

**C E N T R E
I N T E R N A T I O N A L
D ' A R T
C O N T E M P O R A I N
D E M O N T R É A L**

From the series « Mapping the Automatists in Montreal », #121

**Presence of the Automatists at the
Montreal School of Fine Arts
3450, Saint-Urbain street**

Claude Gosselin, C.M., February 7th, 2022

But first, a few words about the Montreal School of Fine Arts.

It was created in 1922 by the Quebec government under the impulse of Athanase David, then Secretary of the Province. The first classes were given in 1923. In 1969, the School was integrated into the newly created Université du Québec à Montréal to become part of the Arts Family.

Over the course of its history, the Montreal School of Fine Arts has occupied two buildings at the corner of Saint-Urbain and Sherbrooke streets: initially it was housed at 3450 Saint-Urbain Street from 1923 to 1955. This last year it left this building to occupy a former school of the Montreal English school network, at 125 Sherbrooke Street West, a school refurbished to meet the needs of a visual arts school.



Montreal School of Fine Arts, 3450 Saint-Urbain street in Montréal. Architects : Jean-Omer Marchand and Ernest Cormier. Photo : Images Montréal.

This move was necessary to make room for the teaching of architecture in the building on Saint-Urbain Street, designed by the two most important architects of Montreal in 1922, Ernest Cormier and Jean-Omer Marchand. Built in the purest beaux-arts style, the building was raised by one floor in 1928. This is the building we can see today, and this is the building that the Automatists, then students, knew between 1923 and 1944.

The classes given there include painting, drawing, sculpture, decorative arts and architecture. Starting in 1937, classes were given on Saturdays for children and teenagers aged 4 to 18 years old.

Until 1940, the teaching of arts was rather academic and conservative. In the early 1940s. Charles Maillard, then director of the school since 1925, was strongly contested by the students and by professor-artist Alfred Pellán. Maillard was forced to resign in 1944.

Let us mention some of the professors: Roland-Hérard Charlebois, professor of advertising art from 1937 to 1943 and who replaced Maillard at the head of the institution from 1946 to 1957, Alfred Pellán, Dyonnet, Alfred Laliberté, Julien Hébert to name only those that were particularly active during the 1940s.

But let us recall the different Automatists who learned their trade there:

The first "future Automatist" to attend the School was **Paul-Émile Borduas**. This is fitting, as he is the eldest of the group and the first to practice art. Borduas was born in 1905. He entered the school in its first year of existence, 1923, and remained there until 1927. He finished his studies with a teacher's diploma, which allowed him to teach for the Montreal Catholic School Board, for Grasset College, and for several other institutions, including an important tenure at the École du meuble. We will tell in another podcast about the exciting years of this location.

At the time of his studies at the Montreal School of Fine Arts, Borduas was a figurative painter. He was the assistant of his master, the painter Ozias Leduc, who had several commissions for church decoration. It was only after 1938 that Borduas, now an independent teacher, developed a new aesthetic more closely linked to surrealism and non-figurative painting.

The second "future Automatist" was **Fernand Leduc**. He is the second oldest, born in 1916. He began his studies in September 1938 and graduated in 1942. He registered under the name of Brother Charles-Garnier. The following year, he had to make a choice: continue his religious life or pursue a career in the arts. Leduc chose to leave the orders. Upon graduation, with a teacher's diploma in hand, he taught drawing for a few years at the Catholic School Board of Montreal.

Louise Renaud enrolled in 1939, first in evening classes, then in 1940, in regular daytime classes. She stopped her studies in 1943 and moved to New York where she took classes in stage lighting at the New School for Social Research. She was the permanent contact with friends who had stayed in Montreal or lived in Paris.

Françoise Sullivan also enrolled in 1939 and attended classes until 1945. She would obtain her diploma. The works she produced during this period were influenced by Fauvism, in which she loved bright colors and the juxtaposition of bold and generous strokes.

Pierre Gauvreau, following his dismissal from Collège Sainte-Marie, at the suggestion of René Chicoine, a friend of his mother and professor at the Fine Arts School, Pierre Gauvreau enrolled in art classes given under the aegis of the École des beaux-arts at the Monument National in 1939. The following year, September 1940, he enrolled in the regular classes given at the School itself. He left the school in 1943 without completing his studies. He did not obtain his diploma, which did not prevent him from producing magnificent artworks.

Madeleine Arbour also took drawing classes in the evenings in 1940.

Thus, of the 15 artists in the Automatists group, 6 received academic training at the Montreal Fine Art School.

If we exclude Borduas who was there during the academic years from 1923 to 1927, the important period for this group of artists has been the 6 school years between 1938 and 1944. This was a particularly intense period that marked this group of friends to the point of creating a visual identity and a thought process in Montreal during the period 1945 - 1955.

However, these student artists should not be isolated from the student artists enrolled at the École du Meuble during the same period. The latter school included Jean-Paul Mousseau, Jean Paul Riopelle, Maurice Perron and Marcel Barbeau. Very friendly and regular relations marked these two groups to the point of merging into one.

Thus was born what would become the Automatists.

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