

PAINTING IN MONTREAL, 1915-1930

The Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel and their contemporaries

GALERIE DE L'UQAM – MUSÉE DU QUÉBEC

Painting in Montreal, 1915-1930. The Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel
was curated by Laurier Lacroix with the assistance of Estelle Piquette-Gareau.

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Note to the Reader

*This publication brings together the texts published in the catalogue
Peindre à Montréal, 1915-1930.
Les peintres de la Montée Saint-Michel et leurs contemporains
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*Due to publication costs,
we are compelled to publish the English version of these texts without illustrations.
To view the reproductions of works included in the show
or otherwise relevant to the texts,
readers are asked to refer to the French edition.*

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*We sincerely wish to thank them along with the lenders
and all the contributors who worked so hard to make this show possible.*

Laurier Lacroix
Curator

ON THE TRAIL OF THE PAINTERS OF THE MONTÉE SAINT-MICHEL

Estelle Piquette-Gareau in conversation with Odette Legendre

O.L. – *This exhibition is the culmination of nearly twenty years of research. How did this long adventure begin?*

E.G. – It was a stroke of luck. In 1978, when I was visiting the museum at the Ferme Saint-Gabriel, a small painting caught my eye, an oil painting of the farm by J. J. Jutras. I hadn't heard of this painter, and the nun who was acting as my guide didn't know anything about him either. Some time later, I noticed a painting signed by Jutras at an art-collector friend's place. He told me that Jutras was one of the eight Montée Saint-Michel painters—whom I had never heard of—and showed me works by each of them. He also offered to put me in touch with one of them, and that's how it all began.

O.L. – *So it was through this friend that you met Jean-Paul Pépin?*

E.G. – Yes. I first met Mr. Pépin at his home on January 13, 1978, and I'll never forget it! Here was this 80-year-old man, cheerful, full of life and thrilled to talk to me about his painter friends. He truly was one of a kind, a fascinating and remarkable man, verging on theatrical, I dare say. He was a great talker, and he told me his life story, occasionally letting himself get carried away.

I soon realized that some of his remarks needed to be tempered, but I also sensed how deeply he cared for his companions, the Montée and his art. He even said, "If some day you tell our story, remember this thought that I wrote in my journal: I hope that Nature, which I revered, will follow me in eternity."

O.L. – *Did you have access to the journal Mr. Pépin alluded to?*

E.G. – Yes, and what a fantastic opportunity! At our second meeting, on January 27, he decided to show it to me. Just the day before, I had written in my own journal, "Spent the afternoon at the Saint-Sulpice Library without finding anything but articles by Albert Laberge and Monseigneur Maurault." I was delighted!

It was really at that moment that I decided to find out more about the group.

Jean-Paul Pépin's seven-volume journal begins in 1927. The first volume contains his thoughts and reflections on his life and life in general; the others consist of biographies of his friends the painters, comments on the world of art and artists, and practical information. These texts deserve to be analyzed in greater depth, but when you read them, you realize how difficult it must have been to be a painter in Montreal between the Wars, especially during the Depression.

O.L. – *You seemed to have struck a chord with him.*

E.G. – Yes, I believe I did. I'll always remember what he said to me on February 1, after he decided to give me his archives: "I'm giving them to you, my dear, because I think I have found the person who will spread the word about the Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel." I was deeply touched by such a show of confidence on his part; he had often tried, unsuccessfully, to interest people in writing about the group.

His boxes were a treasure-trove: some fine photographs, press clippings, reviews, all of his bookkeeping and reams of correspondence. There was also a list of people who collected the Painters and their contemporaries, for whom Mr. Pépin had often acted as dealer. Thanks to this list, we were able to locate several paintings. His most famous "customer" was also one of his dearest friends: this friendship is recorded in the many remarkable, unpublished letters of Jean-Paul Pépin and Marc-Aurèle Fortin.

O.L. – *You must have learned so much from him. Tell me how you tracked down the other painters.*

E.G. – Through Mr. Pépin, I met Ernest Aubin's six nephews and nieces, who had kept nearly all of their uncle's paintings. Aubin himself had no children, but one of his nieces who had been very close to him wrote me a poignant account of the life of "the father of the Montée Saint-Michel." He was a shy man and a perfectionist, talented, demanding and meticulous to

the extreme. He had such a great fear of wasting time that he kept a minute-by-minute record of his activities!

I then had a chance to speak with the widow of Joseph Jutras, and I recorded the long conversations we had. She showed me her husband's archives, but I had to content myself with dreaming of this other treasure until very recently, when his two daughters made me immeasurably happy by lending me the archives. In addition to invaluable biographical notes on his colleagues, I found biographies of some of his contemporaries, hundreds of press clippings and material related to his occupation of perfumer.

Joseph-Onésime Legault proved more elusive, as all I could find out about him was what Monseigneur Maurault had written and an account by painter Francesco Iacurto. Legault was Iacurto's neighbour and mentor, sharing with him his love of painting and a job well done and giving him valuable advice. There was nothing else, and you wouldn't believe the lengths I went to. For instance, I spent years searching in vain for Legault's daughter, and then by chance I found his two grandchildren. They had kept many of his mementos and magnificent photos, but most precious of all, they had carefully conserved their grandfather's paintings and the poster of the group's only exhibition, in 1941.

O.L. – *What put you on the trail of Onésime-Aimé Léger?*

E.G. – I had read in Monseigneur Maurault's article that Léger was a close friend of photographer Lactance Giroux. As it happened, among the actors I used to work with were the famous Giroux sisters, Antoinette and Germaine. I wondered if they were by any chance the photographer's daughters. My research led me to their sister Billie, who confirmed my hunch.

As luck would have it, Billie Giroux herself had known Léger quite well, since he often came to the studio to retouch her father's photos. In return, her father frequently gave his bohemian artist friend a place to stay when he was in his cups, so to speak.

O.L. – *Did you find any documents on Léger?*

E.G. – Very few remain. If we are to believe Albert Laberge's anecdote, during one of Léger's many moves, a garbage man accidentally disposed of a package containing the artist's canvases and all his papers! Valuable documents were probably lost in this mishap.

O.L. – *Where did you find information on Joseph-Octave Proulx?*

E.G. – Mostly in the biographical notes Proulx sent to Maurault. Proulx was born in Boston and divided his

time between the United States and Canada, which complicates matters. Fortunately, he often wrote to Aubin to share adventures from his travels and the pleasures of his visits to various American museums, which he described in great detail. But all in all, we don't know much about him.

O.L. – *And what about Élisée Martel?*

E.G. – We know even less about him! He left no descendants, and the only link we have with him is through a couple of Montreal collectors, who own nearly all of his paintings.

O.L. – *Of these eight painters, Narcisse Poirier is without a doubt the best known.*

E.G. – Yes, that's right. In this case, I was able to compile a portrait from information included in a number of articles and other publications.

O.L. – *Your research on the Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel has spanned many years. What was the most difficult aspect of it?*

E.G. – These were obscure painters, whose true worth had never been appreciated. They were forgotten, and for a long time I was advised not to invest so much energy on a lost cause. Yet I suppose I remained motivated, if only to communicate my enthusiasm to the people I met.

O.L. – *You conducted your research mainly with people rather than in the library?*

E.G. – Yes indeed. And it is very delicate process, winning and keeping people's trust, especially when you first meet them. After all, I had nothing to offer but my curiosity, determination and a strong desire to make the group better known, but I couldn't offer specifics or guarantees. Essentially, it's a question of heart and patience.

And then, it isn't easy to go into someone's home, rummage through their closets, obliging them to re-examine memories that are sometimes painful. You have to get people to drop their defences and you have to reassure them, both of which take a lot of honesty and discretion. And you have to keep your promises and to treat confidential information with all the dignity it deserves, and never to misuse it. It's a basic matter of respect and integrity, but it is absolutely crucial.

Today, I realize to how rash it was for a non-specialist like me to leap without looking, as it were, into this type of work. In the final analysis, it was love and passion that lured me into the ups and downs of this adventure.

O.L. – *Did you ever feel like giving it all up?*

E.G. – I often questioned what I was doing and wondered if I was kidding myself. I even felt discouraged by the scope of my undertaking. But I'm the kind of person that when I start something, I see it through to the end. Even when the going gets tough, I don't give up.

I had also grown very fond of "my painters." I felt so close to them, to their hopes and their fears. It brought to mind my own experiences on the stage as a 20-year-old; these were not easy years either. I felt I understood them. After all, they were of the same generation as my parents.

But I must admit that sometimes I did feel somewhat isolated and lonely. Luckily, I could always count on my family's support. My husband Jean was active in getting the project off the ground, and my children, Sylvie and Jean-François, each in their own way, did what they could to help. I am deeply grateful to them.

Finally, the courses I took at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) from 1981 to 1983 provided me with indispensable tools. Not only that, the Art History Department and Galerie de l'UQAM Art Gallery gave me the institutional support I needed to define and realize my project. Thanks to Laurier Lacroix, a competent and energetic team gradually developed around the project. And the results speak for themselves.

O.L. – *Was it all worthwhile?*

E.G. – Absolutely. I have always believed in the Montée Saint-Michel painters. I was always convinced that they are absolutely worth discovering, that they must assume their rightful place in history. My greatest success is that I managed to convince so many of their family members and specialists associated with the project. Now the exhibition is finally about to see the light of day, on a scale I never dreamed possible. To know that my grandson, François-Xavier, and countless others will finally be able to get to know and love "my painters" as I do, that is my sweetest reward.

Montreal native **Estelle Piquette-Gareau** became interested in theatre as a teenager. She studied drama with Ms. Jean-Louis Audet, Jeanne Maubourg-Roberval and Sita Riddez, as well as music, voice and ballet. She was actively involved in radio drama, and was a member of Pierre Dagenais's theatre troupe L'Équipe. In 1947, she played the role of Agnes in the first Canadian production of Molière's *School for Wives*.

In preparation for a teaching career, she took courses at the Institut pédagogique and the Psychology Department of the Université de Montréal. She also received a diploma and a teaching certificate from the Société du bon parler français. In 1954, she married Doctor Jean Gareau and founded a nursery school in Saint-Jean d'Iberville. Estelle and Jean Gareau have been active in the art community and collect works by painters from here and abroad.

Estelle Gareau's research led her to enroll in art history at UQAM. She continues to add to the archives on the Painters of the Montée Saint-Michel.