



Art Gallery of Ontario
Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario

Activities and Resources

Canadian Connections

Exploring contemporary concepts using the TDSB collection



MOUSEOVER ARTWORK TO ZOOM

Audio

TDSB student, Esme, speaks about the painting



[Download the MP3 \(2:37 minutes, 3.2 MB\)](#)

Norval Morriseau (Canadian, 1932 – 2007), *Boy with Fish*, c. 1979, acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Toronto District School Board. Acquired by the Prueter Collection. © 2012 Estate of Norval Morriseau

Boy with Fish

Norval Morriseau

1979

[\[Collapse All\]](#)

Artist & Artwork

LEARN ABOUT THE ARTIST

Morriseau is an Ojibway artist who was born and raised near Thunder Bay by his grandparents in following with Ojibway culture. At six, he spent two years at a Residential school. He signs his paintings with the name Copper Thunderbird, a name given to him by a medicine woman. Morriseau was a sickly child resulting in his family calling a medicine woman to heal him. Ojibway culture believes that giving someone a new name provides them with renewed strength and energy so the medicine woman changed his name to Copper Thunderbird. He signed all his paintings with this name. Inspired by Ojibway folklore, which is passed down orally, Morriseau was curious as to how these legends would appear when translated into images.

“My idea is, why I draw them-see, there’s lots of stories that are told in Ojibway. But that wasn’t enough for me. I wanted to draw them – that’s from my own self-what they would look like.... Even if I don’t get no money I would be glad to paint them just for people to see.”

—Norval Morriseau

His breakthrough came when Jack Pollock, an art dealer and artist, held an exhibition of Morriseau’s work at his gallery in Toronto in the 1960’s. After the year 2000, Morriseau spent much time with his committee identifying his original pieces from forgeries (fakes) of his work in galleries around Canada.

Compare authentic Morriseau Paintings to the suspected forgeries:



<http://www.morrisseau.com/browsePhoto.php?tag=comparison>

Many Canadians consider Morrisseau as the leader of a First Nations renaissance in Canada as First Nations artwork was not considered fine art in the early half of the 20th century. His work shifted Canada's cultural perceptions of First Nations art and brought international recognition to First Nations culture.

However, some fellow tribesmen resented Morrisseau's work as they felt he was sharing their secrets with others. The Ojibway believe their legends are powerful medicines and when shared with the wrong people, it reduces the power of the legends.

[Discuss & Create](#)

LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Norval Morrisseau is a self-taught artist. His paintings look like ancient petroglyphs (prehistoric rock carving or painting) and the subjects are often painted in profile. Although he had a difficult life (he suffered from alcoholism and occasionally lived on the streets), he never expressed it in his artwork, which is characterized by bright and bold colours and thick black outlines. Morrisseau's paintings are a testament of his optimistic outlook on life. He was quoted as saying,

"The world in which we live in is dark, and it's even getting darker...It needs to be brighter."

—Norval Morrisseau

This painting suggests a fishing scene. Since the fish are as large as the boy, it suggests that nature or animal life is as significant as human life. A spirit line or energy line connects to fish together.

[Discuss & Create](#)

[Top of page](#)

Inspiration

The Ojibway First Nation is strongly connected to nature, both environmentally and spiritually. Traditionally, the Ojibway provided for themselves through hunting, fishing and gathering. A number of legends and folktales explore Ojibway way of life and spiritual beliefs, some of



which are represented in Morrisseau's paintings. Many of his works, including *Boy With Fishes* show a strong connection to the land, and his cultural heritage. Morrisseau was also influenced by the rock and birch bark paintings his ancestors painted.

[Discuss & Create](#)

[Top of page](#)

Toronto Connection

THE ARTIST'S TORONTO CONNECTIONS

Morrisseau first exhibited in Toronto in the 1960's at the Pollock Gallery, which is now closed.

His work is part of many public and private collections, and is often on display. You can view an original Morrisseau at the TD Centre, 356 Dundas Street West, Toronto, a few blocks east of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg, Ontario also has an extensive collection of Morrisseau's paintings.

<http://mcmichael.com/exhibitions/morrisseau/morrisseauatmcmichael.cfm>

THE ARTIST'S AGO CONNECTIONS

The AGO owns a number of works by Morrisseau, including the popular series *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1977. This series depicts the artist transforming into a Thunderbird in a succession of large painted canvas panels. This work was completed as part of his recovery from illness, under the guidance of a Shaman (medicine man or woman) who gave him his spiritual name "Thunderbird".

[Top of page](#)

Discuss & Create

EARLY REACTION TO MORRISSEAU'S PAINTING

Q1. What do you think was the public's reaction to Morrisseau's work in the 1960's?



REVEAL ANSWER

Q2. Why is it important that First Nations culture be reflected in Canada's artistic landscape?

DIGGING DEEPER INTO THE WORK

Q1. Where does this scene take place? What would happen if we changed the background colour? How would this change your interpretation of the story? What makes you think that?

Q2. Who might the person in the middle be? Why are the fish so big?

Q3. People sometimes describe Morisseau's artwork as looking through an X-Ray. Why do you think people say that?

Q4. Why do you think he was referred to as the "Picasso of the North"?

Q5. Looking at the painting, ask yourself how many years of art training Morisseau received? What makes you say that? Are you surprised to learn that Morisseau was a self-taught artist? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a self-taught artist? Have you taught yourself a new skill or technique?

Q6. What can we learn about Morisseau's personality from this painting? What elements support your answer?

INSPIRATION: OJIBWAY CULTURE

Q1. How does Morisseau illustrate the Ojibway connection to nature in this painting?



Q2. Look at this painting and other Morriseau pieces. How important do you think nature is in Ojibway culture? What can you learn about the environment that the Ojibway live in from looking at Morriseau's artwork?

"Whenever you are looking at my pictures, you are looking at my visions, whatever they may be."

—Norval Morriseau

PICTURES AND STORYTELLING

Q1. Discuss the various formats for storytelling. How many different vehicles for legends and stories can you think of? Be sure to include traditional and contemporary forms (like oral traditions and computer-generated films).

Read an Ojibway legend aloud to the class. Ask the class to visualize and draw/paint what they see in their minds in a single painting. Keep the results a secret and do not share the artwork until everyone is finished.

Q2. Did everyone see the same images, colours, characters and scenes? Why was everyone's artwork so different? Describe the differences you see in the variations. What impact do these different interpretations have on the meaning of the story? Are some representations more optimistic, frightening, or fantasy-like than others? Explain.

Q3. Does Morriseau's painting represent the beginning, middle or end of an Ojibway legend? What do you think happens before or after?

Finish the legend by adding additional frames. Use this painting to make a comic strip. When finished, orally share your story with the rest of the class. Compile your comic strips into a class book.



ETHNOGRAPHY, CULTURAL BELIEFS AND CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

Q1. Artwork tells a great deal about the cultural beliefs and values of a group of people. Gather several Morisseau images online from searching the internet, and identify constant themes in Ojibway culture. What is important to the Ojibway First Nations? What can you see in the artwork that supports your answer?

Q2. Morisseau also used his artwork to express historical and present day conflicts experienced by the First Nations. What kinds of conflict can you see represented in his work?

Create a piece of artwork that symbolically illustrates a present day conflict. What conflict will you choose? What artistic style would you use to bring awareness to your cause? Will your artwork suggest a solution to the conflict? Why or why not?

[Top of page](#)

Find Out More

Benton-Banai, Edward (2010). *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Johnston, Basil H. (1997). *Star-man and Other Tales*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.

Peacock, Thomas and Wisuri, Marlene (2007). *The Four Hills of Life: Ojibwe Wisdom*. USA: Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Is this a Fake Morisseau? Read the Globe and Mail article outlining the trial over featuring a collector and an art dealer:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-factions-square-off-over-morisseau/article4226038/>

Compare the authentic Morisseau paintings with the alleged counterfeit paintings (according to Morisseau protégé Ritchie Sinclair – who is still in court with many collectors and dealers over the allegations). Do you agree with Sinclair's identification of "fake Morisseaus"? Why or why not? How can you prove a painting is an original after the artist dies?



<http://www.morrisseau.com/browsePhoto.php?tag=comparison>

Video

1981 Norval Morrisseau – Teachings of the Grand Shaman

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcznBdkZMEs&feature=plcp>

[Top of page](#)

