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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #108

Schooling at Collège Sainte-Marie:  
Pierre Gauvreau, Claude Gauvreau,  
and Bruno Cormier

At the Gesù:  
Exhibition by Pierre Gauvreau  
Muriel Guilbault plays in *Huis-clos*

Claude Gosselin, C.M., July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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On the lot between De Bleury Street, René-Lévesque Boulevard (formerly Dorchester), St-Alexandre Street, and Ste-Catherine Street, there used to be a set of buildings of prime importance, both for education and for religious and cultural activities from 1850 to 1960.

The Collège Sainte-Marie, located on the corner of De Bleury Street and René-Lévesque Boulevard, was a college for boys built in 1850 and run by the Jesuits, a religious community that played a major role in education in Quebec. The Université du Québec à Montréal, at the time of its founding, used the building briefly (1965-1969). The building was destroyed in 1976.

The Gesù is one of the oldest performance halls in Montreal. Located under the Church of the Gesù, the amphitheater opened on July 10, 1865. Its first vocation was to serve as an academic hall for the Collège Sainte-Marie. Major renovations undertaken in 1945 enabled it to accommodate theater companies including Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent, the Théâtre du Rideau-Vert and the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. Plays by Gratien Gélinas, such as *Tit-Coq* (1948), Marcel Dubé's *De l'autre côté du mur* (1952) and *Zones* (1953) were presented there.



Collège Sainte-Marie. Architect: Maurice Perrault. Photo: William Notman, 1895. McCord Museum.



The Church of Gesù and its amphitheater in the basement. Exterior, view to the southwest taken from de Bleury Street. The two front towers, including the bell towers, remain unfinished. Known as the *Chapelle du Gesù* during the existence of the Collège Sainte-Marie. Architect: Patrick Charles Keeley (1864-1865). Photo: Pierre-Richard Bisson, 1979. University of Montreal Archives. Succession of Pierre-Richard Bisson.

Pierre Gauvreau, Claude Gauvreau and Bruno Cormier attended Collège Sainte-Marie. Pierre Gauvreau and Bruno Cormier walked together regularly between their homes and school. Pierre Gauvreau studied there from 1934 until the end of the 1937-1938 school year. During this period, a copy of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and a collection of Rimbaud's *Poésies*, two forbidden works, were found. Thus at the start of the 1938 school year, he was refused admission, citing "that he had stubbornly refused to submit to the prescriptions of the Index of prohibited books" (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p. 50). His poor academic record and delays in school fees payments were also reasons for his dismissal. Forced to take a year off, he occupied himself with reading and drawing. Painter René Chicoine, who occasionally participated in Mrs. Gauvreau's *Lundis littéraires*, advised him to apply at the École des beaux-arts. Once accepted, Pierre Gauvreau entered preparatory class at the Monument national for the 1939-1940 school year. "Considered very talented, it was intended to protect him against this very talent, and he was forced to draw cubes, spheres, pyramids for a year". (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p. 50)

His brother Claude Gauvreau entered Collège Sainte-Marie in the fall of 1937. But due to his mother's financial difficulties, she pulled him out of school the following year. It was not until September 1939 that he returned to the College before being expelled in November or December for making "heinous" drawings. He was readmitted in the fall of 1941 and was dismissed a second time in 1945 "for having supported ideas incompatible with official teachings" (Claude Gauvreau and Jean-Claude Dussault, *Correspondance 1949-1950*, Montreal, Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1993, p. 126). He recounts having developed an anti-clerical feeling that was ineradicable from his time at the Collège Sainte-Marie (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p. 75).

### **Exhibition of summer works in the hall of the Gesù**

In 1941, even though he was no longer a student at the College, Pierre Gauvreau was part of a group exhibition for that year's graduating class. His friend Bruno Cormier, who was still a student there himself, suggested he participate in the exhibit. Gauvreau showcased around twenty oils inspired by the works of Fauve artists Matisse and Picasso. Paul-Émile Borduas, who was invited to award a prize to the best students, was surprised by the quality of Pierre Gauvreau's works.

Borduas wanted to give the first prize to Pierre Gauvreau for his work, but the College authorities refused. Borduas gave him a recognition award instead. In addition to the prize, Borduas invited him, through his student Guy Viau, to attend his workshop, where regular meetings were held on Tuesdays. He happily accepted and asked to bring his friends: Bruno Cormier and Françoise Sullivan. Permission granted. Afterwards, he invited his group from the École des beaux-arts Magdeleines Desroches, Louise Renaud, Adrien Villandré and Fernand Leduc.

"Pierre exhibited at the Gesù that year a series of 'holiday works' of a Fauve character; it so happened that Borduas was judge of these works and he awarded the first prize to Pierre. The Jesuits contested the validity of the prize on the pretext that my brother was not an 'amateur'; but Borduas wanted to get to know the young painter and he had one of his students from the École du Meuble, Guy Viau, call him. Pierre therefore began to attend Borduas's studio and I remember that he returned from those evenings in a state of ecstatic vertigo absolutely without comparison for me." (Claude Gauvreau, "L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope", *La Barre du jour*, no. 17-20, January-August 1969, p. 49.)

### **Muriel Guilbault plays *Huis-clos***

From January 27 to February 3, 1946, at the Gesù Muriel Guilbault played the character of Estelle in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Huis-clos*. Interestingly, Sartre was a prohibited author at the time in Quebec. Sartre, himself a refugee in Quebec during the war, saw an impromptu and informal performance in a hotel by the actors who performed it in Montreal. He was in town to give a lecture entitled "La littérature française de 1914 à 1945: la littérature clandestine" on March 10, 1946 in a small private room at the Windsor Hotel. Impressed by the performance, he invited Muriel Guilbault to Paris to take over the role.

*Translation by Vincent Godin-Filion, proofreading by Dominique Robb.*

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Claude Gosselin is General and Artistic Director at the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal.