

**NORVAL MORRISSEAU AND THE  
EMERGENCE OF THE IMAGE MAKERS**

Organizers: Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

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For years the Canadian art establishment has resolutely dismissed the work of Norval Morrisseau and several other prominent native painters, arguing that whatever value their collective works might have would be primarily anthropological and not artistic. Consequently, they claimed such paintings rightly belonged in museums of natural history and not galleries of fine art. A parallel assertion was that any body of artwork labelled, promoted, exhibited and marketed on the basis of the artists' ethnic origin or the cultural content of the work, could not presume to receive consideration from the art community on the basis of esthetics. The many patrons and admirers of Indian art have long been offended by this myopic view, based as it is on attitudes which are often irrational, and occasionally appear to be racist. The chief villain in the piece, and main bastion of resistance, was seen by many to be the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, thwarting the efforts of those who would seek to legitimize what for many was no more than a fashionable commodity and the product of successful marketing strategies. Admittedly, for a time, work by Woodland painters seemed to be everywhere and standards for judging it nowhere. Curiously, such criticisms have never been levelled at contemporary Inuit art, an obviously ethnic genre, which has enjoyed considerable gallery favour since the early 1950's.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, the general public's fascination with Indian legend painting, or 'contemporary Woodland Indian art' as it has come to be known, has measurably declined, possibly as a result of overexposure in public buildings and the proliferation of substandard work. It is therefore surprising, but nonetheless gratifying, to see the Art Gallery of Ontario finally recognize the creative genius of Norval Morrisseau and formally acknowledge his revolutionary contribution to mid-20th century Canadian art. In an exhibition entitled 'Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers', the viewer can trace the artistic and spiritual maturing of a modern-day master and gain added insight into the tremendous impact his work has had, not only on his contemporaries, but on a whole generation of young Indian painters who have grown up in the shadow of his imposing reputation and who now work in a style he virtually invented.

To mount a show of this nature, the Art Gallery of Ontario enlisted the assistance of two experts in the field - Elizabeth McLuhan, Curator of the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, and Tom Hill, Museum Director at the Woodland Indian Cultural Educational Centre in Brantford, Ontario, who is himself a Seneca Indian and an artist. To them fell the

dual challenge of assembling a small focused show (of forty-nine pieces), and preparing a catalogue which would provide a "long-range art-historical perspective on Indian art" and a "full-length examination of contemporary Woodland Indian art in its cultural and political context". In truth, the Art Gallery of Ontario did not expect or intend this exhibition to be of great significance or importance; of moderate interest perhaps, but not actual importance. However, McLuhan and Hill took full advantage of the opportunity thus presented and transformed a modest assignment into a major event. This is an impressive show dominated by many of Morrisseau's better known canvases, but including works by a few lesser known artists, some of them quite striking. In such austere surroundings these paintings make a refreshingly bold statement of colour and form. No less effective in its presentation is the accompanying catalogue, coming as it does at a time when an authoritative voice on the subject is most welcome. In this instance there are two voices.

The first belongs to Tom Hill, who traces the history of Indian art in Canada from its early ceremonial forms, through the development of commercialized crafts, to its recent manifestation as a mass-marketed fine art product. Particularly illuminating is the third section, 'The New Art: Politics and Pictographs', which presents an exhaustive account of the many obstacles and bureaucratic hurdles encountered by contemporary artists struggling to gain a foothold in today's art world.<sup>2</sup> As Hill observes, "market credibility has been proven, intellectual credibility is forthcoming, but the politics have been awesome". This comprehensive overview provides an ideal introduction to the book's second part: an in-depth study by Elizabeth McLuhan of Morrisseau's career, followed by a brief examination of six other native artists (Daphne Odjig, Carl Ray, Joshim Kakegamik, Roy Thomas, Saul Williams and Blake Debassige) whose work has been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by Morrisseau.<sup>3</sup> The catalogue is a valuable reference, reproducing as it does every piece in the show, many in colour.

McLuhan's stated purpose is to present "a visual journey following one man's search for a style that would bridge two cultures, a style that would communicate the essence of Ojibwa values and perceptions to contemporary native and non-native viewers alike". More than this, it is also an emotionally charged visual documentation of an intensely religious search: no less than a personal quest for spiritual identity. What makes this parallel journey so compelling is that the artist is constantly changing, transforming himself while torn between two dramatically different cultures. It has not been a smooth progress to self-realization, fraught as it was with poverty, illness and alcoholism. In the midst of it all Morrisseau has produced some stunningly original works over the past twenty-five years.

Born in 1932 on the Sand Point Reserve near Thunder Bay, and raised by grandparents according to Ojibwa custom, the young Norval studied tribal lore and prepared to be a shaman. It was at this time that he received from his grandfather the commission to visually record the sacred myths and beliefs of the Ojibwa people. The spiritual nature of this mission was soon confirmed by the appearance in a vision of the thunderbird, a powerful Ojibwa deity, granting

protection against those who would oppose his unorthodox adaptation of traditional religious imagery. As tribal custom forbade the representation of sacred imagery for non-religious purposes, this supernatural endorsement gave Morrisseau a sense of resolve and the confidence to embark on such an undertaking. From this point on he signed his work with his new Ojibwa name 'Copper Thunderbird', using Indian syllabics.

The unique approach to painting which one readily identifies with Morrisseau today evolved over a period of years through several major stages of exploration and subtle refinement. The first of these stages, which McLuhan identifies as 'Pre-Pictographic', covers the brief period 1958-1960, when the artist first set out the themes and concerns that would occupy him over the next twenty years: chiefly, self-transformation and the quest for spiritual power. In these early works of ink on brown paper and tempera on birchbark, figures seem very experimental, rendered in a stiff and awkward fashion, suggesting an unsure mix of symbolism and naturalism. However, the major motifs are already in place: man changing into a thunderbird, medicine snake, ancestral figures. In a pen and ink sketch from 1959 entitled 'Coming Away', Morrisseau hints at what is to come by reworking what has come before. A freeform interpretation of a medicine scroll introduces the Ojibwa spirit world, teeming with mythic bears, birds, fish and manitous bound in multiple relationships of conflict and communion. It is an unstructured but visually captivating work.

The succeeding 'Early Pictographic Phase', 1960-1963, witnessed Morrisseau's transition from fledgling shaman to professional artist. By skillfully adapting and amplifying the traditional symbolism from the sacred birchbark scrolls and rock paintings - the dots, split circles, expressive inner parts and kinetic lines of spiritual power - he fashioned a highly personalized and streamlined visual vocabulary. These elements, when combined with a strong calligraphic line, were ideally suited to depicting a wealth of startlingly original images, images which found immediate acceptance by the art buying public. The paintings, boldly executed in black, brown and white on neutral backgrounds, were successfully premiered in 1962 in Morrisseau's first exhibition at Jack Pollock's Toronto gallery.

In the years 1963-1966, following this landmark show, McLuhan notes that Morrisseau's images conveyed "a timeless power, and such a sense of definitive archetypal form that they deserve the term icon". There are several excellent pieces in the exhibition that illustrate this. During this 'Iconic Pictograph Phase' there is less emphasis on legendary narrative (not that the artist was ever a strict devotee of this approach) and a greater concern with the creation of personal visual statements reflecting the essence or spirit of the subject portrayed, while at the same time allowing for multiple levels of interpretation. This shift in philosophical focus also marked a major move towards the use of richer colours and much larger canvases, perhaps indicating an attempt to capture the scale of the themes depicted. Ancestral figures have been recast as visionary self-portraits, and even the terrifying spectre of the Windigo now seems to embody the common fears of humanity rather than the specific horrors of cannibalism. Perhaps the most effective work from this period is the brutally

direct painting of the artist tightly wrapped with writhing snakes. It is a powerful visual metaphor for the continuous inner battle for supremacy over the baser passions and desires which the snakes represent.

Transformation of the medicine snake into the serpent of temptation has strong Christian overtones. In fact, the Christian church and its considerable body of religious imagery have had a profound influence on Morrisseau's thinking and painting style. Beginning in the mid-1960's and continuing for the better part of the next decade, he laboured in various ways to reconcile the many native and Christian images competing for prominence in his mind and on his canvases. It was a time of professional success and personal turmoil; moments of inspired creativity alternated and sometimes coincided with periods of incarceration for alcohol-related offences. Expressive response to feelings of cultural schizophrenia took different forms. One such expression was a 'nativization' of classic Christian iconography. In two separate examples, combining two distinct visual traditions, black formlines define discrete pockets of primary colour, revealing Mary and Joseph cloaked in brilliant tribal costume, as if frozen in stained glass adoration. Even more intriguing is a portrait of the artist as Jesus Christ. Clad in traditional shamanic dress, the figure stands as a mystic "amalgam of Christ's status as a shaman and the artist's role as an image maker". However, not all such cultural blending was this harmonious. In a bitter indictment of white society, the Christian missionary is shown extending a hand of friendship to a native father and son while the dreaded smallpox disease (indicated by an innocent dot pattern on all three figures) is transferred as well. It is an angry picture which once again exposes the artist's ambivalence towards the whiteman and the benefits of his culture.

Not until the mid-1970's was Morrisseau able to come to terms with his anger and erratic behaviour. At this time he became a disciple of Eckankar, a religious movement which espouses a concept of soul travel and universality more compatible, in his view, with traditional Ojibwa beliefs. This led to a broader approach to spiritual issues in his work and coincided with an exploration of multi-panel painting. By far the most successful and spectacular of these experiments is the expansive six-piece 'Man Changing Into a Thunderbird'. It is a reworking of an old and familiar theme, but the evidence of artistic growth over twenty years is dazzling to behold. Richly patterned images now explode from a blinding orange sky that threatens to engulf the viewer with its sheer scale and brilliance. The work hangs together as a total unit even though the transformation is not continuous. Instead, faces and feathers advance and recede in a cohesive swirl of unifying energy. One leaves with the distinct impression of having gazed directly into the face of the sun to witness a rare event of supernatural proportions. 1

The final piece, and perhaps the most intimate of Morrisseau's work displayed here, is a charming dyptich painted in 1978 entitled 'The Storyteller: The Artist and His Grandfather'. It is a warmly affectionate tribute to the man who taught him the traditions of his people and who sent him off on his artistic pilgrimage so many years ago. Particularly effective is the use of acrylic washes to create a dream state, enabling the elder and child to commune once again

across the boundaries of two complementing canvases.

At this stage in his career the artist appears to have subdued some of his personal demons and achieved a measure of spiritual peace. However, Morriseau is not one to rest on his reputation for long. As McLuhan points out, "his brilliance lies in his ability to break away from his own conventions, to constantly renew his vision". In 1983 this vision led him to produce a work of remarkable complexity and scope. Returning, as it were, to the beginning only now with a quarter century of experience and confidence - he has fashioned a vast surreal dream environment. Entitled 'Shaman Teaching His Two Halves in a Dream State', it is a pen and ink rendering on paper, nine metres in length, crowded with images of mythic and mystic wonder. As a testimony to his roots in Ojibwa pictography, Morriseau has created a sacred scroll writ larger than life, detailing one man's personal odyssey through the world, a world in which the viewer is challenged to lose himself. A section of this scroll is reproduced in the catalogue although the work itself is not on display in the exhibition. Its present whereabouts is not made entirely clear.<sup>5</sup>

Morrisseau is undeniably an innovator, the first to update and visually translate the beliefs of the Ojibwa for both native and non-native audiences. His influence on his fellow artists has also been enormous. To illustrate this phenomenon the exhibition organizers have included a selection of paintings by six other native artists who have drawn on and adapted Morriseau's style in their work. This section of the show is less than satisfying. In the case of Daphne Odjig and Carl Ray the pieces displayed do not adequately reflect either their stature among contemporaries or their achievements as artists. Those familiar with their work might justifiably feel that they have been done a disservice, while those unfamiliar with it might wonder at their inclusion in the show at all.

For many years Daphne Odjig, an Odawa from Wikwemikong Reserve, Manitoulin Island, has experimented with several forms of artistic expression employing a variety of media. Since the late 1960's she has used the pictographic technique as a point of departure for portraying themes of Indian reality unsuited to depiction using traditional western artistic conventions. In the process, she has evolved her own intensely personal, and readily identifiable approach to painting that makes much use of a lyrically flowing formline and multiple internal rhythms. Of the six Odjig works in the show 'Thunderbird Man' is by far the best. In this instance, the rippling formlines define the central figure and set up a series of sensual vibrations which radiate outwards, reverberating throughout the entire composition, filling it with a mood of highly charged dramatic tension. One half expects the lines of tension to snap and the canvas to quiver and shake as the two identities merge into one. Elsewhere, Odjig has employed her own pictographic style to create a number of erotic paintings and also a series of scenes of the Holy Land for El Al Airlines. Any of these would have been more appropriate for the show than the uninspiring examples of collage and impressionism which appear to have little direct relation to the style developed by Morriseau. Ideally, the Art Gallery of Ontario should have attempted to secure from the National Museum of Man in Ottawa 'The

Indian in Transition', Odjig's epic mural depicting Indian history from the time of European contact to the present. This sweeping chronicle best represents Odjig's adaptation of the pictographic form and thus would have provided a more adequate indication of her own considerable artistic vision.<sup>6</sup>

Cree artist Carl Ray might have been shown to better advantage as well. His delicate fine line interpretations of Cree life and legends, executed in somber tones of brown, blue and black, provide an interesting contrast to Morrisseau's vibrant canvases but suffer in comparison. Only one work, an iconic depiction of a wolverine entitled 'Bang wa-Jusk, Legendary Man Eater', hints at Ray's real ability as a colourist. In 1978 (the year of his untimely death at the age of thirty-two), the Wah-Sah Gallery in Winnipeg displayed three excellent paintings by Ray. Executed with great sophistication and subtlety of colouring, they were bold statements by a mature artist filled with much mystic symbolism. Had they been part of the exhibition, they would have served as a suitable counterpoint to Ray's crisp linear renderings.

Ray is often regarded as a bridge between Morrisseau and the new generation of native painters. In fact, he taught art to many of them while travelling with Morrisseau throughout northern Ontario in the early 1970's. Today, several of these former students are emerging as major names in the field. Of the more than seventy-five artists estimated to be working in the new pictographic tradition only four were selected for inclusion in the current exhibition. (It must have been a difficult task for the organizers to decide who to exclude.)

The new breed of painters seems to be working in one of two broadly defined regional styles. In northwestern Ontario there is a decided preference for the use of sinuous black formlines to segment and interconnect all colours and figures. Themes expressed are mainly from Ojibwa oral tradition, and most artists work in isolation from one another. Thomas, Josh Kakegamic and Williams follow these basic conventions but produce works of originality that bear remarkably little resemblance to one another. Of particular appeal are Kakegamic's wonderfully inspired interpretation of the 'Boy in the Moon' legend, Thomas' three metre mural 'Art of My People' and Williams' symbolic portrait 'Homage to Morrisseau', which appears on the exhibition poster and catalogue cover. The work from this region contrasts with that from Manitoulin Island where a second style has evolved characterized by the use of spidery lines, blended colours and sophisticated textures. Themes are often personalized explorations of universal human values, values instilled in the young by tribal elders through the local Ojibwa Cultural Foundation. Since the foundation acts as a cultural touchstone to which all are linked, the artists have a sense of community in their work.

For whatever reason, only one painter from this area is represented.<sup>7</sup> Mind you, Blake Debassige is probably the most innovative and accomplished of all the younger artists in northern Ontario. Still working comfortably within the pictographic tradition, Debassige has nevertheless moved farthest from Morrisseau. In so doing, he has defined an individualized style which he uses to address increasingly subjective themes such as the artist's role in reaffirming cultural values. However, like Morrisseau, he cannot resist the challenge of

Christian and native imagery, something he has done in a grand and wonderfully conceived work called 'Tree of Life'. In this large canvas a mystical Christ is superimposed on a stylized evergreen tree, among whose branches hide brilliant and whimsical birds and mask-like images of the twelve disciples. It is a magnificent painting, a marvellous-modern-day icon layered with complex sacred symbolism.

As McLuhan points out in the conclusion to the catalogue, Morrisseau receives full credit for inventing and refining the modern pictographic style. "The true talent of the second generation will be tested in their [sic] ability to find freedom within or without the pictographic conventions and to personalize both the forms and function of the art". In the book's Preface, Dennis Reid of the Art Gallery of Ontario expresses a hope that the exhibition will "establish a critical framework for the evaluation of this aspect of artistic activity". The exhibit does this merely by standing as an example of what is good. Beyond that "each artist who paints in the pictographic style must be evaluated as an artist, not as an Indian".

'Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers' had its premier showing at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto after which time it was to travel across Ontario to Thunder Bay, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury into 1985.

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#### NOTES

1. Perhaps the fact that Inuit prints and sculpture have always been perceived and promoted as art and not just extensions of a craft and curio industry, would account for their early and immediate acceptance by the art community. In reality, only a fraction of the items produced qualified as art on the basis of esthetics alone, but in this case, gallery owners assumed as a matter of course that they would sift through the mediocre in order to find and exhibit the superior.
2. The art world can be a very foreign place for the member of a society which has no tradition of creating art for art's sake. And, it was not that long ago that depiction, in any form, of native culture was actively discouraged, if not prohibited outright in residential schools. For those artists who persevered, their work was often promoted and marketed not as fine art, but as a new variety of native curio. Final public acceptance of Woodland Indian art as art appears to have had as much to do with the national search for a truly Canadian identity in the late 1960's as it did with any other single factor.

3. Much of the preliminary research for this section of the catalogue was written in the early 1970's as a master's thesis at the University of New Mexico. In personal conversation, Ms. McLuhan mentioned that she had encountered strong resistance to the idea that a significant self-generated artistic tradition could arise from the talents of only one man painting in the backwoods of northern Canada.
4. 'The Art of Norval Morrisseau' by Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, Methuen 1979, contains over one hundred and thirty full-colour reproductions of Morrisseau's paintings and prints, including a large fold-out of this six-panel work.
5. See 'Norval Morrisseau: Recent Work', Exhibition Review by Mark Nissenholt in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1983, pp. 225-227. One section of the scroll is reproduced on page 227.
6. This is such an important work in terms of Odjig's career and Canadian native art in general that inclusion of a large-scale colour photograph (unorthodox as this seems) could have been considered for the show. A small black and white photograph does appear in the catalogue. Admittedly, none of this might have been possible given the budgetary and spatial constraints placed on the exhibit.
7. The addition of the work of Leland Bell from Wikwemikong, with his paintings of statuesque El Greco-like figures would have preserved a better balance between the regional styles.