 92.7 x 233.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Gilles Corbeil, Montreal
Waddington & Gorce Inc., Montreal
Private Collection, Toronto

EXHIBITED

Galerie Gilles Corbeil, Montreal, *Dessins de Jean Paul Lemieux*,
April 25 – May 11, 1974

DRAWING HELD A special place in Jean Paul Lemieux’s heart, and it was a constant throughout his career. As a student at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal, Lemieux drew praise as a book illustrator with a keen sense of composition and rhythm. His many sketchbooks, now housed in the National Gallery of Canada, are filled with notes, watercolours and sketches. In 1927, his talent as a graphic artist earned him first prize in a year-end school competition, for *Affiche de bal masqué*.¹ In 1929,

he illustrated the cover of the popular Montreal magazine *La Revue moderne* with a tightly composed drawing on the theme of aviation.² Hoping to make a name for himself in advertising and commercial art, he completed an internship with interior designer Guy Selz in Paris that same year. But in 1930, only six months after Lemieux returned to Montreal and founded the commercial art studio JANS with Jori Smith and Jean Palardy, the onset of the Great Depression forced the three friends to close their little venture in Beaver Hall Square. That prompted Lemieux to pursue further studies as an art instructor. He would go on to teach at the École des beaux-arts de Québec until 1965.

The famous painter considered drawing to be a medium in its own right, as exhibition-worthy as painting. One of Lemieux’s last solo exhibitions during his lifetime, at the Lacerte-Guimont Gallery in Sillery in 1983, was a collection of recent drawings. A decade earlier, the Gilles Corbeil Gallery in Montreal had mounted two separate shows of Lemieux’s drawings: a collection of wash drawings in 1972 and, two years later, a collection of drawings done with coloured felt pens. The latter became favourites during the winter months Lemieux spent in Florida, far from his studio, and nurtured his renewed interest in drawing during this period. *Plage*, a landscape from 1974, is a fine example, as is *Five O’clock*, an indoor scene completed in 1973, the same year as *Les premiers communiants*.³

Lemieux’s drawings show a rich vocabulary deployed with perfect mastery. People and objects emerge as an accumulation of strokes: simple hatching and cross-hatchings and small circular patterns. In the visual symphony of *Les premiers communiants*, the white of the paper is employed to great effect, not only as a surface for ink but also in delineating the white shapes he brings into play in the scene, such as the ribbons worn by the young lads and the white wall that occupies much of the background. Only the faces and hands are treated in greater detail in this scene.

As the second sacrament after baptism, Communion is a significant event in the life of any young Catholic who has reached the age of reason. Lemieux explored the theme in an earlier work: in 1971, he painted the portrait of a young boy dressed for First Communion.⁴ In *Les premiers communiants*, Lemieux underscores the high ceremony of the event, arranging a row of six boys in a frieze, their hands in prayer, dressed in their Sunday best and with the immaculate white satin armbands and ribbons that symbolize this rite of passage. Blond, brown-haired and red-headed, the young boys wear an expression of solemn anticipation as they march in procession, bookended by a pair of priests. In the middle ground, the artist has depicted six trees in full spring bloom, echoing the youthful innocence of the children. In the background, Lemieux completes the composition with a high wall that blocks out all but a tiny sliver of sky.

As a remarkable composition that remains open to interpretation, *Les premiers communiants* is a testament to Lemieux’s view of drawing as an essential art form. The format itself is of course eloquent, but even more so, it is the “Lemieux effect,”⁵ evident in the mood and spirit of the drawing—the gentle irony floating in the air—that works on the viewer, instantly projecting them into the scene and prompting reflections on their own existence.

It is our opinion that *Les premiers communiants* was the centrepiece of the *Dessins de Jean Paul Lemieux* exhibition presented at the Gilles Corbeil Gallery in 1974. Despite the absence of references—such as a catalogue, a list of the works exhibited, or newspaper articles about the exhibition—a note left by Mrs. Lemieux in her husband’s sales records indicates that the provenance of this exceptional work started with the 1974 showing.⁶

We thank Michèle Grandbois, author of *Jean Paul Lemieux au Musée du Québec*, for contributing the above essay, translated from the French. This work will be included in Grandbois’s forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work.

1. École des beaux-arts de Montréal fonds, 5P-610 :02/1 T-1 box 589, Service des archives et de gestion des documents, Université du Québec à Montréal.



detail

2. *La Revue moderne* 10, no. 7 (May 1929).
3. Guy Robert, *Lemieux* (Montreal: Éditions internationales Alain Stanké, 1975), *Plage* illus. p. 144, *Five O’clock* illus. p. 229.
4. Heffel Fine Art Auction House sale, May 28, 2014, *Communion*, lot 32, cat. p. 46.
5. Marie Carani, *Jean Paul Lemieux* (Quebec City: Musée du Québec & Les Publications du Québec, 1992), exhibition catalogue, 235–63.
6. Jean Paul Lemieux et Madeleine Des Rosiers fonds, R6612, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

ESTIMATE: \$60,000 – 80,000