



17 Claude Tousignant

AANFM LP QMG RCA 1932 -

Sans titre

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed, dated 6/1966
and inscribed FT 106 ac on a label
42 in diameter, 106.7 cm diameter

PROVENANCE

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

CLAUDE TOUSIGNANT IS one of the giants of Canadian modern abstraction. He has been a major innovator, contributing to a number of phases of non-objective art from the time of his emergence in 1952. Tousignant is continuing to create and evolve in full force today, however, without question his career is most associated with his geometric Op Art paintings of the 1960s. *Sans titre* from 1966 is an outstanding example of his unique iconic signature image.

In contradistinction to the lush palette-knife painterly textural applications of the Automatists, Tousignant's interest in geometry and colour drew him to the legacy of the Bauhaus and the constructivists—Josef Albers, Piet Mondrian, László Moholy-Nagy and Barnett Newman. By 1956 he was creating hard-edge abstraction, with meticulous thin, even coats of industrial car paint that eliminated all texture and brush-strokes. Each band of colour or area was exclusively one hue, without any modulation or shading. Thus, Tousignant is recognized as a central figure in the second generation of Montreal abstraction, the group the Plasticiens.

All of these inventive practitioners employed newly developed acrylic paints to optimize dazzling colour as the key sensation to be experienced through their work. The properties of acrylic are ideal to pursue hard-edged painting, along with masking tape and a clear acrylic sealer to create razor-sharp, crisp clean lines. Masking tape comes in rolls, and each strip of tape, by definition, can most naturally be used to create straight lines of a consistent even width. Additionally, the most common shape of a canvas stretcher is either a rectangle or a square. Thereby, the properties of the material and the customary shape of the canvas dictate rectilinear compositions as the most suitable. The great majority of hard-edged painting compositions feature lines or shapes bearing 90-degree angles.

In 1962, Tousignant began working on circular-shaped canvases. They are a technical marvel, a brazen virtuoso dare: creating hand-painted, perfect hard-edged circles of machine-like precision. He explored this motif for over a decade. *Sans titre*, dated 1966, is from the period of his greatest critical acclaim

and rapid rise to prominence. In 1965, Tousignant and Guido Molinari were the sole two Canadians included in the seminal exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (it toured to five other US cities). It defined a new tendency referred to as Op Art and featured leading international figures of the movement, including Albers and Larry Poons. Tousignant represented Canada at the prestigious *8th Biennial de São Paulo* in 1965.

In 1966, he participated in the National Gallery of Canada traveling exhibition *Constructions de Montréal*. In 1967, he won First Prize in the painting section at *Perspective '67*, Art Gallery of Ontario, also shown at Expo 67. In 1968, he was included in a staggering number of exhibitions worldwide, among them the Edinburgh International Festival of the Arts; Musée national d'art moderne, Paris; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome; Musée cantonal des beaux-arts, Lausanne; Palais des beaux-arts, Brussels; *Canada: Art d'aujourd'hui*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and *Canadian Artists '68*, National Gallery of Canada, *7th Biennial of Canadian Painting*. By 1970 he was prominently discussed in art history texts, notably in *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, by Dennis Reid.

Sans titre is deceptively simple. There are equal-width concentric bands of blue interspersed with what at first appear to be the other components of the primary triad: red and yellow, but which turn out to be red, orange and two yellows. When these colours are viewed at a distance, the eye blends them into various subtle intonations of green and lilac. Yet up close, the individual colour contrasts explode in a cacophony of dynamic visual stimulation. Such works feign the posture of cool, intellectual exercises, but this target painting is anything except reserved. *Sans titre* is “romantic minimalism”; its configurations advance and recede, drawing the viewer into its depths.

Works of this period have been avidly acquired for distinguished private and corporate collections. Tousignant's works are in nearly every important public museum collection in Canada and beyond, including the National Gallery of Canada, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Art Gallery of Ontario, Vancouver Art Gallery, Phoenix Art Museum and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

We thank Jeffrey Spalding for contributing the above essay. Spalding is an artist, curator, author and educator. For more than 40 years, Spalding has served in leadership roles at art museums and educational institutions. He is currently an Art Consultant for the Tao Hua Tan Cultural and Creative Company, and a Lifetime Senior Artist, Tao Hua Tan International Artist Creative Residency, China.

ESTIMATE: \$50,000 – 70,000