

**C E N T R E
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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #109

Windsor Hotel, 1170, Peel Street

Conference by Paul-Émile Borduas
"Des mille manières de goûter une œuvre d'art"
November 10, 1942

Jean-Paul Sartre,
"La littérature française de 1914 à 1945:
la littérature clandestine"
March 10, 1946

Claude Gosselin, C.M., August 7th, 2020

The Windsor Hotel is a Second Empire style building designed by American architect William Boyington. The Second Empire or Napoleon III (France) style is inspired by many styles ranging from architectures of Greco-Roman Antiquity, to neoclassicism and the Italian and French Renaissance.

The hotel opened in 1878. It is often considered the first grand hotel in Canada. During the 1940s, the hotel welcomed several renowned guests for conferences on political, social, and cultural topics.



Windsor Hotel. Original part on the left opened in 1878, architect: William W. Boyington.

North Annex opened in 1906, architects: Hardenbergh and Gilbert.

Photo: William Notman, 1938-1935.

McCord Museum.

The Société d'études et de conférences

Founded in Montreal in 1933, the Société was a group of women favoring study and research in small groups. It held its literary and cultural events in hotels in Montreal, including the Hotel Windsor. Among their many guests, let us remember two names: Paul-Émile Borduas and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Paul-Émile Borduas, “Des mille manières de goûter une œuvre d’art”, November 10, 1942

Paul-Émile Borduas gave a conference titled "Des mille manières de goûter une œuvre d'art" [*A Thousand Ways to Taste a Work of Art*]. The lecture focused on art history from Ancient Egypt to the 1940s. It was given at the Salon Prince-Charles-de-Galles. The conference was subsequently published in *Amérique française* under the shorter title “Manières de goûter une œuvre d'art” (vol. II, No. 4, January 1943, p. 31-44).

Claude Gauvreau, attending the conference with Louise Renaud, recalls it like this: “There he was with a touching shyness, hardly daring and rarely raising an eye towards his audience full of propriety; perhaps it was because he was the only one reading a text and had no opponent to face, but he displayed none of the qualities of a relaxed, witty, precise and often paradoxical debater that he would later deploy victoriously in many forums. I had the opportunity to read the text of this conference in Saint-Hilaire a few years later... Borduas certainly showed himself to be personal, although awkward and somewhat uncertain, but we could not yet identify the masterful author of *Refus global*” (“L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope”, *La Barre du jour*, No. 17-20, January-August 1969, p. 49-50).

Excerpt from Borduas's conference

“By expressing the forms of the invisible world, art causes rupture, utter confusion, as if no one, apart from the artists, possessed an inner world foreign to the world around them, a world of familiar monsters according to the pretty expression of François Hertel.

This insurmountable abyss could have been foreseen. We had always sought out the borrowed qualities, loved the ideal beauties, the outward beauties of nature, but we should never have ceased to contemplate the real beauties, the objective beauty of the work of art. We had loved its abstract beauty, without loving its perceived beauty. Without perceived beauty there can be no real abstract beauty. We only liked what was illusory about art, thus preferring shadow to prey. This illusion, though beautiful, should not have satisfied us alone. We have constantly forgotten the essential beauty when it should have had all our care, all our love.

We only liked in art what was wanted, what was achieved, what was achieved in figuration; therefore, what is definitively fixed, impersonal, and starting from death. When it should have been necessary to contemplate in it what is spontaneous, generous, fatally personal, therefore that which is eternally alive and therefore inevitably changing.

On the one hand, it is the illusory, the unreal appearance of life, but real death in fixity. On the other hand, it is the tangible with or without the unreal appearance of sight, but it is real life in constant evolution.

[...] Art can be for us the opportunity for a complete renewal of our intellectual and sensitive life. The time is now; a strong interest drives us. For weeks, months, years, a deep concern has gripped us, accumulated by the multitude of works of art deemed to be masterpieces, which escape us, displease us, or horrify us. We feel that a new, powerful, compelling world is being built without us. How can one remain indifferent to it? Would it not take even more strength to resist than to abandon, while there is still time, this thick veil of our prejudices that cause us so much harm?"

Link to the conference text "Des mille manières de goûter une œuvre d'art" (p. 31-44):

<http://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2224798?docsearchtext=%22mille%20mani%C3%A8re%20de%20go%C3%BBter%20une%20oeuvre%20d%27art%27>

Jean-Paul Sartre, "La littérature française de 1914 à 1945 : la littérature clandestine", March 10, 1946

In March 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre, after a two and a half month stay in the United States, gave a series of lectures in Canada: the 8th in Toronto, the 9th in Ottawa and the 10th in Montreal. He returned to France on the 14th.

In Montreal, he gave his lecture "La littérature française de 1914 à 1945: la littérature clandestine" [*French Literature from 1914 to 1945: a clandestine literature*] at the Windsor Hotel. The conference was part of the annual tea-talk of the *Société d'étude et de conférences*, a club that attracted the French-Canadian female social elite.

Jean-Paul Sartre quickly became a very popular media subject in January 1946 when his play *Huis-clos* was presented at the Gesù in Montreal (January 27 to February 3). Debates in the press (regarding the play and existentialism) resulted in an invitation to give a conference at the Windsor. The conference attracted 600 participants, which was the conference room's maximum capacity. The 86-minutes conference was recorded and broadcasted by Radio-Canada.

Summary of the conference by Yvan Cloutier: "After a description of the writers' conditions in France during the war, Sartre undertakes a long analysis of the three social functions of underground literature: (1) conservation (2) escape and (3) engagement. After a long presentation of Camus's work, Sartre ends with considerations on the link between 'writing, the literary function and the democratic structure of States'".

During his stay in Montreal, Sartre requested a private performance of *Huis-clos*. The small and intimate performance took place late on the evening of March 10. Muriel Guilbault played the role of Estelle. After the performance, Sartre asked Guilbault to perform the play in Paris, but she declined the invitation.

Note: Reference for the drafting of this text: **Cloutier, Yvan**, *Sartre au Québec (1945-1954)*, thesis, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, 1988.

See also: **André Langevin**, "M. Jean-Paul Sartre et l'existentialisme", *Le Devoir*, March 11, 1946, p. 10.

For more information about the Windsor Hotel, [click here](#).

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

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