



12 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Composition

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1958 and on verso titled on the exhibition label and inscribed *Laing* on the Arthur Lenars & Cie., Paris shipping label and variously 45 5/8 × 35 in, 116 × 89 cm

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by G. Blair Laing
Laing Galleries, Toronto
Collection of John A. MacAulay, Winnipeg
Private Collection, New York
A.K. Prakash & Associates Inc., Toronto
Private Collection, Nova Scotia

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*, online addendum to *Volume 2, 1954–1959*, 2012, <http://www.riopelle.ca>

EXHIBITED

Musée de Tesse, Le Mans, *One Hundred Years of Modern Painting, from Claude Monet to Arman*, June 6 – July 3, 1975

COMPOSITION IS A powerful example of Jean Paul Riopelle’s signature “mosaic” style. At the peak of his powers and fame, throughout the 1950s Riopelle would continue to refine the oblique relationship between his lyrical abstractions and the landscape imagery that they frequently evoke without submitting to the constraints of naturalist representation.

The formal hybridity and art-historical savvy displayed by works like *Composition* prompted some observers to apply the term “abstract impressionism” to describe Riopelle’s production in this period.¹ Their luminous fields of colour and immersive scale reveal a filial relation to the near abstraction and panoramic sweep of Claude Monet’s late *Water Lilies*. Fittingly, Riopelle and his long-time partner, the American Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell, would live together near Monet’s former estate at Vétheuil, beginning in 1959. But though nodding to the past, Riopelle performed an audacious reinvention of the legacies of Impressionism reflective of the athletic gesturalism and monumental proportions of American action painting as well as the chromatic and textural poetry of French Art Informel.

Confidently modeled with a palette knife or spatula, Riopelle’s tile-like blocks or wedges of broken but intense colour nimbly balance intuition and structure, expressivity and impersonality. These competing vectors trace the multiple influences on Riopelle’s formation. Studying under the visionary artist and pedagogue Paul-Émile Borduas at the École du meuble in early 1940s Montreal, Riopelle found common cause with other future members of the Automatist movement. The Automatists were in search of a visual equivalent to the stream-of-consciousness writing practice of Surrealist André Breton. As Borduas stated in the group’s 1948 manifesto, *Refus global*—a document that Riopelle not only signed, but for which he supplied the striking cover artwork—their goal was an “unpremeditated writing in plastic matter.”²

Sharing a studio with Marcel Barbeau and Jean-Paul Mousseau in the mid-1940s, Riopelle was among the most adventurous students of the charismatic Borduas. Independent of the emerging New York School, these younger artists had begun to experiment in directions that ran parallel to the Abstract Expressionists’ technique of “all-over” composition and its democratic treatment of the entire pictorial surface.³ Opening

in New York in January 1946, and organized by the multidisciplinary Françoise Sullivan, the inaugural exhibition of the Borduas group (as it was then known) issued a defiant challenge to the Americans on their home turf.⁴

Even prior to the Automatists’ formal declaration of cultural revolution in the pages of *Refus global*, Riopelle had already joined peers Fernand Leduc and Thérèse Renaud in relocating in 1947 to Paris, where he soon sought out Breton. Riopelle developed a fruitful rapport with Breton that led to his inclusion in the sixth *International Exhibition of Surrealism*—the only Canadian participant. Riopelle would draw inspiration from the collections of non-Western art amassed by Parisian Surrealists like Breton, sparking a fascination with Indigenous arts and Nordic landscapes.⁵

The bold application of white pigment in *Composition* bears the lasting imprint of a 1954 flight over the Austrian Alps.⁶ Glacial locales—both real and imagined—would be a growing preoccupation of Riopelle’s in subsequent decades, culminating in a number of series inspired by the Canadian Arctic during the 1970s. Upending mimetic norms, Riopelle was known to travel in search of landscapes he had already summoned through free association.⁷

Composition is also notable for its venerable provenance. Acquired direct from Paris by G. Blair Laing, the legendary Canadian gallerist and author of the encyclopedic *Memoirs of an Art Dealer* (1979/1982), it later passed to the Winnipeg-based John A. MacAulay, whose collection was of national significance, as recognized by its presentation in exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Toronto in the mid-1950s.⁸

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Werner Schmalenbach quoted in *Jean Paul Riopelle* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), exhibition catalogue, 81.
2. Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus global/Total Refusal*, trans. Ray Ellenwood (1948; Toronto: Exile, 1985), 46.
3. See Roald Nasgaard, “The Automatist Revolution in Painting,” in *The Automatist Revolution: Montreal, 1941–1960* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 30.
4. See Allan Lindgren, *From Automatism to Modern Dance: Françoise Sullivan with Franziska Boas in New York* (Toronto: Dance Collection, 2003).
5. See Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers, and Yseult Riopelle, “Riopelle and the Call of the Land: An Adventure between Two Continents,” in *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures*, ed. Andréanne Roy et al. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in assoc. with 5 Continents, 2020), exhibition catalogue, 37–41.
6. See Michel Martin, “Mitchell | Riopelle: Painting Bears Witness,” in *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation* (Quebec City: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario; Landerneau: Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc pour la culture, in assoc. with 5 Continents, 2017), exhibition catalogue, 26.
7. See Andréanne Roy, “Riopelle and the Memory of Places: A Voyage to the Land of Titles,” in Roy et al., *Riopelle*, 152.
8. See G. Blair Laing, *Memoirs of an Art Dealer*, vols. 1 & 2 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979, 1982); National Gallery of Canada, *Paintings from the Collection of John A. MacAulay, Q.C.* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1954), exhibition catalogue.

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 400,000