

C E N T R E  
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D E M O N T R É A L

*From the series « Mapping the Automatists in Montreal », #122*

The studio of Paul-Émile Borduas  
was located behind 3940 De Mentana Street, a stone's throw from the artist's  
home at 953 Napoleon Street, from 1935 to 1938.  
In 1938, newly married, the Borduas moved to a house next door at 983  
Napoleon Street, keeping the same studio.

Claude Gosselin, C.M., February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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Paul-Émile Borduas was born in Saint-Hilaire in 1905. At the age of 15, he was the assistant of painter Ozias Leduc, a resident of his village, for whom he had a longstanding admiration. He entered, aged 18, in September 1923, the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. He would be there until 1927. The following year, he left Montreal for France where he stayed until November 1930. On June 11, 1935, he married Gabrielle Goyette, a nurse and doctor's daughter, in Granby. Shortly after, the couple moved to 953 Napoleon Street, near Lafontaine Park. In 1938, the young family moved to 983 Napoleon Street. They had three children: Janine, Renée and Paul.

The studio was located in the De Mentana alley, behind 3940 De Mentana Street, near the artist's house. It was there that many artists who gave life to the Automatist movement met.

In the spring of 1945, the family left Montreal to settle in Saint-Hilaire, Borduas' native village.

#### **Borduas's first group**

The first meetings at Borduas' studio took place in the spring of 1941. They would have taken place shortly after March 7. Guy Viau, quoted by François-Marc Gagnon in *Chroniques du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p.41 referred to this as the "prehistory of automatism". According to Gagnon, "at first, they were Borduas's students at the École du meuble: Gabriel Filion, Pierre Petel, Guy Viau, Charles Daudelin, Roger Fauteux, Jacques de Tonnancour and former students of François Hertel at Collège Brébeuf, including Charles Trudeau and his brother Pierre Trudeau, J. Langlois, Pierre Gélinas, Jacques Rolland" (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chroniques du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p.40-41, 47-48).

Gagnon recalled, still in *Chroniques du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*: "During the visits of the young people to Borduas's studio, which became a sort of habit, we did more than discuss art and poetry. Everyone was free to bring their own work and to receive advice from the master. He himself would show them his own paintings, especially that amazing series of gouaches that occupied him at that time. [...]"

During these evenings, discussions revolved around Soutine and the search for the material or the 1921 introduction to the first edition of Volume I on "Modern Art in the History of Art" by Élie Faure and his questioning of the future of art in a world disrupted by the war, but also André Breton and surrealism. [...]"

[It is] André Breton who made (Borduas) understand that one does not reach the sources of an epoch by willpower. [...] that it is vain to "want" such matter. Matter, as the drawing, as value, as composition, are only means of expressions, they are given by surplus to who expresses himself generously " (p.47-48).

### **The arrival of Pierre Gauvreau**

Tuesday evenings at the **Atelier de Borduas** really took off with the arrival of participants from outside the École du meuble and Collège Brébeuf. Sometime after the end-of-year exhibition at the Gesù, during which the works of Pierre Gauvreau had fascinated Paul-Émile Borduas, who awarded him a prize out of competition. Paul-Émile Borduas asked Guy Viau to invite the young Gauvreau to his studio. Upon receiving the invitation, Pierre Gauvreau accepted on the condition that he would be accompanied by his friends Bruno Cormier and Françoise Sullivan. This meeting took place in November 1941. The three of them met him in his studio on Mentana Street and were then invited to the Borduas family home on Napoleon Street where Mrs. Borduas served tea and biscuits. Françoise Sullivan recounts that the first time they went to Borduas's house, François Hertel, Guy Viau, Pierre Trudeau and Roger Rolland were also there (reported in Patricia Smart, *Les femmes du Refus global*, 1998).

Soon, the whole of the small "resistance force" was challenging the teaching of the École des beaux-arts. Magdeleine Desrochers, Louise Renaud, André Villandré and Fernand Leduc (all students at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal) would also soon be part of these events, as Jeanette Biondi reports in her biography of *Pierre Gauvreau Le jeune homme en colère*, published by Éditions Lanctôt, Outremont, 2003, p. 63.

The topics of discussion at the Tuesday evening meetings were varied and go far beyond painting: the group talked about philosophy, society, art, culture, politics. The group had a strong interest in surrealism and psychoanalysis, and the names of André Breton and Sigmund Freud came up periodically. Moreover, the reading of *Égrégories ou la vie des civilisations* by the French psychiatrist Pierre Mabilhe was an important work in the formation of the philosophy of the future signatories of *Refus global*, because they saw that the factors of our dynamism come from the internal movements of the unconscious, (Jeanette Biondi, *Biographie de Pierre Gauvreau*, 2003; Guy Robert, *L'art au Québec depuis 1940*, Éditions La Presse, Ottawa, 1973, p. 70), Rémi-Paul Forgue would even go so far as to use the word automatism in an article published in the

*Quartier Latin*, entitled "Le surréalisme à Montréal", on November 13, 1945 (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chroniques du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*, p.232-233).

Between 1942 and 1944, several artists joined this first group of artists at the Tuesday night meetings. They were : Claude Gauvreau, Thérèse Renaud, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Marcel Barbeau, Denis Noiseux, Pierre Mercure, Jeanne Renaud, Mimi Lalonde, Claude Vermette, Mariette Rousseau, Gilles Hénault, Rémi-Paul Forgues, André Jasmin, Fernand Bonin.

Starting in the fall of 1944, the group met every Tuesday at the Borduas' home on Napoleon street. (During the summer of 1944, they were held at the Charbonneau farm in Saint-Hilaire, Borduas' neighbors. Borduas had a house built there that would not be ready until the following year.) Among others, Bruno Cormier, Pierre Gauvreau, Claude Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Jeanne Renaud, Louise Renaud and Françoise Sullivan attended. These meetings played a key role in the creation of the Automatists group (Marc Lanctôt, *Françoise Sullivan, exhibition catalog*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2018, p. 14).

In the spring of 1945, the Borduas family moved to Saint-Hilaire, Paul-Émile's hometown. Jean Paul Riopelle, Maurice Perron, Françoise Lespérance, Muriel Guilbault. Marcelle Ferron, Magdeleine Arbour, Suzanne Meloche and Paul-Marie Lapointe would join the group later on. (Patricia Smart, *Les femmes du Refus global*, Montréal, Boréal, p. 62; François-Marc Gagnon, *Chroniques du mouvement automatiste québécois 1941-1954*).

It should also be noted that Mentana's studio was used as a location for drawing classes for children on Saturdays, beginning on October 18, 1941 (André-G. Bourassa and Gilles Lapointe, *Paul-Émile Borduas. Écrits II*, t. 1 (1923-1953), Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1997, p. 166).

To consult the complete catalog of Paul-Émile Borduas <http://www.borduas.concordia.ca/>

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