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next door, “who can tell at a glance if an animal has been weaned too young.”

He also has boundless admiration for hockey legend Maurice “Rocket” Richard, with whom he played shinny at a local rink as a child. At a party to which the sports press was invited a year and a half ago, Riopelle gave the Rocket one of his works. “How much is it worth?” asked one of the journalists. As he always does when people mention money, Riopelle lapsed into disgusted silence.

So too does he become annoyed when asked about painting. He has said, however, that he has particular affection for Matisse, that he considers *The Fourteenth of July* by van Gogh one of the great works of humanity and that he could spend hours contemplating Monet’s *Water Lilies*. But he loathes intellectual discussions and claims he has never opened a book in his life.

Nonetheless, he did confide in a radio interview in 1987 that the most powerful text written about art is Antonin Artaud’s treatise on the life and death of van Gogh. In a strange roundabout way, what Artaud says in those distinctly poetic ruminations applies equally well to Riopelle, particularly in the passage describing the power of van Gogh’s ability to represent nature, “as if he had re-perspired it and made it sweat, made it spurt forth in luminous beams onto his canvas, in monumental clusters of colours...”

Riopelle was acquainted with Artaud in the surrealist circle dominated by the poet André Breton (who hailed the Canadian’s painting as “the art of a great trapper”). The two men were not very close (“Artaud was difficult”), but Riopelle felt an almost brotherly affection for this brilliant visionary who, between two stays in an asylum, stirred controversy in the ranks of the Parisian avant-garde (“I always defended him”).

In leaving Montreal for Paris, Riopelle ventured forth to meet his century. Alone, he might have spent the rest of his days in the antechamber of fame. But fate smiled in 1952 when the eminent Parisian art critic George Duthuit became enamoured of his

work. At about the same time, a prominent art dealer purchased almost all of his oeuvre, ending an extremely uncomfortable financial situation for the painter and his family. Finally, a friend offered him a studio, which allowed him to paint the large-scale canvases now characteristic of his work.

“My friends always spent the night,” he says, evoking the intensity and passion of his years in Paris. A touch of bitterness filters through when he thinks of his old friends, all of whom have passed away. The last, Samuel Beckett, died two years ago.



*La roue—Cold Dog (Indian Summer) (1955)*

“You can’t go anywhere anymore. You think they’re going to be there. Then you realize there’s nobody left.” But there’s still work to be done. And perhaps the overdue acclaim of a capricious public. But make no mistake – Riopelle, who seems to be rediscovered every 10 years (in 1981, the Pompidou Centre in Paris presented a huge retrospective of his work), remains a man in exile. Whenever he attends a private viewing of his work (something he does only rarely), he soon hastens back to his studio.

“We are all madmen,” said Matisse, describing the painter’s obsession. For Riopelle, whose canvases overflow with incredible energy, “painting is a sickness,” and the act of creating, a trance. But amid the suffering and isolation, there is stubbornness and force of will – in Riopelle’s case, the phenomenal will of a free spirit who has never been reined in. ⊕

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