

**C E N T R E
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CONTEMPORAIN
DE MONTRÉAL**

From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #111

**At Henry Morgan & Co.
585, Sainte-Catherine Street West**

Exhibitions

- 1. Peinture moderne: May 16 – 29, 1941**
- 2. Paul-Émile Borduas: April 23 – May 4, 1946**

Claude Gosselin, C.M., August 17th, 2020

Morgan's is the first department store in Canada. It was founded by Henry Morgan and David Smith in 1845. It moved to multiple locations between 1845 and 1891, on Notre-Dame streets, then McGill and Saint-Jacques (Square Victoria) before settling permanently in 1891 at 585, Sainte Catherine Street West. In 1960, Morgan's was acquired by The Hudson's Bay Company and the name was changed to HUDSON'S BAY (LA BAIE D'HUDSON, in Quebec) in 1972.

<http://www.hbcheritage.ca/history/acquisitions/morgans-of-montreal>

It was not uncommon at the time to see department stores offering spaces for exhibitions.



Henry Morgan Building, 585, Sainte-Catherine Street West, built in 1891 by architect John Pearce Hill.

Photo: City of Montreal Archives.

March 30, 1936.

Borduas showcased his works twice in the hall of the store's auditorium.

1. From May 16 to 29, 1941: *Peinture moderne* exhibition

Borduas presented five works. Three of them are still lifes: "*Nature morte. Ananas et poires*" and two other unidentified ones. There are also two portraits: "*Portrait de Maurice Gagnon*" and "*Portrait de Madame Gagnon*".

He exhibited alongside ten other artists: Marie Bouchard, Denise Gadbois, Louise Gadbois, Eric Goldberg, John Lyman, Louis Muhlstock, Alfred Pellan, Goodridge Roberts, Jori Smith, and Phillip Surrey.

The exhibition is a revival of the "Première exposition des Indépendants", presented at the Palais Montcalm in Quebec from April 26 to May 10, 1941 and organized by Father Marie-Alain Couturier, then professor at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. The exhibition generated tension between Father Couturier and Charles Maillard, the latter being director of the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. Maillard saw it as a betrayal on behalf of the school's former students (Borduas, Muhlstock, Roberts and Smith). A controversy ensued in the press, opposing Maillard's formal teachings to Father Couturier's liberal teachings (André-G. Bourassa, Jean Fiset and Gilles Lapointe, *Paul-Émile Borduas. Écrits I*, University of Montreal press, 1987, p. 143-150). Father Couturier left the École des beaux-arts de Montréal and accepted Jean-Marie Gauvreau's invitation to become professor at the École du Meuble, joining Paul-Émile Borduas.

This exhibition is significant: for the first time, critics notice Paul-Émile Borduas's impact on Montreal's arts community. A total of eight reports were published on the artist. Among these, let us mention Maurice Gagnon's remarks: "Borduas and Pellan are the masters of the group. [...] Borduas is a classic because of the balance of colored masses, harboring the power of the Fauves. Impossible to move a single object there: their order and stability hold something eternal. [...] Constantly obsessed with production, he can afford to organize harmonies of total rigor and grandeur. His still lifes and the portrait of a woman entitled *Composition [Portrait de Madame Gagnon]* were astonishing to all" ("Opinions. Exposition des Indépendants chez Morgan", *Le Devoir*, May 26, 1941, p. 2).

2. From April 23 to May 4, 1946: *Œuvres de Jean-Paul Borduas*

This time Borduas exhibited alone. He presented 23 paintings made between 1943 and 1946. This was his first solo exhibition in three years. Many of the paintings presented contained numbers in the title: *3.45 ou État d'âme* (1945), *3.45 ou La femme au bijou* (1945), *5.45 ou Nu vert* (1945), *2.46 ou Jéroboam* (1946), *5.46 ou Petite abstraction grise* (1946) - bought by Marcel Barbeau -, *10.46 ou Climat mexicain* (1946) which belonged to Claude Gauvreau. In *10.46 ou Climat mexicain*, "the form/background dissociation which would become characteristic of Automatist paintings of the years 1947 and 1948 is already manifesting" (François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas*, MMFA, 1988, p. 212).

Critics were not very vocal about this exhibit. Some were even half-hearted. Perhaps it was because this was Borduas's first exhibit in three years? (François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas*, MMFA, 1988, p. 112). Nevertheless, among the articles written about him, only Paul Dumas's retraces the artist's career: "It is known that Borduas abandoned the representation of reality since his memorable series of gouaches that he showed long ago... The paintings that followed his gouaches pyrotechnics show a certain concern. We felt the painter uncertain of finding the same ease with the pigments in capturing the multicolored flashes that crossed his inner night as with the softer medium and the more fluid material of gouache. However, from his exhibition at the Dominion Gallery [in 1943, for his second solo exhibition], Borduas had already overcome this difficulty. Today's paintings confirm this by their success" ("*Borduas*", *Amerique française*, 5th year, no. 6, June-July 1946, p. 39-42).

Some critics, including Dumas, still try, wrongly, to link Paul-Émile Borduas's works to surrealism. Other critics, not knowing how to describe Borduas's works, stick to a formal approach: "Fluid lines that suggest movement and rhythm, soft tones that overlap giving an impression of transparency and infinite depth, Borduas's works are imbued with a radiance of mystery which creates bewitchment and endears irresistibly" (Anonymous, "Exposition des œuvres de Borduas chez Henry Morgan", *Montréal-Matin*, April 24, 1946, p. 7).

Text based on François-Marc Gagnon's exhibition catalog *Borduas*, 1988, and *Chronique*, 1998.

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.

Claude Gosselin is General and Artistic Director at the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal.