JEAN-PAUL
JÉRÔME

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Masters Gallery has specialized in the exhibition and sale of Canadian Historical, Post-war and Contemporary art since 1976. The gallery currently represents 20 living artists and shows an impressive collection of important Canadian historical artwork.

The goal of Masters Gallery has always been to display the finest examples of Canadian art, with a focus on providing a welcoming and educational gallery experience.

This publication is a companion piece to the exhibition *Jean-Paul Jérôme: Theme and Variations*, organized and presented by Masters Gallery from March 25 to April 8, 2021.

JEAN-PAUL JÉRÔME

THEME AND VARIATIONS

March 25 - April 8, 2021

Masters Gallery ltd. Est. 1976

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MADRIGAL
1985
Acrylic on canvas
mounted on masonite
101.6 x 50.8 cm

1996

PASSACAILLE
1985
Acrylic on canvas
mounted on masonite
101.6 x 50.8 cm

FOREWORD

By the mid-1950s, the Automatistes, led by Paul-Émile Borduas, had shown painting could be much more than making objects appear lifelike. By relying on unconscious gesture, rather than nature, as their primary inspiration, they transformed the possibilities of art and introduced the first abstract movement in Canadian art history. Yet, a group of Montréal-based artists felt the insistence on spontaneity and associative meaning was limiting the wider potential of abstract art. In 1955, Jean-Paul Jérôme, who had studied with Stanley Cosgrove, joined with Louis Belzile, Fernand Toupin and Rodolphe de Repentigny to publish the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*. Unlike the Automatistes, the Plasticiens were "indifferent to any possible meanings in their paintings." They called for precision and control, with emphasis on the "plastic elements: tone, texture, form, line" and "the overall effect in painting and relationships amongst those elements." Instead of unconscious desire, Jérôme and the Plasticiens would usher in a new era in which conscious effort would guide abstraction toward "perfect forms in perfect order."

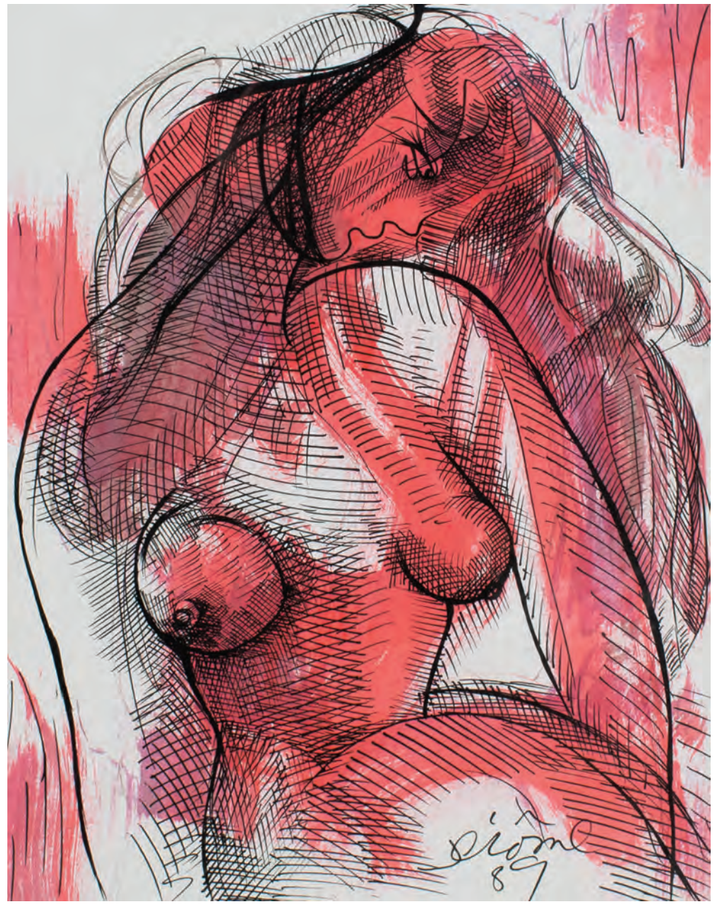
Jean-Paul Jérôme's commitment to a more rigorous style marks an important shift in Canadian art toward post-painterly abstraction, which remains an influence to this day. With its stress on dynamic composition over accidental form, much of modern graphic design is post-painterly in nature. Indeed, in our present media-rich environment, the Plasticiens' valuing of "aesthetic pleasure" is more relevant than ever. In an extensive career as an artist, during which he held a teaching position at Montréal's École des beaux-arts for many years and was appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy in 1978, he produced more than 5,000 works of art—an astounding figure given the care with which each was made. Those on view in this exhibition span the critical decades following his retirement from teaching, when Jérôme was at the height of his powers and devoting himself full time to the visual arts. It is hard to pick out one period or a single work as representative of Jérôme's legacy, as comes naturally when surveying the Group of Seven. It's as if each individual work, with its complex interlacing of form and harmonized colour, reflects the entirety of his astonishing 60-year dedication to his art.

It has been our great pleasure and good fortune to collaborate with Robert Jérôme on this exhibition. We must also thank Simon Blais, of Galerie Simon Blais in Montréal, for making the introduction. Their passion for Jean-Paul Jérôme's work has made them vital experts on the subject. While we have come to share their enthusiasm, we cannot claim to possess their knowledge, which is the backbone of the exhibition and its catalogue.

Ryan R. Green
President, Masters Gallery Ltd.

March 2021

LA CHEVELURE CRÉPUE DE LA SOMPTUEUSE AMOUREUSE (8-4-89)
1989
Ink drawing on cardboard
33.5 x 25.4 cm



"Intuition plays a significant part in painting and much remains uncharted for the artist. If you are not aiming for something original, you can comfortably remain within the confines of making a pretty picture. However, breaking out of such confines means somewhat of a change to your habits.

Sometimes, you have to take a break in order to recharge your subconscious and bring a freshness to your work. Otherwise, you're going about it by adding, and by adding you're repeating—and repetitive work is not creative, it's formulaic. Every time it becomes so, you have to put a stop to it in order to discover a new means of expression."

Jean-Paul Jérôme, interview with Richard Barbeau, art historian, May 17, 2001, in the artist's studio in Montréal, Québec.

OBJET DE LA MER
1987
Acrylic on canvas
66 x 53.3 cm

THEME AND VARIATIONS

Jean-Paul Jérôme was one of the founding members, along with Rodolphe de Repentigny (alias Jauran), Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin, of the first group of Plasticien artists, a linchpin of Canadian abstraction. However, we are only just beginning to fathom the soul and mind of this artist, who with his three friends co-signed the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*, written in 1955 by Jauran, the group's theoretician. Following the death of the latter in 1959, Jean-Paul Jérôme kept a lower profile. Indeed, the painter passed on only brief theoretical insights into his work and granted only a few interviews shedding light on what motivated his artistic choices.

A solitary individual, married just for a short time and childless, given to introspection and an indefatigable worker, Jérôme devoted his life to art, initially in parallel with teaching, notably at Montréal's École des beaux-arts, from 1958 to 1973, and then exclusively until his death in 2004, after a 60-year-long career. His critical fortunes, while ongoing and complex, do not enable a deeper comprehension of the person. Jean-Paul Jérôme remains a laconic, mysterious, totally independent figure. It is as if the man, in keeping with his true nature, had deliberately wanted to disappear behind the work.

And what a body of work that is! Thousands of oil and acrylic paintings, pencil, ink and charcoal drawings, wood and metal sculptures, tapestries, and more. Besides his early works from the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, as well as from the purely Plasticien experience, which lasted roughly from 1954 to 1956, Jean-Paul Jérôme constantly renewed the formal aspects of his art from 1958 until the end of his life. Flirting with gestural painting at the beginning of the 1960s, he explored textures and medium in the middle of that decade to then develop a more organic type of abstract painting between approximately 1966 and 1974. He gradually returned to a geometric refinement in the mid-1970s, a time during which his paintings and drawings displayed a very Constructivist kind of linear freneticism that occupied him until the middle of the following decade. The late 1980s constituted a transitional phase for him, a period during which he once again took an interest in organic forms and tried his hand at sculpture for the first time in his career. In the 1990s, incorporating colour in his works as he had never done before, geometric formalism definitively triumphed in his art. A remarkable colourist was then discovered. Beginning in the 2000s, when he was over 72, he changed his style again, executing paintings in relief and developing a passion for geometric collage. A highly talented draftsman, at the same time as he made these various explorations of abstraction, he created a large body of figurative work that generally conformed to his formal concerns of the moment.

To what extent does that cornucopian oeuvre enable us to know the enigmatic man who brought it about, the one who gave his life so that it could take shape? It is difficult to answer such a question; the body of work is not the individual who created it, it can only be a material indication of his soul. However, in the case of Jean-Paul Jérôme, that work took on such great importance in his life that it was literally the essence of his inner being and principal companion.

Anyone who spent a bit of time with Jean-Paul Jérôme and took an interest in his life and career can only have developed a picture of him as a quiet little man of few words, very focused and meticulous, yet physically sturdy and robust. Old photographs show him to be so, and conversations with members of his family as well as past visits to his studio corroborate it. Despite his basically reserved demeanour, he succeeded in imbuing his painting with that physical intensity, strength and vitality—features constantly visible in his work. It seems as if the energy that struggled to find expression within the artist's introspective nature positively exploded in his works.

From the early days of his career, Jean-Paul Jérôme clearly stood out from the other members of the Plasticien group through the dynamism of his geometric works, where forms almost appear in motion. His stay in Paris from 1956 to 1958 sharpened his knowledge of painting skills: through Galerie Denise René and Galerie Arnaud, he would spend time with Vasarely, Herbin, Barré, Dewasne, Mortensen, Poliakoff, Gilioli, Giacometti, Magnelli and Hans Hartung. His interest in the powerful gestural painting practised by Hartung, reflected in the works immediately following those executed during the Plasticien period, attests to the importance of that type of formal exploration for the artist. Such compositional intensity would later be expanded into the almost manic meticulousness of the 1970s works in the Constructivist tradition, in which a profusion of lines fills the painting with a strong vibratory energy. In the 1990s, he made his geometric compositions even more powerful by increasing their visual impact through incorporating rich, saturated colours. That is when he succeeded in expressing his inner strength through his art most convincingly. The reliefs and collages of the 2000s would maintain that vital formal spirit.

The exhibition *Jean-Paul Jérôme: Theme and Variations* highlights a variety of works executed from 1985 to 2003, a selection that clearly illustrates the energy and vigour characterizing the art created by Jean-Paul Jérôme. From gestural experiments in drawings and collages to works with Constructivist and colourful geometric compositions, it brings together key examples of his post-Plasticien oeuvre. Sincere in his fidelity to the Plasticien movement of his early career, until the very end of his life Jérôme would seek the purity and ideal perfection of abstraction. In this exhibition, the intimate presence of the artist is virtually palpable—only fitting for a man who, for so many years, put his very soul into his painting.

BY CHARLES BOURGET

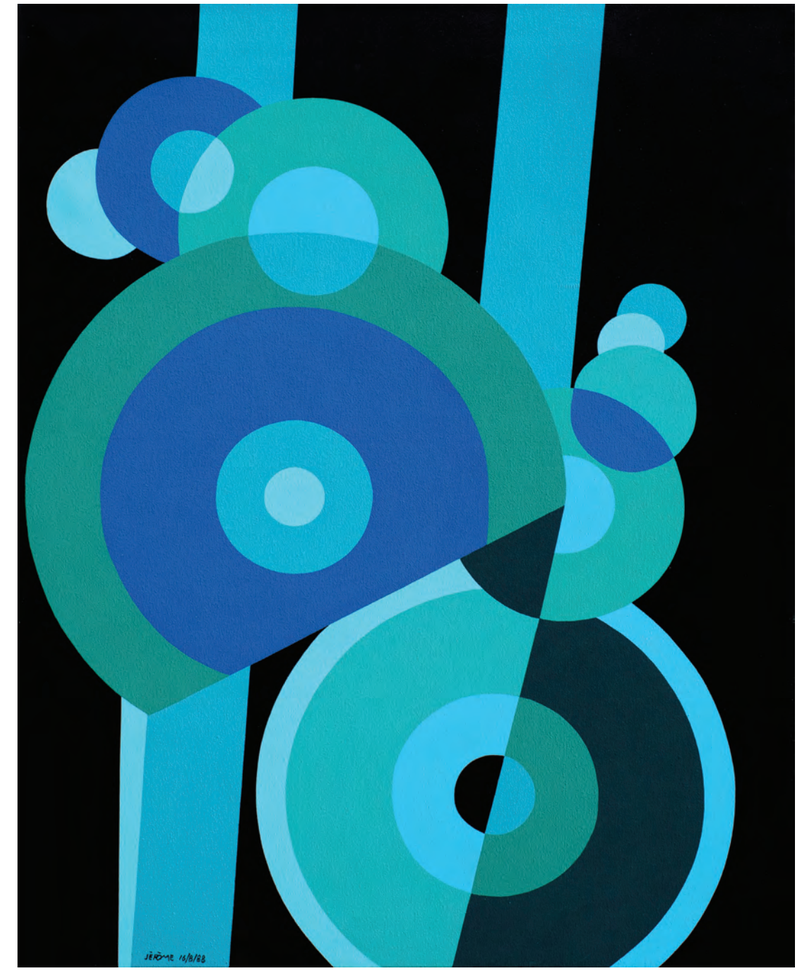
Charles Bourget was awarded a PhD in the history of art and architecture by the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne in 1999. He was exhibition curator at the Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent from 1994 to 2008 and worked as the curator of modern and contemporary art at the same institution between 2001 and 2005. In that latter capacity, he mounted Les vibrations modernes*, a 2001 exhibition on the work of Jean-Paul Jérôme. There he also developed retrospectives devoted to two other Plasticien artists, Louis Belzile (1994) and Fernand Toupin (2003). He shared his thoughts on the artist in the 2018 film* Jean-Paul Jérôme: Colour, Light, Form. *Charles Bourget has taught the history of art and architecture at the Cégep de Sherbrooke since 1998.*

Le Colombier studio, 1996

"The eye uniquely perturbs the boundaries of life… that of thinking visually."

Jean-Paul Jérôme, studio note, October 8, 1999

SIRÈNE RIVAGE
1988
Acrylic on canvas
71.1 x 55.9 cm



SIRÈNE ERRANTE
1988
Acrylic on canvas
75.5 x 60 cm

UN JARDIN ENSOLEILLÉ
1990
Acrylic on canvas
40.6 x 40.6 cm

"Being a painter is not a profession but a destiny.
A painter: It's a difference, it's a personal conviction,
it's everyone, everything and nothing."

Jean-Paul Jérôme, archival note

1971

BOUQUET PASSION (1-1-93)
1993
Polychrome wood sculpture
104.4 x 30.5 x 40.6 cm

"A sculpture cut from wood and painted, unique in its precise scale, here its graphic curves seen enhanced through the careful incorporation of black or white lines that slice through the volumes according to the visual inspiration. That is how the vibrant solid colours are definitely imbued with sweetness and sunshine.

The curves and relief shape the mystery of angles and large planes. Harmony is created through proportions in the penumbra of space."

Jean-Paul Jérôme, excerpt from an archival document on Bouquet Passion, La Batelière studio, Varennes, Québec, January 28, 1993

TIMELINE

1928 Jean-Paul Jérôme is born in Montréal on February 19. He grows up in the city's Villeray district.

1942 The young student visits an exhibition on Van Gogh held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which will trigger his determination to become an artist.

1943 He is admitted to Montréal's École des beaux-arts at the age of 15.

1949 He receives his teaching diploma from the École des beaux-arts.

1949-1951 Still at the École des beaux-arts in Montréal, he studies fresco painting with Stanley Cosgrove.

1951-1953 His work appears in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' Spring Exhibition group shows.

1954 Marking his complete break from figurative painting, solo exhibition of his first abstract works at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. He meets Jauran, Fernand Toupin and Louis Belzile, with whom he will form the Plasticien group.

1955 Exhibition of his work along with that of Jauran, Fernand Toupin and Louis Belzile, as well as the issuance of the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*, at Montréal's L'Échourie gallery.

1956-1958 A stay in Paris that would have a lasting influence. He becomes acquainted with Hans Hartung, Richard Mortensen, Victor Vasarely, Alberto Giacometti, Martin Barré, Auguste Herbin and Jean Dewasne. He regularly attends the exhibitions of the newest art at Galerie Denise René, Galerie de France and Galerie Arnaud, where his own work will be shown in 1957.

1959-1973 He teaches at the École des beaux-arts in Montréal and in different other schools in the city, as well as in Sorel. In his spare time he paints in the various studios he sets up over the years in Saint-Ours, Saint-Roch-de-Richelieu, Saint-Laurent-du-Fleuve and Varennes, all on Montréal's South Shore, taking inspiration from the river and the area countryside.

1969-1970 Jean-Paul Jérôme sets aside his art making during 1968. He goes back to it in 1969–1970 with a major series of very gestural works in ink on paper that are a departure from his previous practice. This hiatus ends in 1970, when he makes a definitive return to painting.

1973-2004 He quits teaching in 1973 in order to fully devote himself to his work in painting in his studios in Montréal and Varennes. Many exhibitions will follow.

1978 He becomes a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, an honour awarded in recognition of his contribution to the country's visual arts and the importance of his work.

2001-2005 The Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent presents a retrospective of his work. The exhibition, entitled *Les vibrations modernes*, will travel throughout Canada.

2004 Still very actively making art, Jérôme dies suddenly on August 14, leaving his final work, which he had entitled *L'ivresse de la vie* [*The Ecstasy of Life*], unfinished on his work table. It is estimated that he created over 5,000 works during his 60-year-long career.

2013 A website devoted to the artist's life and work, jeanpauljerome.com, goes online. It is produced by Jérôme Art International / Robert Jérôme. The latter, nephew and legal successor of Jean-Paul Jérôme, ensures the continuing stewardship of the artist's work, in accordance with the wishes expressed by him in 2002.

2018 An Official Selection of the International Festival of Films on Art (FIFA), the world premiere of the documentary *Jean-Paul Jérôme: Colour, Light, Form* takes place at FIFA in Montréal on March 16. Based on an original idea by Robert Jérôme, its executive producer, the film is directed by André Desrochers.

2019 The Musée d'art contemporain de Baie-Saint-Paul presents the exhibition *Explorer l'abstrait*, which brings together works from throughout Jean-Paul Jérôme's 60-year-long career. Also in 2019, the Musée d'art de Joliette holds the exhibition *Jean-Paul Jérôme: The Lyrical Abstractions*, which shows a 1969–1970 series of spectacular ink drawings.

2020 As part of its exhibition *Challenging: 350 Years of Art Practice in Québec*, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec unveils a never publicly seen work by Jean-Paul Jérôme dating from 1956.

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