

NORVAL MORRISSEAU: SHAMAN ARTIST

IAIA MUSEUM
108 CATHEDRAL PLACE, SANTA FE

This important retrospective was the National Gallery of Canada's first solo exhibition of a First Nations artist in its hundred and twenty-seven-year history—until now, it has reserved solo shows for dead European masters the likes of Renoir and Picasso. In an art world that classifies indigenous work as “craft” and relegates it to anthropology museums, this show symbolically recognizes the paintings of Norval Morrisseau (Ojibwe) as fine art on the level of those European masters. Fortunately, this exhibition has stopped in Santa Fe en route to the New York branch of the National Museum of the American Indian, part of the Smithsonian.

What makes Morrisseau a master is not the somewhat crude way he applies paint to canvas. Using acrylic colors straight out of the tub, he paints with fingers or wide brushes at a speed that has allowed him to be greatly prolific—some 10,000 works are said to exist, along with numerous fakes, since his style is easily copied. However, those colors pull the viewer into the fascinating parallel universe that Morrisseau inhabits, where humans shapeshift into animal and spirit forms.

Morrisseau's grandfather initiated him into the ways of the shaman through ritual, storytelling, and vision quests. The artist's representation of Ojibwe legends breaks two taboos: first, of disclosing Native secrets; second, of altering them in his reinterpretation. Confronting these taboos and others (his famed erotic imagery is all but absent from the show) gives his paintings an edgy, voodooesque quality of extraordinary power.

Another key to that power is his use of heavy black lines that swell and diminish in a continuous gesture, defining forms and connecting them, creating a sense of compositional and metaphorical unity. Heavy lines are an Ojibwe technique that Morrisseau reinvents, portraying humans in cartoony caricature with buggy yellow eyes, beaked noses, and pincer-like lips. Morrisseau's design elements distill the vocabulary and motifs of First Nations' art and translate them into a unique contemporary expression.



Norval Morrisseau, *Artist And Shaman Between Two Worlds*, acrylic on canvas, 69½" x 112", c. 1980

This show, which spans the years 1958 to 2002, traces the evolution of Morrisseau's style. In the early days he experimented with materials such as gouache and oil paint on surfaces like birchbark and stone. We see his lines grow from thin to thick and color areas resolve from messy to clear. By the 1966 piece *Thunderbird and Snake*, his style is already a signature, complete with the bugged eyes and his “X-ray vision” inside bodies. However, his palette is restricted to earth tones through the sixties and early seventies, as shown in a series of portraits of animal spirits and Catholic icons. The 1974 piece *Indian Jesus Christ* depicts a crucified Indian whose fingerless hands are open wounds that echo his wild eyes, serving both to criticize the white man's treatment of the Indian and reveal Morrisseau's own tormented embrace of Christianity.

When the artist suffered from a life-threatening illness at age nineteen, a medicine woman revived him with a ceremony in which she gave him the powerful name “Copper Thunderbird.” *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, a six-panel piece from 1977, is a progressive portrait of the artist's

transformation into a thunderbird. The first panel shows the torso of a copper-skinned man surrounded by small birds. He sprouts first one wing and then the other, then talons for feet, growing ever more psychedelic until the last panel is a thunderbird resplendent in turquoise and a panoply of jeweled colors, with the smaller birds hidden under its wings and absorbed as eyes.

During the eighties, Morrisseau settled on acrylic on canvas and incorporated ever-brighter colors into his work. But this was a period of great personal turmoil, with reports surfacing that he was living on the streets of Toronto, trading paintings for bottles of booze. Only one piece from this decade is included, *Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds*, in which a bird sprouts from the head of the artist, whose multicolored eyes betray an inner torment also evoked by random streaks of blue and pink in the background and the appearance of ghostly hooded figures.

In the nineties, Morrisseau returned to the studio, creating the most striking paintings of his career in intensely bright, almost neon colors. The exhibition culminates in the circa 1994 masterwork *Observations of the Astral World*, which is nearly eight by seventeen feet. Humans morph into birds and fish fly, as two worlds of beings meet before a tree of life. The juxtaposition of electric colors makes the painting pulse and vibrate, playing tricks on your eyes, sucking you into the world of trance and vision.

Don't miss the exhibition's 1974 film, which offers a glimpse into a life that—despite Morrisseau's early success—has been no picnic. The artist has fought battles with TB, alcoholism, and mental illness. He was badly burned in a hotel fire, after which he had a vision of Jesus and converted to Christianity. Although his wife Harriet bore him seven children, he was largely absent from his family. Morrisseau, now seventy-five, lives in fragile health in an assisted living facility.

Clearly, however, art has been a great source of strength and personal redemption for him. The vibrant colors of his later pieces impart a sense of spiritual joy. If a shaman is an intermediary between the material and spiritual world, then Norval Morrisseau is a shaman through the act of painting. As he wrote, “I say to the shaman, ‘I too came into this world to beautify the world with color.’”

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