

NOVEMBER 19, 2021

## RIOPELLE'S MAGNETIC NORTH A CONTEMPORARY TAKE ON AN HISTORIC GREAT

Jean Paul Riopelle is Canada's most internationally renowned twentieth-century painter. Yet until now little discussion about his work has addressed how the Montreal artist was inspired by Indigenous art and the northern landscape. A travelling exhibition uncovers new insights and raises timely questions about these aspects of the famed creator's output.



Claude Duthuit photograph of Riopelle in the Arctic, July 1977, Archives Ysueit Riopelle. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).



In 2019 the Art Canada Institute proudly published *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon, a book that pays tribute to one of the greatest painters of the mid-twentieth century. But it was far from the last word on the revered artist. Like all creative pioneers, Riopelle (1923–2002) is the subject of continuous scholarship and interpretation. Earlier this year, *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures* opened at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it was curated by the MMFA's Jacques Des Rochers along with Andréanne Roy and Ysueit Riopelle. The exhibition examines the legendary figure's largely overlooked art from the 1970s while also raising complex questions about the inspiration and appropriation by situating Riopelle's pieces alongside historical and contemporary Indigenous creations. Recently the show travelled to the Audain Art Museum in Whistler, British Columbia, where on view through February 21, 2022, it continues to explore how Riopelle's interest in Indigenous cultures and the Canadian North took his practice in unexpected directions. "It's a conversation that needs to happen here," says Curtis Collins, Audain Art Museum director and chief curator. "It's a conversation that's related to our collection here but it's also a conversation that extends beyond B.C." The following works give a window into Riopelle's *The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures* and his legendary career.

Sara Angel  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

### A MEMBER OF THE CANADIAN AND FRENCH AVANT-GARDE



Jean Paul Riopelle, *Blizzard*, 1954, private collection. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

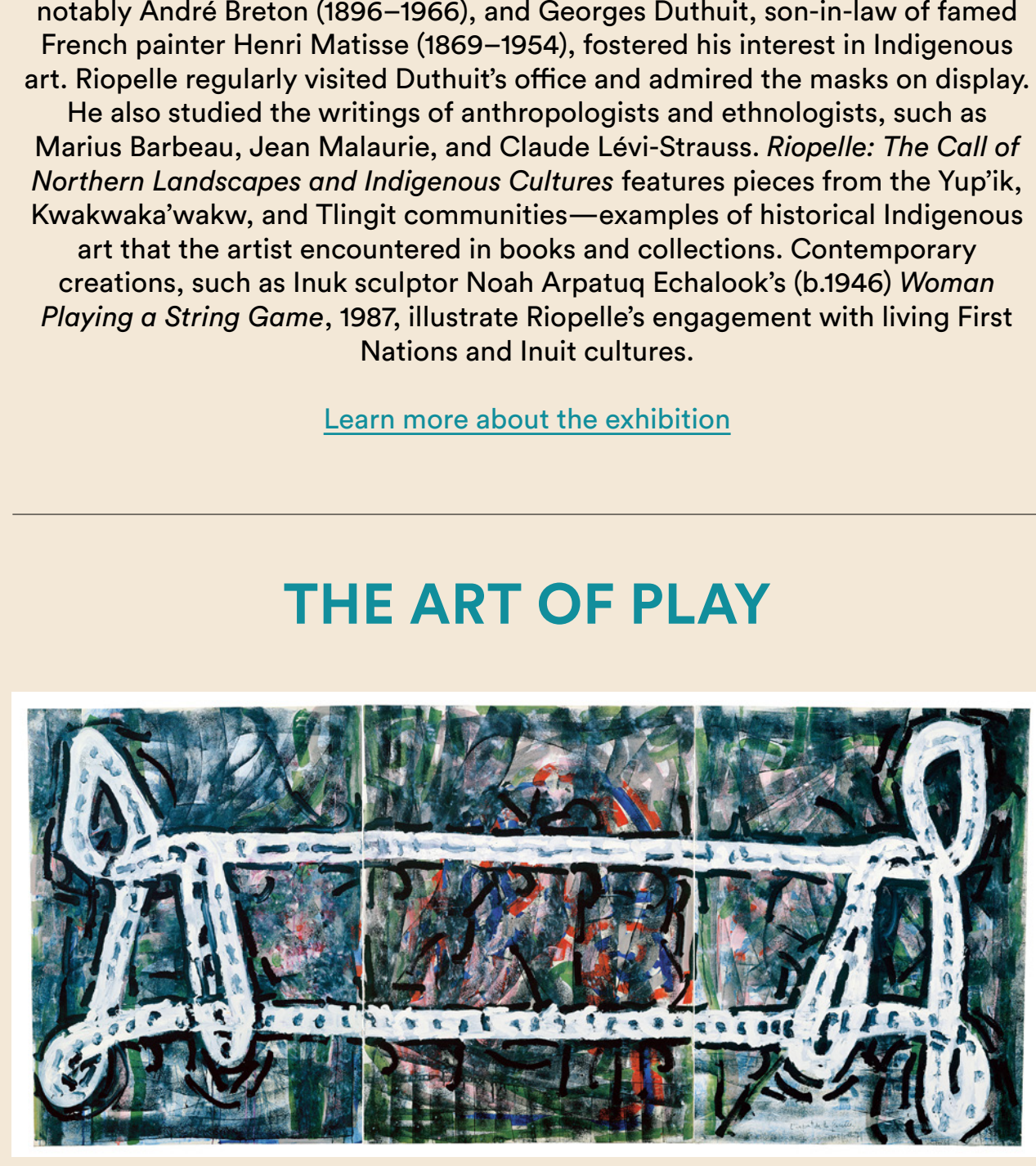


Basil Zarov, *Jean Paul Riopelle outside of the Studio at Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson with "La Défaite" in the Distance*, about 1976, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

A student of the pioneering abstract painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), Riopelle was a founding member of the artist group the Automatistes as well as one of the sixteen signatories of the infamous anti-establishment manifesto *Refus global* (1948). Soon after its publication Riopelle settled in Paris, where he began working with a palette knife—as can be seen in the richly textured *Blizzard*, 1954—a technique that would bring him international acclaim in the 1950s. Then, in 1974, he set up a studio in Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson in the Laurentians (as shown on the right). With his companion Dr. Champlain Charest, a Québecois restaurateur and art collector, Riopelle travelled to Arctic and Subarctic regions that few had experienced apart from the First Nations and Inuit who lived there. These extraordinary sights inspired him to explore a rich array of new themes in his art.

[Learn more about the exhibition](#)

### THE INFLUENCE OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES



Noah Arpatuq Echallook, *Woman Playing a String Game*, 1987, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Riopelle's interest in Indigenous art developed in Paris in the 1950s. He travelled to the French capital on a Canadian government fellowship in 1945 and soon became part of the École de Paris. Riopelle's association with the Surrealists, notably André Breton (1896–1966), and Georges Duthuit, son-in-law of famed French painter Henri Matisse (1869–1954), fostered his interest in Indigenous art. Riopelle regularly visited Duthuit's office and admired the masks on display. He also studied the writings of anthropologists and ethnologists, such as Marius Barbeau, Jean Malaurie, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures* features pieces from the Yup'ik, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Tlingit communities—examples of historical Indigenous art that the artist encountered in books and collections. Contemporary creations, such as Inuk sculptor Noah Arpatuq Echallook's (b.1946) *Woman Playing a String Game*, 1987, illustrate Riopelle's engagement with living First Nations and Inuit cultures.

[Learn more about the exhibition](#)

### THE ART OF PLAY

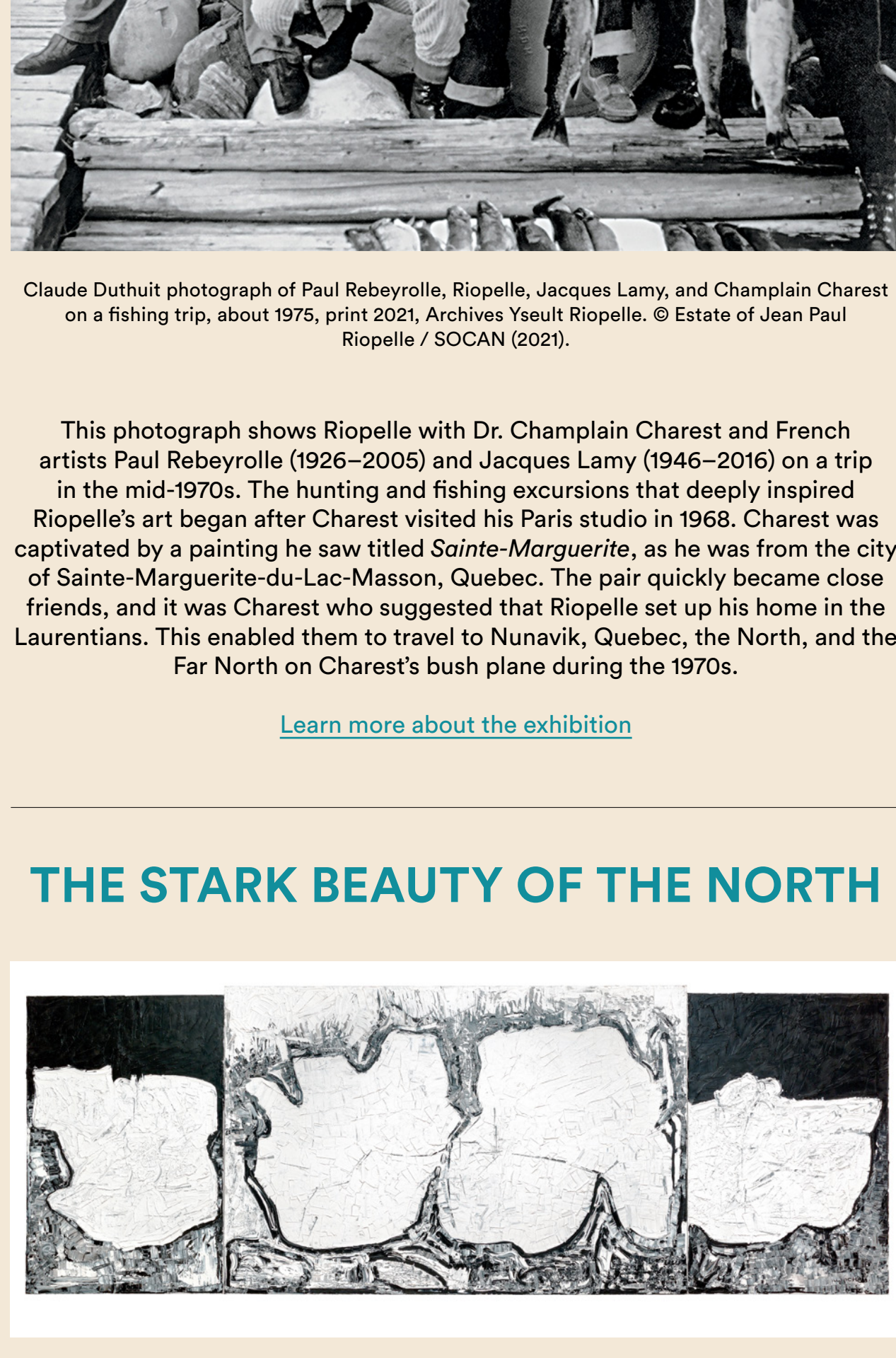


Jean Paul Riopelle, *L'esprit de la ficelle* (triptych), 1971, private collection. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

The central symmetrical motif of Riopelle's lively triptych *L'esprit de la ficelle*, 1971, references an Inuit game known as *ajaraaq*. As Noah Arpatuq Echallook's sculpture *Woman Playing a String Game*, 1987 (above), illustrates, this activity involves looping a twine around one's fingers to form various figures called *ayaraasaq*, which also serve a ritual function. Riopelle's monumental masterpiece is part of his series *Jeux de ficelles*, 1971–72, which is dedicated to the pastime. According to the MMFA, "The strings rendered by Riopelle are sometimes inspired directly by the *ajaraaq* figures; at other times, the artist takes great liberties in creating his own motifs." He first learned about *ajaraaq* in Canadian anthropologist Guy Mary-Rousseilière's book *Les jeux de ficelle des Arvilgajarmiut* (1969), and he may have also personally observed the string games during his northern expeditions.

[Learn more about the exhibition](#)

### THE TURN TOWARDS FIGURATION



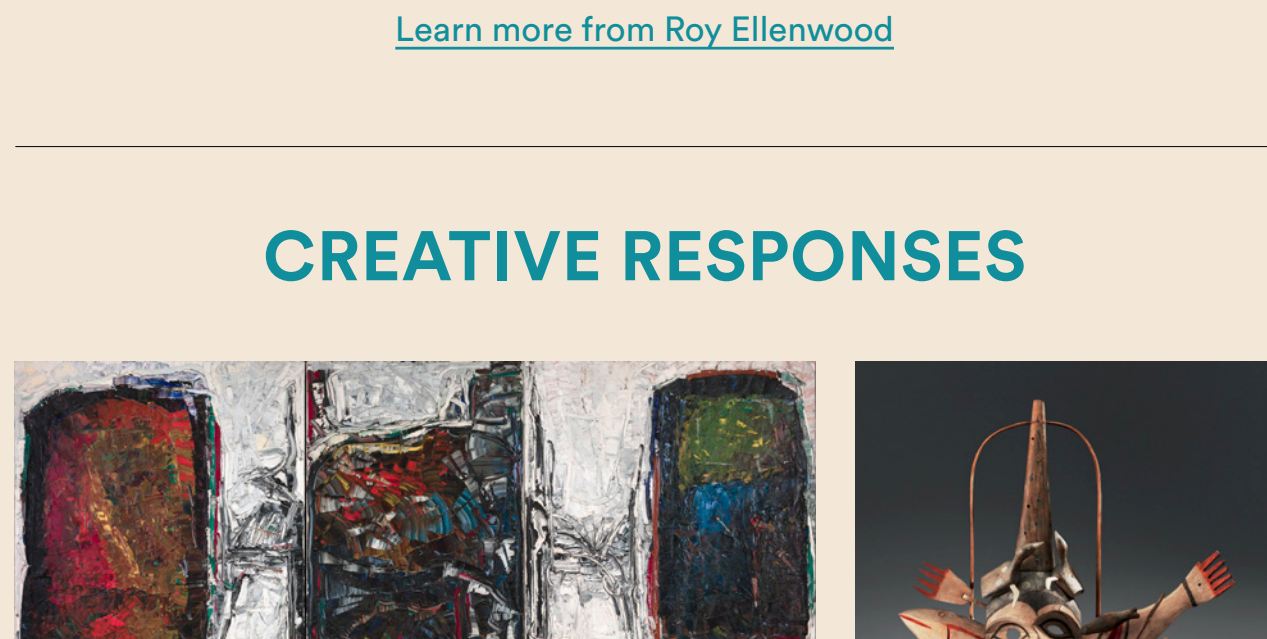
Jean Paul Riopelle, *Grand duc*, 1970, private collection. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

Riopelle's art evolved in response to a result of his journeys to the North. In *Grand duc*, 1970, he builds up layers of colour using a palette knife to depict an abstracted owl—a motif that appears in more than twenty paintings and nearly as many bronze sculptures he made in the same year. Guest curator Ysueit Riopelle, who is the artist's daughter, comments that during his trips to the North Riopelle "immerse[d] himself in nature" and "was inspired by everything he could discover. It could be icebergs or animals." At this point in his life, his work becomes much more figurative, "in the sense that he's rendering somewhat identifiable objects and landscapes," adds Curtis Collins, Audain Art Museum director and chief curator.

[Watch an interview with Ysueit Riopelle](#)

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### AN APPETITE FOR ADVENTURE



Claude Duthuit photograph of Paul Rebeverylle, Riopelle, Jacques Lamy, and Champlain Charest on a fishing trip, about 1975, print 2021, Archives Ysueit Riopelle. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

This photograph shows Riopelle with Dr. Champlain Charest and French artists Paul Rebeverylle (1926–2005) and Jacques Lamy (1946–2016) on a trip in the mid-1970s. The hunting and fishing excursions that deeply inspired Riopelle's art began after Charest visited his Paris studio in 1968. Charest was captivated by a painting he saw titled *Sainte-Marguerite*, as he was from the city of Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson, Québec. The pair quickly became close friends, and it was Charest who suggested that Riopelle set up his home in the Laurentians. This enabled them to travel to Nunavik, Québec, the North, and the Far North on Charest's brush to plan during the 1970s.

[Learn more about the exhibition](#)

### THE STARK BEAUTY OF THE NORTH

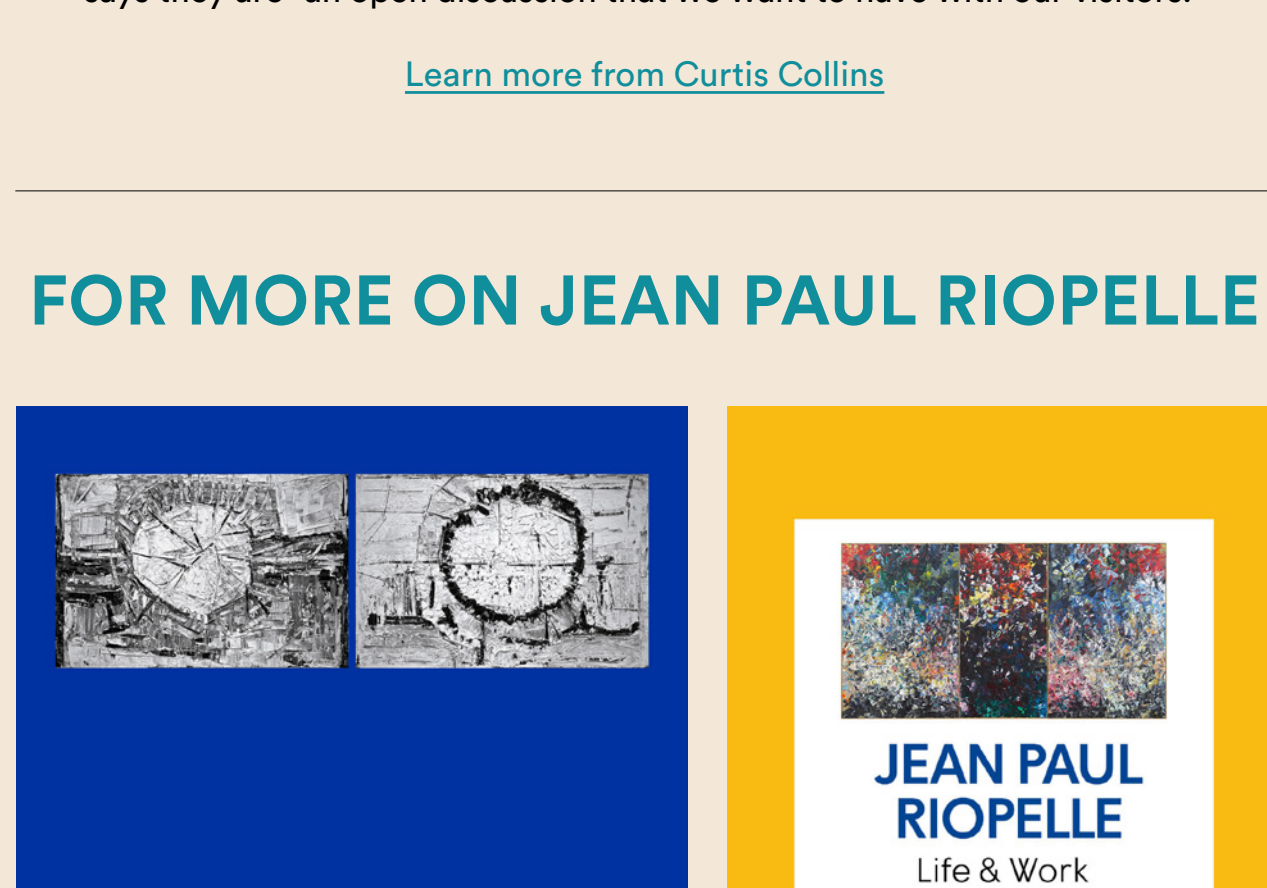


Jean Paul Riopelle, *Pangnirtung* (triptych), 1977, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

*Pangnirtung*, 1977, consists of four white forms outlined in black for the brilliant that they alternately smooth and jagged contours. Long renowned for his brilliant colour combinations, Riopelle radically reduced his palette to black, white, and grey in his icebergs series, 1977, which he developed after a trip to Pangnirtung, Nunavut, the same year. The heavy impasto paint, built up using a palette knife, reveals his interest in capturing the uneven surfaces of icebergs and their reflection of light. Resembling an aerial view of the Arctic landscape, the triptych hovers between abstraction and representation.

Learn more in *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon

### THE SUPERIOR TRAPPER



Claude Duthuit photograph of Riopelle in the Arctic, July 1977, Archives Ysueit Riopelle. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

This photograph shows Riopelle surrounded by melting icebergs in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, in the summer of 1977, one of many trips he made to the region with Charest. The exhibition includes other photographs and postcards from these travels to the Far North, as well as letters that Riopelle sent to his romantic partner, the American painter Joan Mitchell (1925–1992). "During that trip [to Pangnirtung in 1977], he sent a half-dozen postcards to Joan Mitchell in France, keeping in mind that she did not appreciate his new Québec residence, and as an animal lover, hated his enthusiasm for hunting and fishing," said Roy Ellenwood in a lecture accompanying the MMFA exhibition. Revealing Riopelle's playful humour, Ellenwood says of the postcards, "It is hard not to read some of [them] as teasing gibes." The French Surrealist artist André Breton cemented Riopelle's image as a Canadian woodsman by nicknaming him the "superior trapper."

[Learn more from Roy Ellenwood](#)

### CREATIVE RESPONSES



Jean Paul Riopelle, *Les masques* (triptych), 1964, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. © Estate of Jean Paul Riopelle / SOCAN (2021).

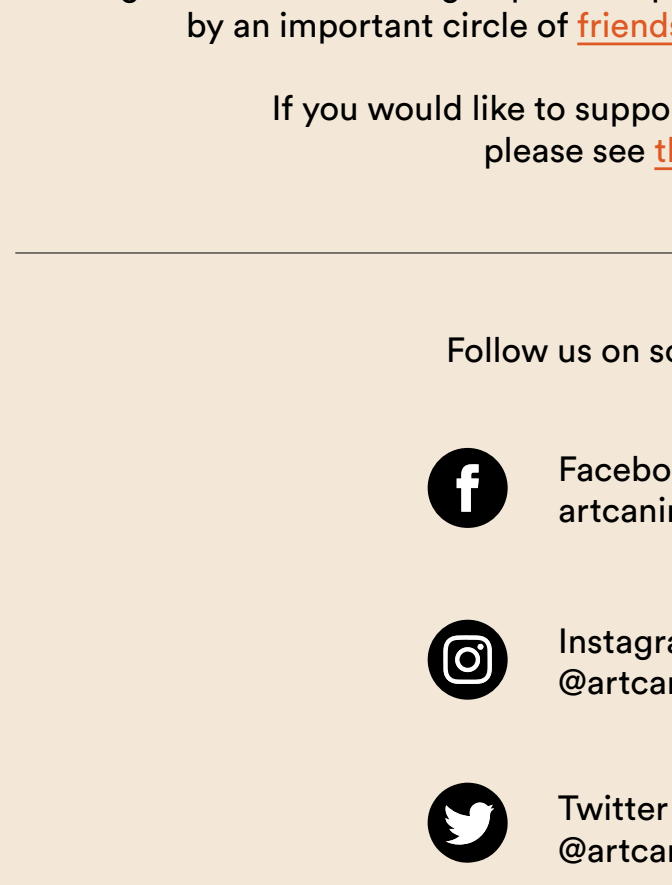


Hooper Bay region of southwest Alaska, Yup'ik, mask, early 20th c., wood, driftwood, spruce root, pigment, watercolour, nails, cotton thread, 73 x 74 x 15 cm. Collection of the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Inv. AB 1129. Courtesy of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. [2] Cover of the book Riopelle: *The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures*, edited by Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers and Ysueit Riopelle. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Publishing with 5 Continents Editions, Milan. [3] Cover of *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.

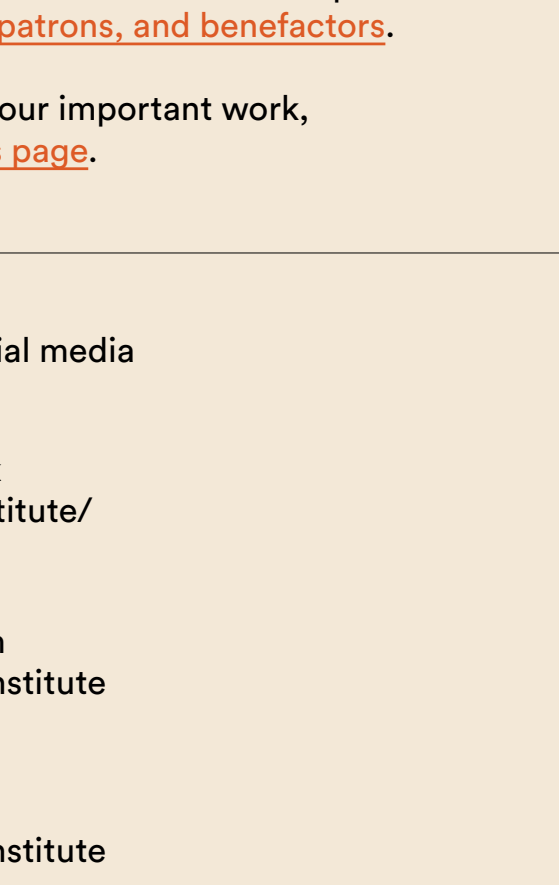
Beginning in 1965, Riopelle produced several paintings that made reference to Inuit and Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations art, including the sumptuously coloured *Les masques* (triptych), 1964 (left). His works are not naturalistic renderings but rather represent his creative responses. The early twentieth-century Yup'ik mask on the right is featured in the exhibition and exemplifies the Indigenous objects that Riopelle came across in collections, books, and magazines. Today there are many ethical questions surrounding historic Indigenous art, as many pieces in museums were taken from communities by force and provenance is often unknown. Reflecting on these issues, Collins says they are "an open discussion that we want to have with our visitors."

[Learn more from Curtis Collins](#)

### FOR MORE ON JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE



Cover of the book *Riopelle: The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures*, edited by Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers and Ysueit Riopelle. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Publishing with 5 Continents Editions, Milan.



Cover of *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.

Delve further into the dramatic impact of the North and Indigenous cultures on Riopelle's practice in the 1950s and 1970s with the exhibition's catalogue, edited by Andréanne Roy, Jacques Des Rochers, and Ysueit Riopelle and featuring contributions from specialists in art history and anthropology, including several Indigenous scholars. To learn more about how Riopelle's practice evolved over the course of his fifty-year career, read *Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.

[Purchase the exhibition catalogue](#)

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