

NORVAL MORRISSEAU

Artist remembered as 'great shaman'

Painters pledge to honour legacy of 'Picasso of the North' by starting a native art school in his memory

BRETT POPPLEWELL
STAFF REPORTER

Friends, family and fans of the late Norval Morrisseau gathered last night to pay tribute to the Canadian artist who took native art and put it on the world stage in vibrant colour.

In a small auditorium in downtown Toronto, native elder Vern Harper and others who knew Morrisseau from his days as an artist living hand-to-mouth on the streets of Toronto spoke of the man heralded as "the Picasso of the North" as a spirited individual, well loved by all who knew him.

"Everyone recognized him as a great artist, but he was more than that. He was a great shaman. There won't be one like him in a thousand years," said Harper. "Just being in his presence when he was at his best or at his worst was a great honour."

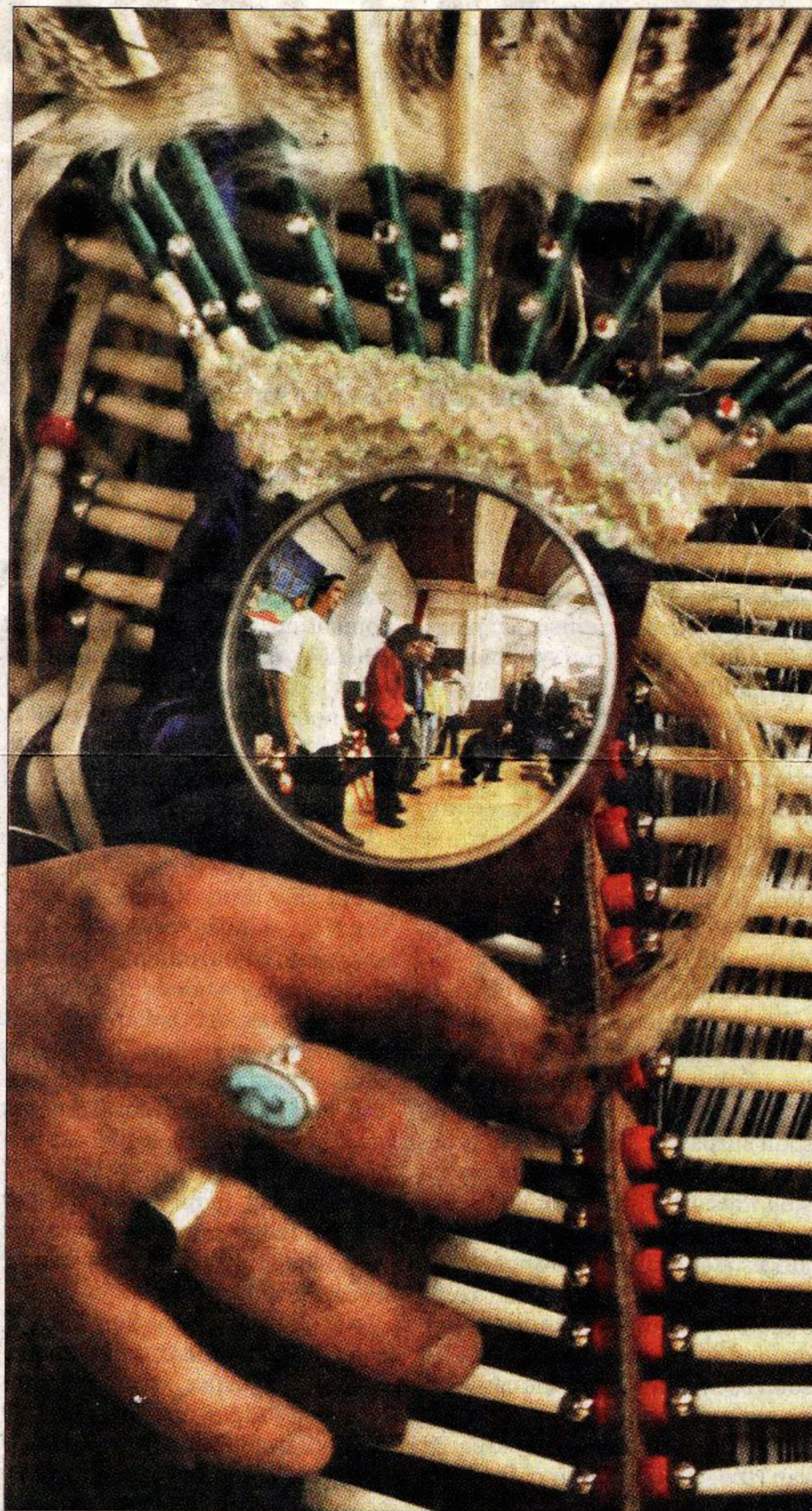
Morrisseau, 75, died Tuesday at Toronto General Hospital after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. Harper, a long-time friend of Morrisseau, was joined by two artists who had been mentored by the experienced painter.

One of those artists, Richard Sinclair, said it's unfair for the media to "lift him up here and they put him down there," in reference to Morrisseau's reputation as the most influential native artist of his generation, as well as a troubled alcoholic.

Sinclair and fellow painter Brian Marion vowed last night to honour Morrisseau by starting a native school of art in his memory.

They hope to incorporate Morrisseau's native name, "Miskwaa-bik Animiki," which translates to Copper Thunderbird, into the school's name.

"From an artist's perspective, (his

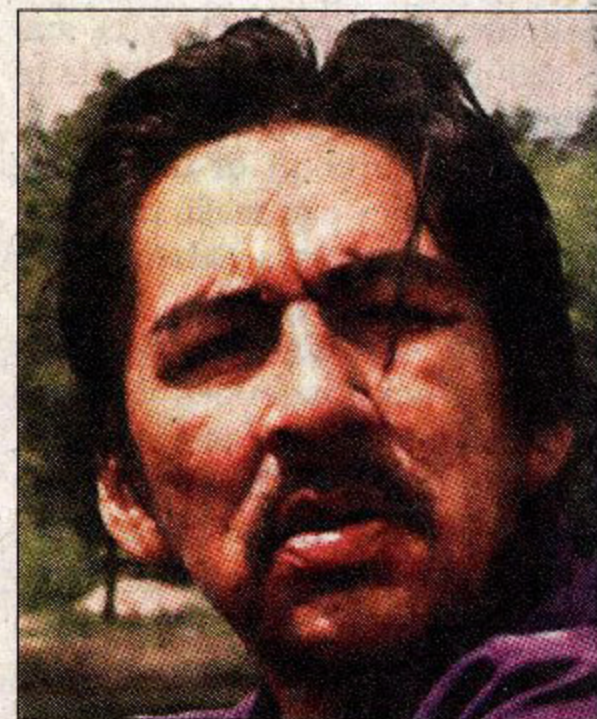


LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Friends and family of artist Norval Morrisseau reflected at ceremony.

legacy) is just starting now," Sinclair said. "All of us will be long gone and what he did is just going to keep growing."

The traditional memorial featured native dance, singing, the smoking of a prayer pipe and managed, for the most part, to avoid the



Norval Morrisseau

recent controversy over what should come of Morrisseau's remains.

Christian Morrisseau, the artist's youngest son and one of his seven children, insists his father's remains should be brought back to a reserve near Thunder Bay where the artist's estranged wife is buried.

There won't be one like him in a thousand years

NATIVE ELDER VERN HARPER

Meanwhile the artist's brother wants his ashes to be spread over Lake Nipigon.

What exactly his wishes were remain open to interpretations.

"Norval always knew that this was not his home and that he would go home sometime and now he's going home," said Harper.

Regardless of the controversy, Christian affirmed yesterday that his love for his father is "unconditional."

"I have to say although he really wasn't there for me as I grew up, I've learned who my father was through books, through my sister and through my mother as well," he said.