

C E N T R E
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C O N T E M P O R A I N
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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #114

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Part 2

The Spring Salons, 1938 – 1954

Claude Gosselin, C.M., August 14th, 2020

The first exhibition was held in Paris in 1667, to showcase art to the public. The name "Salon" appeared in 1725 when the exhibitions were held in the Grand Salon du Louvre. A few Salons still exist to this day (1).

The Art Gallery-Art Association of Montreal held a "Spring Salon" from 1880 to 1949. The annual exhibition continued after the Art Gallery became the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The last Spring Salon was in 1965. The Salon's purpose was to grant visibility to Quebec and Canada's contemporary art.

The artists of the Automatists group regularly participated in the Spring Salons. The following text is largely inspired by François-Marc Gagnon's various publications, which can be found in the general bibliography of the project "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal, 1939-1955".

1938: 55th Salon, from March 17 to April 10

This is Paul-Émile Borduas's first Spring Salon. François-Marc Gagnon believes Borduas presented *Matin de printemps* (1937). Borduas was absent from the following Salons, from 1939 to 1945 inclusively.

1944: 61st Salon, from April 20 to May 28

This is the first time the Salon has two juries to select works: a jury for academic art, and a "modern" jury for more daring works. Jean Paul Riopelle (this was his first apparition at the Salon) presents a watercolor, *Paysage*. Works shown at the Salon were for sale: Riopelle priced his *Paysage* at \$ 300.

1945: 62nd Salon, from April 5 to 22

Jean Paul Riopelle presents *Après-midi d'hiver (Carré Saint-Louis)*, an oil (\$ 45). Marcel Barbeau exhibits a non-figurative oil titled *Convoitise* (\$ 45), while Jean-Paul Mousseau chooses to present *Le Christ* (\$ 35), a figurative painting with a religious theme. The modern jury is made up of Prudence Heward, Louis Muhlstock, Goodridge

Roberts and Mostyn Lewis of the Art Association of Montreal. The academic jury, meanwhile, is made up of Richard Jack, Adrien Hébert, Sheriff Scott, as well as J.W. Hickson from the Art Association of Montreal.

1946: 63rd Salon, from March 28 to April 28

The modern jury was made up of Paul-Émile Borduas, Fritz Brandtner and Marian Dale Scott.

Jean Paul Riopelle: This was his third appearance at the Salon. He showcased three works: *Création d'un monde*, oil, \$ 150; *Graphomancie léthiférique*, watercolor, \$ 65; *Tête*, watercolor, which was not for sale.

Jean-Paul Mousseau: an oil titled *Appareil d'aération*.

Marcel Barbeau: an oil titled *Ténébreuse, étrange, inattendue*.

According to François-Marc Gagnon, Claude Gauvreau bought one of Jean Paul Riopelle's works : "I think it was at the Spring Salon that I first saw a painting by Riopelle; it was a grim, non-figurative painting with great lyricism and which struck me as quite new. Although then very poor (I still am), I wanted to acquire this painting; I got to know Riopelle on the very premises where this painting was exhibited, and I offered him \$ 15 for his work. He accepted, and this is how Riopelle sold his first non-figurative painting. At that time, for the sake of economy, Riopelle painted with Sherwin Williams paint; the painting soon destroyed itself and Riopelle replaced it for me with a painting from the same period which also destroyed itself" (Claude Gauvreau, "L'épopée automatiste vu par un cyclope", *La Barre du jour*, no. 17- 20, January-August 1969, p. 57).

Éloi de Grandmont shared a few brief lines on Automatist works: "Let us say, however, that this show has improved over the past few years. Fernand Bonin, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Gordon Webber, Jean-Paul Riopelle and a few others are interesting elements of this exhibition, but we are forced to realize that they are a little lost in these two hundred exhibitors" ("Les arts. Surréalisme", *Le Canada*, April 24, 1946, p. 5).

Charles Doyon made a few very brief comments on the young artists in the exhibition: "[...] Riopelle and J.-P. Mousseau, whose stained glass figures mist up and get lost in the making of richly colored arabesques [...] Marcelle [*sic*] Barbeau with spotted landscapes" ("Le Salon du printemps", *Le Jour*, April 27, 1946, p. 5).

1947: 64th Salon, March 21 to April 20

Paul-Émile Borduas, a member of the modern jury, presented his works in a non-competitive section. He showcased two paintings from 1947 entitled *19.47* or *Parachutes végétaux* and *8.47* or *Carquois fleuris*.

This was Marcelle Ferron's first participation at the Salon. Her work, *Huile n° 8*, is not for sale.

1948: 65th Salon, from March 4 to 31

The Automatists are absent from this Salon. Their absence is explained in a letter of protest published on February 17 in *Le Devoir*, signed by Marcel Barbeau, Paul-Émile Borduas, Magdeleine Desrochers-Noiseux, Fleurent Emery, Marcelle Ferron-Hamelin, Pierre Gauvreau, Jean-Paul Goudreau, Jean- Paul Mousseau, Serge Phénix, Jean Paul

Riopelle, Claude Vermette, Guy Viau and Paul Wilson. Entitled “Protestation d’un groupe de peintres contre certaines décisions du Comité d’organisation du 65^e Salon du printemps [*Protest of a group of painters against certain decisions of the Organizing Committee of the 65th Spring Salon*]”, the letter called into question the exhibition conditions, which included the formats, the juries, the display and the prices.

The letter pointed out that Harry O. McCurry, director of the National Gallery of Canada, and Robert Tyler Davis, recently appointed director of the Art Association (which organized Salons at the Art Gallery), were both part of the academic and modern juries at the same time. Only Maurice Gagnon was considered by artists to be truly a modern art jury member.

Excerpt from the letter:

“The undersigned, painters, have for several years been fighting a struggle against academicism. Until recently the Spring Salon was an academic salon; therefore, they had refrained from participating. In 1943, the Art Association, eager to have a representative salon, took the initiative to create a section with a modern jury. The painters presenting themselves to this jury were grouped together in specific rooms. This distinction enabled the undersigned to exhibit at the Salon without compromising their struggle. Upon reading the invitation to the 65th Spring Salon, the undersigned believe that the guarantees given in the past are not expressed there and that the conditions imposed on exhibitors do not favor a truly representative demonstration of the best works.

*[...] Consequently, not foreseeing any possible changes to the conditions of the 65th Spring Salon, the undersigned are obliged to abstain from participating” (“Protestation d’un groupe de peintres”, *Le Devoir*, February 17, 1948, p. 5, and other extracts published in *Chronique*, p. 462-463).*

1949: 66th Salon, from April 20 to May 15

The jury consisted of John Lyman, Marian Dale Scott, and Guy Viau, which indicated that the protest letter from the previous year had been acknowledged.

Paul-Émile Borduas exhibited *Réunion de trophées* and wins the Jessie Dow Prize for Painting in the modern section;

Jean-Paul Mousseau displayed two oils: *Marchant sur toi, eau nette* and *Jet fuligineux sur noir torturé*;

Marcel Barbeau, two oils: *Soupir dans le trébuchard pittoresque des alentours poudres* and *Une maîtresse cajole un arc-en-ciel*;

Pierre Gauvreau, an oil, *L’ascenseur d’Ubu*;

Jean Paul Riopelle, an oil, *Propagation de Zarathoustra*.

Critic Renée Normand wrote: “Of [Borduas’s] students, Gauvreau and Mousseau are the most distinctly personal - especially the first who seems to detach noticeably from the sacred path to achieve a result that one would like to see the second achieve as well; both have a magnificent talent, which perhaps only lacks maturity”. She further underlined: “The Dow Prize for Painting went to Borduas for a very beautiful canvas masterfully arranged, where talent and experience emerge, more than automatist psychology, which here remains particular to those who suffer it, and disturbs in no

way the uninitiated. Richness and harmony, severely rhythmic composition - everything remains plastic despite the method." ("Les arts", *Le Canada*, April 25, 1949, p. 14.)

Critic Charles Doyon wrote a paragraph about the Automatists: "Among the group of Automatists and standing out from their environment, two sparkling oils by Mousseau, a purple composition by P. Gauvreau: *L'ascension d'Ubu* [sic]. Riopelle with an impulsive construction and two Barbeau oils complete the surreational index" ("Le 66^e Salon du printemps", *Le Clairon*, May 20, 1949, p. 4).

The magazine *Canadian Art* also highlighted the Automatists presence at this Salon: "Even the most distracted spectator will have no difficulty, this year, to say which pieces of the annual Spring Salon, held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, was devoted to 'academic' art or 'modern' painting. Jury II (there are always two juries at the Salon) agreed to hang a good number of experimental and controversial works by the French-Canadian group 'automatiste'" (Anonymous, "Paul-Émile Borduas Wins a First Prize at Spring Exhibition in Montreal", *Canadian Art*, vol. IV, no. 4, Summer 1949, p. 77).

1950: 67th Salon, from March 14 to April 9

The jury of the "modern" section, whose role was to select non-academic works, was made up of Stanley Cosgrove, Jacques de Tonnancour and Goodridge Roberts. They rejected works by Marcel Barbeau, Marcelle Ferron, and Jean-Paul Mousseau, while those of Paul-Émile Borduas were accepted. There followed a protest from several members of the Automatists group and their friends.

On the opening night, March 13, Claude Gauvreau, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Suzanne Meloche-Barbeau, Marcel Barbeau, and thirteen other people infiltrated the museum carrying protest sandwich boards. Claude Gauvreau remembers it thus: "[...] we took our 'sandwiches' out of their hiding places and put them on. It was understood that we would march slowly in the most rigorous impassibility without considering the reactions of the spectators. There were quite a few of us. Mousseau led the way and I followed him immediately. One can judge the effect on this elegant and mannered crowd produced by the offensive and sometimes scatological phrases inscribed on the bodies of the imperturbable strollers. [...] We had been seen and read perfectly by all. The demonstration was an impeccable success" ("L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope", *La Barre du Jour*, no. 17-20, 1969).

1951: 68th Salon, from May 2 to 30

Paul-Émile Borduas was the only member of the group to present a work, entitled *L'éruption prévue*. This was his last participation in this Salon (*Chronicle*, p. 755).

1952: 69th Salon. Information unavailable

1953: 70th Salon, from March 13 to April 19

Pierre Gauvreau showcases *Merci pour demain* (\$ 150);

Fernand Leduc: *Les bons augures*.

Marcel Barbeau and Marcelle Ferron were rejected from the Salon (*Chronique*, p. 830).

Rodolphe de Repentigny wrote: "Pierre Gauvreau is represented in this group by a beautiful canvas, strongly colored, which shows vegetation from another world whose canopy is lost in a purplish mist, while the bottom of the painting is occupied by a warm brown mass, alive. Title: *Merci pour demain* - A painting by Fernand Leduc, *Les bons augures*, shows even more progress in the direction of the non-figurative. Although the color is less pleasing than the previous one, the shape is more stripped of the naturalistic gangue. Leduc has achieved a strictly personal composition" (François Bourgogne, pseudonym of Rodolphe de Repentigny, "Le Salon du printemps", *L'Autorité*, March 21, 1953, p. 5).

1954: 71st Salon, from March 17 to April 18

The double jury is canceled; from now on it would consist of four members.

At the 1954 Salon, only Marcel Barbeau presented an artwork, *La torture des esprits lucides* (*Chronique*, p. 893).

(1) Salons:

Painting and sculpture Salon
Independents Salon

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_\(Paris\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_(Paris))
www.britannica.com/art/Salon-des-Independants
www.artistes-independants.fr/

Salon of Rejects

fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_des_refus%C3%A9s

Fall Salon

www.britannica.com/art/Salon-des-Refuses
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_d%27Automne
www.salon-automne.com/fr/accueil/

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