



## 21 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

### Sans titre

oil on canvas, signed and on verso signed,  
titled *Composition* on a label and dated 1950  
28 ¾ x 36 in, 72.7 x 91.4 cm

### PROVENANCE

Galerie Cruze, Paris  
Gallery Moos, Toronto  
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection,  
Toronto, July 1983

### LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,  
*Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, reproduced page 263,  
catalogue #1950.025H.1950

PAINTED IN 1950, *Sans titre* belongs to a moment of profound transformation in modern painting, when the language of the medium was being fundamentally changed. In the years immediately following the Second World War, artists across Europe and North America sought new ways to engage with paint, moving beyond traditional composition towards a more direct, physical and immersive approach. In New York, the Abstract Expressionists were redefining gesture and scale; in Montreal, the Automatistes were advancing a radical language of spontaneity and psychic automatism; while in Paris a new generation was revitalizing the School of Paris through a renewed emphasis on material, gesture and space. Within this international context, Jean Paul Riopelle emerged as one of the most dynamic and independent voices, his work distinguished by its density, structural coherence and expressive intensity.

Yet Riopelle's position within this landscape remains singular. As Stéphane Aquin has observed, his work "resists classification," existing outside the conventional categories of both the Paris and New York schools. Moving between these artistic centres while fully belonging to neither, Riopelle developed a language that is at once international and deeply individual. In Aquin's words, "Riopelle would always find his artistic identity in an elsewhere."<sup>1</sup>

This painting unfolds through a dense accumulation of palette knife strokes, forming a tightly interwoven field of colour. Deep reds, blues and passages of black are punctuated by flashes of ochre and white, creating a pictorial surface that appears compact and expansive at the same time. Across this richly worked ground, white and dark linear accents, at times sharply incised, at others fluidly applied, cut through the composition, activating it with urgency and movement. The surface is charged with energy, as

if the marks themselves are continually forming, colliding and dispersing across the canvas.

At first encounter, the composition may appear spontaneous, even turbulent. Yet Riopelle's painting is never arbitrary. As Michel Waldberg observed in his essay "Riopelle, the Absolute Gap," the apparent disorder of his work conceals an underlying rigour, "far less erratic than [it] may at first appear," grounded in "the extreme soundness of its structuring."<sup>2</sup> The strokes interlock with precision, forming a complex system of relationships across the surface, each contributing to the whole. The painting is not a field of random gestures, but a constructed space, developed stroke by stroke with remarkable control and assurance.

In this respect, Riopelle's work offers a compelling point of comparison with the contemporaneous innovations of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Both sought to liberate painting from the constraints of traditional composition, embracing gesture as a primary means of expression. Yet their methods and results differ in fundamental ways. Where American painters often emphasized dispersion and openness, Riopelle's surfaces are layered, compact and intensely physical. His paintings do not dissolve form so much as rebuild it, creating a dynamic and cohesive pictorial field. As Aquin has noted, Riopelle functioned as a "relay" between European thought and the various art trends, from surrealism to abstraction, bridging traditions rather than aligning himself with any single movement.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction is central to understanding the achievement of *Sans titre*. Riopelle's painting is grounded in the material presence of paint itself. The thick impasto captures and reflects light, producing subtle shifts in tone and colour as the viewer moves before the work. The surface becomes a terrain, a field of accumulated gestures that registers both immediacy and control. As Riopelle himself remarked, "When I hesitate, I don't paint; when I paint, I don't hesitate!"<sup>4</sup> The act of painting is one of total engagement, in which instinct and structure operate simultaneously.

While often described as an abstract painter, Riopelle rejected the term, preferring to emphasize his connection to the natural world. He stated: "My conception is not abstraction; it is to move freely toward it ... to try to understand what Nature is, not to start with the destruction of Nature, but to move toward the world."<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Aquin has cautioned, to interpret Riopelle simply as a "force of nature," or to frame his work in terms of raw instinct, risks obscuring his "real artistic mastery."<sup>6</sup> Rather than depicting the natural world, his paintings operate as constructed fields of energy, spaces in which perception, memory and gesture converge.

The white and black calligraphic accents that traverse the surface of this work introduce a further dimension, recalling the



**JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE**  
**Sans titre**  
 watercolour and ink on paper, 1948  
 10 x 13 ¼ in, 25.4 x 35.2 cm  
 Sold by Heffel November 22, 2017, lot 25

Not for sale with this lot



**SHITAO (ZHU RUOJI)**  
 folding fan mounted as an album leaf  
 ink and colour on gold-flecked paper, 1699  
 6 ¾ x 17 ½ in, 17.5 x 44.5 cm  
 Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art  
 Bequest of John M. Crawford Jr., 1988, 1989.363.153

Not for sale with this lot

dynamic linear networks of Riopelle's ink and watercolour works from the late 1940s. In those works, lines intersect and overlap, creating structures that André Breton described as a system of "traps," webs that capture and hold movement within the pictorial field.<sup>7</sup> In *Sans titre*, this principle is transformed through the density of the oil paint. At moments, the lines gather into fleeting configurations, suggesting forms that almost cohere before dissolving back into the surrounding field. A looping contour may briefly evoke a recognizable shape, only to disperse as the eye continues across the canvas. The line does not define form; rather, it traces the movement of thought and gesture, articulating a space in constant flux.

Waldberg further drew a parallel between Riopelle's work and the traditions of Chinese painting, particularly the writings of the seventeenth-century artist Shitao, for whom the "Single Stroke of the Paintbrush" embodied the unity of thought and action.<sup>8</sup> The comparison is not one of direct influence, but of shared sensibility. In both cases, the mark becomes the trace of an encounter, a record of the artist's engagement with the world. Painting emerges not as depiction, but as event.

*Sans titre* stands as a compelling example of this moment of renewal. Painted at a time when Riopelle was emerging as a leading force in post-war modern art, the work possesses a remarkable sense of vitality and assurance. The dense accumulation of strokes conveys an energy that recalls the rhythms of the natural world, not as representation, but as sensation, a field of movement and transformation. The painting seems to pulse with life, its gestures unfolding with a momentum that is both immediate and sustained.

1. Stéphane Aquin, "Jean-Paul Riopelle's Critical Migration," in *Jean Paul Riopelle* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), exhibition catalogue, 37.
2. Michel Waldberg, "Riopelle, The Absolute Gap," in *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 1939-1953, ed. Yseult Riopelle (Hibou Éditeurs, 1999), 40.
3. Aquin, "Critical Migration," 37.
4. Quoted in François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 127.
5. Quoted in Waldberg, "Riopelle," 48.
6. Aquin, "Critical Migration," 37.
7. Quoted in *ibid.*
8. Waldberg, "Riopelle," 45.

This work has remained in the same private collection for 43 years since it was acquired from Gallery Moos in 1983. It is reproduced full page in volume 1 of the *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*.

**ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000**

