

Refus global

[AN ARTISTIC UPHEAVAL IN MONTREAL]

MODERN CANADIAN ART began in Montréal.

First there was Alfred Pellán, who'd been painting in Paris and who came home in 1940 with his own abstract canvases and concrete ideas.

Then — most importantly — there was Paul-Emile Borduas, the founder of a school — *les Automatistes* — and the maker of a manifesto, *Refus global*, which has been called "perhaps the most single important social document in Québec history and the most important aesthetic statement a Canadian has ever made."

Pellán set the stage; his own Matisse-like paintings were a thousand kilometers beyond the staid and representational state in which he found Canadian art. Borduas was close behind; he began painting his first abstracts in 1942 and in the spring of that year he held a famous exhibition of gouaches, half way to abstraction — some accidental shapes were developed into animal likenesses, some were not. He became the spontaneously chosen leader of the teen-age students at the Ecole du Meuble and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. They gathered at his home to discuss surrealism, psychoanalysis and social reform, three subjects frowned upon by both the powerful provincial government and the Church. For a moment the followers of Pellán and the followers of Borduas were one; in 1943 Charles Maillard, the

conservative director of the Ecole des Beaux Arts vetoed Pellán's efforts to include some student abstractions in the annual school show. The students rebelled and forced Maillard's resignation but Pellán's victory was an abstraction itself. The students — and Borduas — had turned their backs on him, not from contempt but because they felt a compulsive need to cut free from Paris and to begin at a beginning of their own. So they met with Borduas and casually began to construct their major bomb bursts. The first was their joint show of 1946 — Borduas, Marcel Barbeau, Roger Fautoux, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Fernand Leduc and Jean-Paul Mousseau. Borduas was the oldest — by from eleven to twenty years — the philosopher and the most accomplished painter. The show exploded in the face of the Montreal establishment, delighting the young. "Enfin! La peinture canadienne existe!", said the young critic-poet, Claude Gauvreau, brother of the painter, Pierre. Some of the students, though it was not yet apparent, were advancing beyond the master in terms of their abandonment of old forms. Barbeau's *Le tumulte a la mâchoire crispée* was undisciplined, dynamic and unprecedented, a frozen explosion in which every part of the canvas had been vigorously assaulted. Barbeau was delighted with it: "*C'est la première fois que je peins avec une joie parfaite.*"* Borduas was not; a painting needed a certain depth: "Il faut que ce soit un objet sur un fond allant jusqu'à l'infini."** At his suggestion Barbeau destroyed all his other paintings of that year.

Still the school flourished and the next year acquired its name — from a Borduas canvas, *Automatisme 1.47* — an acknowledgement of their debt to surrealist automatic painting techniques.

In 1948 they exploded the second bomb by publishing *Refus global*, a hand-assembled mimeographed book wrapped around with reproductions of an ink drawing by Riopelle. It was simply a collection of essays, short pieces by Claude Gauvreau, Françoise Sullivan, Bruno Cormier and Fernand Leduc, and a long one by

* "It is the first time I have painted with perfect joy."

** "There must be an object on an infinitely deep ground."

Modern Canadian art began when Alfred Pellán, upper left, opposite page, returned from Paris in 1940. Paul Emile Borduas, lower left, founded a school, *les Automatistes*, and encouraged younger painters, including Jean-Paul Riopelle, upper right. Guido Molinari, lower right, who enrolled in art school the year Borduas issued his *Refus global*, grew up under the influence of the *Automatiste* belief that art was totally intuitive and he once blind-folded himself and painted in the dark. He later rejected that approach totally, becoming a hard-edge pioneer. Today he is the acknowledged leader of French-Canadian painting. Samples of the work of the four are on the next few pages. Riopelle's oil, *Landing*, is at the top of Page 8, Borduas' oil, *Fond blanc*, is below it and Pellán's oil *Quatre femmes*, is on Page 9. Molinari's acrylic, *Structure*, is on the lower right side of Page 10.