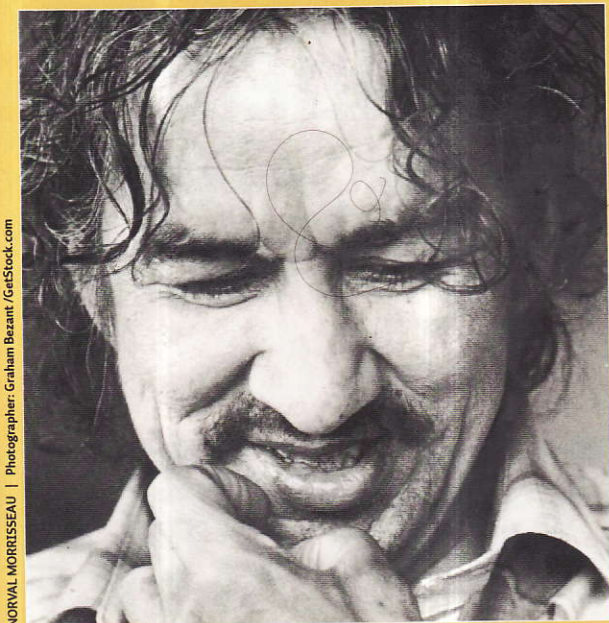


COPPER THUNDERBIRD

THE ART OF NORVAL MORRISSEAU



EXHIBITION GUIDE
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NORVAL MORRISSEAU | Photographer: Graham Bezan / GetStock.com

Celebrated Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau was born in Fort William, Ontario in 1932. Raised by his grandparents, he learned at an early age the stories and legends of his heritage from his grandfather Moses (Potan) Nanakonagos, a sixth generation Shaman in the Midewiwin society.

The most widely recognized themes in Morrisseau's artworks address the oral traditions and legends of the Midewiwin as seen in petroglyph rock paintings of northern Ontario. A common theme throughout his entire body of work is the exploration of spirituality, allegory, and representation. Using the narratives of the Ojibway oral traditions, Morrisseau created a new visual vocabulary that gave the legends of his people an image for the first time. However, traditionally in his culture only the Shaman had the right to paint the sacred legends, and thus his work invited criticism from the elders in his community. Morrisseau maintained that he was a true Shaman, because it was the Shaman who were the artists of his people: "I am a shaman-artist... My art speaks and will continue to speak, transcending barriers of nationality, of language and of other forces that many be divisive, fortifying the greatness of spirit that has always been the foundation of the Great Ojibway."¹

Morrisseau also explored other themes in his artwork, always dealing with some aspect of his own spirituality. The Catholic religious iconography that he became familiar with during his childhood years at St. Joseph Catholic school in Thunder Bay, as well as his interest in mysticism after his conversion to the Eckankar religion in 1976, are both subjects of his art.

¹ Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979) 7

² Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979) 7

“My paintings are icons... I bring together and promote the ultimate harmony of the physical and spiritual world.”

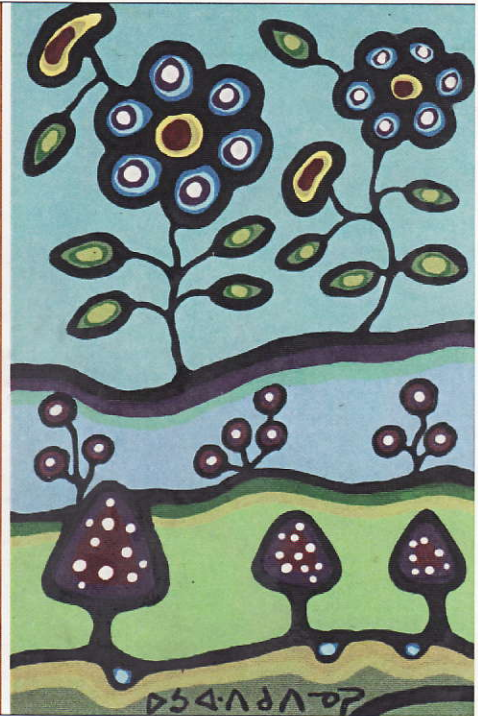
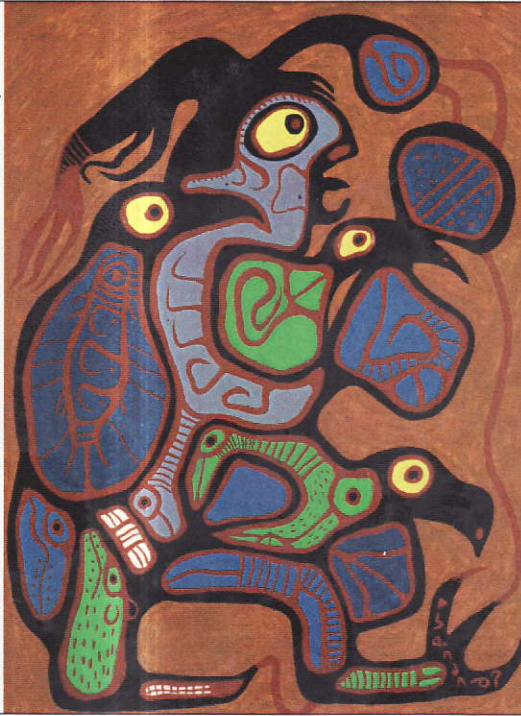
~ NORVAL MORRISSEAU

After the age of nineteen, Morrisseau signed all of his artworks in Cree syllabics using his Ojibway name: Copper Thunderbird. The thunderbird and other totemic figures such as the bear, the turtle, and the snake are subjects frequently found in his work. Other common motifs include Shaman, plants, animals, ceremonial processes, and spiritual creatures. By using the X-ray style for which he is now recognized, Morrisseau was able to reveal the inner soul of the figures within his paintings.

Each of Morrisseau's pieces is legible as a narrative because his unique vocabulary of symbols and colours has been used to create a visual language. Morrisseau intended his art to convey the spirit of his people: “My paintings are... icons; that is to say that they are images which help focus on spiritual powers, generated by traditional belief and wisdom... I bring together and promote the ultimate harmony of the physical and spiritual world.”²

Morrisseau's career as an artist spanned many decades, during which he was awarded many accolades. In 1978, Morrisseau was made a member of the Order of Canada. He was acknowledged as a Grand Shaman of the Ojibway in 1986. In 1995, he was awarded with the First Nations' highest honor, the Eagle Feather, and in 2006 he became the only First Nations artist to have been awarded a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada. Perhaps the most significant achievement of Norval Morrisseau's career was his ability to communicate through his artwork the richness of the cultural traditions of Canada's native peoples.

(L): SHAMAN | Acrylic on Canvas | 25 x 31 in. | C. 1970's (R): ALKALEIDS | Acrylic on Canvas | 17 x 22 in. | n.d.



FORM/COLOUR AND LINE

Norval Morrisseau was a self-taught artist known for his unique style, later named the “Woodland Native School of Art”. This style is characterized by strong black outlines, bold colours and the simultaneous representation of the interior and exterior of the figures in his work. Morrisseau’s spiritual and cultural upbringing was a source of inspiration for him as were the petroglyphs (rock paintings) that Morrisseau saw as a young man. Various formal conventions in Morrisseau’s work include lines of communication, lines of power, lines of prophecy, and divided circles. Each convention represents attributes of figures or a particular theme within a painting.



PETROGLYPHS

Petroglyphs found in Ontario, which date from as early as 900 AD, were created by ancestors of the Ojibway. The images were a great source of inspiration for Morrisseau. Morrisseau's own artwork reflects the petroglyphs in both form and theme, however he added narrative to the sacred images, something that had not been done by any artist before him. Although Morrisseau was criticized for depicting the sacred knowledge of his people, he believed that he was preserving the heritage of the Ojibway through his art.

(L): THE STORIES I LEARNED ON MY TRAVELS | Acrylic on Canvas | 63 x 63 in. | 1984
(R): THE LEGEND BECOMES REAL FOR THE CHILD | Acrylic on Canvas | 53 x 39.5 in. | C. 1970's



STORYTELLING

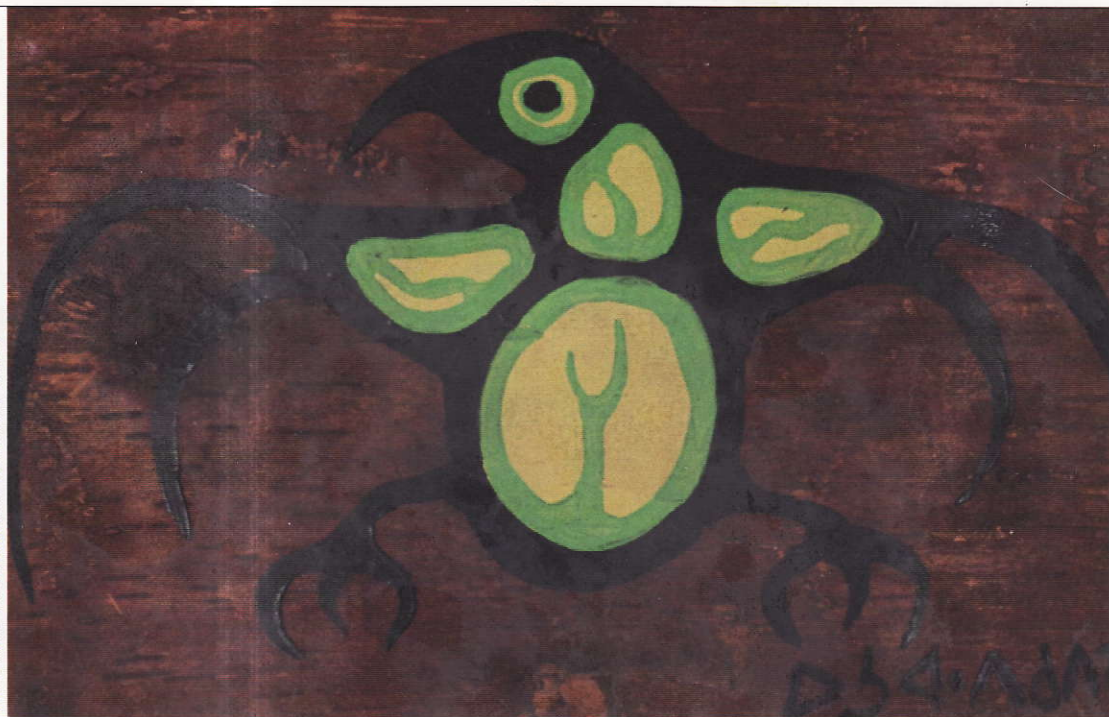
Morrisseau was raised by his maternal grandparents. He learned much of traditional Ojibway culture and legends from his grandfather Moses “Potan” Nanakonagos. As a young boy, Morrisseau was enthralled by the stories that his grandfather told him about the legends of his people. Many of these stories, adapted and transformed through his imagination, are reflected in his paintings.

(L): THREE LOONS I | Acrylic on Paper | 25 x 22.5 in. | C. 1960's
(R): THREE LOONS II | Acrylic on Paper | 25 x 25.5 in. | C. 1960's



LOON

The Ojibway people have different clans, in which membership is passed on through paternal lineage. Each clan has a designated animal totem to protect its members. The loon represents one of the original Ojibway clans, along with the bear, catfish, marten, and crane. The loon symbolizes family, control and loyalty to the Ojibway. By returning to the same place each spring to raise its young, the loon is often a symbol of home and belonging. Decorative depictions of the loon are popular subjects in Morrisseau's artwork, as are the legends involving these birds.



MANITOU

A Manitou, or spirit, possesses different powers than the clan totems, and can be called upon in certain circumstances for protection from evil, for assistance in accomplishing goals, and for aid in communication with various spirits. Morrisseau would have called upon different Manitous throughout his life, however most widely used were the thunderbird and the bear, which held personal significance to him.

THUNDERBIRD | Acrylic on Canvas | 58.5 x 55.5 in. | 1977



THUNDERBIRD

Morrisseau's relationship with the thunderbird is significant to his artworks. As a young man he became very ill with tuberculosis and was taken to a doctor in Fort William, Ontario. When his health continued to deteriorate, Morrisseau's family called upon an Ojibway medicine woman to perform a renaming ceremony. Morrisseau recovered from the illness and from that point on signed all of his artworks in Cree with the name Copper Thunderbird. According to Anishnaabe tradition, renaming a person with a powerful name can bring new life to that person, and in Morrisseau's case the thunderbird totem brought him power and strength.

Thunderbirds are powerful guardians to the Anishnaabe and are believed to be both intelligent and wrathful. The birds are thought to be the messengers of the four winds, reigning over the skies. The thunderbird is considered the most powerful of the Manitou, and plays a significant role in many Anishnaabe ceremonies.



BEAR

The bear is a totem figure for the Ojibway, and according to Anishnaabe beliefs it protects members of its clan by warding off enemies and strangers. The Ojibway believe the bear is a powerful being that has a special relationship with them. Often referred to as 'grandfather to the Ojibway', the bear is thought to have strong curative and spiritual powers. The bear totem represents strength, power, individual direction, and masculinity.

INORGANICS | Acrylic on Canvas | 26 x 29.5 in. | 1977



ECKANKAR

Norval Morrisseau joined Eckankar in the 1970's. This religion holds that followers can obtain a unique understanding of the self by exploring their personal relationship with God. According to Eckankar teachings, through spiritual exercise, each individual can obtain spiritual freedom and become one with God. Morrisseau found that the teachings of this religion paralleled his own spiritual ideas that were inspired by his Anishnaabe heritage. Followers of Eckankar believe that all nature has a single soul that is free to travel as light in order to seek spiritual enlightenment. Morrisseau's interpretations of Eckankar beliefs are illustrated through the abstract figures that float freely within the canvas of many of the artworks he painted during the 1970s.



A Message From Sherry Brydson

From the first time I saw Norval Morrisseau's work, a large and powerful mural at the Indians of Canada pavilion at Montreal's Expo 67, I have been in awe of his genius. In combining shamanistic knowledge and traditions with no-holds-barred storytelling and his own unique style, he has achieved the stature of a Picasso or a Dali.

In establishing this collection, Westerkirk Works of Art aims to celebrate and to share Norval Morrisseau's works, and through them his ideas about family, spirituality, the relationship of man with nature and the greatness of spirit that is the foundation of religious faith.

Norval Morrisseau was a contemporary genius whose work is destined to provoke thought, knowledge and healing for centuries to come. He was truly a National Treasure and a man for all time, and it is our great pleasure and privilege to share his works through this exhibition.

We are thrilled to have the interest and support of some of Norval's family members, in attendance at the opening of this exhibition. We thank them for making the long journey from Keewaywin and for giving so generously of their time to share their memories of their father.

Elmwood Spa

Canada's Favourite Urban Oasis

'The Elmwood' is a Toronto Heritage building built in 1889 at 18 Elm Street. It was the original home of YWCA Toronto, until the 1950's. By inviting new guests into the spa to enjoy the Morrisseau exhibition, the spa hopes to continue to build awareness and support for the new YWCA Elm Centre and Irma Brydson Place, an \$80 million affordable and supportive housing development on Elm Street. The YWCA Elm Centre will provide 300 new homes for families, with 50 specifically for families of Aboriginal ancestry.

With more space than any other day spa in the region, Elmwood Spa is a complete wellness destination that caters to women and men who want stress relief and relaxation in a serene atmosphere. It is an ideal place to gather with friends, to celebrate milestones, to reconnect with a loved one, or to use as one's own destination for stress relief and self-renewal.

elmwoodspa.com



As an organization committed to women-focused services, YWCA Toronto has provided a range of housing options for women since 1873. A safe, affordable and supportive place to live is a priority for women, particularly young mothers, older women or women with special needs such as mental health or addiction issues.

With more than 70,000 Toronto families on the waiting list for a home they can afford, and more than half of these being women-led families, a women-focused housing program such as the YWCA Elm Centre is greatly needed. It will provide greater opportunity for programmatic focus and the building of a safe and supportive environment - features that increase the effectiveness and stability of communal life.

Donations welcome
ywcatoronto.org

Paintings included in the Copper Thunderbird Exhibition

Alkaleids, n.d
acrylic on canvas
21 x 32 inches

**Artist Speaks to
Moose Spirit, c.1970's**
acrylic on canvas
51 x 56.5 inches

Astral Figures, 1980
acrylic on canvas
19 x 35 inches

Balance of Nature, 1975
acrylic on canvas
39.5 x 62 inches

Battle Between Thunder, 1975
acrylic on canvas
19.5 x 35 inches

Catchers of the Universe, 1978
acrylic on canvas
51 x 70 inches

Energy Shaman, 1977
acrylic on canvas
21 x 30.5 inches

Family of Birds and Fish, n.d
acrylic on canvas
24 x 48 inches

Family of Loons, 1979
acrylic on canvas
31 x 23 inches

Fish and Loon, 1974
acrylic on canvas
20 x 32 inches

Flowers of Life, 1972
acrylic on canvas
30 x 19 inches

**Great Horned Medicine
Snake, 1960-1964**
acrylic on millboard
54 x 38.5 inches

**In Honour of Ojibway
Family, 1996**
acrylic on canvas
37.5 x 78

Inorganics, 1977
acrylic on canvas
26 x 29.5 inches

**Interdependence of
All Things, c.1970's**
acrylic on canvas
27 x 42 inches
Loon Diving, 1993-1994
marker on paper
40 x 31.5 inches

Moose, n.d
acrylic on canvas
30 x 44 inches

Ojibway Family Life, 1978
acrylic on canvas
50 x 87 inches

**Ojibway Family Under
the Tree of Life, 1978**
acrylic on canvas
93 x 57 inches

**Petroglyph Thunderbirds,
c.1970's**
acrylic on canvas
57 x 52 inches

**Sacred Fish Shaman Ride,
c.1970's**
acrylic on canvas
25 x 17 inches

Salmon, 1976
acrylic on canvas
18.5 x 25.5 inches

Salmon Spawn, 1975
acrylic on canvas
32 x 22.5 inches

Shamen Face Evil, 1979
acrylic on canvas
23 x 30 inches

Shaking Tent Vision, 1976
acrylic on canvas
54 x 58.75 inches

Shaman, c.1970's
acrylic on canvas
25 x 31 inches

Shaman, c.1980's
acrylic on canvas
52 x 44.5 inches

Spirit Power, c.1960's
acrylic on paper
27 x 37 inches

Spirits Within, 1976
acrylic on canvas
46.5 x 43 inches
Tales of the Story Tree, 1978
acrylic on canvas
78.5 x 52 inches

**The Legend Becomes Real for
the Child, c.1970's**
acrylic on canvas
41 x 54 inches

**The Sacred Bear Ancestral
Figure, c.1970's**
acrylic on paper
33 x 42 inches

**The Stories I Learned on my
Travels, 1984**
acrylic on canvas
63 x 63 inches

Three Loons I, c.1960's
acrylic on paper
25 x 22.5 inches

Three Loons II, c.1960's
acrylic on paper
22 x 25.5 inches

Thunderbird, c.1960's
acrylic on birchbark
18.5 x 16 inches

Thunderbird, 1977
acrylic on canvas
58 x 55.5 inches

Totem Bear, c.1960's
acrylic on board
56 x 29 inches

Thunderbirds, 1970
acrylic on canvas
27 x 30 inches

Turtle, c.1960's
acrylic on birchbark
16 x 16 inches

Wasakajack, 1977
acrylic on canvas
25 x 22 inches

Wasakajak, 1976
acrylic on canvas
55.5 x 53 inches

Elmwood Spa elmwoodspa.com | 416.977.6751

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