

In the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #123

The St. Louis Square and the Automatists

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

As a preface, let's situate **St. Louis Square** in Montreal. It is located between Sherbrooke Street to the south, Des Pins Avenue to the north, St-Denis Street to the east and Laval Avenue to the west.

The land in St. Louis Square was purchased by the City of Montreal in 1848 to build an open-air drinking water reservoir, which was inaugurated in 1851. It remained active until 1869, when the McTavish Reservoir was opened to meet the drinking water needs of a growing city. A prestigious housing development was built around the Square in 1880 by the Saint-Louis brothers, two entrepreneurs who constructed 13 buildings with the help of architect Joseph-Émile Vanier.

The **St. Louis Square** became the place of residence of the French Canadian bourgeoisie in Victorian style houses. It was not uncommon to see Irish Catholics joining them. The family of poet Émile Nelligan, for instance, lived on Laval Avenue, near the Square.

For her part, **Françoise Sullivan**'s mother, Corinne Bourgoin, once lived in St. Louis Square before marrying an Irishman, John A. O'Sullivan, who liked to joke that his daughter lost the "O" in her name at her baptism.

St. Louis Square was also called *Carré Saint-Louis* in the early 1970s following a strong demand for French translation in Quebec. In this case, the translation of the word Square by Carré was an error and does not really translate the scientific term "square", designating a location developed for urban planning in England during the 19th century, i.e. a rectangular green space, often with a fountain and a pond, surrounded by houses. For our part, we will maintain the original name of St. Louis Square.

In an interview given to Jean-Pierre Lefebvre for *Le Saint-Armand* newspaper in June-July 2005, **Pierre Gauvreau** mentioned that he lived in the area around St. Louis Square. He says and I quote:

"the neighborhood where I was born, around Square Saint-Louis, was a neighborhood where separated women came to live. It was a fairly easygoing neighborhood. My mother had freethinking friends and held what she called her "Literary Mondays". There was always a speaker such as Robert Choquette, in his early days. After the lecture, we would discuss. My brother Claude and I would eat what was left of the sandwiches. That's how culture came to us: via the stomach..."

End of the quote.

To be more exact, **Pierre and Claude Gauvreau** lived with their parents on *Terrasse Saint-Denis*, also called *Montée des Zouaves*, just south of Sherbrooke Street. It was there that **Françoise** was introduced to the brothers **Pierre and Claude** by her childhood friend, Alice Guimond, whom she had met at the Académie Saint-Urbain, on Saint-Urbain

street near Milton street. Alice's parents lived in a house next door to the Gauvreau's on [Terrasse St-Denis](#). The Sullivans lived on Hutchison Street near the school.

Close to the Square, on Roy Street, lived **Bruno Cormier** and his family. He had met **Pierre Gauvreau** at Collège Sainte-Marie from the 1934-35 school year. The two friends made the school run together from St. Louis Square to the College. For more information on this period, we refer you to our website, the Document and the Podcast, produced on [Collège Sainte-Marie](#).

As teenagers, **Françoise Sullivan, Pierre Gauvreau and Bruno Cormier** shared many readings, discussed music, painting and films. They often met at St. Louis Square. **Pierre**, a great cinephile, would enthusiastically recount the latest ones he had seen and would take on the air of "Charles Boyer", as Françoise told us.

Unfortunately, **Pierre Gauvreau** was expelled from Collège Sainte-Marie in 1938 at the age of 15. Pierre was a great reader, curious and freespirted. A classmate denounced him after having caught him with Rimbaud's and Baudelaire's writings in his possession, authors who were banned at the time. These books had been purchased at Eaton's department store with his friend Bruno Cormier. At Eaton's, there was a department of French books and the law of the index was not taken into account. To this fault, one must add that the dismissal was partly caused by the fact that his mother owed several months of tuition to the College.

Pierre Gauvreau continues the story of his childhood to Jean-Pierre Lefebvre:

*I stayed at home for a year. That's when I started to draw. Among the people who came to my mother's Mondays, there was René Chicoine. He was a professor at the École des beaux-arts and a painter himself. Having seen my drawings, he said this extraordinary sentence to my mother: "If you don't know what to **do**, make an artist out of him! Afterwards, I passed an entrance exam to the School of Fine Arts, (I had to reproduce the discobolus, imagine!). ... Instead of putting me in the first year, they put me in preparatory year.*

End of citation.

This is how **Pierre Gauvreau** entered the Montreal School of Fine Arts in September 1939. Françoise Sullivan followed him the next year.

In the spring of 1938, a beautiful friendship had developed between **Françoise Sullivan, Pierre and Bruno Cormier**.

Françoise, who took dance lessons from Gérald Crevier, passed on her knowledge to her friends Pierre and Bruno who danced with her on occasion.

In early December 1940, she invited them to participate in a choreography commissioned by Alice Szata, a friend of her mother's who worked at the Monument National. The choreography was intended to occupy the time of a set change for a children's show. You can find more information about this performance on our website, on the Document and the [Monument National](#) podcast.

Let us conclude by pointing out that since its creation, St. Louis Square has served as a major breeding ground for creators and performers of all artistic disciplines until very recently. We could only mention Gaston Miron, Michel Tremblay, André Gagnon, Claude Jutras, Dany Laferrière, Pauline Julien, Gilles Carles, René Derouin, Chloé Sainte-Marie and many others. A cultural heritage to be saved, both architectural and intangible.

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Claude Gosselin is the initiator of the project and the general and artistic director of the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal.