

MARCELLE FERRON

The Sum of Freedom

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Marcelle Ferron (1924-2001), an exceptional woman guided by a vital force and an ideal of unparalleled freedom. Inspiring and humane, she built from her life a sanctuary of liberty that enabled her to fully realize her unique and innovative vision of non-figurative art. As a feminist, sovereigntist activist, and staunch advocate for the social role of the artist, Marcelle Ferron crafted a body of work that was resolutely abstract and deeply personal.

This presentation of the MAJ's permanent collection is part of the centenary celebrations honouring the artist, organized by Amis de la place Marcelle-Ferron.

Photo: In her studio in Clamart (France) around 1959. © Estate of Marcelle Ferron

MARCELLE FERRON

Louiseville, Québec, 1924 – Montréal, Québec, 2001

1. *Sans titre*, 1947

[Untitled]

Oil on panel, 13.7 x 25.8 cm

Gift of Francis St-Pierre

2022.527

In her early years, Ferron worked on small surfaces, often opting for masonite or plywood due to financial constraints that prevented her from affording canvas. Heavily influenced by surrealism and the teachings of Paul-Émile Borduas, leader of the automatist movement in Québec, this particular work was created a year before Ferron signed the *Refus Global* manifesto at the age of 24. Seeking to unleash her unconscious, she applied thin layers of colour over which she layered black. Using a tool, she vigorously scratched the surface in successive strokes, sometimes until the support showed through. In 1949, two years after completing this painting, Ferron held her first solo exhibition at Librairie Tranquille, titled *Roots that See My Ancestors*. Critics noted the “dark tonality” and “nocturnal light” prevalent in her paintings

2. *Sans titre*, 1954

[Untitled]

Oil on cardboard, 20.1 x 25.4 cm

Estate of Marcel Dufour

Restoration of the work in 2024 with the generous support of Mr. Georges Drolet.

2019.013

In 1953, Marcelle Ferron leaves the province of Québec by boat with her three young daughters for France, where she would reside for a period of thirteen years. She settles in Clamart, in the Parisian region, in a country house with a garden, which includes a garage serving as her studio. From then on, she embarks on a significantly different pictorial journey. Changes are noticeable in the abundance of small touches of bright and vibrant colors, applied with a spatula instead of being scraped on. The sizes of her works also increase. The compositions occupy the entire surface of the canvases, revealing subtle spots of white amidst a richness of colors and luminous bursts. This painting production is influenced by nature, as she lives among the trees and wildflowers.

3. *Abstraction*, 1957

Oil on masonite, 15 x 19.4 cm

Séminaire de Joliette collection. Gift of the Clerics of St. Viator of Canada. Gift of Réal Aubin to the Séminaire de Joliette collection in 1967.

2012.180

Abstraction stands out from the two previous paintings. Ferron distances herself from the automatist style, which is normally more fragmented. Here, the spatula strokes, now broader, are not well-defined; they seek to integrate with one another. The colors she applies to the surface blend with each deposit of material, producing blocks with fine colored streaks that will make her famous. Ferron works the painting paste by texturing it, a method she will maintain throughout her career. The black painting paste of the early years has disappeared in favor of white, which increasingly manifests in her compositions. The speed of execution is also clearly visible. This work is a reduced version of the paintings she will produce in the coming years in larger formats.

4. *Lyrisme*, undated

[Lyrism]

Oil on masonite, 52 x 15 cm

Morisset family donation

2020.105

Lyrism is one of the few artworks by Marcelle Ferron in the MAJ collection to have a title. Undated, it was likely created between 1957 and 1963. Several clues lead us to this deduction. The titles of Ferron's works in the 1950s are evocative and sensual. *Lyrism* also unfolds from integrated and non-fragmented strokes where the colors blend. The four corners of the work reveal the white background of the canvas, and the few paint spots applied by the artist alone occupy the entire space. Moreover, its vertical format is particularly interesting; it anticipates the artwork format she would favor from the 1980s onwards.

5. *La Ponche*, 1958

Silkscreen, 1/50, 50.7 x 66.7 cm

Gift of Raymonde and Jean Gérin

1992.073

This work is part of an album collection of screen prints representative of the automatist movement of the 1950s, created by ten Québécois artists. A copy of this album is held in all major art museums in eastern Canada. According to Roland Giguère, artist and director of Éditions Erta where this album was produced, this was the first edition of color screen prints printed in Québec. Ferron's *La Ponche* reveals itself in vibrant colors, although more synthetic than those she normally uses in painting. Sensibly, the same formal vocabulary is found here as in her paintings where blocks of paint scatter across the surface. However, here the large spots overlap each other instead of merging into each other. Thus, the blocks of color have their full autonomy.

6. *Sans titre*, 1962

[Untitled]

Oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm

Maurice Forget donation

1995.089

The beginning of the 1960s marks a new phase in Marcelle Ferron's pictorial expression. She grants herself the freedom to adopt increasingly imposing

formats and makes spatula strokes where the gestures take on more dimension. Constructing her paintings with broad spatula strokes in thick paste, she spreads the material in often compact compositions, which stand out against a dazzling white background. As René Lussier mentions, the material-color is transformed into light-color magnified by whites. She also develops her own tools, such as long knives that allows her to arrange the paste into colored sections. Her compositions diffuse lines that widen and amplify while remaining dense, based on a complex interplay of planes that dynamically fill the space.

7. *Sans titre*, 1963

[Untitled]

Oil on canvas, 19.5 x 24.5 cm

Estate of Marcel Dufour

2019.014

8. *Sans titre*, 1966

[Untitled]

Gouache and oil on cardboard, 38.6 x 33.5 cm

Gift of Maurice and Franceline Jodoin

1989.100

This work was produced in 1966, the year of Ferron's return to Québec, during which she designed the famous stained-glass windows of the Champ-de-Mars metro station in Montréal. In parallel with her oil production, Ferron also worked with gouache, as in the case of this painting. This medium compels her to make quick decisions and liberates her from certain constraints inherent in oil painting. From the latter half of the 1960s, Ferron abandons the spatula lines that structured her paintings for a slenderer approach. She favors continuous, sinuous, or undulating movements. She uses saturated and sometimes violent colors with strong contrasts between red and black. This work, divided vertically in two, seems to evoke two tectonic plates meeting, two opposing forces, expressive yet harmonious.

The MAJ is presenting twelve works by Marcelle Ferron from its permanent collection. This selection adheres to the chronological order of the works' creation, allowing the public to trace the stylistic evolution of the artist over the five decades of her career. Her practice is divided into two segments, reflecting a significant hiatus in her painting between 1966 and 1973, during which she focused on integrating art with architecture by creating monumental stained-glass artworks.

The first part of the exhibition showcases Ferron's early works, predating the *Refus Global* manifesto (1948) and her thirteen-year sojourn in France. The second part revisits into periods from her last thirty years, marked by an interest in calligraphic art and the translucency she explored in her glasswork, which she later incorporated into her paintings.

Regarding the history of the MAJ's collection of Marcelle Ferron's work, the first painting entered the collection of the Séminaire de Joliette, predecessor of the Museum, in 1969, thanks to a private donation. The second piece was purchased ten years later, a rare acquisition by the Museum. This gesture testifies to the importance of Ferron's art at the time. Nonetheless, the majority of the works on display today have been donated over the past decade.

The collection assembled here represents the breadth and diversity of Ferron's pictorial legacy, showcasing her mastery of colour and gesture. The works depict her stylistic transition from darkness to light and illustrate the evolution of spatial construction in painting, exploring myriad possibilities centred on colour, mass, transparency, and line.

Julie Alary Lavallée, Collections Curator

9. *Sans titre*, 1973

[Untitled]

Gouache on paper, 54.9 x 39.2 cm

Gift of Guy and Jeanne De Repentigny

1991.189

Between 1966 and 1973, Ferron devoted herself almost entirely to public art. Her return to painting in 1973 was in no way hindered by this hiatus, as this work demonstrates. The expressiveness and energy of her gestures remain as vivid as ever, alongside the vibrancy of the colours. Large fields of almost monochromatic colours, combined with spatula strokes, burst forth in the form of explosions or swirls. Throughout the 1970s, her painting style transformed. The coloured masses are now elongated and assert themselves as shapes rather than strictly spots. Moreover, the transparency of glass, a material she brilliantly exploited in her public art, is seen in this gouache through the penetration of light into the layers of pigment. The long green, blue, and beige lines allow the hidden light behind the work to filter through.

10. *Sans titre*, 1975

[Untitled]

Oil on paper, 57.2 x 72.9 cm

Gift of Lisette and Claude Boyer

1990.028

The broad lines of color that she deployed in the 1970s feature prominently in this work. These long horizontal trails are punctuated with small gestures that instill rhythm over time. Ferron interrupts the calm to striking effect, introducing a diagonal line and the presence of red. In addition, a curved black line breaks the linearity of the piece. Foreshadowing the artist's interest in calligraphy, the black line, increasingly visible in her work, transitions from a graphic sign to a structuring element.

11. *Abstraction*, 1976

Oil and metallic paint on cardboard, 79.4 x 100.2 cm
Purchase, ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec
1979.007

During her stays in China and Japan, Ferron discovers Chinese pictorial techniques. She particularly embraces traditional Chinese painting, which resonates with her sensitivity for gesture. Here, Ferron utilizes line as a form of writing which floats above the composition. Later, the black line takes precedence in the foreground, acting as both the subject and structuring principle of the composition. In the 1970s, she incorporates gold or silver metallic paint, as exemplified by *Abstraction*. In her writings, she elaborates on how the golden templates and prevalent gilding in China left a profound impression on her. This fascination with shimmer is transposed into this painting. Purchased directly from the artist in 1979, this work represents a rare acquisition by the Museum, underscoring the extent to which her art was coveted.

12. *Sans titre*, about 1983

[Untitled]
Oil on canvas, 111 x 70.6 x 4 cm
Legacy of Jean Éthier-Blais
1995.342

Ferron painted this piece for her friend Jean Éthier-Blais, an intellectual and diplomat whom she met in Paris while he was stationed at the Canadian Embassy. Conceived after a journey to the Far East, the work evokes Chinese calligraphy and freely soaring birds. The calligraphic signs against a golden backdrop take center stage here. To the right, a vertical line traverses the canvas from bottom to top. Throughout her career, Ferron continually reinterpreted various expressions of nature, imbuing them with a strong sense of freedom. These two guiding principles are serenely and grandly revealed here through a few black lines reminiscent of schematized birds discernible in the distance.

In the 1980s, Ferron began to favour the vertical format. This orientation of the canvas facilitated her practice as her mobility declined. At a young age, Ferron was afflicted with bone tuberculosis, which remained a handicap throughout her life. This painting was created around 1983, the same year Ferron was awarded the Paul-Émile Borduas Prize, an honour bestowed for the first time by the Québec government upon a female artist.

FLOOR PLAN

2nd floor

Salle Marie-Éveline Prévile et Luc Ratelle

