



PROPERTY FROM THE ESTATE OF EDGAR AND DOROTHY DAVIDSON

29 JEAN PAUL LEMIEUX

CC QMG RCA 1904 ~ 1990

Les voyageurs

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1964
39 3/4 x 74 3/8 in, 101 x 189.5 cm

PROVENANCE:

Galerie Camille Hébert, Montreal
Acquired on August 31, 1964 for \$1,800 by
Edgar and Dorothy Davidson, Montreal
and then moving to Ottawa in 1972

LITERATURE:

Marie Carani, *Jean Paul Lemieux*, Musée du Québec,
1992, a similar 1956 canvas entitled *Le train de midi*
reproduced page 128

Serge Cantin, *Nous voilà rendus au sol*, 2003, page 34

Two imposing men occupy the foreground of this Jean Paul Lemieux painting entitled *Les voyageurs* ~ one facing us, carrying an attaché case, and the other shown in profile with dangling arms. On the right, one can see a train from which we assume the man with the valise just disembarked. There is no indication of a station, or even of a road going from the train to the figures. They are left in a completely empty country that is immense and covered with snow. If we assume that the man on the left with a cap is a taxi driver or a chauffeur, we have no indication of any car, or any other means of transport. Evidently, Lemieux was spare with details. Even the faces of the two men are not very clear ~ you have to look carefully to see their expressions. They do not seem to look at each other, or even to exchange a word. If one could imagine that the man with the valise is the boss and the man with a cap, a servant ~ like in the Hegelian opposition of the master and the slave ~ the title does not stress this. Both are called “les voyageurs” (the travelers), without distinguishing between them.

The archetype of the numerous train pictures in Lemieux's oeuvre is the famous *Le train de midi* (The Noon Train), 1956, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. The relationship with *Les voyageurs* could be questioned, since in *Le train de midi*, no one is in sight. But things are less simple. In the preparatory sketches of *Le train de midi*, Lemieux played with the idea of having one or two people added in the foreground of the composition. He decided, I think rightfully, not to follow this lead in *Le train de midi*, which remains the haunting picture it is today. But the idea of people was not lost. Rightfully again, he decided to give them all his attention, and so we have *Les voyageurs*, with the train barely visible on the right.

The concept of the tourist is often seen as opposite to that of the voyageur. The tourist is said to be a superficial spectator, almost a voyeur, and the voyageur, somebody more deeply involved with the country he visits. But here this opposition is barely applied, since we are obviously speaking of voyageurs who belong to the country where they travel, and are not visiting a foreign country. The purpose of their presence in this vast empty landscape does not seem to have anything to do with tourism. Lemieux

saw himself as a “voyageur” in his own country. He could take a fresh look at the landscape, as if he saw it for the first time, and at the same time have a strong feeling of belonging.

We could apply to Lemieux a nice Hasidic story quoted by the French-Canadian philosopher Serge Cantin. Living in Cracow, Poland, the story goes, was a poor rabbi named Eisik. One night, he heard a voice in a dream that he should go to Prague, where he would find a treasure under a bridge. The rabbi was skeptical at first. But he had the same dream the next day, and the day after, so he set out for Prague on foot. Two months later, he was in Prague near the bridge, but he saw that the bridge was guarded. Trying to figure out how to get to the bridge, he attracted the attention of a guard, who asked him politely if he had lost something. The rabbi could not lie, and told him his dream. The guard burst out laughing. He told him that he also had had a dream, telling him to go to Cracow to the house of a certain rabbi, where he would find a fantastic treasure behind the stove. “Reasonable as I am,” the guard told the rabbi, “I would never have obeyed a voice heard in a dream.” The rabbi thanked him and rushed back home to Cracow, looked behind the stove and found the treasure that ended his misery!

Lemieux would have loved this story. The real treasure, the one which ends our misery, is not in a far distant country, but at home, inside us. Nevertheless, you often need to go to a foreign country to discover this simple truth. This was the experience of Lemieux, discovering the true appearance of Canada on his return from France. Moreover, somebody met during your trip abroad often makes you realize that you should take a better look at your own country. In the case of Lemieux, we do not know who this person could have been.

But all this, which applies to Lemieux and his relationship to the Quebec landscape, does not apply as neatly to the men of *Les voyageurs*. They are not painters and they do not seem to look at the landscape around them. The tall one, who faces us, could be a businessman, if not a “voyageur de commerce”, as we used to say in the old days in Quebec to describe a traveling salesman. But a “voyageur de commerce” normally would not take a taxi, and would be even less likely to have a chauffeur. He would have his own car and travel alone. So, again, as often in Lemieux's paintings, we are left with a certain ambiguity. We suspect there is a story behind the scene, something that Lemieux saw that caught his attention, like the priest and his servant sitting far apart on the verandah, as he has told apropos his painting *Les noces d'or*. But here, we are left to ourselves to reconstruct a story about this painting. There is certainly a distance between the two men, if not a complete alienation of one from the other, but we have no key to progress further. After all this is a painting, not a novel!

We thank François-Marc Gagnon of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute of Studies in Canadian Art, Concordia University, for contributing the above essay.

ESTIMATE: \$350,000 ~ 450,000



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