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BY ERIC HUTTON

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THE ABSTRACTIONIST ponders in his gaudy Paris studio amid oversized canvases and piles of empty paint boxes. Once started, Riopelle completes his paintings in one burst.



THE PAINTING DAUGHTER Sylvie hangs her work above her teddy-bear. The Riopelle influence is strong.



THE HOSTESS, Mme. Françoise (left) entertains at home. The host sits beneath one of his striking canvases.



THE PERFECTIONIST in the family, dancer Françoise, practices four hours a day, teaches too.



The native genius we've never discovered

Galleries, collectors and critics
in Europe and the U.S. prize the paint-piled canvases
of Montrealer Jean-Paul Riopelle—
but in his home town they think he's a foreigner

BY CATHERINE JONES

Although most of his fellow Canadians have never heard of him, a thirty-four-year-old artist from Montreal named Jean-Paul Riopelle has cause to rejoice these days. His canvases hang in a dozen museums in Paris, London, Ottawa, New York, Toronto, Philadelphia, Chicago, Lille, Zurich and Cologne. He has received international acclaim and has been ranked among the most important living painters.

A fair-sized Riopelle can fetch as much as twenty-five hundred dollars and a really big one might bring five thousand. His work has been exhibited as far afield as Brazil and Japan, and is in the most important private collections of Europe and North America, including those of Nelson Rockefeller and Walter Chrysler Jr. Indeed, the motor scion admires this artist's work so much that he once presented him with a special souped-up motor. This pleased Riopelle, who's an ardent hot-rodder, enormously.

Riopelle is one of three Canadian painters whose work has been bought by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and was one of three to represent Canada at the Venice *Biennale* in 1954. He's far better known in Europe than in his native land, where he is often mistakenly consider-

ed French. In fact, in a recent exhibition held in Montreal, called *French Painters*, the works of this native Montrealer were prominently displayed.

Riopelle was born and raised in Canada, the only son of a Montreal architect, but for the last ten years he has lived in Paris. He rarely leaves the city, although he brings his wife and two children back to Canada every year to visit his family and hers in Montreal. Riopelle looks like Chico Marx; he acts rather like him, too. When he is feeling exuberant, his laugh bursts out like an express train exploding from a tunnel. When, on the other hand, sorrows assail him, he observes the world with dark-eyed reproachful wonder.

Besides painting, Riopelle has two passions: one is the circus, which has fascinated many other artists, and the other is cars. He has five of them, his favorite being a 1931 Bugatti that uses not engine oil but castor oil. He drives it around Paris with the same force, exuberance, and freshness of spirit that characterize his paintings. There's a distinctly Chico Marxian flavor to a drive with Riopelle in his Bugatti: it is composed of daring dashes, unexpected stops, rhythmic turns, and soaring runs. Since there's no **continued on page 31**

laying on thick wedges of paint with palette knives.



THE HOT-RODDER relaxes with his five-car collection. Riopelle's pride is this aged Bugatti.



The native genius we've never discovered

Continued from page 17

speed limit in Paris and it's strictly *défendu* to sound the horn, he has scope for self-expression behind the wheel. But always underlying the seemingly mad manipulation of the vehicle is the control that has been so noted in his work.

As Georges Duthuit, one of France's leading authorities on art, has said: "Riopelle has force and energy and at the same time the complete control of this medium which he has discovered for himself—control even in a paroxysm of expression."

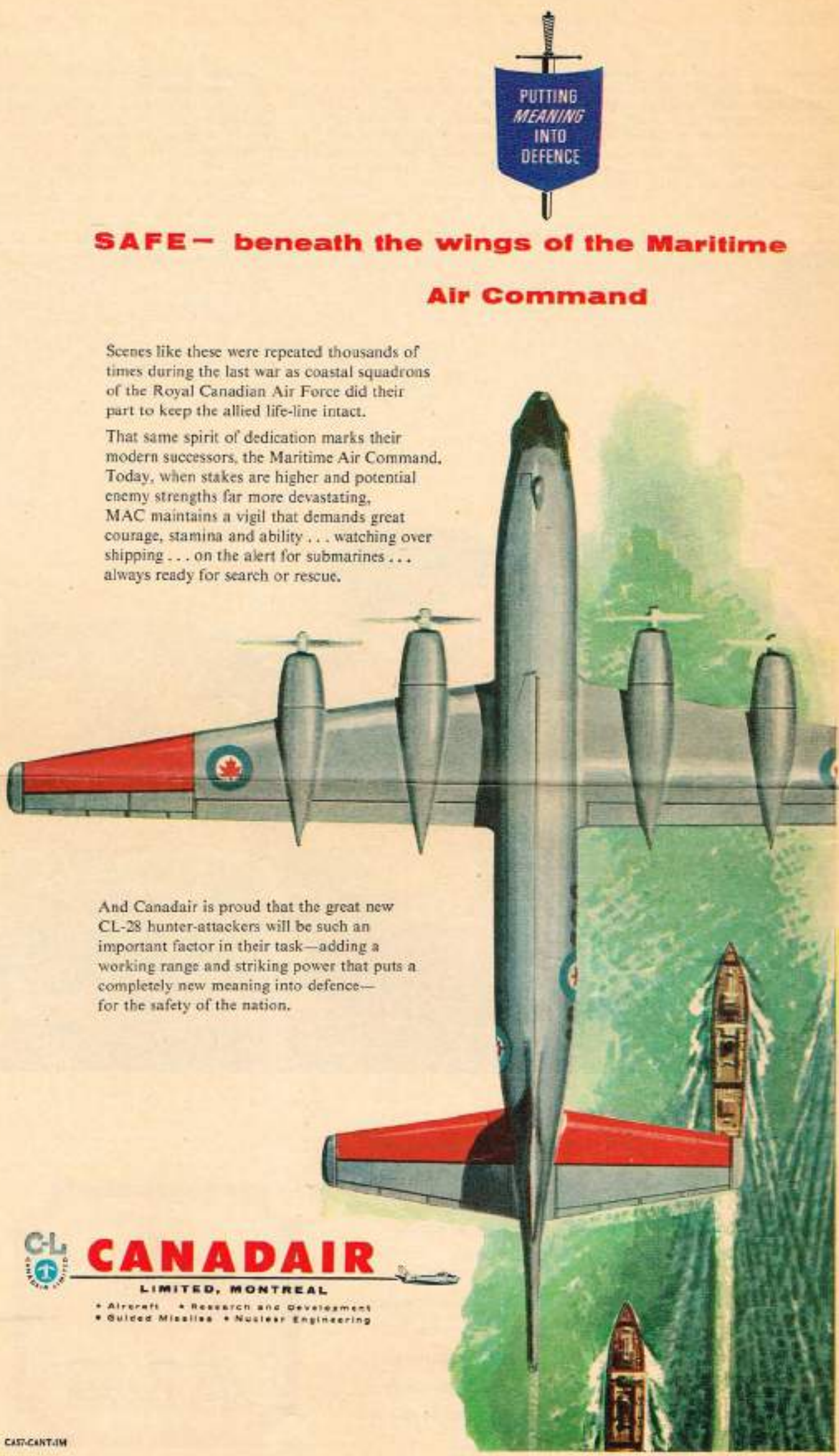
Riopelle has been painting since he was eight, and he always got special attention in art class at school. After leaving school and putting in a couple of years at Montreal Polytechnique he took up painting seriously, working with a group of young Montreal artists who called themselves the Automatistes. Their idea was to paint automatically; that is, to let the hand place the point with no conscious direction from the brain. None of the original group is painting in this style today. Riopelle began to evolve his own unique style in 1945; he decided that it was necessary to discover nature in a new way, to observe without preconception, and to paint naturally.

He went to Paris for a year, returned to marry Françoise l'Espérance, a Montreal girl, and in 1946 settled in Paris permanently. The Riopelles and their two daughters live in an apartment in a residential district called Auteuil, but Riopelle's studio is outside the city in the suburb of Vanves. There, he works in the former *salle des fêtes* of a group of workers' flats, a huge thirty-foot, high-ceilinged room with windows all down one side, a mountain of empty paint tubes, and a *mélange* of his own paintings stacked against every surface.

Riopelle's palette is a four-by-eight-foot piece of tempered masonite fixed to an easel. He paints huge canvases, many of them taller than he is, as though Canada's dimensions had influenced his work. He uses pounds of paint on every picture, painting not with brushes but with knives, some of them almost as big as a plasterer's finishing trowel.

When he paints, he attacks his canvas with violent jabs and sweeps and the paint goes on in pie-shaped wedges, layer upon layer, spasm after spasm. Sometimes he's so impatient that he cannot even wait to put the paint on his knife, but uses the tube itself to paint with until at last, after one uninterrupted session of creativity, the picture is done. But there is nothing slap-dash about the finished canvas, and even people who may be baffled by its context see that every particle of pigment is placed exactly where the artist intended it.

People see different things in Riopelle's paintings. Once, when art dealer Jacques Dubourg was showing some Riopelles to an American client, she said: "It's funny, but I seem to feel horses and rolling plains and huge skies in this one." Riopelle had painted it just after he returned from a visit to the Camargue—the cowboy country of France. The trees and forests of Canada are easily



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"Make no mistake: fifty years from now the works of Riopelle will be classed as masterpieces."

discernible in his early works. Later his works became more abstract; yet recently his paintings have seemed to be growing more representational again.

"Riopelle represents a climax to the whole non-objective movement," Dr. Robert Hubbard, curator of Canada's National Gallery, says. "He has perhaps brought it up to its highest possible development—the danger is, of course,

that you can't go very far beyond it."

It may be that the artist is aware of this, and it will be revealing to watch how his style changes in the years to come.

It is, moreover, odd that the man who is known as one of the foremost painters of our time should come from a land whose painters have thus far failed to impress the Europeans. A few years ago when the National Gallery tried to bor-

row some Canadian paintings back from European galleries for an exhibition, none were hanging, most of them could not be located, and the whole idea had to be dropped. Riopelle and Morrice (who died in 1924) are the only Canadians whose works are on display on the Continent.

Riopelle gets up early and drives to his studio every morning. Afternoons,

when he isn't painting, he likes to work on his cars with his garageman and friend, Henri Phillipot, and a second mechanic who is also the well-known French circus clown Rex. Riopelle knows quite a bit about cars and Phillipot is something of an expert on art. They are both mad about the circus, so the three form an extraordinarily harmonious team. After a certain amount of adjusting, greasing, grinding, and re-winding, one will say to the others: "Cu marche?" "Cu marche?" the others respond with enthusiasm. This is the signal that it is time to repair to the bistro for a Ricard, a licorice-flavored aperitif much favored in France.

Riopelle is a tab-grabber. "Please!" he will say with deep solemnity any time someone else tries to settle the bill, "C'est mon quartier." It is the custom in Paris for a man to play the host in his own local bistro to friends visiting from another part of the city. But every quarter is Riopelle's quarter, and beating him to the draw is regarded as a considerable victory.

Paris has not always been gay for Riopelle. His finances were at a low ebb when he had his first show four years ago. To be out of work for a painter is stark tragedy, since, if he has no money, he cannot buy paint, and without paint he has no hope of doing his work. At Riopelle's first show not one canvas was sold.

Impossible to duplicate

A month later a sculptress friend about to give an exhibition said she'd like to have a few Riopelle paintings on the walls. Riopelle acquiesced and a strange thing happened. The dealer who had had Riopelle's pictures for two years—he had not bothered to hang them—bought four. A man Riopelle had never seen before came up to him at the opening and said, "Do you need an atelier?"

"Did I need an atelier?" Riopelle recalls. "I was painting at home at the time and the two children were very young. So this fellow said, 'All right, come to this address tomorrow, I'll give you the key. I'm leaving Paris for three months.' Then I knew, he is drunk, or he is crazy." But Riopelle was mistaken. The offer was genuine. The next day he did get the key. He continued to paint in this studio for two years, and the pictures sold.

Since his zoom to fame other people have tried to climb on the bandwagon and paint like Riopelle, but without much success. His technique is as unique in painting as Norman McLaren's work is in animated film for the National Film Board. Light, color, sensations, emotions, and perceptions must pass through the brain cells of the creator before being rendered visible to the world. The results are thus impossible to duplicate.

Riopelle's work will probably have a strong influence on other artists. "Make no mistake," the producer of a series of films called *L'Art et les Hommes* said recently on a Radio-Télévision-Française program on which Riopelle appeared, "fifty years from now the works of this man will be classed as masterpieces, and we are fortunate indeed to be living in the same moment in history as one of the masters." Rembrandt, da Vinci, Goya, El Greco, Rubens, Rembrandt and Matisse were a few of the other artists in this same series, and for a painter, in the words of Pearl Bailey, "that ain't no bad bunch to hang out with."



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Riopelle feels strongly that the present system of granting fellowships to artists for a year in Paris is all wrong. "What can an artist from Canada do here in a year?" he asks. "First, he must find a place to live, find out how he will live. Then, for six months, he just walks around seeing things. He must go to the museums, the galleries—he sees Paris, he sees a new life completely—it's impossible for him to start right in painting. So what does he do?" He shrugged. "At the end of the year maybe he has three sketches to take home."

Riopelle believes that scholarships should be for three years at least, and should be given to very young artists. "Maybe they would give fewer, but it would help more." He was recently suggested for a fellowship himself, but he refused to apply. "How will they help me now, to give me five thousand dollars?" he asked. "I would like very much to have their money, of course, and if they want to buy my paintings, okay—but if they have this money to give to a painter, they should give it to a young painter, not to somebody already established."

Riopelle has long periods when he doesn't paint at all, but simply studies his canvases. Each new painting is preceded by an intense period of mental concentration so that when, finally, the creative volcano erupts, the artist knows exactly what he's doing. As a result he seems somewhat single-tracked in his interests. He doesn't read much, never goes to theatre or movies, rarely listens to music and dislikes all forms of dancing. He has never watched his wife dance although she herself practices four hours daily at a studio and conducts regular lessons for little girls in black tights at a primary school in Vincennes.

Indeed, Madame Riopelle's weekly schedule is enough to make strong men blanch: in addition to dancing, teaching and running the household she makes all her own clothes and is an astonishing cook. The younger Riopelles have inherited their parents' separate talents: Sylvie likes to paint with large blobs

of lively color—an obvious influence from her father; Isolde has wanted to be a dancer since the age of three.

When Riopelle isn't painting he is a gregarious host, and he and his wife often entertain nightly, at home or at a restaurant, when he is on a sociable streak.

Last spring, when the Riopelles had some guests to dinner, one of them, who had not seen their apartment before, remarked, "I can't help thinking how lucky you people are to be living here surrounded by all these marvelous Riopelles!"

Her host roared with laughter. "That reminds me of a story about Picasso," Riopelle said. Picasso was having some friends to lunch in his house in the south of France. One of them looked around and said, "I notice you don't have any Picassos on your walls, Pablo—why is that, don't you like them?"

"Oh, on the contrary," Picasso replied. "I like them very much, it's just that I can't afford them!"

At the moment, Riopelle can still afford Riopelles. His total creative output is fantastic: once he painted forty pictures in forty days, and the wall shows no signs of drying. On an average he paints about one hundred and twenty-five pictures in a year, and except for the ones that he wants to keep he sells all of them through art dealer (and son of the artist) Pierre Matisse in New York, dealer Jacques Dubourg in Paris, and Tooth's art gallery in London.

Although the people who handle his paintings find it repugnant to assess an artist's work like so much mining stock, they all believe the investment value of a Riopelle purchased today is a sure thing. It's bound to increase in price, they say. Riopelle himself doesn't try to predict the future for he knows that his style of painting is in a state of evolution.

"Maybe I don't know what Jean-Paul means in these pictures," a friend from Canada said recently at his studio in Vanves. "All I know is, they make me want to shout with joy." ★

JASPER

By Simpkins



MACLEAN'S

"Mummy, is that a Canadian?"

MACLEAN'S MAGAZINE, AUGUST 3, 1957

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