

**C E N T R E  
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*From the series « Mapping the Automatists in Montreal », #120*

**2660, Jeanne-Mance street, apt. 10  
Activities at the Leduc "Atelier"  
from November 28, 1944 to the beginning of June, 1946**

Claude Gosselin, C.M., February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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On November 28, 1944, Fernand Leduc moved into a room at number 10, 2660 Jeanne-Mance Street, which he already knew because it was used as a studio by his friend Charles Daudelin. For Fernand Leduc, this room served as both home and studio. The furnishings were frugal: a single bed, a sink, a table and a few chairs. The toilets, common to the tenants of the house, were on the floor. The house, which has now been destroyed, was located at the corner of Sherbrooke and Jeanne-Mance streets, near the Montreal School of Fine Arts.

At the time Leduc occupied the "Atelier", he had been a teacher with the Montreal Catholic School Board since the beginning of the school year in September 1943 and had taken on a teaching position in visual arts at Collège Notre-Dame in the fall of 1945. These years were a very active and intense period for the artist.

**The Leduc Atelier: a meeting spot for artists.**

Regularly, in the evening, friends met at Leduc's. It included poets **Claude Gauvreau, Gilles Hénault, Rémi-Paul Forgues** and **Thérèse Renaud**; dancers **Jeanne Renaud** and **Françoise Sullivan**, when they were not in New York studying dance and choreography; medical student and psychoanalysis enthusiast **Bruno Cormier**; painter **Pierre Gauvreau**, when he was not in various Canadian army camps in Quebec, in Ontario and British Columbia, between 1943 and his departure for England on April 14, 1945; and the painters **Jean-Paul Mousseau** and **Claude Vermette** and sometimes, but rarely, **Paul-Émile Borduas**. **Louise Renaud**, who had been in New York since the fall of 1943, was present there through her mailings containing books and art magazines: *VVV* and *Le Minotaure*. In her letters, she also recounts the cultural activity in New York, impromptu meetings with Breton, Léger and Duchamp, who came to dine at the home of the gallery owner Pierre Matisse, where she worked as a governess for his children.

In 1944, Borduas was 39 years old, Leduc 28 and the other members of the group between 16 and 25.

**Thérèse Renaud**, in *Un passé recomposé : Two Automatists in Paris (1946-1953)*, testifies to the atmosphere that reigned at the Atelier: *"The Atelier was the meeting place of a young protestor eager to live intensely a freedom that was difficult to experience in the 1940s ... Discussions intensified over coffee, occasionally a glass of beer, rarely cider or wine .... We decide once and for all that the only true religion is that of our hearts and desires. We listen to modern music and also to jazz..."* [...]

... *"Borduas rarely came, but we were the attentive and faithful admirers of his comments, especially during the evenings at his house, on Napoleon Street, where the young painters brought their work..."*

... *(Mousseau) scribbles constantly, on the corner of a table, small drawings with China ink. Bruno Cormier, always on the lookout, pursues his medical studies, reads a lot and shares with us his discoveries. Claude Gauvreau, usually standing silently, walks around the room and sometimes reads us a poem. There is also Pierre Gauvreau who discusses painting, Gilles Hénault, philosophy and politics with Fernand Leduc, because for a moment we felt attracted by the Marxist ideal."* (1)

The ideas developed and defined at the Atelier were occasionally published in *Quartier latin*, the official student newspaper of the Université de Montréal. Thus, in 1945, we find the writings of Claude Gauvreau, Rémi-Paul Forgues, Thérèse Renaud, Bruno Cormier and drawings by Jean-Paul Mousseau. These few examples show the effervescence that could reign at the Atelier and the importance of the discussions that took place and that had an impact on the Automatist movement.

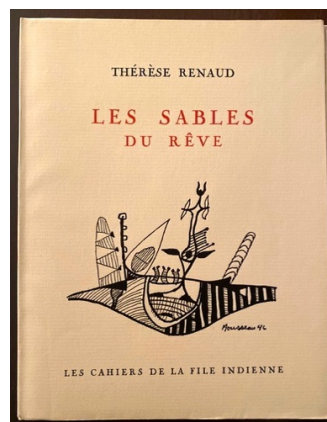
**For Leduc himself, it was during this period that he moved from surrealist painting linked to dreams to non-representational painting linked to gestural abstraction.** He abandoned surrealism as widely practiced in Europe for a gestural painting more practiced in the United States. It must be said that he was in New York at the beginning of April 1945 where he met André Breton on April 1 to present him with the thoughts of Quebec artists. He was disappointed by this meeting because he understood that Breton was more interested in expanding his influence in Canada than in listening to his friends. He said: *"For us, painting was not a message. It was a direct language in itself"* (2)

**Gilles Hénault** clarifies the difference between the two ways of painting by taking examples of two works: a charcoal drawing of 1943 executed in the manner of Dali and a small oil painting, *La dernière campagne de Napoléon*, done in 1946. He writes: *"But what is essential to see is the abandonment of psychic or dreamlike automatism as practiced by the surrealists, in favor of a technique more properly pictorial and more welcoming to the "accident". That amounted to questioning the surrealist notion of the "objective chance". It was no longer a question of the unexpected meeting of two heterogeneous objects in an unusual place, according to the famous image given by Lautréamont (... an umbrella on a dissection table...?) nor of premonitory coincidences. The revealing, it is the*

*painting. It does not transcribe a thought by calling upon reminiscences of dreams. The action of the painter is exerted directly on the canvas at the time when he paints, as place of revelation" (3).*

**It was again through meetings at the Atelier that Leduc defended the idea of a group of autonomous painters. It was he,"** wrote Claude Gauvreau, *"who wanted to form a group of autonomous painters at the cutting edge of evolution and oriented towards a unanimous center... It was Leduc who wanted an autonomous demonstration of the group" (4).* It would be held in April 1946, on Amherst Street (now Atateken) in Montreal. It followed an exhibition that Françoise Sullivan had presented in January 1946 at the Studio of Francizka Boas in New York, where she was studying dance, an exhibition that she had initially proposed to the gallery owner Pierre Matisse but who had refused it. This same gallery owner would represent Jean Paul Riopelle a few years later.

**Finally, it is at the Atelier that the publication of the poems of Thérèse Renaud were composed, written from 1943, under the title of "Les Sables du rêve".** Gilles Hénault, co-founder with Éloi de Grandmont, of the new publishing house *Les Cahiers de la file indienne*, proposed to Thérèse Renaud, in the winter of 1945, to publish her poems. Jean-Paul Mousseau would offer the six drawings that accompany them. Thérèse said: Mousseau *"made small drawings on the end of the table... We chose among his drawings, a little at random, as for my poems". (5).* And it is Fernand Leduc who suggested the title of the collection that he drew from a verse of André Breton: *"there will always be a shovel in the wind in the sands of the dream" (6).* *Les Sables du rêve* was published on September 11, 1946.



*Thérèse Renaud, Les Sables du rêve, Montréal, Les Cahiers de la file indienne, 1946, 37 pages.*

### **The end of the Atelier.**

Isabelle Leduc, Fernand's daughter, wrote that her father left Jeanne-Mance Street in June 1946 to move to the 3629 Lorne Crescent Street at the end of the summer vacations, probably in August, before classes resume. As for Thérèse

Renaud, she left Montreal on October 22 for Paris. Fernand spent the winter alone, but in March 1947, he left to join his beloved Thérèse in Paris. They were only separated for five months.

## Conclusion

When reading and listening to these events, we can see how much Fernand Leduc's "Atelier" was, for two years, between 1944 and 1946, for young passionate artists, an important place for essential meetings. They will have found there moments of stimulating exchanges giving meaning to their artistic productions and to their professional and social commitments. That time, the artists' studios were convivial places where it was good to live and discuss. This was the case for Fernand Leduc's studio, Borduas' studio, Marcel Barbeau's and Jean Paul Riopelle's Atelier de la ruelle studio, Jean-Paul Mousseau's. All of these locations played an important role in the formation of the Automatists group.

## Notes

1 RENAUD, Thérèse, *Un passé recomposé : deux automatistes à Paris (1946-1953)*, Montréal, Nota bene, 2004, p.18.

2 DUQUETTE, Jean-Pierre, « Fernand Leduc, de l'automatisme aux michromies », *Voix et Images*, vol. 2., n°1, septembre 1976. Repris dans BEAUDET, André, *Fernand Leduc : Vers les îles de lumière. Écrits (1942-1980)*, Montréal, Hurtubise-HMH, 1981, p. 199.

3 HÉNAULT, Gilles, *Regards sur l'art d'avant-garde*, Montréal, Sémaphore, 2016, p.71-72.

4 GAUVIN, Lise, *Entretiens avec Fernand Leduc suivis de Conversations avec Thérèse Renaud*, Montréal, Éditions Liber, 1995, p. 31.

5 *Ibid*, p. 155-156.

6 BRETON, André, « Les États généraux », *VVV*, n°4, février 1944.

We are very indebted to Ray Ellenwood, *Égrégore. Une histoire du mouvement automatiste à Montréal*, Montréal, Kétoupa Édition, 2014.

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