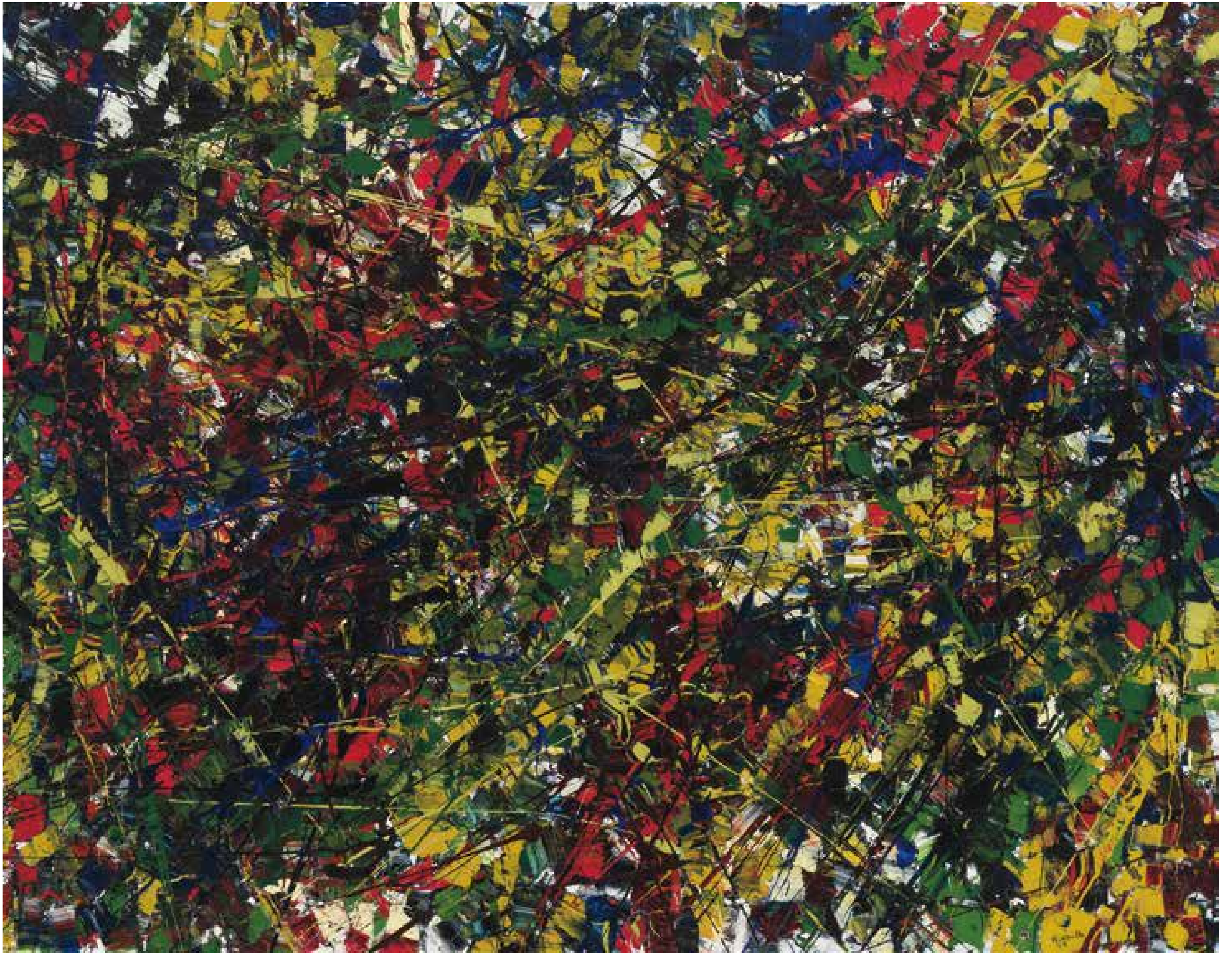

13 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Jouet

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1953 and on verso titled and stamped with the Paris export stamp
45 x 57 ½ in, 114.3 x 146.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Jacques Dubourg, Paris
Galerie Anne Abels, Cologne, 1959
Private Collection, Geneva
Sold sale of *Canadian Post-War & Contemporary Art*, Heffel Fine Art Auction House, June 17, 2009, lot 31
Property of an Important Estate, British Columbia

LITERATURE

Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painting," *ARTnews*, vol. 51, no. 8, December 1952, pages 22 – 23 and 48 – 50
Robert Goldwater, "These Promising Younger Europeans," *ARTnews*, vol. 52, no. 8, December 1953, pages 14 – 16 and 53 – 54
James Fitzsimmons, "Art," *Art and Architecture*, vol. 70, no. 12, December 1953, pages 32 – 33
Robert M. Coates, "Young Europeans at Guggenheim Museum," *The New Yorker*, no. 29, December 19, 1953, page 89
James Thrall Soby, "Younger European Painters," *Saturday Review*, January 2, 1954, pages 61 – 62
Karel Appel, Georges Mathieu, Mattia Moreni and Jean Paul Riopelle, Kunsthalle Basel, 1959
Eduard Trier, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, Galerie Anne Abels, 1959, reproduced

EXHIBITED

Kunsthalle Basel, *Karel Appel, Georges Mathieu, Mattia Moreni and Jean Paul Riopelle*, January 24 – March 1, 1959, traveling in 1959 to the Musée des beaux-arts, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, catalogue #38
Galerie Anne Abels, Cologne, *Jean Paul Riopelle*, November – December 1959, catalogue #2

DATED 1953, *JOUET* (Toy) belongs to the crucial period when Jean Paul Riopelle confronted the New York scene head-on. He was part of James Johnson Sweeney's show entitled *Younger European Painters* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (which was not yet in the Frank Lloyd Wright building) at the end of 1953 and the beginning of 1954, exhibiting the rather dark *Blue Night*, 1952, now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum. At this time, Riopelle was already in contact with the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. Moreover, the art critics, who were quick to compare him to Jackson Pollock, noticed his contribution to the Guggenheim's show, singling him out as one of the most promising among the 33 "younger European [!] painters" exhibited. It was a grand debut. Meanwhile his teacher, Paul-Émile Borduas, was having his first one-man show in New York at Georgette Passedoit Gallery, at 121 East 57th Street, not far from the Pierre Matisse Gallery (situated in the Fuller Building at 41 East 57th Street) where Riopelle was showing.

The issue, of course, was the competition between New York and Paris, not Canadian painting. Had Sweeney's show demonstrated the existence of a new avant-garde in Paris, strong enough to leave behind what was then happening in New York? It is in this context that the critics who mentioned Riopelle's contribution to *Younger European Painters* should be considered. For instance, the art historian Robert Goldwater suggested that "Pollock and Riopelle, Soulages and Kline, Bazaine and Brooks, etc." should be compared to each other. The comparison between Wols and Pollock, attempted by Georges Mathieu in Paris, is dismissed in favour of Riopelle. For James Fitzsimmons, three major painters were exhibited in *Younger European Painters*: Riopelle, Pierre Soulages and Mathieu! For Robert Coates, who is habitually credited as the creator of the appellation Abstract Expressionism, Soulages, Serge Poliakoff, Pierre Tal-Coat and Riopelle were the best in the exhibition. We find the same type of selection from James Thrall Soby. For him, Soulages and Mathieu came first, but Alberto Burri, Marc Mendelson, Riopelle, Raoul Ubac and Vieira de Silva were also worthy of attention. The only one to directly attempt a comparison between Pollock and Riopelle was Fitzsimmons, in the *Art and Architecture* article already referenced.

Fitzsimmons wrote, "Riopelle's painting is large and horizontal, and resembles some of Pollock's later compositions. But Riopelle did less with line and more with colour, and the reference to the external world, to nature, was more overt. He laid on his colour—deep reds, greens, blues and blacks—very thickly, layer on layer, with short choppy strokes that were sometimes parallel, sometimes diagonal to each other. Over and among these colours he threw a tracery, a torn web of sparkling white lines. The final result is quite magnificent: a sort of tapestried richness of substance."

There is much to say about this description. Speaking of "tapestry," Fitzsimmons was quite close to the metaphor that would be used later about Riopelle's pictorial effect, when the word "mosaic" was used instead. The difference between Pollock and Riopelle was aptly put: Pollock worked with line, Riopelle with colour. In fact, Pollock came from Pablo Picasso and Riopelle from Claude Monet. Even when Pollock broadened his lines, as in the magnificent *Greyed Rainbow*, 1953, at the Art Institute of Chicago, they remained what they were: lines. We should not forget that 1953 is the date of Pollock's *Portrait and a Dream*, in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art, where figuration influenced by Picasso clearly surfaced. In his article, Fitzsimmons insisted on the figurative effect of Riopelle's *Blue Night*, stating, "For me the painting has the feeling of a dense forest at night with the blue night sky showing through the thick leaves and branches."

In fact, *Blue Night* was much more abstract than his contemporary Pollock's painting of 1952 – 1953. And Fitzsimmons did not advance his case by stressing that since Riopelle was a Canadian, who "worked for a time as a trapper," he must have known the forest! Why not say that Pollock, who came from Wyoming, worked as a cowboy and took the idea of his use of line from the movement of lashes? By the way, this story of Riopelle having

been a trapper was the pure invention of André Breton, who used to call him "le trappeur supérieur." They liked trappers in Paris! In Paris, Riopelle and his American friends, Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell, had quite deliberately detached themselves from the vogue for Picasso after the war and became interested in Monet, who, when almost blind, transformed his beloved garden in Giverny into abstract fields of colour. This was understood early on by Francis and Riopelle: painting could be a colour field, more or less homogenous, that invaded the scope of vision. A French critic invented the word "nuagisme" (from *nuage*—cloud) to described the effect produced by their paintings.

In fact, the real affinity between Pollock and Riopelle lies at a deeper level. Both had been looking for a way to remain extremely conscious during the act of painting. Pollock put his canvas flat on the floor in order to dominate the whole surface. He created line with paint thrown from above, staying in constant control of what he was doing. Otherwise, he could not have achieved the all-over effect he was searching for. The canvas became, as Harry Rosenberg suggested, an "arena in which to act—rather than a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or express an object, actual or imagined," an arena where "energy was made visible," to quote the title of B.H. Friedman's book on Pollock. The same was true of Riopelle. One has to realize how the use of the palette knife was as determinant for Riopelle as the drip technique was for Pollock. When the palette knife charged with colour was applied, the result was unknown, or rather it would only be known after Riopelle lifted it from the canvas. Then he would have to decide what to do after. Each stroke of the palette knife was a succession of hiding and emergence that made the painter extremely aware of what was happening on his canvas. Each stroke of paint became a conscious decision, always risky.

In both cases, the consciousness of the process of painting was at the maximum. The very awareness of each painter made them feel in control of what was at stake on the canvas. Neither Pollock nor Riopelle wanted to get involved in copying nature, because they would have lost themselves in the object being painted. They wanted to "work from within," as Pollock famously said.

One last word about the title of the work—why *Jouet* (Toy)? I don't think Riopelle wanted to suggest that painting was for him just a playful activity. It was done with too much inner struggle to be considered as such. In fact, Riopelle had been often reluctant to give titles to his pictures, preferring to simply leave them untitled and to let others do the job. In 1953, he had two small children in the house—Yseult was five and Sylvie four years old. I imagine that there were some toys around!

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.

This work is accompanied by a photo-certificate of authenticity #1953.056H (#255-CA-GA) and is included as an addendum to Volume 1, in Yseult Riopelle's online catalogue raisonné on the artist's work at http://www.riopelle.ca.

ESTIMATE: $1,200,000 – 1,600,000

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Jean Paul Riopelle in his studio on rue Durantin, Paris, 1952
Photos: John Craven
Courtesy of Yseult Riopelle