

15 Guido Molinari

AANFM LP QMG RCA SAPQ 1933 – 2004

Sans titre

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed twice,
dated 2/1968 and inscribed FM 134 OC
on a label

60 × 24 in, 152.4 × 61 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of Steinberg Inc.
Collection of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,
Montreal, acquired from the above in 1990
Estate of Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg,
Montreal

LITERATURE

“Guido Molinari,” *The Toronto Star*,
March 13, 1969
Gail Dexter, “An Artist Unites Man and
Environment,” *The Toronto Star*,
March 15, 1969
Dennis Young, *49th Parallels: New Canadian
Art*, Ringling Museum of Art, 1971,
pages 15 – 16
Pierre Théberge, *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur
l’art*, National Gallery of Canada, 1976,
pages 44 and 86
Robert Welsh, “Molinari and the Science
of Colour and Line,” *Canadian Art Review*
vol. 5, no. 1, 1978, for a full discussion of
Molinari’s understanding of Structuralist
theory and its impact on his oeuvre,
pages 3 – 20
Paulette Gagnon and Yolande Racine,
L’œil du collectionneur, Musée d’art
contemporain de Montréal, 1996,
listed page 58

EXHIBITED

Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal,
L’œil du collectionneur, October 18, 1996 –
January 5, 1997

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND OUTSTANDING
achievement began for Guido Molinari in 1959
with his initial attempts to eliminate horizon-
tal or angular elements from compositions.
Relying solely on repeating vertical bands of
colour, soon to all be of equal width, estab-
lished Molinari’s mature visual voice. By 1961,
suites of repeating stripes in multiple hues
exploded across canvases and catapulted a new
artist onto the international stage. Molinari’s
striped paintings entered collections such as
the National Gallery of Canada (1963), Vancou-
ver Art Gallery (1964) and, with his inclusion
in *The Responsive Eye* (1965), the Museum

of Modern Art, New York (1966). A Guggenheim Fellowship
(1967) and the prestigious David Bright Prize for his monumental
striped paintings, presented when he represented Canada at the
34th Venice Biennale (1968), rounded out the decade.

Throughout this period of intense activity, all of Molinari’s
paintings were comprised solely of vertical bands of colour: visu-
ally dynamic groupings of carefully calibrated hues that seem
to repeat and set off optical illusions unique to each observer.
Colour detached from both figure and ground spreads out across
a flattened picture plane. Each colour appears to be constantly
on the move, reaffirming Molinari’s belief that “there is no such
thing as colour, there are only colour harmonies. Any given colour
exists only in its shape and dimensions, and its correlation with
other colours.”

Sans titre, like all of what have come to be known as Molinari’s
Bi-serial paintings, was developed by dividing the canvas into a
series of sequential groupings of vertical bands of colour. The
repeating colour bands in *Sans titre* appear twice, in the same
order, bifurcating the painting into two equivalent rectangles
comprised of four stripes each, or is it four equivalent rectangles
of hues. Molinari was interested in colour relationships, and the
degree to which rhythmic sequences of repeating colours begin
to actively respond to the viewer’s position once you are engaged
in looking closely. Essentially through his extensive reading of
Structuralist philosophy and his enthusiasm to move beyond the
achievements of Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock, artists he
admired, Molinari was always testing the perceptive capacity of
each viewer.

How much visual information can any individual hold onto?
For example, if you focus on two bands in *Sans titre*, perhaps red
and grey, it is relatively easy to at the same time expand your
comprehensive capacities to the adjacent bands on either side—
so four bands—but make that next step, to six bands, and your
previously concentrated perception of the pair of colours where
you began your visual journey begins to wane. Dennis Young
wrote of the artist, “His serial repetitions produce slight changes
of resonance in each colour note across the work. By this
method of repetition, Molinari implies a discursive, temporal
reading of the canvas, which, like the tonalities used, is aimed
at mitigating the figure-ground gestalt ... Colour hovers near the
painted surface and the gestalt potential of the work remains
unfirm: just as each hue makes a slight equivocation where it
abuts an adjoining colour.”

The immersive visual richness of *Sans titre* from 1968 results
from an exploration of what the artist called colour / space. In the
1976 National Gallery of Canada retrospective catalogue, Pierre
Théberge described these paintings as “a completely new picto-
rial space.” An unrelenting rigour underscores all of Molinari’s
Bi-serial paintings, achieving what he described in 1969 as his
goal as an artist, “to do away with the distinction between figure
and ground. There is a unity between man and his surroundings.
My paintings express it by permitting the viewer to enter the
painting.”

How each colour actually performs when placed side by side
and repeated across a flat surface is central to Molinari’s oeuvre;
that and his belief that emotional responses to juxtapositions of



Guido Molinari; who represented Canada at the 1968 *Venice Biennale*
Photo: Frank Lennon / *Toronto Star*
Courtesy of Getty Images, editorial #502503307

colour are fundamental to painting. The striped paintings are any-
thing but cool abstraction, and their force in engaging viewers is
unrelated to their scale. *Sans titre* does not so much envelop you;
its constantly active surface engages you. Molinari’s stripes form
delicate relationships to initiate an ongoing experience, anticipa-
tions realized inform experience, and all of the elements in the
painting flow freely—no blanks unfilled, no single colour pushed
to the back, no overlaps, and most importantly, the self-identity
of each individual colour band is never sacrificed.

Each colour is fully saturated, individually applied with unerr-
ing gestural detachment and abutted with precision. Colour alone
is activating the space in each painting. With figure-ground abol-
ished, Molinari’s colour / space brings the dynamics of time and
movement into the relationship one can have with the painting.
As your eyes move, a colour relationship changes, space opens up
or folds in. Molinari creates an accordion of colour in which all
of the optical action is orchestrated with the simplest of means—
through abutting bands of colour and the powerful influence each
has on the other.

We thank Gary Dufour, adjunct associate professor at the
University of Western Australia, for contributing the above essay.
Dufour was the curator of the exhibition *Guido Molinari, 1951 –
1961: The Black and White Paintings*, shown at the Vancouver Art
Gallery, the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Art Gallery of Ontario
in 1989 – 1990.

ESTIMATE: \$60,000 – 80,000