

**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", #105

**1097, Berri Street
506, René-Lévesque Blvd East
École du Meuble**

Claude Gosselin, C.M., August 4th, 2020



The Académie Marchand building when it opened in 1909. Architect: Jean-Omer Marchand. Photo: Commission scolaire de Montréal's archives, 1909. Jean-Omer Marchand (1873-1936), trained at the École des Beaux-arts de Paris, produced an impressive number of first-rate buildings in Montreal; the École du Meuble is cited among the heritage buildings of the City of Montreal.

Established in 1935, the École du Meuble attended to applied arts (one would say "design" today). Jean-Marie Gauvreau, unrelated to Pierre and Claude Gauvreau, was its first director. In 1937, he hired Paul-Émile Borduas as a teacher to replace Jean-Paul Lemieux who left to return to Quebec. He taught there from 1935 to 1937. Borduas's hiring was a simple process. He was already teaching drawing at the Commission des Écoles catholiques de Montréal, which the École du Meuble was a part of. The school quickly became, in 1939, a place of social, religious, political, and educational emancipation. There were discussions about new ideas in modern art inspired by American and European artistic and literary trends.

The Commission des Écoles catholiques de Montréal sold the Académie Marchand (the

building where the École du Meuble was located) to the Government of Quebec in 1941. The building was then renamed École du Meuble de Montréal.

Among the teachers were Paul-Émile Borduas (from 1937 to October 21, 1948), Jean Paul Lemieux (1935-1937), Frédéric Back, the architect Marcel Parizeau, André Jarry, Jules Bazin, Gérard Morisset, Father Marie-Alain Couturier.

Father Couturier, a French Dominican exiled to North America between 1940 and 1944, started teaching at the École du Meuble in 1941. Previously, he had taught for a year at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal, where he was fired by its conservative director Charles Maillard. At the École du Meuble, he was supposed to teach a course on religious art, but instead introduced modern and contemporary artists to his students.

Maurice Gagnon was the school's librarian and taught art history. The school's library became an important place where artists could find books and magazines on modern and contemporary art.

Borduas was undoubtedly the most active in the transformation of ideas and the most involved in the formation of the group which would become known as "the Automatists".

Among Borduas's students between 1942 and 1948 there was Marcel Barbeau (1942-1947), Maurice Perron (1943-1946), and Jean Paul Riopelle (1942-1946). Jean-Paul Mousseau entered the school in 1945 but left before the end of the school year.



Borduas teaching at the École du Meuble, 1942. Photo: Collection of Gilles Lapointe.

The graduating class at the École du Meuble organized a sudden strike on February 25, 1946. The strike was declared following a change in the curriculum and a course given by André Fréchet, honorary director of the École Boulle de Paris. Director Jean-Marie Gauvreau cut by half the courses given by Paul-Émile Borduas. He believed the teacher had some responsibility for the strike and wanted to reduce his influence among the students, as well as isolate the most rebellious ones. Among the strikers were Marcel Barbeau, Roger Fauteux, Maurice Perron, and Jean Paul Riopelle. To mark his disavowal, Jean Paul Riopelle refused to receive his diploma from the director's hands. (F-M Gagon, *Chronique*, p. 270-274, and *Catalogue raisonné Riopelle*).

Marcelle Ferron was introduced to Paul-Émile Borduas's works by a family friend, Gilles Hénault. In the fall of 1946, she met Borduas for the first time when she invited him to her home. She showed him her works. Subsequently, Paul-Émile Borduas invited her to the École du Meuble every Wednesday so that she could present her works to him. Although she was not his student, the teacher still gave her advice. Thanks to Paul-Émile Borduas, she eventually met the Automatists (F-M Gagnon, *Chronique*, p. 588-589).

On September 4, 1948, less than a month after the publication of the *Refus global* manifesto (August 9, 1948), and after a 13-year teaching career, Paul-Émile Borduas was suspended, then officially dismissed from his post of professor on October 21, 1948. The letter of dismissal was signed on September 2, 1948 by Gustave Poisson, then Deputy Minister at the Department of Bien-Être social et de la Jeunesse. It was addressed to Jean-Marie Gauvreau, director of the École du Meuble, to "inform him that Mr. Paul-Émile Borduas is suspended from his functions, without salary, as of September 4, 1948". He added: "A request for referral will be submitted to the commission du service civil because the writings and manifestos [sic] he publishes, as well as his state of mind, are not likely to favor the teaching that we want to give to our students".

The École du Meuble became the Institut des arts appliqués in 1958; it was integrated into the Cégep du Vieux Montréal in 1969. Jean-Marie Gauvreau maintained his position as director until 1968.



École du Meuble's façade, at 1097, Berri Street, after architectural modifications.
Photo: Alexis Hamel, January 2008.

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