



(OPPOSITE) UNTITLED DRAWINGS (1945), INK AND GRAPHITE ON WOVE PAPER, 27.5x21.5cm EACH (11"x8½").
COLLECTION: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO.
PHOTOS BY CARLO CATENAZZI.

THE LION IN AUTUMN

The magical past
and clouded present of Jean-Paul Riopelle

By LISA ROCHON

Jean-Paul Riopelle is one of those exotic talents tempered by the discretion of a Sphinx. Nevertheless, what Robert Fulford said of him in *Canadian Art* in 1961 is still true. "More than any other Canadian, living or dead, he has impressed his artistic personality on the world outside of Canada." A Montrealer who plunged fearlessly into the surrealist depths of postwar Paris, he surfaced, by the mid-'50s, in New York, as an artist whose painting was shown alongside the work of Giacometti, Dubuffet and Yves Tanguy. You could have seen him in a Montparnasse café with Jean-Paul Sartre or at the famous Cedar Tavern in New York with Jackson Pollock. He is a man with a passion for racing cars; he's also a recluse who likes to go hunting for wild geese on Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. But he is all of these things without even hinting at what he is really thinking. At once a myth and a reality, very much alive, very much a survivor of a bygone era of the hard-living, hard-drinking artist, Jean-Paul Riopelle is elusive, to say the least.

Two years ago in Paris, at the opening of *Presence of Canadian Painting* at the Canadian Cultural Centre, talk of Riopelle swirled from the ground floor, where young artists stared silently at one of his famous palette-knife oils from the '50s, to the champagne reception upstairs, where a gaggle of established Canadian artists discussed Riopelle's latest paintings of geese and owls. Conversation rallied around either Riopelle or New York. Riopelle was not to be found, and, asked whether he would be arriving late from his studio in Saint-Cyr-en-Arthies, just west of Paris, Liliane Jenkins, then the centre's art curator, was glad to divulge a tidbit about the mystery man: "Oh well, you know, Riopelle never comes to his openings," adding with a sigh, "he never has."

Riopelle can afford to avoid cocktail parties; his reputation is intact. His paintings are handled by the world's biggest galleries: the Galerie Maeght Lelong in Paris and Zurich, the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, the Dominion Gallery in Montreal. At Sotheby's auction in Toronto in May, a 1953 Riopelle painting sold for \$165,000 — a record price for a living Canadian artist.

When the National Gallery of Canada opens its new building next spring, *Pavane*, a triptych painted by Riopelle in 1954, will occupy a commanding spot in the Canadian galleries. And at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, *Chevreuse*, an enormous 1954 canvas, almost fills an entire wall.

The pictures from the '50s have secured Riopelle's place in art history. It was during this period that he perfected his technique of action painting. His obsession to conquer a canvas could last for 48 hours, as Riopelle worked like an exorcist, freeing paints from their tubes and palette knifing the colours into a frenzy of spinning tops and a fury of gouged and scored reliefs. Says Jean Fremon, executive director of the Galerie Maeght Lelong: "I think the beginning of Riopelle's career was dazzling. He was very young and he commanded an authority that was noticed by everyone. He was really, for 15 years, the leader of his generation."

Eighty kilometres north of Montreal, the Laurentians ease their foothills under fields frozen to burgundy. The trees are covered in an autumn frost while horses stand silently nearby, staring out at the highway. The cutoff for Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac Masson comes just after the exit for Mont-Gabriel — prime ski country — and leads to a narrow road that winds past winter resorts and signs for off-season lunch or dinner specials.

Driving to Riopelle's part-time Canadian residence in late November, I think of the artist as a teenager in Montreal, and 20 years later in Paris just after he won the UNESCO prize at the 1962 Venice Biennale. Photos from that period portray a bull of a man with a thick neck and deep, haunting eyes. This was a face that could animate an entire room. Walter Moos, of Gallery Moos in Toronto, recalls the energy of Riopelle at a 1964 dinner in New York. "He was a dynamo. Unbelievable. He was going like a volcano. The energy of this man is absolutely incredible."

As I approach the wooden church of Sainte-Marguerite, Riopelle's magical past enters my thoughts. This was a man who caught the attention, when he first went to Paris in 1947, of

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(RIGHT) *BIJOUX BROYERS* (1955), OIL ON CANVAS, 40.6x33cm (16"x13").
PRIVATE COLLECTION.
COURTESY: DOMINION GALLERY.

surrealists André Breton and Salvador Dali. He became especially close to Alberto Giacometti, with whom he travelled to Venice for the 1962 Biennale: "We spent 15 days in Venice. Where? I don't think either one of us could imagine where we stayed. I remember a very pretty room in a superb palace hotel. I opened the door, closed it and never returned. Alberto never went back to his hotel room either."

He still sleeps little, drinks a lot and could care less about either. In fact, Riopelle's stubbornness about his health reflects his cavalier approach to living life as it pleases him. He's not the kind of guy to try to pin down from one continent to another, let alone for lunch. He's certainly not one to court the press — especially the English press — but from old friends in Canada a portrait emerges. "He's very warm and intense," says artist and contemporary Françoise Sullivan. "He makes you feel like the world. I remember a party when five different women told me that Riopelle loved them."

Perched on a hillside, overlooking Lac Masson, Riopelle's studio is marked by one of his iron sculptures stretching its bird's wings from the rock it is mounted on. The building is an elegantly renovated barn — a home and skylit studio Riopelle created for himself in the mid-'70s. From outside, where the wind is careening around the trees and across the lake, a glimpse through the window offers an interior view unfolding as if in slow motion. A pair of stuffed white geese hangs silently from the living-room ceiling, oblivious to their many magic-marked likenesses covering the wall. Riopelle has company. Two young men and a blonde woman are lounging around the Sunday breakfast table with him. Riopelle — one can barely make him out — fumbles for a cigarette. I knock, the dogs bark and Riopelle shuffles across the pine floor to open the door.

This is our second meeting. A year earlier he had made a rare public appearance at Art Expo Montréal, where an exhibit of his work had been mounted in collaboration with the Galerie Maeght Lelong. At 11 a.m., Riopelle ducked into the exhibition, inspected

the commotion caused by his public appearance, and breathed, "I'm thirsty." A flustered press agent led the artist to a nearby snack bar and, drinking beer from a plastic cup, Riopelle allowed a few questions about his years in Montreal. It had been frustrating to be a 16-year-old art student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. "One of my professors told me he didn't like to discuss Cézanne because he only knew how to paint apples!" laughed a still incredulous Riopelle.

This time, at Lac Masson, he looks smaller, and the rumpled corduroy shirt and pants hanging from his slouched body make him look almost frail. Engulfed in an easy chair, his knees almost touching his chin, Riopelle braces himself for an unhappy task — giving an interview. His mass of hair is bedraggled and his sunken eyes are heavily bloodshot. In the space of a year, Riopelle has aged far beyond his 63 years. He refuses to give a tour of his studio. "This is what I'm doing," he gestures, nodding at a wall and floor covered in dozens of drawings of geese, some cut out, some spray-painted. "Mixed media," he snorts.

Jean-Paul Riopelle, born October 7, 1923 in Montreal, is the son of Léopold, an architect who arranged for his son to take art lessons from a realist painter, Henri Bisson. One of his first paintings, Riopelle recalls, represented a straw owl, a bird that has since haunted many of his works. Riopelle's father also introduced him to Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, otherwise known as Grey Owl, who lived at the time in the woods in Terrebonne, 32 kilometres north of Montreal, leading the life of a naturalist. "I would occasionally visit him with my father," recalls Riopelle. "We would go to see the wild animals. There were a lot at his place. Even inside it." The shack, the animals and, most importantly, Grey Owl's philosophy — a total rejection of all the pleasures and horrors of the 20th century — would make a major impression on Riopelle.

Years after first meeting Grey Owl, Riopelle befriended another solitary figure — Ozias Leduc. Riopelle ignored the Saint-Hilaire gossip that labelled Leduc the village fool for occupying a

shack and rejecting a large inheritance. He was fascinated by Leduc's ability to labour over one painting for an entire year, layering the colours of one season upon another until, all of a sudden, Leduc would lean into his canvas to finish a landscape in 20 minutes.

His acquaintance with Grey Owl and with Leduc taught Riopelle two important lessons: the need to cultivate a bond with nature and the strength to be a nonconformist. Both qualities can be seen in his paintings: a reaching for the fringe, pinning the tenacity, the sensitivity of one man against the wild, then turning that struggle loose on a canvas. He has hunted and journeyed back to nature since he was a child, always renewing his intuitive sense of the land. Says Walter Moos: "He is in touch with the world, much more so than most people today."

As a teenager in high school, Riopelle was already making the kind of career decisions most of us spend a lifetime avoiding. He was a bright mathematics student at L'Ecole Polytechnique, but it bothered him that his paintings and his artistic talent went un-nurtured. He quit the Polytechnique for the city's Ecole des Beaux-Arts. But the art school had long suffered from the heavy-handed direction of Charles Maillard, an ultraconservative academic whose teaching methods reflected the repressive, patriarchal regime of Premier Maurice Duplessis. After only one day, Riopelle left the school — and its antimodernist stance — for the Ecole du Meuble, the school of carpentry, design and fine art where Paul-Emile Borduas taught.

Borduas had already attracted many of the up-and-coming artists of the '40s. Students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts would cut their classes to sit in on a lecture by Borduas; others clamoured to get to the Tuesday night meetings at his home, gathering in his living room to watch and listen and to discuss. He introduced his students to abstract painting and to a philosophy that called for a more liberalized Quebec, which for the artist would mean the right to create freely and spontaneously. These were the ideas he later published in the 1948 manifesto *Refus Global*, with its exhortation to "MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC! MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE MYSTERIES!" The Tuesday night sessions became the informal gathering point for a group of artists who became known as the Automatistes, following a 1947 exhibition in an apartment in Montreal. (The term Automatiste was first applied to the group, which included Borduas, Riopelle, Marcel Barbeau, Pierre Gauvreau, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Fernand Leduc and Marcelle Ferron, by a young journalist, Tancrede Marsil, writing for *Le quartier latin*. The word was drawn from the theories of André Breton and referred to creation according to subconscious dictates.)

Françoise Sullivan easily recalls the powerful influence of Borduas: "He was an intellectual who had a message to give. He was talking to us about magic and love and ecstasy. He was already talking about the beauty of children's drawings and sometimes his students would bring their drawings. Sometimes there were dozens and he would give a critique in front of us. And he would say, 'Oh, this is mechanical and stiff, it's not good. But this area just flows, it's really alive.'"

The Art Gallery of Ontario recently acquired four of Riopelle's drawings from 1945. "They're four very interesting drawings which are almost like doodling but they're part of a process. They're consistent with surrealistic practice in France and New York. They're so dead on!" says Dennis Reid, curator of Canadian historical art. The drawings were done with translucent commercial inks spread across a very thin paper to create a stained glass effect. Riopelle, barely out of his teens, and Marcel Barbeau, his best friend at the time, shared a studio at Saint-Hubert. They had just discovered the previously unacknowledged reality of painting: the flat, two-dimensional surface. Borduas disapproved of their inventions and once angrily told Barbeau his paintings had no depth. "He told me they were no good," says Barbeau 40

(OVER) *JUILLET* (1962),
OIL ON CANVAS,
78.6x129.4cm (31"x51").
COURTESY: PIERRE
MATISSE GALLERY.



AUTRICHE (1954), OIL ON
CANVAS, 200x300.4cm
(78 3/4"x118 1/4").
COLLECTION: THE
MONTREAL MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS.

years later, "so I destroyed 100 of my paintings."

"Borduas," agrees Riopelle, "could be hard on his students." He reaches for his fourth beer of the morning and opens a fresh pack of Gitane cigarettes. The moment is long, somewhat uncomfortable, as he considers the question. "But not with me. We had a more intimate relationship. Never was there any kind of criticism." The fact is, they were two entirely different men. Says Pierre Gauvreau, "Riopelle was interested in mechanics. He was not a theoretician. In fact, he hated discussing theories. But Borduas was very much an intellectual, a bit of a mystery man who was constantly questioning one's existence, our destiny."

Riopelle, however, saw another side of Borduas. "I lived with Borduas for one year at Saint-Hilaire, outside of Montreal. We

didn't do anything but go fishing. Abundant discussions never existed. Not for me, anyways." But Borduas's commitment to surrealism and the work of André Breton certainly had an effect on Riopelle. The more Borduas talked about Breton, the more Riopelle wanted to meet him. The war finally ended, and Riopelle, restless to enter the outside world, decided to set sail across the Atlantic. His parents were devastated by this seemingly impractical career decision — scandalous against the backdrop of post-war Quebec — and decided not to support him. The 22-year-old Riopelle volunteered to work on a cargo ship that transported horses to Europe. That was his first trip to Europe and it was followed by a brief sojourn in New York, but Riopelle didn't stay. ("Nobody thought that my paintings had any interest and I had no

money to live in New York.") By 1947 he had returned to Paris.

That year Riopelle organized an exhibition at the Galerie du Luxembourg with the participation of fellow Automatiste Fernand Leduc. Although the show received little public response, it attracted the attention of Pierre Loeb, one of the few Parisian gallery directors keen on supporting upstart surrealists, and variations on that theme, such as Riopelle. Loeb introduced him to Jean Arp, the surrealist sculptor and, most importantly, to André Breton.

Returned from his exile to New York during the war, Breton was still promoting surrealism. As the leading theoretician of the movement, Breton advocated childlike spontaneity and renewed contact with the unknown regions of the self. But Breton had





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failed to keep the interest of many of his former admirers, including Salvador Dali, Philippe Soupault and Paul Eluard. Aware he was losing political ground, Breton attempted to pump new life into his theories on automatic expression. As if he were a special envoy, Riopelle arrived in Paris to help prevent surrealism from sliding into the Seine. According to Galerie Maeght Lelong's Jean Fremon, "Breton realized that the surrealistic painting of those years had a certain relationship with the unconscious and the dream phenomenon but there was not anything automatic about them. Riopelle solved Breton's problem. There was no fantastical imagery, there was automatic painting — a rapid and spontaneous movement that tried to unite the artist's feelings."

Superficially, at least, Riopelle's paintings, with their sweeping brush-strokes, could at this point be classified as *tachiste* — a

European term for action painting — but they quickly developed into something else, as Riopelle began applying the paint directly from the tube. The fact that he had been invited to the 1947 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme at the Galerie Maeght indicated his growing popularity. Riopelle wrote quickly to Borduas, addressing him as "Cher Maître" and extending an invitation from Breton to all the Quebec Automatistes. When Borduas finally wrote back, he graciously refused the invitation, explaining that the offer gave him "a moment of fright".

In a matter of months, the teacher and student had drifted far apart. But what Riopelle watchers sometimes refer to as a devastating "rupture" between an art teacher and his precocious student was after all typical of what happens when somebody leaves Montreal for Paris and somebody else stays behind.

Borduas and Riopelle would cross paths later in New York when Riopelle was showing at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and Borduas started to show at the small Galerie Passadoit. In 1960, Borduas died in Paris, a sick, impoverished man. It had taken him four years to secure a solo show at a gallery there. Riopelle was just about to hit the high point of his career.

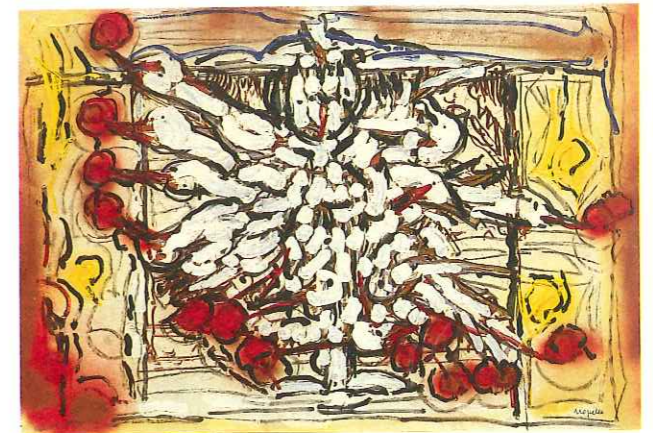
At that time, Riopelle was a star in Paris, looked up to by other abstract artists, such as Belgian painter Pierre Alechinsky, recognized when Jackson Pollock was not. The French critic Georges Duthuit befriended Riopelle and defended his work, just as he had upheld the work of Henri Matisse, Nicholas de Staël and Sam Francis. Riopelle's paintings of the '50s had developed from the automatic approach into a complicated counterpoint of colour and texture. The liberal brush-strokes of the '40s had been replaced by a series of daring juxtapositions. In the catalogue accompanying the Riopelle exhibition at the 1962 Venice Biennale, the late J. Russell Harper vividly described this important phase in the artist's career: "...Riopelle flattened out with his palette knife some of the rebellious blobs of paint squeezed from the tube. His use of the knife increased steadily. Soon the whole surface became a modelled mosaic of flat colour areas, skillfully laced together to give an exhilarating sensation both of romantic colour harmonies and light vibration... But landscape was not abandoned. Sometimes green walls with occasional light touches simulated the impenetrable forest pierced by feeble shafts of light. Sunsets and sunlit vistas are broken into tingling prisms."

Riopelle was drawing from many sources, two of them close at hand: Monet's garden at Giverny and the work of Henri Matisse. Riopelle's studio at Saint-Cyr is a short drive from Giverny and in *Nymphéas*, Riopelle celebrates the impressionistic light and the fluid technique of Monet. Riopelle's contact with Henri Matisse took place on a more personal level. Not only did he admire the simplicity and the clarity of his painting, he also visited often with Madame Matisse after Henri died in poverty. "The lady in the hat," says Riopelle, cared for him like a second mother.

As his work matured, Riopelle's confidence soared to take on a cocky edge. He was quick to demystify the work of Salvador Dali — already an idol to the more obsequious of the younger generation — when he came face to face with the surrealist artist. "I remember clearly," begins Riopelle, looking steadily across the room, "when Dali came to one of my shows in Paris. He said to me," and deepening his voice to an impossible drone, "'Young man, come see, come, I'm going to visit your exhibition with you.' Then, in front of one of my paintings, Dali commented: 'This one is the most mystical that I know.' And I responded simply 'Yes, but dipped in milk, it would be much more so.' He headed for the door and whenever we met on the street he changed sidewalks. I had guessed his own approach, and he was furious. He was beside himself with anger."

Still, in spite of a certain fame, Riopelle was poor during the early years in Paris. Married at 23 to Françoise Lespérance, the artist had two daughters, Sylvie and Yseult, to support. Sometimes he would have to borrow a friend's studio to continue working. But by the '60s, the years of struggle were over. Riopelle was showing at Gimpel in London, the Galleria Dell'Ariete in Milan and frequently at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. Aimé Maeght was by now a close friend whom Riopelle would invite on board his boat, which was moored in Monaco. During the '70s, Riopelle was invited to work at the Fondation Maeght at Saint-Paul-de-Vence. There he indulged in the sun and sea and the oversize studios where there was enough space to create a huge ceramic wall. Restless, he travelled to every corner of Europe. And he could finally indulge his love of cars by amassing a collection of some 20 automobiles dating from the early 1900s.

Gradually, Riopelle separated line from colour and started to move away from the palette-knifed paintings. In *Encre de couleur*,



(OPPOSITE) *PARURE* (1967),
OIL ON CANVAS,
100.2x100.2cm
(39½"x39½").
PRIVATE COLLECTION.
COURTESY: GALLERY
MOOS.

LES FRERES LACHANCE
(1983), OIL AND PAPER ON
CANVAS, 68x98cm
(26¾"x36¾").
COURTESY: GALLERY
MOOS.

a work on paper created during the early '70s, the red, yellow and blue strokes are detached from each other. The work has become increasingly figurative until, for the last several years, it has featured the ubiquitous geese or owls. But throughout this evolution, nature has been a constant point of reference.

Talk of the birds can bring an embarrassed silence from his followers or a defensive, "Well, people are learning to appreciate them." Both Jean Fremon and Walter Moos contend that Riopelle's drastic shift in style recalls Picasso's many stylistic periods. "The public usually lags 20 years behind in assessing or in coming to terms with the work," says Moos.

Riopelle's old colleagues from Montreal tend to be more critical of his latest work. Says Marcel Barbeau, "Next to his great paintings, I find this kind of thing very weak." François-Marc Gagnon, a Canadian art history professor at the Université de Montréal, dismisses the owls as a back-to-the-woods phase, an unfortunate way in which the artist has chosen to revisit the earliest sources for his art.

It is early afternoon now, and Martin Gauvreau prepares to leave Riopelle's house with his girlfriend. Martin is the son of Pierre Gauvreau and visits Riopelle on the weekends. Like Riopelle he is uneasy with a stranger and reluctant to converse. From upstairs, Anne Lemieux, the daughter of Quebec painter Jean-Paul Lemieux, descends for a late breakfast. She is visiting from Quebec City, where the historic prison on the Plains of Abraham is to be renovated for the Riopelle International Foundation to house works by young Quebec artists, as well as Riopelle's own works and those of his contemporaries. Riopelle says the foundation used to be important in his mind, but not anymore. Other people say the funding for the project has run dry. The president of the Riopelle foundation, Jean Chapdelaine says simply, "It's been put on hold." Anne sits down to join the interview, nursing this morning's Bloody Mary. She is there, it seems, to listen to Riopelle and nod absent-mindedly at his thoughts, smiling at his laugh that is becoming forced.

The afternoon sun blazes through the windows to strike at the stone fireplace. The grandfather clock ticks softly, killing time. One of Riopelle's hunting dogs wanders across his golden geese scattered over the pine floor. Paul, the lumberjack helper, is there to chase the dog away and bring Riopelle another beer. Riopelle remains wedged in his chair, then laughs, "Maybe if he pisses on top of them it would add something — make them better."

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