

E C Z I N E



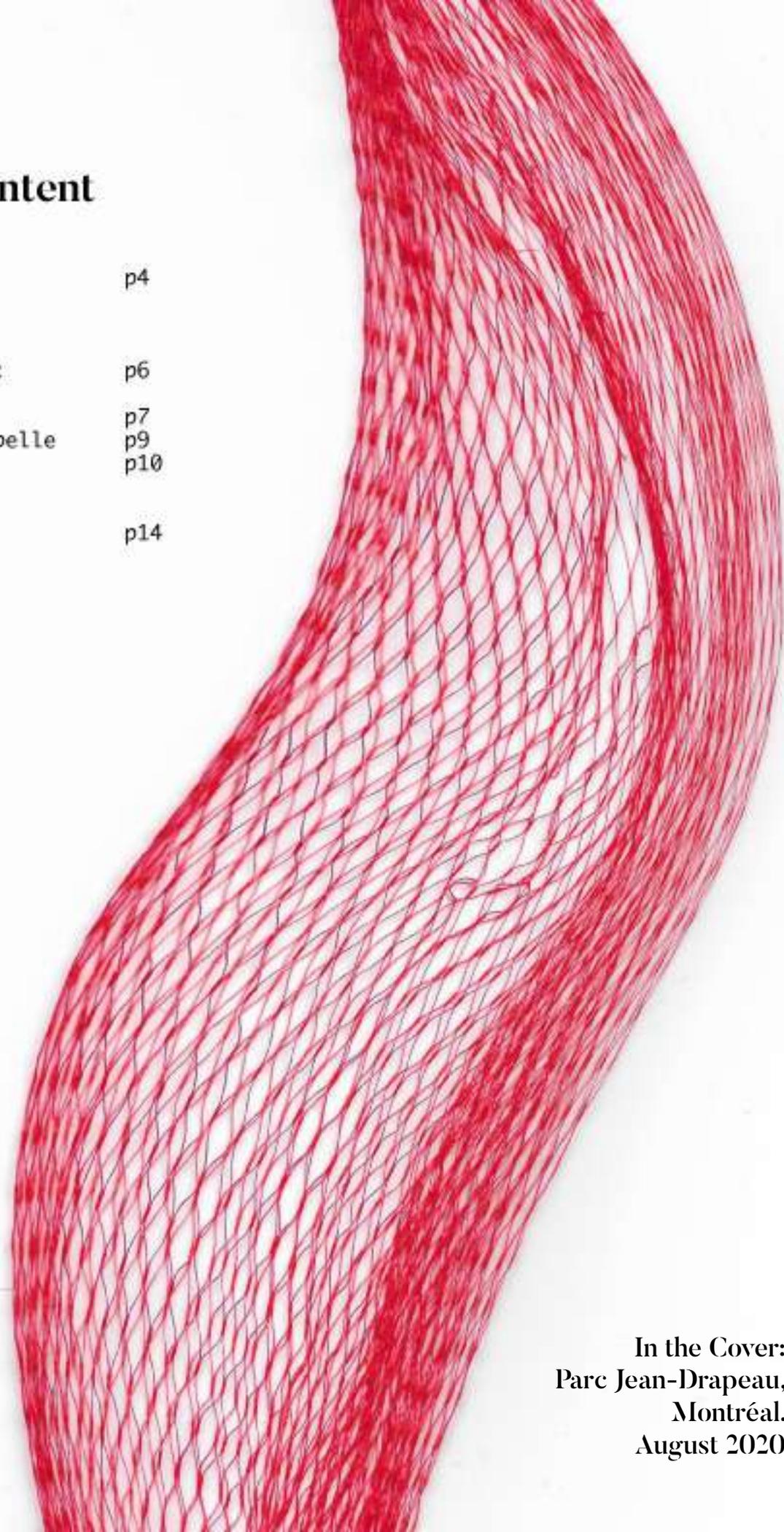
—Picturing the Landscape
of Canadian Identity—

René-Lévesque Park, Lachine, Montreal.
September 2020.



Table of Content

Introduction	p4
Picturing the Landscape of the Canadian Identity:	p6
-Tom Thomson	p7
-Jean-Paul Riopelle	p9
-Kent Monkman	p10
Bibliography	p14



In the Cover:
Parc Jean-Drapeau,
Montréal.
August 2020

Throughout this semester we've studied the different ways in which image-making has shaped the foundations of a whole Nation. From the early artworks during the colonization to the explorers' registry of the land they delved into, with fear as well as with excitement, to the National Film Board and the democratization of audiovisual expression in Canada and Québec, this project has been also a personal exercise.

Both of my parents are fine art painters and ever since I was a child, images have made me who I am. While growing up everyone assumed I was going to be a painter as well, but in my teenage years, I rebelled and decided to study photography as my first career. Transmuting my thoughts into an image has been a way of defining myself, of creating my world, so during the preparation of this project, I read carefully and wrote passionately about how landscape painting brings to life much more than a tridimensional scene because hidden to the eye there's a fourth one that knows no limit and that is the human psyche.

During this year nature has been our confidant while looking through our windows or with the singing of the birds that visited us in our balconies. The confessions some made when going for walks up Mount Royal or during afternoons of drawing sitting on a bench at Lafontaine.

This zine is way more than the result of exhaustive research through books and websites, it's also the compilation of personal photographs that evoke the feelings I was going through during these recent months. Ever since April, I also started piling up textures and elements, not for recycling but a further purpose, I promised myself to see the beauty in the paper bags from the coffee shop, the plastic bags that carried the mail that arrives at my door, or the nylon nets of the fruits that I bought at my local dépanneur; I see these now as part of my legacy on this Earth, as a human and as a settler—they intertwine graphically with the content because they're there to illustrate the reality within the reality, that us humans changed the course of the Earth and there's nothing we can do to revert it.

I read a lot, and I hope I make any sense. But if not, these are my findings and I hope you find yourself in them.

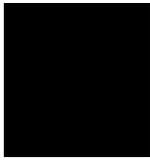


From above: A self-portrait I took back in July, 2020. My mom lat night at her home studio/library; One of my dad's landscapes back home in Panama.



Mount Royal, Montréal.
October 2020.

PICTURING THE LANDSCAPE OF CANADIAN IDENTITY



New Brunswick Landscape by William G.R. Hind, 1879

One of the things that were left in my apartment when I first moved in this past June was a 20x40 painting of a dreamy alps scene. High-peaks crowned with sumptuous and fluffy clouds that embrace almost with maternal care this tiny shack sitting atop this carefully put hill, whose skirts drink from this magnificent body of water that seems both soothing as well as daunting –sublime. At first sight intimidating for its grandeur, but appeasing after slow observation, this painting hangs from the same wall as a self-portrait by my father, a studied painter whose art has taken him through amazing journeys both personally and internationally. I brought it with me when I moved to Montreal because to me is a piece of home and family heritage.

While on lockdown, while on one of those long sits on the couch thinking long about everything and nothing at the same time, I started thinking, what could these two paintings share? What discourse could they formulate? Now, I do think it's worth mentioning that this painting is something probably found in a Village de Valeur, and keeping it objective my father's painting is pretty awesome, everyone who sees it in person has something to say about it—my father's gaze is commendable and commanding I gotta admit, he did a good job. Taking it even further, the self-portrait became an extension of

myself and my DNA and eventually, I started to fantasize what would be my story within this Romantic frame on natural magnificence.

As the British historian Simon Schama once put it, Landscapes are constructions of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock, and as a creative form they are a reflection of the heart and the mind. Either vertical or horizontal, landscapes tell stories, they are narratives of lost times and places for they immortalize not just a place but the feeling of the person who is lost within the frame, that being the artist and/or the voyeur.

And you see, it's interesting to go back in time to realize that before the human even acknowledged its appearance, it had to see itself in exuberant greens of tropical jungles or through the early-morning reflections of the Sun on the white crisp snow during the winter. Nature is the reflection of the species and landscapes are the mirror that refracts us.

From the French caves in France where Paleolithic people drew bison and hunting rituals, landscapes materialize as blueprints of sociology, and of the understanding of dimension and existence at a time being.

As put by the geographer Stephen Daniels, Landscape imagery is not merely a reflection of, or distraction from more pressing social, economic, or political issues; it is often a powerful mode of knowledge and social engagement.



Pine Trees at Sunset by Tom Thomson, 1915

After all, all national identities are consciously characterized by both historical and geographical heritage. In the case of Canada, being such an extensive and rich country in terms of topography, one where there's less density in comparison with the majority of the other countries, the relationships people have had with the foothills, mountains and valleys, prairies, and lakes, to the unconquerable vastness of the North, are what most honestly speak to the Canadian identity, there's a sort of patriotic topography.

Torn under the British and French gaze, landscape painting in Canada was drawn particularly to the picturesque, a perspective that had emerged in the late 18th century as a reaction against the rapid expansion of the cultivated English landscape. In the latter half of the 19th century, Canadian artists began to reject such European formulaic compositions in favor of more Romantic styles reflecting a more personal and intimate engagement with nature. With the intensification of Canadian nationalism in the 1880s, landscape artists from Montreal and Toronto turned to Québec City as a symbol of the country's historical continuity¹.

Almost in the same time frame, in 1958 the Gold Rush boomed on the East coast and lured all of British Columbia. At the same time, as explained by historian W. L. Morton, The ultimate and the comprehensive meaning of Canadian history is to be found where there has been no Canadian history: in the North.

Before moving here, Canada always felt synonym to maple syrup and cold winters, but now that I call it my home I understand all of the other ramifications that are born from l'érable that is Canada as a country and as an identity, and ideology. I see now how Canada is largely defined by its nature and its landscapes, and therefore by the brushstrokes that immortalize them.

In nationalist mythology, the nation is often represented as if embodied in the landscape itself, as written by Eva Mackey in 'Death by Landscape' Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology, and on this matter coming to the turn of the century, landscape art came to represent the matters of human and nature with a softer eye, sometimes even challenging the very own tradition that was brought by the European masters. The beautiful was defined as pastoral, orderly, smiling, and serene. Funny because until this day, these are four words that normally are linked to the Canadian people: nice, gentle, considerate, and educated.

With the Industrial Revolution came development and new ways of transportation, and eventually, the automobile liberated cross-country travelers from the narrow path of the railway track, not to mention the lateral vision from the passenger rail car and the inability to stop at points of interest¹.

As all manifestations in art are of time, place, and people, the notions of landscape painting in Canada kept shifting with the sentiment of the people and in the wee hours of 20th century Toronto, a group of seven artists took the scene by storm. Their work would eventually be a symbol of generosity and nobility of spirit, of national promise, and a broader invitation to explore. The Group of Seven an amalgamation between Franklin Carmichael, Lionel Fitzgerald, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, Frederick Barley and special mention to Tom Thomson and Emily Carr.

One of my favorite artworks by Thomson is Pine Trees at Sunset, its bold gradients of oranges and zesty limes in circular and thick brushstrokes transmit liberty and audacity, freshness and inventiveness. The artwork itself is a symbol—at least to me—of a quest, of an exploration...but for spiritual renewal. The frenetic swirls that make up the sky are of birth and reinvention, when looking at it you don't know if it's the Sun that's going to sleep, or you the one waking up from a dream. The reflection of this fire sky on the water and the childlike yet concise chocolates of the ground in the foreground are just some of the details that I most admire of Thomson, his naivete when approaching nature, and the inner dialogue that comes across in every single one of his painting. Every Thomson frame is also a psychological portrait of the sensibilities of his period.

Being one of the predecessors of the Group of Seven, one cannot deny Thomson's contribution to what would be the new chapter in Canadian landscape painting. The Group of Seven as a whole created a new concept of nationalism as a reflection of its time, deeply rooted in traditional notions of geo language, ethnicity, and morality.

Their landscapes showed a fresh and expressive modernist vision, bold in coloring and lighting, which quickly supplanted tamer European influences that had shaped Canadian landscape art in the 18th and 19th centuries².

Same as the frame hanging from my wall, one thing that captured my attention while analyzing The Group's work is the denial of human presence in their scenes. In the Romantic verbatim, landscapes often included the human figure within the composition, whether the Group's denial to follow this

was motivated by the refusal of traditional notions or not, the pristine wilderness of early 20th-century Canadian landscape art fails to reflect the complexity of Canada's multicultural composition and it's probably the reason why, as reported by Catharine M. Mastin in The Group of Seven in Western Canada, The Group's work appealed mostly and particularly to Canadians of European ancestry, who shared their quest for an emerging identity.



Lawren Harris' Isolation Peak, 1931.

One thing that kept coming back while researching for this project was the word "Nordicity," or "nordicité" en français. A word first coined by Louis Edmond Hamelin a night after a ski excursion in 1975, encompasses very well the complex way of living up here in Canada, where six months a year are spent under low temperatures and early dark skies. As written by Catherine Métayer in the most recent issue of Besides magazine, "The North sleeps within us. It's a state of mind, an attitude. A lifestyle of those who explore, cultivate, and inhabit the territory with curiosity and humility³."

An artist whose work always revolved around this word was Jean-Paul Riopelle's, the same name that now emblazons the MBAM's most recent exhibition aptly titled The Call of Northern Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures. The exhibit explores the prolific period (the 1950s-1970s) in which Riopelle repeatedly journeyed up north and traversed

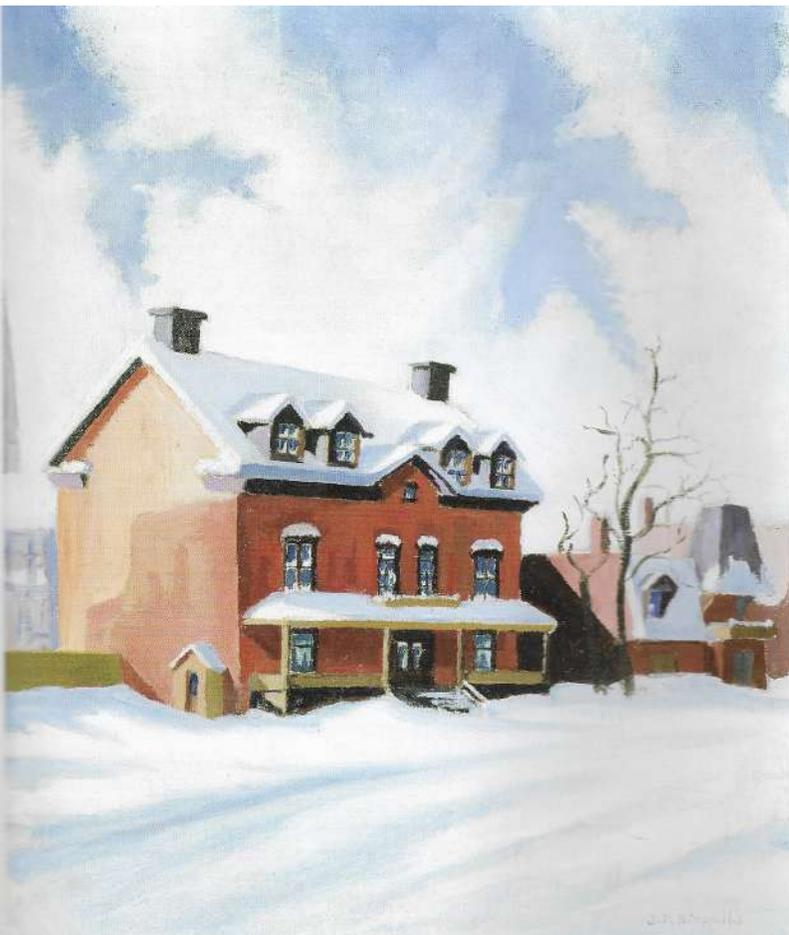
the land to hunt, fish, and immerse himself in nature. Same travels that fueled his Northern imaginary and that was fed by the exchanges of indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives. Mostly abstraction, Riopelle re-defined the tradition of landscape art and through his talents, presented a convoluted and more personal vision of the nature-human relationship. This convolution of feelings and ideas is hard not to be associated with the 1948 Refus Global, a manifesto released on August 9, 1948, by a group of sixteen young Québécois artists and intellectuals that included Paul-Émile Borduas, Françoise Sullivan and Riopelle himself, and that later set the tone for the Québec Automatiste movement.

The undeniable primitive forms of Riopelle might come as a result of his explorations, but also woke up the public to the presence of Indigenous communities—specifically the Inuit. Questions of cultural appropriation raise in 2020 and Riopelle's work was not the exception. A man of all sorts, Riopelle had a deep appreciation for



Icebergs (1977) by Jean-Paul Riopelle is one of the artworks that mark this period that saw Riopelle take inspiration from Inuit culture and the Northern landscape.

Indigenous communities and their toponymy, the way they approached the North and the territory, and that is evident in his work. It was not until more recent years when the First Nation perspective came into the scene, only this time to time travel to the 19th century and create a new narrative that defies the never-ending binary of nature/culture.



Rue de Lorimier (1943) showcases Riopelle's figurative nordicity.

A Study of Mother and Child (2016) by Kent Monkman.





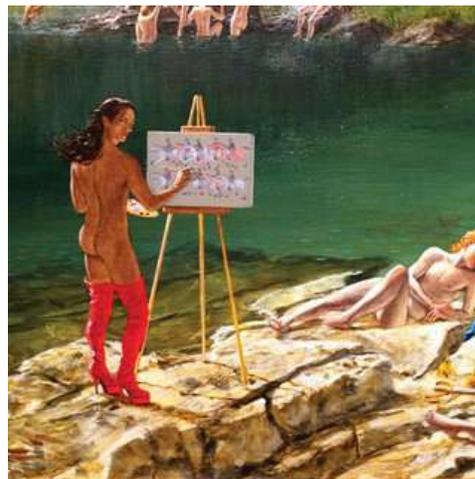
The Triumph of Mischief (2007)

Excess, theatricality, and ostentatious nature, are just three of the words that come to mind when I think about Kent Monkman's work. Maybe because as a queer person, I understand better the nuances in his work, Monkman's oeuvre is spellbinding and magnetizing. And placed in the wider perspective of the Canadian identity in our days, when inspecting the large-scale universes Monkman paints one feels invited to get lost in these Romantic scenes. There's a repetition factor to these paintings, one that adds familiarity to the equation, and it's maybe this the key factor in Monkman's world because, through insights of the collective cultural argot, he is capable of inserting himself in our lives and minds just to reset the chip installed ever since the Spanish set foot on America.

Perfectly written by Michèle Thériault in the preface of the Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen Interpellations compilation, "Contradictions abound, and as Monkman's paintings tease them out, one is left with more questions than answers as to how exactly

'belonging' and 'Nation' can be reconciled for one and all."

Studying postmodernism in class and reading about this binary in art, of humankind (culture) and nature, I find overly thrilling to see the work of a queer Cree man that fearlessly—or better said fiercely—travels through time with his alter ego Miss Chief, demounting European institution like Delacroix or Jacques-Louis David.



Miss Chief Eagle Testickle is Monkman's alter-ego who is often the center of his re-interpretations of the Romantic European landscapes.



The Romantic landscape, emerging amidst an industrial revolution, technological progress, the division of labor, a population explosion, the increasing bureaucratization of existence, and the differentiation of social classes... If Romantic landscape painting emerges therefore as an act of ideological reinvention in the face of need, its re-emergence, queered in the hands of Kent Monkman, is surely no less so⁴.

La pièce de résistance in Monkman's landscapes is what I would call the beauty of the once unseen. His works are chronicles of negotiation with history, with power, with race, with desire, with selfhood⁴. It reconciles the gap between time and place, then and now, allowing the viewer to rework our history, alive to our contemporary perspectives.

Monkman revisits the landscape, not as 19th-century observers approached it, but rather as we in the present tense might consider such a view⁵. And such view in 2020 standards, includes everyone, from up North to down South; from the warm East to the cold

David's famous 1799 painting is a response to Poussin's 1638 *Rape of the Sabine Women*, a painting that perfectly represents "the language of sexual aggression, and the rhetoric of virile masculine conquest of a mysterious but finally penetrable and controllable feminine land," as written by Susan Morgan¹.

West. It speaks of many modern, contradictory desires.

Seeing Monkman fill in the gaps of his history, inviting the viewer—regardless of background—to be part of the story within the frame allowed me then to fill in the gaps of my questionnaire.

While both paintings hanging on my wall may come from completely different origins, it was up to me to create their discussion because I am part of the discussion. And if there's something I learned while making this project is that history belongs not to those who lived it, but to those who tell it.



Looking up on Ontario Street,
Hochelaga, Montréal.
July 2020



“Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons every where
Looked at clouds that way.”

- Joni Mitchell

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Little, J.I. Fashioning the Canadian Landscape : Essays on Travel Writing, Tourism, and National Identity in the Pre-Automobile Era. University of Toronto Press, 2018.

2. M. Mastin, Catharine, editor. The Group of Seven in Western Canada. Key Porter Books, 2002.

3. Métayer, Catherine. "Comment Vivre Notre Nordicité?" Editorial, Besides, Issue 09, p. 11.

4. D. Katz, Jonathan. Miss Chief is Always Interested in the Latest European Fashions. Interpellations, edited by Michèle Thériault, Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen, 2012.

5. McMaster, Gerald. "The Geography of Hope." Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Miss Chief. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008.

Other sources:

- Gagnon, François-Marc. Jean-Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020.
- M Magazine, Musée des Beaux-Arts Montréal. Issue 20, September/December 2020.
- Silcox P. David. Tom Thomson, Life and Work. Art Canada Institute.
- Wistow, David. Meet the Group of Seven. 1999

**As presented to Valérie Tremblay
by Mauricio Herrera Barría**

December, 2020.