



31 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Iceberg

oil on canvas, on verso signed, dated 1980 [sic] and inscribed *D. Lelong New York / 80F* / indistinctly and variously, circa 1977
57 3/8 x 38 1/8 in, 146.4 x 96.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Maeght-Lelong, New York
Post War and Contemporary Art, Sotheby's London,
June 29, 1989, lot 557
Private Collection, Los Angeles
Post-War & Contemporary Morning Sale, Christie's New York,
May 16, 2013, lot 144
Private Collection
Post-War and Contemporary Art Day Sale, Christie's New York,
November 12, 2021, lot 413
An Important Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,
Volume 5, 1972 – 1979, 2021, reproduced page 192 and 193,
catalogue #1977.241H.V1977

EXHIBITED

Salon international des galeries d'art, Montreal Convention
Centre, *Retrospective*, September 25 – 29, 1985

PAINTED IN A richly inflected monochrome palette, there is nothing black-and-white about this vigorously modeled canvas by Jean Paul Riopelle. One of the more enigmatic works in the “deeply mysterious” *Icebergs* series (1977 – 1978), its sophisticated perceptual investigations were inspired by the artist's repeated visits to Pangnirtung on Baffin Island beginning in 1969. “In the Arctic nothing is clear-cut,” Riopelle observed of the subtle effects of transparency and greyness that can be generated by arctic ice.¹

In an illuminating essay completed by Andréanne Roy, the late art historian François-Marc Gagnon explored the visual ambiguities of the *Icebergs* as unfolding a mode of perceptual immersion.² Rather than a straightforward transcription of visual experience, to quote curator Michel Martin, the *Icebergs* communicate Riopelle's “sensorial memory” of the land.³ The immersive genesis of *Iceberg* (1977) is powerfully conveyed by photo-documentation of Riopelle's 1977 visit to Pangnirtung captured by Claude Duthuit, which shows the artist engulfed by melting ice evocative of the contours of a whale (figure 2). A grandson of Henri Matisse, Claude was also the son of art historian Georges Duthuit, an influential member of the Surrealist circle grouped around André Breton to which Riopelle himself quickly gravitated after emigrating to Paris in 1947. Breton would co-author the foreword to the catalogue accompanying Riopelle's inaugural solo exhibition, at Galerie La Dragonne in 1949, while the elder Duthuit would emerge as another early champion.

It was Breton and Duthuit's collections of non-Western cultural belongings that would ignite Riopelle's passion for the Far North and Indigenous arts of the Americas. He would initially



FIGURE 1: Jean Paul Riopelle in his studio in Sainte-Maguerite-du-Lac-Masson with *Iceberg* indicated, 1977
Photo © Basil Zarov
Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, e011205146

pursue these interests in works on paper referencing ceremonial Yup'ik masks acquired by Parisian Surrealists as well as Gitksan carvings likely encountered via reproductions in publications by the Canadian anthropologist Marius Barbeau.⁴ As early as 1954, Riopelle had hoped to present his own work alongside cultural belongings loaned from his Surrealist friends—a pairing that finally materialized to revelatory effect in 2020 in the touring exhibition *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures*.⁵

Not content to explore a disembodied idea of North from afar, Riopelle made multiple visits to the Canadian Arctic in subsequent decades, which would stimulate his engagement with the intricate figures of Inuit string games (*ajaraaq*) in the *Jeux de ficelles* (1969 – 1972).⁶ The prominence of drawing in this series paved the way, in turn, for the lyrical black outlines that define many of the *Icebergs*. Somewhat of an exception to this linear tendency, *Iceberg* (1977) instead retrieves the Neo-Impressionism of Riopelle's signature “mosaics,” whose expansive fields of colour were inspired by the near abstraction of Monet's *Water Lilies* paintings. Incredibly, Riopelle would actually live near Monet's former estate at Vétheuil with his long-time partner, the American Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell. *Iceberg* projects a Nordic mirror image of Monet's pastoral *Nymphéas*—to which the critic Patrick Waldberg aptly compared Riopelle's masterwork *Pavane* (1954), now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.⁷

Riopelle's puzzling use of black to represent icy depths recalls the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who reasoned that since water can appear black, ice too must be black—despite appearances. Like the paradox of Anaxagoras, Riopelle's *Icebergs* manifest the essential ambiguities revealed by the play of perception. This ethos of complexity likewise informed Riopelle's



FIGURE 2: Jean Paul Riopelle in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, July 1977
Photo: Claude Duthuit

rejection of conventional abstract-figurative dichotomies, as well as stylistic labels—of which many were applied to his work over his long and decorated career: from his early association with the Montreal Automatists, whose explosive *Refus global* manifesto he signed in 1948, to the currents of Lyrical Abstraction with which he became identified after moving to Paris.

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. Quoted in Georgina Oliver, “Riopelle, le trappeur traqué,” *Nouvelles littéraires*, no. 2673 (January 8–15, 1979): 14 (trans.).

2. Gagnon and Roy oppose the *methexis* (participation) exemplified by Riopelle’s *Icebergs* to forms of *mimesis* (imitation) reliant on resemblance. See François-Marc Gagnon and Andréanne Roy, “Icebergs: Riopelle ‘Among the World’s Most Beautiful Sculptures,’” in *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures*, ed. Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers, and Yseult Riopelle (Montreal:

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in assoc. with 5 Continents, 2020), exhibition catalogue, 184.

3. Michel Martin, “Mitchell | Riopelle: Painting Bears Witness,” in *Mitchell/ Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation* (Québec 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, 38.

4. See Florence Duchemin-Pelletier, “‘So, My Eskimos Come from France’: Riopelle and the Indigenous Arts in Paris,” in Roy et al., *Riopelle*, 50.

5. See Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers, and Yseult Riopelle, “Riopelle and the Call of the Land: An Adventure between Two Continents,” in *ibid.*, 37.

6. See Krista Ulujuk Zawadski, “Riopelle and Inuit String Games,” *ibid.*, 116–21.

7. See Martin, “Mitchell | Riopelle,” 24.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000

