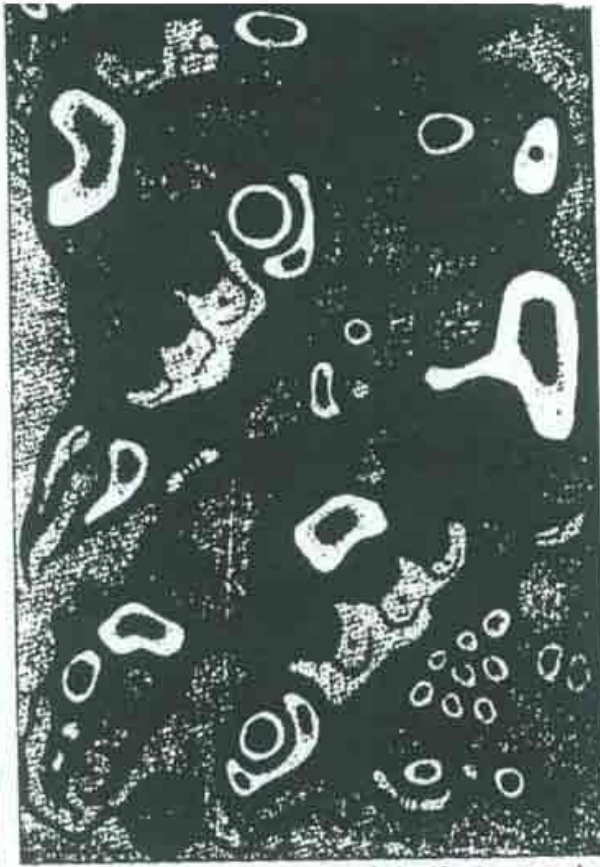




A black and white reproduction of a 1956 painting by Norval Morrisseau titled, *Erected in Honour to All Ancestors and Warriors*.



A black and white reproduction of a painting Morrisseau says is a forgery. The B.C. artist has identified 23 paintings as fakes.

Probe launched as native Canadian artist identifies paintings as forgeries

Morrisseau fakes alleged

BY MURRAY WHYTE

Celebrated native Canadian painter Norval Morrisseau has identified at least 23 paintings sold recently at auction as forgeries, touching off an investigation that could lead to hundreds ofphony paintings attributed to him.

Donald Robinson, Mr. Morrisseau's gallery representative in Toronto, was approached last month by a collector who bought several paintings attributed to Mr. Morrisseau at Kaha's Country Auctions in Pickering, Ont. The collector wanted the works appraised, but Mr. Robinson was suspicious of their authenticity.

Mr. Robinson sent colour photocopies of 23 paintings to Mr. Morrisseau in British Columbia for identification. Mr. Morrisseau sent back a signed statement saying he did not paint any of the works in question.

The paintings were purchased from a collection of about 850 paintings sold by Kaha's on behalf of a single dealer in Thunder Bay, Ont. Also included in the collection was a painting attributed

all these numbers coming out, I just thought 'this is impossible.'

The alleged fakes first came to Mr. Robinson's attention through the Thunder Bay RCMP, which had received a tip through Crime-stoppers. An RCMP officer in Thunder Bay declined to comment on the case.

If the lot contains more forgeries, the financial damages could run into the millions of dollars. Mr. Morrisseau, one of the country's best-known and most marketable living painters, typically sells a medium-sized canvas for \$8,000 to \$9,000. At auction, the paintings sold for an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000, with some going for as much as \$9,000.

Mr. Morrisseau, who is 70 years old, is in ill health with Parkinson's Disease. Over the course of a painting career that began in the 1950s, he developed a reputation for alcohol abuse. In 1987, he became national news not for his art, but for living on the streets in Vancouver's Gastown, crawling

which has sold Mr. Morrisseau's work. "You give him acrylic paint and a canvas and tell him you'll take him out for dinner and give him some liquor and he'll paint. There are probably thousands of those things on reserves all over the country."

Given Mr. Morrisseau's past, riddled with the likelihood he has produced at least 5,000 paintings during his career, it would seem likely he might not remember them all. Mr. Robinson, however, said it was preposterous to think Mr. Morrisseau would not recognize his own work.

"It's not possible," he said. "Norval has an excellent memory for longer-term things. His mind is still very good."

Mr. Morrisseau could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Robinson, who is perhaps the most knowledgeable person in the country on the subject of Mr. Morrisseau's art, said there were several clues as to the paintings' authenticity that would make Mr.

We know how he does faces, what the brush strokes look like, we're so familiar with his stuff."

Allegations of forgeries of Mr. Morrisseau's work are nothing new. "He's been telling us for years about the fakes, and even the people who were painting them," Mr. Robinson said.

The reason for Mr. Morrisseau's apparent popularity with forgers are many. When he started, Mr. Morrisseau was hailed as a true innovator, an inventor of a unique aesthetic that melded a traditional style of native art with contemporary painting. At the height of his popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his paintings would typically sell for \$18,000, a rare figure for a living Canadian painter.

In spite of that success, though, the market for native art soured badly in the 1980s. Only Mr. Morrisseau and a handful of others were still selling work.

Mr. Morrisseau's relative marketability may have made him a target, Mr. Robinson said.

"There are a large number of failed, unsuccessful, jealous and probably relatively poor native painters," he said. "It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagina-

