





8 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Sans titre

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1953 and on verso inscribed *M. Tronche* and indistinctly and stamped indistinctly
28 ¾ x 39 ¾ in, 73 x 100 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Jan Krugier, Geneva
Private Collection, Paris
Private Sale, Christie's New York, 2011
Galerie de Bellefeuille, Montreal
Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné, Online Addendum Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, <http://www.riopelle.ca/>, catalogue #1953.077H

THE OPTICAL VIBRANCY of this almost 70-year-old painting is remarkable. As well-known as Jean Paul Riopelle was in his lifetime—he arguably remains the most internationally celebrated Canadian artist of any time—and as familiar in style as a classic Riopelle such as this is to collectors and historians, *Sans titre* remains visually arresting. On full display are the particular pleasures to be discovered in viewing a Riopelle from this, his most acclaimed period.

First, the overall effect of his dynamic colour and architectural form is commanding, yet when we get close to the surface, we appreciate the intricate, delicate interlacing of these elements in every detail. While *Sans titre* is free and exuberant in handling and might appear to be spontaneous on the intimate level of form and colour, we can see that it is also carefully adjusted to yield an overall sense of calibrated movement. A “fast” look gives the impression of one surging surface, yet in time, patterns emerge.

For example, moving from left to right, our eyes register three subtly distinct zones of hue and surface activity. Blue and black dominate on the left but are divided from the canvas's middle by almost vertical black shapes that proceed from the bottom centre to the centre of the surface. These marks are the mobile edge of a much lighter zone of mostly orange and white, which in turn gives way to a welter of prismatic colours to the right. Thus, while all colours and forms are found on and interact across the surface, accents emerge. Close up, we can follow how Riopelle created these relative weightings in different parts of this canvas. To the left, he concentrates on the largely black striations. In the middle of the surface, the forms replicate but are instead largely white. Left and right are mediated by several bridges of black.

Riopelle's rise to critical acclaim in Canada, Europe and the United States was rapid. A pupil of Paul-Émile Borduas in Montreal in the 1940s, he was a signatory to the manifesto *Refus global* (1948), Canada's most famous and influential proclamation of artistic and cultural liberty. He was a prominent member of the avant-garde group Les Automatistes before moving to France in 1947, where he became part of the Surrealist circle.

André Breton—the “Pope” of the Surrealists—included him in the sixth *International Exhibition of Surrealism* at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1947, where Riopelle was the only Canadian.

It was in Paris in the 1950s that Riopelle consolidated the “mosaic” quality we see in *Sans titre*, his signature style of painting that caught the attention of so many in the art world. His is a highly active, tactile treatment of the painting surface from which, as we see here, emerges an order that feels both intimate and cosmic. His work of the 1950s was compared with American abstraction, that of Jackson Pollock especially (however much the Quebec artist denied the analogy). Also important to his growing acclaim was his rapport with his New York City art dealer Pierre Matisse (son of the famous artist). Matisse took Riopelle on in 1953 and included him in a group gallery exhibition that fall. He had his first solo show in the USA at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in January 1954—*Riopelle: First American Exhibition*. Riopelle represented Canada in the *Bienal de São Paulo* in 1951 and 1955 and the *Venice Biennale* in 1954 and 1962. He returned to live in Quebec in 1972.

The notable provenance of this painting also attests to the artist's increasing transatlantic importance and to the particular qualities of this work. *Sans titre* was first sold by Galerie Jan Krugier in Geneva. Krugier was a storied World War II resistance fighter, art dealer, connoisseur and collector, a Polish Holocaust survivor who became one of the most influential art dealers of the twentieth century. Perhaps best remembered for representing part of Pablo Picasso's estate in his Geneva (1962–) and New York (1967–2010) galleries, Krugier was known for his broad tastes in modern and then contemporary art. He represented artists as esteemed—yet different from one another—as Henri Matisse, Paul Klee and Jean-Michel Basquiat. That Krugier sold this work is another testament to its quality and place in art history.

While there is no question that the dominant impact of *Sans titre* is visual, it is worth thinking about the degree to which it also presents a compellingly tactile surface, one that telegraphs the physicality of paint as a material and records the artist's corporeal presence in the work. It is topographical, almost geological in its layers. Look closely at any passage and some gestures are bold and assertive. But others—especially the striations of colour that Riopelle added with flicks of his brush or knife—are fragile and subtle. As our senses collaborate to form our perceptions, so too the tactile and visual combine to amplify the effect of this painting.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and the author of two books on abstract art—*The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* and *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s*—for contributing the above essay.

This work is included as an addendum to *Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, catalogue #1953.077H, in Yseult Riopelle's online catalogue raisonné on the artist's work at <http://www.riopelle.ca>.

ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000