



Riopelle

Crossroads in Time

TEACHER STUDY GUIDE
SPRING 2025

Vancouver
Artgallery

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	PROGRAM INFORMATION AND GOALS
6	GLOSSARY
8	THE ACTIVITIES
10	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #1: WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?
14	POST-TOUR ACTIVITY #2: MOSAIC NATURE PAINTING
16	POST-TOUR ACTIVITY #3: AUTOMATIC COLLAGE
20	FURTHER LEARNING TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

**“When I hesitate, I do not paint. When I paint, I do not hesitate.”
—Jean Paul Riopelle**

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Riopelle: Crossroads in Time explores Jean Paul Riopelle's multifaceted practice and his visionary and innovative approach to making art, which collectively have made him an icon of modernism in Canada and internationally. In this exhibition, we see Riopelle push the boundaries of painting with his palette knife and aerosol can and dive into sculpture, printmaking, drawing and collage, continually crossing the lines between figuration and abstraction, between tradition and modernity.

Organized by the National Gallery of Canada to honour what would have been Riopelle's one hundredth birthday, *Riopelle: Crossroads in Time* is a retrospective exhibition that covers fifty years of Jean Paul Riopelle's creative production.

The exhibition features artworks drawn from twenty private and public collections and includes a number of significant works, as well as works that have not been previously exhibited. Curated by art historian and independent researcher Dr. Sylvie Lacerte, the exhibition highlights one of the most significant Canadian artists of the twentieth century.

DEAR TEACHER,

This teaching guide will assist you in preparing your class tour of the exhibition *Riopelle: Crossroads in Time*. It provides activities to facilitate discussion before and after your school tour. Engaging in the suggested activities will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require very few materials and can be easily adapted to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Glossary section.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Riopelle: Crossroads in Time takes place on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

RIOPELLE: CROSSROADS IN TIME

HAS 3 MAIN GOALS:

1

TO INTRODUCE

STUDENTS TO THE EVOLUTION OF JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE'S WORK

2

TO CONSIDER

KEY THEMES WITHIN THE EXHIBITION, SUCH AS ABSTRACTION,
AUTOMATISM AND EXPERIMENTATION

3

TO EXPLORE

INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS, TECHNIQUES
AND RIOPELLE'S PROCESS



“When I begin a painting I always hope to complete it in a few strokes, starting with the first colours I daub down anywhere and anyhow. But it never works, so I add more, without realizing it.”
—Jean Paul Riopelle

GLOSSARY

ABSTRACTION Art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

AUTOMATISM / AUTOMATIC DRAWING Creating art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process.

AVANT-GARDE Going against what is accepted as the norm. As applied to art, “avant-garde” means art that is innovative and introducing or exploring new forms or subject matter.

LES AUTOMATISTES A Montréal-based artistic movement founded by Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960). The participating artists made Montréal a focus of mid-century avant-garde art. They created paintings with no preconceived ideas before starting the work. Interpretation could begin only when the work was finished; it was sometimes signified in the title or could be discovered through conversation about the work with friends or viewers.

LYRICAL ABSTRACTION An art movement that emerged in the late 1940s, characterized by the use of expressive brushstrokes and vibrant colours to convey emotion and spontaneity, often in a non-representational or abstract manner. This style emphasizes personal expression.

MODERNISM Although many different styles are encompassed by the term, there are certain underlying principles that define modernist art, such as a rejection of history and conservative values (such as realistic depiction of subjects) and innovation and experimentation with form (the shapes, colours, and lines that make up the work).

REFUS GLOBAL A manifesto published in 1948 and signed by sixteen key figures from Quebec’s artistic community. The title means “Total Refusal.” It challenged the traditional values of Quebec. The manifesto also fostered an opening-up of Quebec society to international thought.

STILL LIFE A work of art that shows inanimate objects from the natural or man-made world, such as fruit, flowers, dead game, and/or vessels like baskets or bowls. Looked at another way, still lifes depict things that are “still” and do not move.

SURREALISM / SURREALIST A style of art inspired by dreams and hidden thoughts. A surrealist is an artist or writer who sought to release the creative potential of their dreams and hidden thoughts.

UNCEDDED A term for a relationship between the government of Canada and Indigenous people when no treaties have been established. In general, “unceded” means the lands and waters of the Indigenous people were never surrendered and were taken without permission.

“Nature is still a mystery: you never see it whole. It’s like me, always slipping away.” —Jean Paul Riopelle

PRE- AND POST-TOUR ACTIVITIES

GRADES 4-12

1. WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?

Grades 4-12 | Pre-Tour Activity

2. MOSAIC NATURE PAINTING

All Ages | Post-Tour Activity

3. AUTOMATIC COLLAGE

All Ages | Post-Tour Activity

GRADES 4–12 | WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



OBJECTIVE

Students are introduced to the life, artistic processes and works of Canadian artist Jean Paul Riopelle.

MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Access to the internet
- Artist Information Sheet (p. 10) and the Student Worksheet (p. 11)

PROCESS

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Give each group one of the categories from the Artist Information Sheet.
- Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p 11) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section.
- Have them conduct research using the internet, either at home or at school.

- Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided on the Worksheet.
- Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What were some of the most interesting things students learned or discovered?
- Which piece are students curious about seeing in the exhibition?
- Does the artist's work connect to or resonate with the student's lives? Why or why not?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

GRADES 4–12 | WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D | ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jean Paul Riopelle was a Canadian painter and sculptor from Quebec, who is recognized as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. Born in Montréal, his early love for nature and Indigenous culture greatly influenced his artistic journey throughout his life. When he was thirteen, his parents encouraged him to pursue drawing and painting classes with Henri Bisson (1900–1973), a well-known artist and educator. Bisson, whose aspiration was "to copy nature," encouraged close looking and reproducing nature as it was in a realistic, academic style. This experience laid a strong foundation for Riopelle's early artistic skills.

However, Riopelle eventually rebelled against this traditional approach when his interest in abstraction grew. While studying in Montréal at École du meuble, he became involved with the avant-garde movement led by his teacher and painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960). Borduas introduced Riopelle to automatism, a method used to access the unconscious mind as part of the creative process. Riopelle joined a small group of Montréal artists committed to this technique, founded by Borduas, called Les Automatistes. In 1948, the group also created Quebec's most notable manifesto, the *Refus global* manifesto, challenging the conventional values in Quebec at that time. Riopelle designed the cover for the manifesto written by Borduas and was one of sixteen artists to sign it. The freedom to create in new and innovative ways, shaped by these experiences, was a pivotal idea that Riopelle committed to for the rest of his life.

Riopelle moved to France, where he lived for the next forty years. He was always exploring new ways to create, combining his interest in abstraction with his love for nature and the world around him. The 1950s were a turning point in his career when he created a signature style of paintings known as the "mosaics." He traded his paintbrush for a palette knife to apply the paint to the canvas. The palette knife added an element of chance to his work. He piled various colours straight from the tube, and each time Riopelle pushed the paint across the canvas, the colours formed a different, unique outcome.

Alongside painting, Riopelle had a lifelong fascination with sculpture. He reminisced about the snowmen he built in his childhood, which laid the groundwork for his future bronze works, including the notable *La Joute* (1969–70, cast c. 1974), the only fountain he ever made, which remains today in Montréal's Quartier international and features a central "Tower of Life" surrounded by various bronze animals. Riopelle even enjoyed printmaking, where he cut up prints and put them back together in new ways to create mixed-media collages that garnered much attention in the art world. Later in his career, he started using spray paint to explore positive and negative spaces, playing with the shadows and shapes of objects.

Despite spending significant time abroad, Canada was always an important source of inspiration for Riopelle. Quebec's natural landscapes and wildlife, the icebergs in the North, the games of the Inuit, snow geese and maple leaves all profoundly influenced his art. Throughout his impressive career, Riopelle received numerous awards and honours. Today, his art remains a vibrant testament to his incredible journey and continues to inspire many people.

"I have never wanted to paint thickly—paint tubes are much too expensive. But one way or another, the painting has to be done. When I learn how to paint better, I will paint less thickly!"
—Jean Paul Riopelle

GRADES 4–12 | WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D | ABOUT THE ARTIST

ARTIST INFORMATION SHEET

PERSONAL INFORMATION

- Born in Montréal, Quebec
- Grew up with a love for nature and Indigenous culture
- Recognized as one of the most important and influential artists of the twentieth century
- Has received numerous awards and honours for his nearly seven thousand works of art

EDUCATION

- Learned to “copy nature” in a realistic style
- Studied at École du meuble in Montréal and became involved with the avant-garde movement
- Introduced to automatism, a method used to access the unconscious mind as part of the creative process, and became involved with the group Les Automatistes
- The freedom to create in new and innovative ways was a pivotal idea he learned at school

ART PROCESSES

- Combined his interest in abstraction with his love for nature and the world around him
- Traded his paintbrush for a palette knife in signature-style paintings called “mosaics”
- Cut up his prints and created mixed-media collages
- Used spray paint to explore positive and negative space

IDEAS + INFLUENCES

- Canada was an important source of inspiration
- Created highly stylized images of nature as seen and felt by him
- Always explored new ways to create
- Snow geese, Inuit string games, icebergs and Quebec’s landscapes and wildlife were profound influences in his art

GRADES 4-12 | WHO IS JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

PERSONAL INFORMATION	EDUCATION	ART PROCESSES	IDEAS + INFLUENCES

ALL AGES | MOSAIC NATURE PAINTING

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY | INSPIRED BY RIOPELLE'S LOVE OF NATURE



“It’s been said that nature was always present in my work. It’s because I always went toward nature, or at least I hope I did, rather than coming from nature.”

—Jean Paul Riopelle

OBJECTIVE

Discover how to create an abstract work of art inspired by nature without the use of a paintbrush.

DISCUSSION

Jean Paul Riopelle developed a love for nature when he was a child. His scout leader remarked that he had a “passionate love for scouting and nature.” As a boy, he enjoyed canoeing and fishing. He also spent summer days painting outdoors with his art teacher. When they were in the city, they painted *still lifes*, and Riopelle added his playful touch by giving one of his pieces the title *Nature bien morte* (1942), which means “very still life.” One of his first artworks was of an owl, titled *Hibou premier* (1939–41), and he would go on to paint owls his whole life.

In his twenties, he went on vacation with his parents to Saint-Fabien-sur-Mer in Quebec, where he painted many

pieces showing the nature found in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region.

Even while creating his large abstract works in the 1950s and 60s, Riopelle’s love for nature never faded. His colourful mosaics were exploding with life. While living in France, he continued his regular excursions into nature, where he went fishing and hunted wild boars. Beginning in the 1970s, his artwork reflected his hunting and fishing adventures in Northern Quebec, and featured geese, moose, icebergs, leaves and the wind.

As he got older, Riopelle moved into a home on Isle-aux-Grues, near the shores of Montmagny. He lived in tune with the cycles of the snow geese. His last artwork, *L’Hommage à Rosa Luxemburg*, completed in 1992, shows how deeply he was connected to nature.

Jean Paul Riopelle, *Figure libre-parure* [Adornment-Free Figure], 1967, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift from the Estate of Eric Sonner, VAG 2010.2.2, © Succession Jean Paul Riopelle/CARCC Ottawa 2025

ALL AGES | MOSAIC NATURE PAINTING

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

LINKS TO WORKS IN DISCUSSION

- *Nature bien morte* (1942) <https://www.studioriopelle.com/oeuvre/nature-bien-morte/>
- *Hibou premier* (1939–1941) <https://collections.mnbaq.org/fr/oeuvre/600028054>
- *L'Hommage à Rosa Luxemburg* (1992) [Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg 1992 by Jean Paul RIOPELLE](#)

MATERIALS

- Printer paper
- Pencil
- Clipboard or something hard to draw on outside
- Heavy cardstock or watercolour paper
- Oil pastels
- Paint: tempera or acrylic
- Hand-size cardboard piece cut in triangle shape
- Container of water
- Paper towel or rag to wipe up, when needed

PROCESS

- Let's look at Riopelle's painting *Figure libre-parure* [Adornment-Free Figure] (1967). Where do your eyes go first? Does the paint appear thick or thin? Organized or disorganized? Planned or unplanned? What do you see that made you say that?
- What patterns do you notice in the work? How has Riopelle placed the colours?
- Even when Riopelle was creating these large abstracts, his love of nature never faded. Can you make connections to nature in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Go outside and find a place where you see different species of trees or bushes.
- Pay close attention to the natural world around you. Take the time to activate your senses. Close your eyes for five minutes and ask yourself the following questions:
 - Do you hear any sounds? What are they? What lines would you draw on your paper to represent these sounds?
 - Do you smell anything? Can you describe it? What colours would you use to represent the smells? Write them on your paper.

- Find a tree or bush. What colours do you notice? Would they change with the seasons? Write these colours on your paper.
- Take a closer look at the tree trunk or bush stem. What patterns of shapes do you see?
- Draw these patterns of shapes on your paper. Find a different tree or bush and do the same again. Are the shape patterns different or the same?
- Go back into the classroom and choose one of your sketches to create your final artwork.
- Use a light-coloured pastel, like yellow, to draw the pattern you choose from your sketchbook large enough to touch all four sides of the paper.
- Consider some of the colours you thought about outside. Begin to fill in the shapes with colour, adding paint using the cardboard.
- You are welcome to use more than one colour in a shape. Don't worry if you don't stay in the lines.
- Once you have finished your painting, think about some of the sounds you heard outside. Look again at the lines and marks you created to represent those sounds.
- Using an oil pastel colour of your choice, add some of the patterns of lines or marks to your painting.
- You may want to outline some of the interesting shapes you see in your painting.
- When you are satisfied, think of a title for your work.
- Display your artwork in class.

CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What elements of Riopelle's work inspired your painting?
- What colours did you choose and why?
- What was it like creating a painting without a paintbrush?
- How are the paintings the same and different?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

ALL AGES | AUTOMATIC COLLAGE

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY | INSPIRED BY RIOPELLE'S LOVE OF FREEDOM



OBJECTIVE

Create a collage exploring techniques of automatism, focusing on enjoying the freedom of a spontaneous and intuitive process.

DISCUSSION

Jean Paul Riopelle was a remarkable artist whose passion for freedom sparked his creativity from a young age. In fact, during his time in scouts, he earned the playful nickname “Taureau la liberté” (bull of freedom). In the 1940s, however, Riopelle discovered the profound meaning of artistic freedom from his teacher Paul-Émile Borduas. Borduas encouraged Riopelle and his classmates to unleash their imaginations without constraints, drawing inspiration from the Surrealists. They painted freely without any plan and became known as Les Automatistes. In 1948, they wrote a manifesto called Refus global that criticized society for trying to keep them tied to tradition and expressed their need for the freedom to create in new and innovative ways.

In 1947, Riopelle moved to France because he felt it was a place where he could truly be free. He immediately became interested in the ideas surrounding Lyrical Abstraction, which

allowed him to be expressive and creative. He worked quickly and used different techniques and materials to create his art, focusing on elements like shape, colour and texture.

Sometimes, Riopelle worked in watercolour and ink on paper. Other times, he squirted paint directly from tubes in heaps onto the canvas and then scraped it across the surface with knives or spatulas. Riopelle loved the freedom to push creative boundaries beyond painting and ventured into printmaking and sculpture. In the 1960s, he gained recognition for his innovative prints, which he cut up and rearranged to create new artworks, exploring how different pieces could come together in unexpected ways.

Jean Paul Riopelle's love for creative freedom has, today, made him an icon of modernism in Canada and around the world.

MATERIALS

- Blank index card and cardstock
- Scissors
- Glue
- Colour markers

ALL AGES | AUTOMATIC COLLAGE

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

- Black markers
- Colour pencils
- Pencil

PROCESS

- Look at Jean Paul Riopelle's *La Danse* [The Dance] [1971]. This work is a mixed media on paper and canvas. How do you think Riopelle made this painting? What do you see that makes you say that? Riopelle's time in Les Automatistes had a profound influence on his artistic career. The freedom to create without a predetermined plan was a technique he embraced throughout his life.
- Gather three index cards. On each card you are going to create a spontaneous work of art like Les Automatistes. You will create your artworks without a plan, allowing yourself to enjoy the freedom to create intuitively.
- On your first index card, create a work of art with your pencil. Can you create different values of grey using the side of your pencil lead? What happens when you add pressure? What happens when you press lightly? What happens when you go over a section for the second or third time? Try to create four different values: white, light grey, medium grey and dark grey.
- Still using your pencil, add some marks, such as dashes, swirls, dots, etc., until you are satisfied. Put the artwork aside.
- On your second index card, use your colour markers. Choose three colours that appeal to you to create your artwork. Fill the card with colour, overlap them and blend them in places. Remember to just work intuitively, without a plan, like Les Automatistes. Choose a different colour and go back in and add marks like you did with your pencil drawing. When you are satisfied, put your paper aside.
- On your third index card, choose a coloured pencil of your choice. Close your eyes and visualize something from the natural world. Draw this onto your paper

without opening your eyes or lifting up your pencil.

Repeat the drawing holding your pencil at the very top. Repeat one more time, drawing with your non-dominant hand.

- Using a black marker, add pattern and line until you are satisfied.
- Place a piece of cardstock in front of you. Like Riopelle, cut up your three artworks into pieces using scissors and rearrange all of them on your cardstock to create something new.
- When you are satisfied with your arrangement, glue your pieces into place.
- Title your work and display in class.

CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- Which elements did you consider from Jean Paul Riopelle's mixed media painting?
- Did you enjoy the freedom to create three different artworks without a plan like Les Automatistes? Why or why not?
- Riopelle enjoyed exploring how different cut-up pieces of art could come together in unexpected ways. What did you notice when putting together your three artworks?
- What was easy or hard about creating in this way?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

FURTHER LEARNING

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

WEBSITES

[Riopelle - NFB](#)

[Discover Riopelle](#)

[ABSTRACTION AND THE INSPIRATION OF NATURE through the art of JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE](#)

[Biography - Jean Paul Riopelle](#)

VIDEOS

[Riopelle on Riopelle](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnT66tIUrdw>

BOOK

Riopelle: Crossroads in Time. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. 2023.

SURREALISM & AUTOMATISM

<http://www.gosurreal.com/history.htm>

A look at the history of Surrealism in Canada from the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art

<http://ccca.finearts.yorku.ca/c/writing/o/o'brien-p/obri001t.html>

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