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AUGUST 5, 2022

REBELS WITH A CAUSE
ON REFUS GLOBAL TURNING 74

Seventy-four years ago, on August 9, 1948, the avant-garde artists known as the Automatistes sent shock waves through society with the release of the anti-religious manifesto Refus global. *Today the document is revered not only as the most important cultural publication in Quebec's history, but for propelling the province into the modern era.*

In the early 1940s, the Automatistes were a group of visual artists, poets, dancers, and designers intent on challenging the rigid boundaries of Quebec society. Led by the painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), a teacher at the École du meuble who introduced many of his students to the movement, they were inspired by the Surrealist practice of "automatism," in which creative activity is carried out

"automatically," without a preconceived plan. The Automatistes's new method of painting symbolized freedom from artistic as well as societal constraints. As the art historian François-Marc Gagnon wrote in his ACI book *Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work*, to articulate their beliefs the ground-breaking group published *Refus global* (*Total Refusal*), in which they "launched a frontal attack on the stifling dominance of Catholicism, and the narrow nationalism of the provincial government under Premier Maurice Duplessis." On the seventy-fourth anniversary of the landmark manifesto, we're looking at its Automatiste creators and their lasting artistic and cultural impact.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE FORMATION OF THE AUTOMATISTES

Maurice Perron, *The second exhibition of the Automatistes at 75 Sherbrooke St West, at the Gauvreau apartment*, 1947, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

The Automatistes initially presented their nonfigurative and abstract works in makeshift venues in Montreal, since no commercial gallery would agree to show all the members of the group. This photograph documents their second exhibition in 1947, which took place at the home of Julienne Saint-Mars-Gauvreau—the mother of artist Pierre Gauvreau (1922–2011) and Claude Gauvreau (1925–1971), a playwright and poet—at 75 Sherbrooke Street West. Painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960) is seated in the centre below his pivotal painting *Leeward of the Island* or *1.47 (Sous le vent de l'île* ou *1.47)*, 1947, which depicts land surrounded by water as seen from above whose shores are visible on the right. It was the first work to be described as an Automatiste painting in the press, and it made Borduas a household name in Canada. Later that summer, the group exhibited their work in France.

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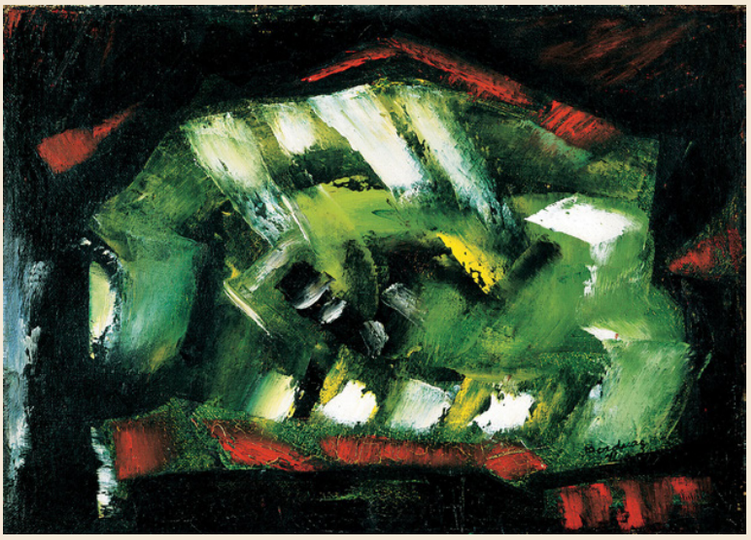
PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS



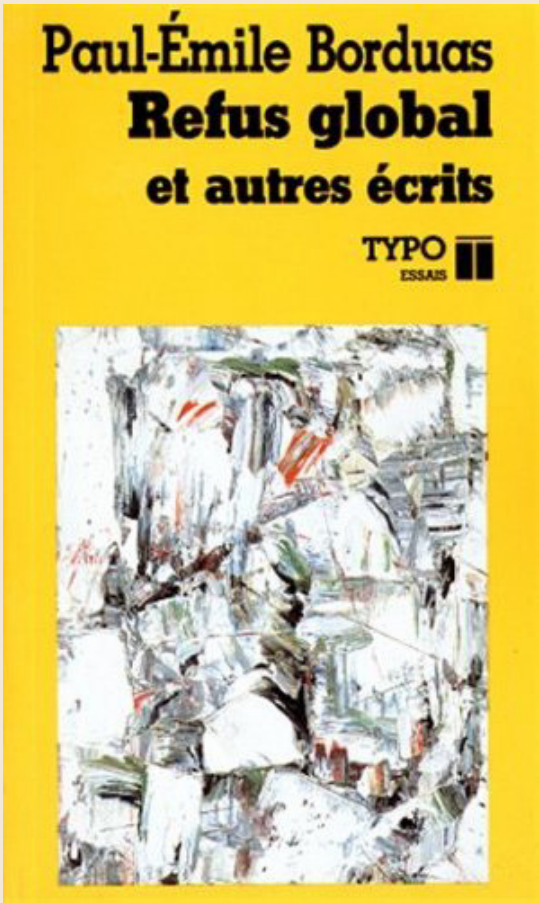
Paul-Émile Borduas, *Green Abstraction (Abstraction verte)*, 1941, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Paul-Émile Borduas, *Study for Torso* or *No. 14 (Étude de torse* ou *N° 14)*, 1942, private collection.

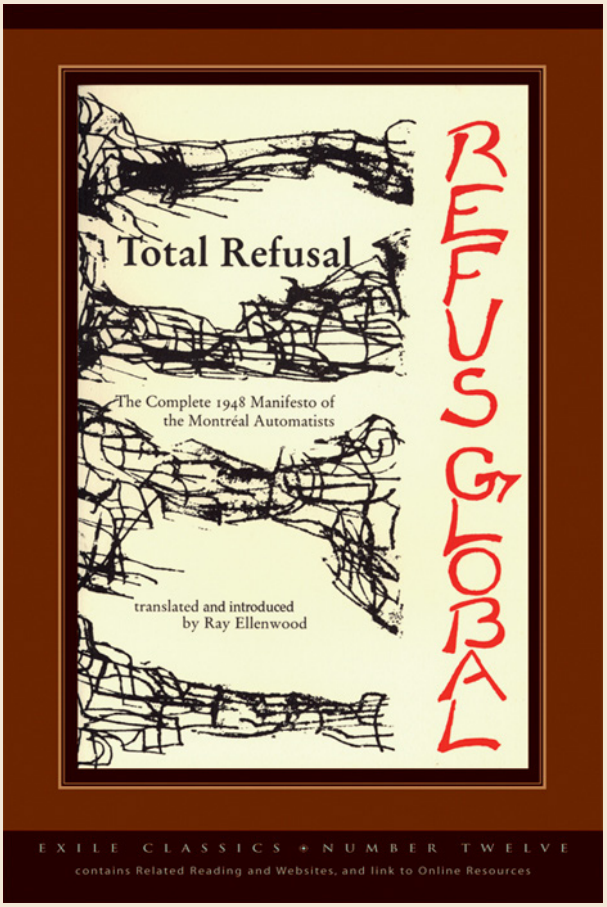
Borduas considered *Green Abstraction*, 1941 (left), his "first totally non-preconceived painting" and "one of the forerunners of the Automatiste tempest already gathering on the horizon." As he explained, an Automatiste painting was not planned in advance, and its unconscious meaning could be elusive, even to its creator. The image on the right—one of forty-five gouaches shown at the Ermitage, an exhibition hall owned by the Collège de Montréal, in 1942—is another early Automatiste work by Borduas with a more readily identifiable subject. However, the artist did not say to himself, "I am going to paint a female torso"; he recognized the subject in an instant when the work was completed. When both of the paintings were exhibited they were judged to be "surrealist" and very "abstract," and not easily understood by viewers.

Read more in ACI's
Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work by François-Marc Gagnon

REFUS GLOBAL



Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus global: et autres écrits* (Typo, 1991).



Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Total Refusal*, trans. Ray Ellenwood (Exile Editions, 2012).

Signed by fifteen members of the Automatistes, *Refus global* sparked great public controversy with its forceful denunciation of the Union nationale government's conservative ideology and the political influence of the Catholic Church. Upon the manifesto's publication, Borduas, the principal author, was swiftly fired from his job at the École du meuble, and, unable to find other work in the province, moved to New York and later to Paris. Meanwhile, the Automatistes members Marcel Barbeau (b.1925), Jean-Paul Mousseau (1927–1991), and Claude Gauvreau (1925–1971) doubled-down on the political cause, publishing their art and their ideas in journals and newspapers. The *Refus global*'s calls for change gradually became more mainstream, leading to the Liberal Party's rise to power in 1960. That marked the start of the Quiet Revolution, when widespread social and economic developments transformed Quebec into a modern and secular province.

Learn more

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE

Jean Paul Riopelle in his studio, 1952, photograph by John Craven.

At the urging of the Automatistes member Jean Paul Riopelle (1923–2002), the group held off on signing the French Surrealist manifesto *Rupture inaugurale* (1947), and instead created their own, which better reflected and responded to the cultural repression in their native Quebec. While Borduas wrote the principal essay for the group's *Refus global*, Riopelle's riotous abstract work in watercolour graced the cover. Riopelle had trained in the academic tradition before studying under Borduas, whose commitment to abstraction radically influenced the young painter. By 1951, Riopelle moved to Paris and believed that automatism as a movement was a thing of the past. In the next decade, he developed his signature abstract "mosaic" style, seen in the background of this portrait, which would bring him international renown.

Read more in ACI's
Jean Paul Riopelle: Life & Work by François-Marc Gagnon

FRANÇOISE SULLIVAN

Françoise Sullivan, *Dance in the Snow* (*Danse dans la neige*), 1948, from the album *Danse dans la neige*.

Multidisciplinary artist Françoise Sullivan (b.1923) not only signed *Refus global*, but she also wrote one of the eight texts that make up the manifesto. Her contribution, “La danse et l’espoir” (“Dance and Hope”), offers a definition of the art form and expresses her “belief that it can inspire personal freedom and awareness of one’s environment,” writes Annie Gérin, author of ACI’s *Françoise Sullivan: Life & Work*. For her now-iconic piece *Dance in the Snow* (*Danse dans la neige*), 1948, Sullivan improvised her movements across the icy hills in Otterburn Park, east of Montreal, while fellow Automatiste Maurice Perron (1924–1999) captured her performance with his camera. An homage to the winter season, *Dance in the Snow* is currently on view in London, England, in the Tate Modern’s ground-breaking exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders*.

Read more in ACI’s
Françoise Sullivan: Life & Work by Annie Gérin

MARCEL BARBEAU

Canada Post stamp featuring Marcel Barbeau, *Le tumulte à la mâchoire crispée*, 1946, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

One of Borduas's students at the École du meuble, Marcel Barbeau (b.1925) created such innovative Automatiste paintings as *Le tumulte à la mâchoire crispée*, 1946, which appeared on a Canada Post stamp as part of a set commemorating *Refus global*'s fiftieth anniversary. Vigorous, swift brushstrokes of fiery colour applied in every direction fill the entire surface of the composition, bringing to mind the all-over, gestural Abstract Expressionist paintings that American artist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) was creating concurrently in New York. Reflecting on the Automatistes's manifesto in the 1998 documentary *Les enfants de Refus global*, Barbeau explained, "It was a need to breathe that we had. It wasn't really related to an established political movement. It was more like an anarchistic act. It was against a very rigid, closed social structure."

Learn more about Marcel Barbeau

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RITA LETENDRE

Tess Boudreau Taconis, *Rita Letendre*, early 1960s, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

The Quebec painter Rita Letendre (1928–2021), renowned for her geometric abstractions exploring light, colour, and movement, acknowledged the profound impact that the Automatistes, and especially Borduas, had on her artistic practice. “What a fine teacher (Borduas) was—probably the greatest influence on my life as a painter,” said Letendre, adding, “My thoughts, my attitudes are automatist, which means that I have no set formula…. I paint freedom, escape from the here and now, from the mundane…The world isn’t only what we see or what we experience.” Letendre began studying at the École des Beaux-arts in Montreal in 1948, but soon grew disinterested in its focus on traditional figurative representation and left, drawn to the more avant-garde developments in abstract painting led by the Automatistes.

Learn more about Rita Letendre

PIERRE GAUVREAU

Pierre Gauvreau, *Hommage à Giordano Bruno*, 1948, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

While a student at Montreal's École des Beaux-arts, Pierre Gauvreau's (1922–2011) experimental compositions caught the eye of Borduas, who invited the young artist to join his forward-thinking group. *Hommage à Giordano Bruno*, 1948, painted the same year the manifesto was published, reflects Gauvreau's dazzling approach to colour and form and his reverence for a sixteenth-century Italian revolutionary. Bruno was a Dominican friar, philosopher, and astronomer whose theories about the universe anticipated modern science but contradicted Catholic doctrine. He was convicted of heresy during the Roman Inquisition and burned at the stake. Gauvreau paid tribute to the "unrepentant heretic" again in 1999 in a painting titled *Les Insoumis no. III: Hommage no. 2 à Giordano Bruno*.

Learn more about Pierre Gauvreau

FERNAND LEDUC

Fernand Leduc, *Porte d'Orient* (*Gate to the Orient*), 1955, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

Fernand Leduc (1916–2014) was among the group of students at the École des Beaux-arts who joined the Automatistes after meeting Borduas in 1941. Producing gestural Automatiste paintings throughout the decade, Leduc was a co-signatory of *Refus global* and contributed a text called "Qu'on le veuille ou non…ceci sera" ("Like it or not…This will be"). In the aftermath of the manifesto, he moved to Paris and began creating paintings like *Porte d'Orient* (*Gate to the Orient*), 1955, that aligned with the less spontaneous and more structured abstractions of the new Quebec artists' group Les Plasticiens. However, Leduc stayed very attached to the Automatistes, as his extensive correspondence with Borduas demonstrates.

Learn more about Fernand Leduc

LES PLASTICIENS

Arthur Gladu and Gérald Brunet, *Plasticiens, exposition à l'Échourie*, 1955, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

Jean-Paul Jérôme, Fernand Toupin, and Jauran around a painting by Jérôme, c.1955.

Following the tremendous impact of the Automatistes in the late 1940s, another avant-garde group of artists soon gathered in Montreal to form a new movement, calling themselves Les Plasticiens. Four young painters, Jauran (Rodolphe de Repentigny) (1928–1959), Louis Belzile (b.1929), Jean-Paul Jérôme (1928–2004), and Fernand Toupin (1930–2009), exhibited together and published their own manifesto (1955) in which they acknowledged their debt to their predecessors but challenged the spontaneity and subjective approach of the Automatistes, arguing in favour of more controlled and orderly geometry in painting. Les Plasticiens were active from 1955 to 1959. Artists Guido Molinari (1933–2004) and Claude Tousignant (b.1932) would form Les Nouveaux Plasticiens in 1959, taking the movement in the direction of geometric abstraction.

Learn more

MARCELLE FERRON

Marcelle Ferron, *Shadows Touched*, 1962, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

Quebec artist Marcelle Ferron (1924–2001), internationally acclaimed for paintings like *Shadows Touched*, 1962, that feature overlapping streaks of colour created with a palette knife, met Borduas in 1945 in Montreal after she was expelled from the École des Beaux-arts over a quarrel with a professor. Ferron soon joined the Automatistes, participating in their exhibitions and co-signing *Refus global* before moving to Paris for thirteen years. While in France she developed her signature bold style of abstract painting as well as her renowned glassmaking practice. Spending the rest of her career in Quebec, Ferron remained dedicated to the Automatistes's belief in the gesture as a fundamental element of authentic artistic expression.

Learn more about Marcelle Ferron

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