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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #106

**Ermitage
3510, Côte-des-Neiges Road,
Paul-Émile Borduas's
First major solo exhibition
April 25 to May 2, 1942**

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

The Ermitage (*Hermitage*) is the name given to the building because of its distance from the Collège de Montréal. It was built between 1911 and 1913. It is the work of the architect Joseph-Alfred-Hector Lapierre (1859-1932) who made it in the purest Beaux-arts style. It consists of a recreation room and an auditorium, renovated in 1941-1942. The Ermitage is owned by the Compagnie des prêtres de Saint-Sulpice, known as the Sulpicians (1911-1994).

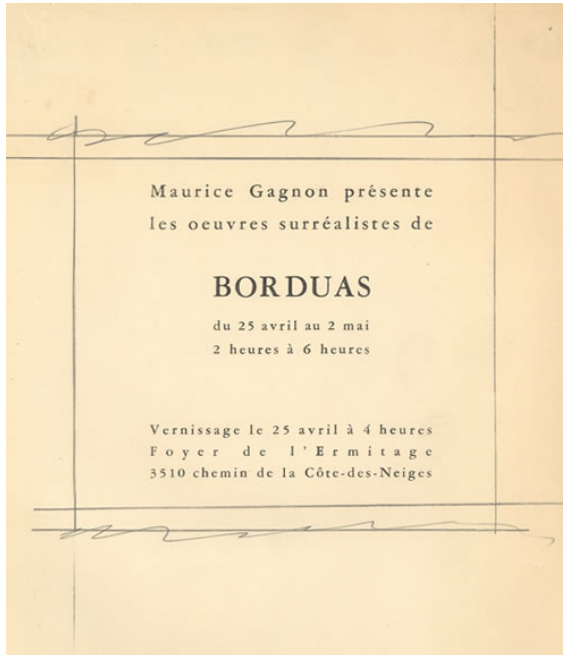
After World War II, the auditorium and foyer were used for concerts, plays and exhibitions. It hosted important artists and musicians, notably Paul-Émile Borduas, Wilfrid Pelletier, and Elisabeth Schuman; Société Radio-Canada recorded on site live shows destined for radio broadcasts. Changes to the rooms were made in 1965.



View of the side facade of the Ermitage overlooking Côte-des-Neiges Road.
Architect: Joseph-Albert-Hector Lapierre.
Photo: BANQ, 1956.

Borduas presents his first major exhibition: gouaches

The exhibition was presented in the foyer of the building from April 25 to May 2, 1942. It was curated by Maurice Gagnon, then librarian and art history professor at the École du Meuble where Paul-Émile Borduas was also teaching. Its title was “Œuvres surréalistes”. Borduas was the first artist in Canada to dare claim the surrealist nature of his works within the title of his exhibit (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p. 67).



Invitation card for Borduas's “Les œuvres surréalistes” exhibition, at the Ermitage, presented by Maurice Gagnon, from April 25 to May 2, 1942. Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky, Institute for Studies in Canadian Art.

Borduas's first work to be considered automatist is *Abstraction verte*, a small canvas painted in 1941 and exhibited in Joliette in January 1942. Nevertheless, the exhibition of Borduas's gouaches at the Ermitage is the true starting point of the movement.

According to François-Marc Gagnon, art historian and son of Maurice Gagnon, the exhibition took place at the Ermitage because no other venue wanted to host surreal and abstract works. In total, there were 45 gouaches, numbered 1 to 45, which reflect the leap Borduas made into the unconscious. (François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: life and work*, ACI, 2014, p. 25). The titles were given during the opening or upon purchase to satisfy collectors. According to sales the exhibit was a success: 36 (or 37 depending on sources) of the 45 works were sold.

Denis Noiseux, Magdeleine Desroches, Fernand Leduc, Pierre Elliott Trudeau and his brother Charles, Jacques de Tonnancour, and Robert Vigneault either received or bought a work. This exhibition marked a turning point in Borduas's career.

The gouaches showcased at the Ermitage bear witness to Paul-Émile Borduas's discovery of André Breton's surrealism (Catalogue Borduas MBAM). Indeed, *Étude de torse* or *No. 14* (1942) is a first true automatist work, according to François-Marc Gagnon, since it is produced spontaneously: the subject is not determined until the work is finished (François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: life and work*, ACI, 2014, p. 24).



Paul-Émile Borduas with Henri Girard and Charles Doyon in front of *Étude de torse*, on the opening day of the exhibition at the Ermitage, April-May 1942.

Critic Robert Élie, a friend and ally of Paul-Émile Borduas, published an article on April 25, 1942 in *La Presse* under the pseudonym of Pierre Daniel. Laudatory, his criticism explains the painter's creative process: "The painter abandons himself to his inner ways and no longer seeks his inspiration in nature, but, thanks to this visual gift which he received at birth, thanks to his formation, images emerge within him, and they are forms and colors of nature, natural rhythms, that his hand traces on the canvas, and that his intelligence develops and binds".

Claude Gauvreau, then only 17 years old, visited the exhibition with his mother. There, Louise Renaud, a friend of his brother Pierre, introduced him to Paul-Émile Borduas. This is their first meeting. (Jeannette Biondi, *Le jeune homme en colère. Biographie de Pierre Gauvreau*, Outremont: Lanctôt Éditeurs, 2003, p. 67; Claude Gauvreau, « L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope », *La Barre du jour*, Nos. 17-20, January-August 1969, p. 50).

The gouaches were painted at the studio in rue de Mentana

Borduas began painting his gouaches in 1941. He used to show them to visitors at Tuesday night meetings in his studio on Mentana Street. In a letter addressed to Borduas, Jacques de Tonnancour speaks of his admiration for his gouaches. For him, the work of the pictorial material begins to be more conscious and thoughtful, to the point of freeing the instinct (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p. 67).

"And that feeling [of physical joy], I felt it even stronger when, in your studio, I saw the same work painted and repainted ten or fifteen times in different ranges. I was wondering what could make you decide to stop it in such a state rather than another, since you did not seem to make a painting but to play at painting. You might have stopped it when you had emptied it, when it had nothing more to teach you, when you had exhausted all its possible states, trying to extirpate from the paint, rummaging and crushing it with a spatula, the solution to the mystery of painting [...] the work was born from a coming, without recovery and without the innumerable transfigurations of the past, and its song took on a character of wholeness, of the plenitude of the complete being, satisfied, fulfilled" (Jacques de Tonnancour, "Lettre à Borduas", *La Nouvelle Relève*, August 1942, p. 609-613).

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

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the donors, private and corporate, who support our project and the CIAC MTL. Their names are listed on our website (<http://ciac.ca/en/friends-of-the-ciac/>).

We would like to thank our researchers: Vincent Godin-Filion, Auky Gonzales Gysin and Dominique Robb, who were hired thanks to the subsidy programs of the governments of Canada and Quebec. Thanks also to Solenn Lacroix, communications intern.

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