

C E N T R E
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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #104

Dominion Gallery of Fine Art
1448, Sherbrooke Street West
Automatists exhibitions

Claude Gosselin, C.M., July 23rd, 2020

It was in 1941 that Mrs. Rose Millman, interested in Canadian art, founded the "Dominion Gallery of Fine Art", named for the new "Dominion" status that Canada had just acquired.

Born in 1890 in the region of Bukovina, Ukraine, (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), she immigrated to Canada, in Quebec City, with her family to escape anti-Semitism. In 1910 she moved to Montreal with her husband, Aaron Millman, a pharmacist. She trained in nursing, then became a founding member of the Jewish General Hospital and the Art Association of Montreal. In 1949, The Art Association of Montreal changed its name to Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The Museum has been in its current location since 1912.

Rose Millman acquired works for her personal collection. Eventually too numerous for her house, she decided to open a gallery in 1941 to display them. She was the first woman in Quebec to open an art gallery. The following year, Max Stern, a recent immigrant from Germany after fleeing the Nazi regime, was its "managing director". In 1944 he became Mrs. Millman's business partner, then bought the gallery in 1947. In 1950, the gallery moved to 1438, Sherbrooke Street West, near the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it still is today. Max Stern, born on April 18, 1904, was an art historian. He died in Paris on May 31, 1987.



Facade of the Dominion Gallery of Fine Art at 1448, Sainte-Catherine Street East, in the 1940s. Photo: Archives of the Musée des beaux-arts du Canada.



Exhibition "Aspects du Canada en 1940". Photo: Archives of the Musée des beaux-arts du Canada.

From 1941 to 1950, the Dominion Gallery of Fine Art was the site of several important exhibitions of the most dynamic artists in Montreal. It hosted the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) on several occasions, an organization founded in 1939 by John Lyman. Paul-Émile Borduas was its first vice-president.

Exhibition “Les Sagittaires”, May 1 to 9, 1943

The exhibition "Les Sagittaires" was organized by Maurice Gagnon following an idea by Paul-Émile Borduas and Guy Viau (Maurice Gagnon and Paul-Émile Borduas were then teachers at the École du Meuble). Its objective was to promote the work of young artists. The exhibition featured 23 young painters under 30 including Pierre Gauvreau, Françoise Sullivan, Fernand Leduc, Louise Renaud, and 11 students of Paul-Émile Borduas. Françoise Sullivan presented two paintings made in 1941: *Tête amérindienne I* and *Autoportrait au visage barbouillé*. In a letter to a friend, Guy Viau described the outcome of the exhibition: "We Sagittarians have sold almost everything (at a very low price, it is true) and the people and the newspapers have been very supportive."

Paul-Émile Borduas, October 2 to 13, 1943

He presented numbered oils that referred to non-figurative experiences. This was his second solo exhibition in Montreal, the first having been presented from April 25 to May 2, 1942 in the foyer of the Théâtre de l'Ermitage. He presented for the first time *Abstraction verte* (1941), though it had previously been displayed at the Séminaire de Joliette from January 11 to 14, 1942 as part of an exhibition organized by Father Marie-Alain Couturier. *Abstraction verte* is a crucial work in Paul-Émile Borduas's career, being the first "non-preconceived" work that he produced. Here's what Borduas said about it in retrospect: "It was the first painting entirely not preconceived and it foreshadowed the Automatist storm which was already rising on the horizon" (Noël Lajoie, "Propos d'atelier. Questions et réponses", *Le Devoir*, June 9, 1956, p. 3).

4th exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society, November 13 to 24, 1943

From 1943 onward, the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) accepted among its ranks student artists as well as young painters. The following excerpt, taken from the proposal drafted by John Lyman, seconded by the members, explains how the junior members would be included in the CAS: "The junior members will enjoy the same privileges as the associate members except the power to elect or appoint the current committee members. Any member of this category who has been admitted three times to exhibit at the society's regular exhibitions will automatically become an artist member, without having to be submitted to an election [...]" ("Notice of meeting", signed by Maurice Gagnon, secretary, dated "May 1943", communicated by John Lyman to Guy Viau. ANQQ, fonds Guy-Viau, P171 / 2, cahier 7).

Paul-Émile Borduas underlined how the CAS allowed his young friends to showcase their works to the public: "From the first evening of the organization of this company, I foresaw that it could perhaps be the social support so urgently needed by my dear students of the École du Meuble. The future showed me how

right I was to believe in it. This company did not disappoint us until the eve of the *Refus global* which it found lacking sufficient strength.” (André-G. Bourassa, Jean Fiset and Gilles Lapointe, *Écrits I*, 1987, p. 421).

5th exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society, November 11 to 22, 1944

The exhibition included 36 artists divided into two groups: seniors and juniors. Among the seniors were 25 artists including 11 women: Paul-Émile Borduas, Jacques de Tonnancour, Louise Gadbois, Eric Goldberg, Prudence Heward, John Lyman, Jori Smith, and Guy Viau.

Among the juniors, there were 11 artists including 2 women. Pierre Gauvreau, Jean-Paul Mousseau, and Louise Renaud were present. This would be Louise Renaud's last participation in a visual arts event in Montreal or elsewhere. Fernand Leduc, who was refused certain works, withdrew from the exhibition. Pierre Gauvreau presented his first non-figurative painting, *Pulsion allègre, grave, jaune, assoiffée*. This work was painted on the evening of his father's funeral, Lucien Gauvreau, on July 25, 1944 (Jeannette Biondi, *Le jeune homme en colère. Biographie de Pierre Gauvreau*, Outremont: Lanctôt Éditeur, 2003, p. 74).



Max Stern with his wife Iris Stern around 1952. Photo: The Gazette Archives, Montreal.

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