

Norval Morrisseau, our copper thunderbird

The supreme visionary left a lasting legacy, writes the man who curated a major 2006 retrospective

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As I write this tribute to one of Canada's greatest indigenous artists, Ottawa is engulfed in the swirling white of a winter storm. Gazing out of the window, the sight is the antithesis of the world according to Norval Morrisseau. His canvases carried the brightest and most intense combinations of colour imaginable. To stand in front of an immense Morrisseau painting is to encounter his brilliant world as the colours begin to interact with one another and animate the figures and beings that inhabit this vibrant space. Morrisseau would enclose these energetic arrangements of incandescent yellow, sky blue, deep crimson, searing red, dazzling orange, apple green and electric purple within a sinewy black line which would unravel itself into a spirit being of the under, upper or middle worlds of the Anishinabek (Ojibway people).

Norval died in Toronto on Dec. 4. No longer is he battling the Parkinson's disease that imprisoned him within his own body. His soul is free to travel the astral worlds depicted in his later paintings, and the lakes and streams of Northern Ontario where he was born and raised. The eldest of five boys, Norval grew up with his maternal grandparents, Moses (Potan) and Vernique Nanakonagos, on the Sand Point Reserve near Lake Nipigon. Primarily self-taught, his art is as much the product of his vivid imagination as it is the studied and measured approach to his visual traditions, and those he admired from other cultures around the world.

Morrisseau's paintings astonish viewers who can only grasp at their content. The viewer is not required to possess the knowledge of the artist in order to appreciate his work. Norval's paintings communicate passion for his culture – a figure in transformation between human and animal states, a human figure endowed with the most fantastic headdress, a schematic representation of a ritual ceremony, or a self-portrait as a thunderbird. All of these may co-exist within the boundaries of a single work or reside alone as an icon to be contemplated for a moment within the matrix of the thousands of works he bestowed upon us – brought down, as he would say, from the “House of Invention.”

We claim Copper Thunderbird as one of our own because he first claimed us – aboriginal peoples with rich heritages to nurture and uphold. He was devoted to his people, the Anishinabek. Morrisseau's debut exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in 1962 was the first show in Toronto dedicated to a first-nations artist. Every painting in the exhibition sold quickly and he received much critical acclaim which garnered him a feature in Time magazine.

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In 1965, he wrote and illustrated a book entitled *Legends of My People, The Great Ojibway*. This was a collection of oral histories that he had gathered over the years from his grandfather and others who related them to him. Through his paintings and drawings some of the principal agents of this living history became core elements in his visual retellings. Beings from the underworld, such as the great underwater lynx, and thunderbirds from the upperworlds reappear throughout his work.

Morriseau's art has been extensively collected by public galleries across Canada. He is renowned for his innovation and skill as a colourist, and from the beginning he considered himself a great artist, regardless of economic measures of success.

During his 50 years of creative output, Morriseau was recognized at the highest levels in Canada. His many awards included the Centennial Medal, membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, the Order of Canada and several honorary doctoral degrees. He has been honoured and esteemed by his own people; most recently, he was recognized with a National Aboriginal Lifetime Achievement Award for his important work.

While remembering Morriseau at a recent event, friend and colleague Barry Ace related a story that perfectly evokes the charisma and character of Copper Thunderbird. Wanting to see his paintings in the collection of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development – the arm of the government that administrates the lives of “Indians” in Canada – Norval called Ace, who was then curator of the Indian art collection, for an appointment. Morriseau arrived in the lobby of the government building looking resplendent in an outfit befitting the character of such an eccentric and life-loving man. His long hair, bear-claw necklace, tall staff topped with an eagle head, a dangling bear paw and deer hooves attached near the bottom, are the accoutrements only Morriseau would wear. The “office-numbered” workers barely took notice. So Norval strode to a central area amid the to-and-fro of the government employees and proceeded to pound his great staff on the floor. The deer hooves rattled with each strike and all the activity around him came to a halt. Turning in a circle, he glared and then bellowed. “Now I've got your attention!”

In 2006, I had the privilege of curating a retrospective of Morriseau's work for the National Gallery of Canada. Much was made of the fact that, in its 126-year history, the gallery had never presented a solo exhibition of a first-nations artist. Morriseau may have been breaking new ground, but it was his art that would be remembered by all those who had the opportunity to experience his masterworks. The enormous four-panel canvas *Androgyny* (1983) fascinated viewers, drawing them in to its centre where Thunderbird and the Great Medicine Snake kept this world in balance. All were transformed by the power of *Man Changing into Thunderbird* (1977); each of six panels depicted a moment in the process of change, the metamorphosis from human being to the most powerful of spirit beings.

For me, curating this exhibition represented the closing of a circle that began with my awakening to the greatness of our own visual traditions, as aboriginal peoples (or *Onkwehonwe* in Mohawk), through my own introduction to the work of Norval Morriseau. To me and to many other artists I know, Morriseau's art stood out like a beacon. His guiding light showed the way for artists like myself to reject the position of ethnographic informant and to claim a place, first and foremost, as artists. Norval demonstrated how the past is connected to the future, and why this is important today. Norval's profound influence has benefited me personally and professionally, and I am forever indebted.

Great artists are seers who have the ability to reach both ahead and back in time while still maintaining relevance to an ever-changing present. Norval Morriseau was a supreme visionary whose legacy will endure forever.

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