

**NEW** Great Canadian Trash Sure

A "Morriseau" at an Ontario Country Auction

Orig. masonite - Size - 64 x 95 cm
Found - rural Ontario

People are still at it, consigners, auctioneers, and buyers...

Dealing in fake Morrisseaus, that is...

Typical is this work purported to be a Morriseau - the auctioneer announced it as a "Morriseau" and sold it as such at a remote rural country auction.

But was it?

Ask yourself, if the same week that genuine Morrisseaus were fetching \$8 to 12,000 at fine art auctions in downtown Toronto, why would a consigner want to park his "Morriseau" at a remote country auction?

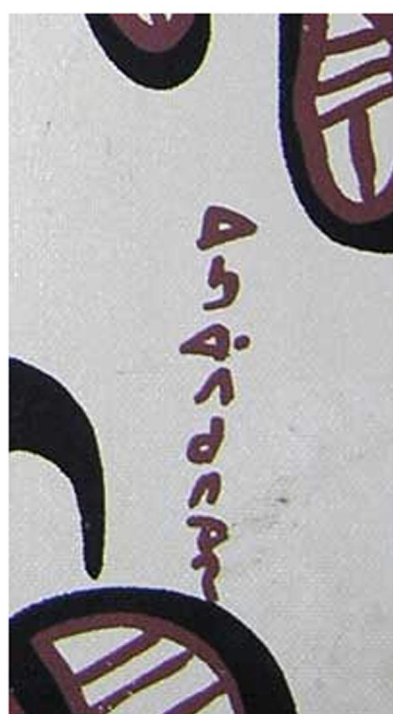
Why would anyone with a genuine work of a major Canadian artist, at any time, try to sell his masterpiece at a remote location where the money ain't, and neither is the knowledge, among buyers or auctioneers... And there's your answer...

Fakes tend to home in on places where the smarts ain't. Hoping to catch a live one. If you ever do get a valuable genuine work of art in a remote auction consider yourself lucky.

Country auctioneers are not fine art experts. Hell their expertise is whippletrees, hooked rugs, and carnival glass. It's easy to slip fakes past them.

And they have no time to research fine art even if they wanted to. And many prefer to smile when a fake waltzes in the door. To them it's buyer, not auctioneer, beware when we're all trying to make a buck.

But people who know they have a real master work don't seem to want to sell it in backwater auctions where few people will know about it. They want maximum publicity to provoke the most interest and bring in the big bucks from people who are looking for real works of art.



This work was bought by a fan of Morriseau who told us he owned another one as well. Did he get a deal at \$400? He suggested in five years it'll grow humongously in value... He also allowed that he met the consignor at the auction!!! Who had told him he had bought the "Morriseau" for \$2,000 and was taking a real bath letting a genuine work by Morriseau go for \$400. Especially, we might add, after all the additional art work he had to put out... So why, you may ask, was he letting it go, and at a remote auction at that, if

he wanted to recoup his investment?

But besides showing up at a remote auction, and the cheap price - few people even at the country auction thought the painting was a bargain - there are other problems with this piece.

It's on a thick chunk of masonite, not a medium that one encounters with Morriseau, with no writing on the back explaining this oddity or its origin. Nor titling, nor Norval's signature.

The signature on the front is another, very big, problem. Those are the syllabics of Norval's name but Norval would not - and neither would you with your signature - sign his like that or in that place - weirdly placed and unartistically presented. *Right* a genuine uncramped original Morriseau signature.

Note how someone - clearly an unartistic klutz - who obviously is unaccustomed to signing that name, starts boldly in a place, and with a size of letter, he thinks will fit, then starts to panic when he sees he's running out space, and cramps his letters closer together and makes them smaller. Then bangs the last letter up against the image.

Study Norval's name on genuine works. His signature is always well distributed however he displays it and does not ram up, clumsily, against his images.

Let's not get into the image. Compare its elements, their distribution, and grace with genuine Morrisseaus.



Another original Morriseau signature.

Just note the difference in the third letter in the three signatures. Norval's are stretched vertically, and compressed horizontally. The other letter is starkly different, being vertically compressed and dramatically pointing out - ooops - stretched to the left.

In letter 2, after the down stroke, Norval goes down and hooks up at the end; the other one goes up and slides off at the end.

In letter 4, Norval's leans forward or has an advance stance and is sharply pointed, whereas the other leans back and is round topped.

Norval's backwards 6 leans forward, the other backward.

Norval's letter 5 have a strongly horizontal starting line; the other is decidedly sloped down.

Norval's question mark hooks to a sharp bend down, the other a rounded bend down.

When so many letters are different we must assume a different hand, than Norval's, made them.



After the auction, the babble among a couple of dealers was that they had seen this "Morriseau" before, but without the signature...

Morriseau and Maud Lewis are among the most popular artists currently being faked on the Canadian fine art scene.

To the uninitiated they fall into the "primitive" category of art, so amateur repro artists home in on them because unsophisticated buyers can't tell their fakes apart from the real primitives...

Small Maud Lewis panels routinely sell for \$5-6,000. A Maud Lewis looks like it can be painted in a few minutes by a skilled artist, so bogus forgers are at it, hoping to cash in on her popularity.

But the one *left* failed to get even a minimum bid at a 2008 Toronto fine art auction.

Wonder why?

Will it show up at a "straw hat" auctioneer, out west, next?

All About Fake Morrisseaus 1

Fish Spirit 1970, A Genuine Norval Morrisseau

The master at work, and at the peak of his form in drawing, composition, placement of all the elements, and palette control.

A Fake Morrisseau!

Can You Believe It?
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School of Morrisseau:
Some fakes are unintentional; Norval had followers/students in the 1970s who wanted to learn "how a pro does it."

Like art teachers, from times immemorial, Norval might show a young artist how to start and design a picture; the beginner would finish it as best he could. The result was a "Morrisseau," passing on his way of expressing his artistic creativity, though these were never intended to cheat or fool anyone.

But these "instructional knock offs" don't really look like a real Morrisseau, once you've studied a few. (Below, purported to be a genuine Morrisseau, Shaman from 1976. The signature certainly looks totally authentic in every way.)

Later, when Norval's work started to attract good prices, some of these "school of Morrisseau" paintings began to appear with Norval's name tacked on. But these signatures don't look like Norval's either. Many are gross distortions even to the uninitiated.

Norval's simple painting style soon attracted imitators, artists who thought he was on to something, and also art forgers and unscrupulous art sellers. Fakes began to show up regularly at some Toronto auctions. But many of the fakes become easy to spot, and tell apart from Norval's own work.

Telltale Signs: What to watch for: Norval's figures are always extremely graceful, and "fluid looking." Neither the figures or the overall composition are blocky or awkward in presentation anywhere on the canvas. The faces - note the lips - of people are graceful, almost feminine, in design and execution, very pleasant to look at. The figures are commonly outlined with thick black borders.

Norval also fills the canvas with his composition; he does not leave huge empty borders or undeveloped areas.

There is also a unified symmetry to his composition, like *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1977, below, from Norval's high period, the 1970s.

Norval's Bad Days: Norval had more than his fair share of bad days, when his lifestyle wreaked havoc with his health, his relationships, and his art.

Did he paint when he was "down"? You can't keep a good painter down. No doubt he painted then too. How well would his paintings turn out at those time? Probably not great, some probably distinctly awful. Would Norval want those around? Quite obviously not. But others, who could only see money, when they looked at Norval, would have squinted these away after having Norval sign them. Or perhaps a sub contractor.

How many of these bad canvases are out there? Probably more than a few. And more are turning up as Norval's fame and prices are going up.

Just like every Group of Seven chicken scratch in pencil or ink is coming out of the woodwork, hoping to make a quick buck for someone, so anything Norval ever did - and lots he didn't - is appearing at auctions.

It is up to you to protect yourself and your hard-earned money from buying a bogus or inferior work.

Remember art auctions offer you no protection from forgeries. Read the fine print in their catalogues and online contracts. Once you've paid, there are no returns, even if you've bought a fake.

So familiarize yourself with his style, and his signature, to protect your investment...

Norval's Signature: You Pick the Fake!!!

Ask yourself... How much has your signature changed over the years? Besides just getting more sloppy as time passes? Does the tilt or shape of your letters suddenly change, markedly, from alimony cheque to alimony cheque? Or does it not really vary much through time unless you decide on a sudden makeover, you know to go along with your Lexus, or impress your new mistress?

To artists, their signature is important to establish and maintain. It's part of who they are, and identifies the paintings they sell. Art buyers would be disturbed to see paintings, ostensibly by the same artist, where the signature varies considerably.

So artists don't fool with their copyright signature, unless they do it when they're high on dope, or drunk, which is sometimes the lot of creative spirits, when they see only gloom ahead... Yes, and they paint, and sign paintings, in that disoriented state...

Right, is the signature on a painting the McMichaels bought from Norval in 1979. It was not one of Norval's better signatures... But conforms pretty well to what we say below.

Compare the last two symbols, above, on each of his signatures, four of which are taken from bona fide Norval canvases.

Note how - on four signatures - the droopy pointer of the "male symbol" aims off to the left, unerringly at the same angle. And doesn't it look like Norval started it at the tip, moved right, and then curled down around, and up, all in a single motion? On two of these characters, above, it looks like a two stroke production - why would Norval depart from the other certified way in making this symbol in his signatures?

The tail on the last "?" also unerringly trails off at the 5:30 position. Which is pretty amazing when you consider that Norval walked up to each canvas on separate occasions yet drew the tail of the last symbol at exactly the same angle each time.

And lest you quibble about the yellow signature, remember it has been straightened/tilted to fit this page. Check it out on the big painting on page 1, and you'll see that Norval put in the exact same angles on the symbols when he signed off...

If you're still confused, look at the "backward six" in the middle of the signature. Norval's are xerox copies of each other, done the same way you write your own name, quickly, without thinking, with a convincing motion, finishing at the same angle.

The fake one (on tan) was done thoughtfully, with workmanlike precision, by a klutz who did an "a" first then added a second vertical stroke... And the red "d" is the only one which is decidedly top heavy, not thin pointed like all the others, suggesting a completely different mechanical approach to making that letter.

And look at the second symbol, the "sickle." Norval's always tails off as an upstroke, not down, like on the two fake ones.

Now look at some of the other letters in this signature and see how the forger went over some letters twice - to make sure he got them right - and how he made the central "tipi" look more like a two-stroke or round-topped "n" than a Norval inverted "v."

Norval is also pretty consistent in where he places the dot on the triangle, virtually dead centre, and out the same distance each time. And his "base line" angles up pretty convincingly to the left, and isn't horizontal at all, like in the fakes. The tan one is a pretty wild overall copy; the red one not that much better.

The red one may be a new fake - we think... Read on.

Who Painted This? A pupil of Morrisseau's, an art student on a lark, or a devious forger?

No Back-up! There was no signature on the back of the canvas, no copyright, no year, and no title, unlike those often found on the back of Norval's known works. (See published examples, page 1)

And that's often important... Here's why.

Norval was not just a pretty picture painter like AY Jackson, or Cornelius Krieghoff, or Lawren Harris; he was a story-teller too! He used his paintings to tell tales, or express spiritual truths, about the heritage of his tribe. (That's why his people were at first angry with him - for publicizing clan secrets. Hey, have you ever heard of a farmer yelling at AY for distorting his barn so untruthfully?)

So to Norval a title on a canvas was important because he wanted to do more than paint one-dimensional souvenir art, like Krieghoff, and he did not set out to pursue a career in art as a preferred way to make a living - read money - like white painters like Bateman or Keirstead or Romance.

Norval started painting because he wanted to express the eternal spiritual truths of his culture. He wanted to speak, not paint, at first. He became a lonely artist, isolated in the remote backwoods of Northern Ontario, about the worst place in Canada to start an "art business." But that wasn't Norval's intention, after all.

That is why his titles are so important - they identify the mystical beliefs Norval is trying to convey on canvas for the uninitiated

Making money from/through his art came later, for Norval, when an entrepreneur, who made his living doing that, engaged Norval to do the same.

Norval's paintings - originally made for himself - were destined, later, not for his own people but for white people, outside his community, who would not understand what he was painting. His titles were meant to bridge the gap of cross cultural ignorance.

So Norval, why didn't you give us a title for this canvas? Without it we can't understand what you are saying, what we are to make of this work!

You obviously had something specific in mind when you painted this. It is a most intriguing juxtaposition of images to say the least. But what was it? What exactly is going on here?

You spent all the money on this huge canvas, spent all this time thinking this up, executing it, all the paint it cost you, the effort - and you forgot to sign off on the back? And what about your one liner name to clarify things for us non-Indians?

Oh! OK. I get it. It's not your work you say.... Sure, you say, you didn't always sign all your canvases. But that was on little ones; so those are out there, without name or title. But on the huge ones, you say, you wouldn't forget - as best as you can remember...

Now it all starts to make some sense...

It's your money... You decide... Remember, you are its only safety net. Everyone else just wants to make money by turning art over and over, to new - uninitiated - neophyte buyers...

This huge canvas, some 4 x 5 feet, was recently sold at a public auction by a prestigious Toronto art auction house.

Could this be a fake? Here's why we wonder...

The signature (red above and right) is not a convincing match for others known to be by Norval. At least four of the letters are out of line with those from real Norval signatures. One, OK; two, hmmm; three, no way José; four, not with my money! See detail below.

The drawing composition is completely off centre, giving a great feeling of discomfort because of a tight margin on the left and too much space left on the right. How could you Norval? (Compare this with the design positioning by Norval in his other canvases published here and see what we mean.)

The colour design is off substantially, the red bar splitting this canvas vertically - without a reason - in a way that destabilizes the composition and upsets the viewer. It is doubtful that this would come from the artistic sensibility of a master in the use of colour like Norval. (He did this once for his famous Time magazine cover below to suggest racial divides that separate White Men from the Red. But he masterfully integrated the colour split artistically and thematically so it works beautifully here whereas left, it doesn't at all. And that canvas also has no title, or explanation, etc. on the back.)

The internal embellishments on the figures are minimal, awkward, haphazardly placed, and indifferently arranged.

There is a lack of grace in the figures. The man on the left looks like he has a broken neck.

There is a poor and simplistic execution of a major animal figure. Norval would not leave a large animal body like this without embellishing it with his x-ray technique. Compare it to other animal figures Norval has integrated into his other works.

The canvas looks like someone was keen on working on some parts, then suddenly lost interest in others. Obviously a student of Morrisseau's or a lackadaisical forger, or just an art student who did this for a lark.

Remember, copying the work of master's has been going on for centuries. Even master painters like Krieghoff and Berczy painted copies of masters for practice.

So was this the work of an awed art student, doing homage to a painting hero?

Or do artists have bad days?

Sorry! I draw a blank here...

Will the back of this canvas have to be the last word on this work by Norval?

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Test Your Skill - Is this Norval's Work?

Is this Norval's signature?

Open up a second page with Norval's first page of his genuine art and compare the figures, the spacing, the arrangement, execution, and artistic presentation.. Or was Norval constipated when he did it?

Do you really believe Norval created this work?

Where are Norval's heavy black outlines of the figures?

Would Norval create an awkwardly standing figure like this with oddly shaped and attached arms?

Were those mouths and lips done by Norval?

Was this just Norval on a bad day?

Or did a forger or clumsy student of Norval's try to copy some of Norval's techniques - badly - and do this?

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So familiarize yourself with his style, and his signature, to protect your investment...

Are you ready to gamble? It's your money... And art auctioneers will offer you no guarantees once you have paid...

**Norval Morrisseau - Copper Thunderbird - 3**[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#)**All About Fake Morrisseaus 2**

Indian art has attracted lots more attention since Norval Morrisseau has belatedly been recognized by the art glitterati in Ottawa.

The public hunger for a work of art from a man they had never heard of before has brought lots of Norval's old works out of the woodwork from all the little shacks and houses of northern Ontario where he once sold them for five or ten bucks.

With his skyrocketing prices, art dealers have begun buying up canvases they only had derision for before.

But hey, if one can make a buck, what the heck...

With so many conflicting interests the unwary buyer can fall victim to all kinds of pitfalls.

Below, how to evaluate what you are thinking of buying...

NOTE: Norval Morrisseau, and his long-time agent Gabor Vadas, hit Toronto in the fall of 2007 - their mission: root out the fakes...

We have seen fake Morrisseaus turn up at auctions in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal as well as on eBay.

Wherever the word has gone out that Norval Morrisseau is a bankable Canadian artist whose prices are climbing rapidly, can the forgeries be far behind?

"They're back. It's another invasion of the fake Norval Morrisseaus. For years, canvases allegedly done by the great Ojibwa artist have been turning up in galleries and at auction -- canvases which the artist, through his business manager and friend Gabor Vadas, insists are bogus." (Val Ross, Globe & Mail)

"As prices for Morrisseau works rise, so do the number of forgeries in the market. They are a concern not only because of fraud, but because a flood of fake paintings devalues the true works of an artist and diminishes the amount of money he receives for his work." (Grania Litwin, Victoria Times Colonist)

Offering sage advice to buyers of any items at auction cautions Donald McLean of Waddington's Auctioneers, "Technically any auction, anywhere, the buyer is on their own. When you are buying at auction, you are required to do your own checking as well." (Globe & Mail interview)

Artist with Parkinson's rails against fakers who'd steal his life's work**By Mike Strobel -- Sun Media (October 24, 2007)**

Ever since Norval Morrisseau had his one man show at Canada's National Gallery and the McMichael Gallery of Art (2006-07) art bearing his name has been showing up at auctions all over the place.

The real ones and the fakes mixed in... So how can you tell them apart?

The pitfalls are many, not the least of which are art dealers, of which there are many, and all trying to support their wives, their mistresses, their illegitimate children, and still make those payments on their Bentley.

Maybe Norval can help...

So, how do you, a beginner, protect yourself from buying a fake?

First you can't trust the auction houses. They haven't got a clue. They sell thousands of paintings, sketches, and prints a year. They can't possibly verify each and every one. They'd spend all their time researching instead of selling, and would go belly up. So they rely on the people who bring the art in to tell them what it is. "I got it from a gallery who told me they got it from Morrisseau himself. I can't remember the gallery or who. It was a long time ago. But it looks like a Morrisseau to me..." Hmmmmhh...

The auction house employee can't spend hours sleuthing out the proof. He gets hundreds of these things a month. He makes his money selling not researching. Their interest is selling lots; you only care to buy one. The two interests don't combine to a buyer's advantage...

So the auction house takes the consignors word, as far as it goes...

But they're of little or no help to you when you spend your money. Hey, they don't want to put you off helping their bottom line...

Ask probing questions, but it won't get you very far most times. When we asked one reputable auctioneer if the antique McKenney and Hall print was really from the 1833 edition, as was printed on the front, or a later repro, he replied "I couldn't promise you that. We didn't have the back off. All I can say is if you don't trust it don't bid on it." We didn't...

Good advice from a reputable auctioneer.

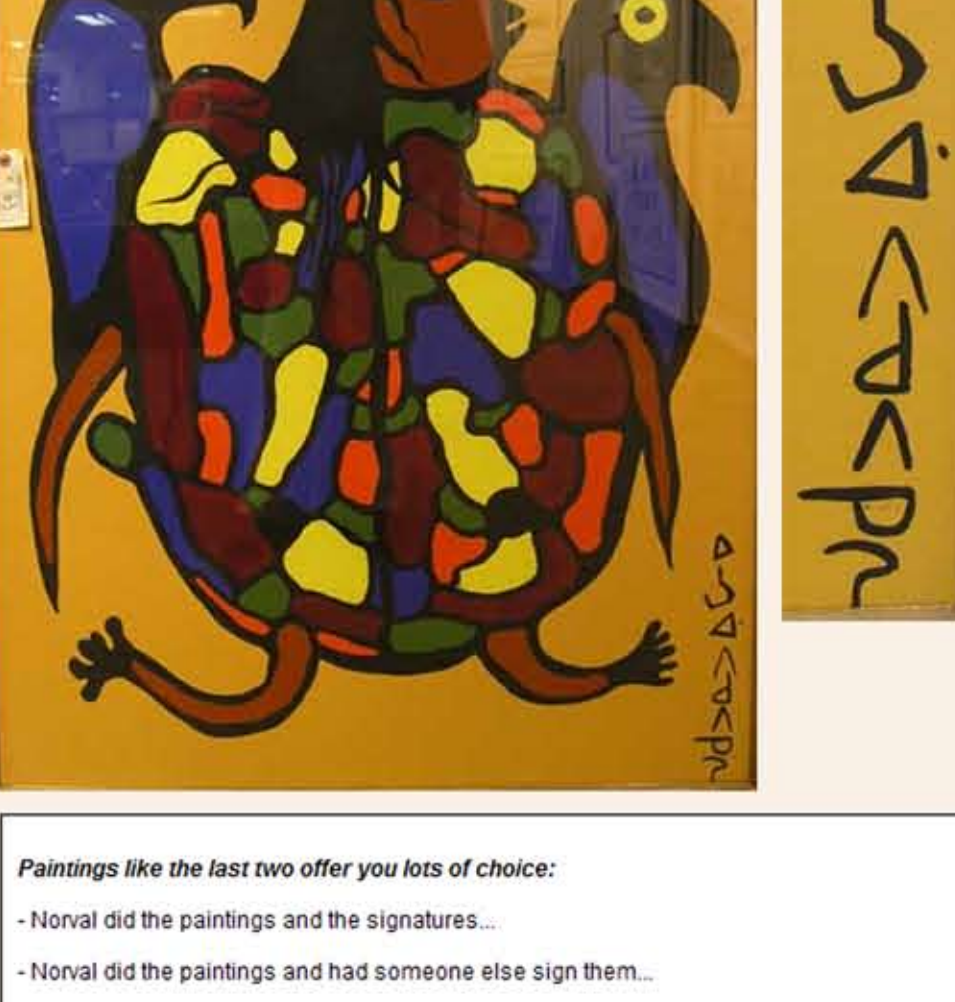
If you yourself can't verify its authenticity, for yourself, don't buy it...

Relying on others will, most times, cost you money and heartache...

But when six Morrisseaus show up everyone comes out...

They look them over, silently, they turn them over and look at the back; nobody says much. More than one smirks... They don't want to share what they know or what they suspect. But hey, if they go cheap...

Left is a real Morrisseau from his early period, probably sixties. It's his design, his artistic execution, the brown paper he used then. Similar ones, from the same period, were in the recent one man show. And the signature looks good. There's one more good thing about it...



It's a wreck...

When Bad is Good...

There are many horizontal bends and cracks across the image. Not only the paper, but the paint, has broken in places along the folds. It has clearly been very badly rolled up and stored for a long time by someone careless.

Probably by someone who hated Morrisseaus, until he became famous, and his prices shot up. Hmmmm... Better go up the attic and unroll that damn thing I got years ago...

So, bad can be good. No forger or faker would so damage his chances of selling his fake for a good price by putting it in that condition.

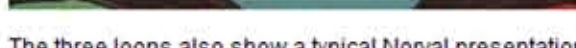
But the owner of a real Morrisseau would. And this one patently is...

Left is a typical run-of-the-mill Morrisseau, of which he did many in the 1970s. It has a good signature; it has Norval's usual smeary inscription on the back.

Also, the canvas backing is off-white, and dirty. And the front shows creasing from having been rolled at various times in its life. It looks its age...

Everything points to a genuine, if ordinary and not very inspired, work Norval did in the 1970s.

This one didn't take him long to do. He probably did it while waiting for the lightning of inspiration to strike him.



The three loons also show a typical Norval presentation.

Again, as expected, the canvas back is old, scuffed and somewhat dirty. The front painted surface shows signs of wear. It's clearly "been around," from before Norval became bankable, from before forgers started taking a lively interest in Norval's art. So once again, with the grime and wear, bad is good...

Another plus is the signature. It has Norval's typical spacing, execution, and sizing. Better yet, his signature is written backwards and maintains its integrity. Only the original writer could possibly get away with that. And no forger would even try...

So the loons is another Morrisseau, but a minimal one, coming out of storage now because prices are going up and one can always use an extra buck if we send this to auction...



The bear is a better Morrisseau that has his trademark designs and is executed with his sense of artistic control. And the signature - whoops - is surely his too...

Which brings us to the next one...

When Good is Bad...

This is the cleanest, neatest, newest canvas of what is claimed to be a Morrisseau, we've ever seen. The canvas back is unsigned and sparkling white and unmarked, like it was made last week. Wonder if it was?

And the front is equally totally spotless and uncreased.

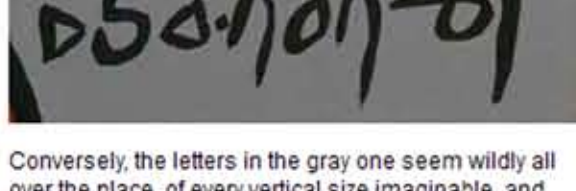
The stark newness, coupled with the detailed precision of the painting is troubling, as it would have had to come from the 1980s, before Norval's Parkinson made his brush too wobbly to do this kind of rock steady detailed work...

Where's the age burn? Where has it been for the last fifteen to twenty years, to be so unsullied in all that time...? And out in the open on that stretcher...?

The signature also gives us real problems when compared to the one below from a \$15,000 Morrisseau.



There is a controlled sizing and spacing on the letters of the green signature that you can see a hundred times on Norval's canvases.



Conversely, the letters in the gray one seem wildly all over the place, of every vertical size imaginable, and have the tightest compression of the letters we have ever seen on any Morrisseau signature. It's as if the signer began, then started to panic that he was going to run out of space with a signature he wasn't used to parsing into a restricted space, like a person is used to doing with his own.

One wonders, wouldn't Norval have foreseen the problem and just arced his signature, where there's lots of room, along the lower neck of the bird like he often likes to do?

You're on your own with your money on this one.

You'll see it again; a dealer bought it and will be selling it for big bucks, to an unwary buyer, as a guess what? One thing's for certain. He'll be hyping it as "in extremely fine, original condition." Which it is, of course... But is it a Morrisseau?

Which brings us to the last one.

Fat, ugly, a graceless, and gross departure from Norval's usual style, and content, and the signature is a very mannered, workmanlike execution of what someone thought Norval's signature is supposed to be, assembled like scorable letters. Certainly not from the heart... Make that Norval's heart...

You compare the last two. Do you think the same artist painted both? Did both signatures?

The last one too, you'll see again. A dealer will sell it somewhere, to someone, as a Norval Morrisseau. Let's hope they will love it for what it is, and, like a wedding diamond, not count on recouping - from a knowledgeable buyer - even a fraction of what you paid when your time comes for selling it off...

Don't count on passing this off as Norval on a bad day...

But then what do I know...?

Paintings like the last two offer you lots of choice:

- Norval did the paintings and the signatures...
- Norval did the paintings and had someone else sign them...
- Norval directed a student to try his hand at both a Morrisseau painting and signature...
- Norval was nowhere in the province when they were painted and signed...

As for me, I'd rather spend my money on a Bentley, and watch it rust C notes daily, down the drain on my drive...

Hey, it's not doing its job in the garage...