



A black and white reproduction of a 1996 painting by Norval Morrisseau titled, Erected in Honour to All Ancestors and Warriors.



A black and white reproduction of a painting Morrisseau says is a forgery. The B.C. artist has identified 23 paintings as fakes.

Probe launched as native Canadian artist identifies paintings as forgeries

# Morrisseau fakes alleged

BY MURRAY WHYTE

**C**elebrated native Canadian painter Norval Morrisseau has identified at least 23 paintings sold recently at auction as forgeries, touching off an investigation that could lead to hundreds of phony paintings attributed to him.

Donald Robinson, Mr. Morrisseau's gallery representative in Toronto, was approached last month by a collector who bought several paintings attributed to Mr. Morrisseau at Kahn's Country Auctions in Pickering, Ont. The collector wanted the works appraised, but Mr. Robinson was suspicious of their authenticity.

Mr. Robinson sent colour photocopies of 23 paintings to Mr. Morrisseau in British Columbia for identification. Mr. Morrisseau sent back a signed statement saying he did not paint any of the works in question.

The paintings were purchased from a collection of about 850 paintings sold by Kahn's on behalf of a single dealer in Thunder Bay, Ont. Also included in the collection was a painting attributed to West Coast native artist Robert Davidson. The painting, dated 1978, has since been denounced by Mr. Davidson as a fake.

Randy Potter, who owns Kahn's, said he believed all the paintings he has sold are authentic. He has sold more than 800, he said, and the only complaints he has received have come from Mr. Robinson himself. "I've sold a lot of these to a lot of people, big dealers, collectors, and not one guy has ever come back [except Mr. Robinson]," he said.

However, Mr. Robinson said these paintings lend suspicion to the entire collection.

"I had long thought there was something wrong with these paintings," said Mr. Robinson, who bought some himself. "With

all these numbers coming out, I just thought 'this is impossible.'"

The alleged fakes first came to Mr. Robinson's attention through the Thunder Bay RCMP, which had received a tip through Crime-stoppers. An RCMP officer in Thunder Bay declined to comment on the case.

If the lot contains more forgeries, the financial damages could run into the millions of dollars. Mr. Morrisseau, one of the country's best-known and most marketable living painters, typically sells a medium-sized canvas for \$8,000 to \$9,000. At auction, the paintings sold for an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000, with some going for as much as \$9,000.

Mr. Morrisseau, who is 70 years old, is in ill health with Parkinson's Disease. Over the course of a painting career that began in the 1950s, he developed a reputation for alcohol abuse. In 1987, he became national news not for his art, but for living on the streets in Vancouver's Gastown, scrawling quickie drawings and selling them to buy food and alcohol.

In the early nineties, Mr. Morrisseau began his recovery, aided by Gabor Vadas, a young man he met on the street in darker days. Despite his disease, he has been a productive painter over the past decade. But some believe the combination of his former lifestyle and current ailment make his judgment less than reliable. There is also some speculation Mr. Morrisseau, in leaner times, would fall back on painting simply to fuel his appetites.

"Over the last 30 years, he would be on reserves and paint paintings for food or liquor," said Michael Rogozimaki, president of Empire Auctions in Toronto,

which has sold Mr. Morrisseau's work. "You give him acrylic paint and a canvas and tell him you'll take him out for dinner and give him some liquor and he'll paint. There are probably thousands of these things on reserves all over the country."

Given Mr. Morrisseau's past, coupled with the likelihood he has produced at least 8,000 paintings during his career, it would seem likely he might not remember them all. Mr. Robinson, however, said it was preposterous to think Mr. Morrisseau would not recognize his own work.

"It's not possible," he said. "Norval has an excellent memory for longer-term things. His mind is still very good."

Mr. Morrisseau could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Robinson, who is perhaps the most knowledgeable person in the country on the subject of Mr. Morrisseau's art, said there were several clues as to the paintings' authenticity that would make Mr. Morrisseau's final say a formality.

Mr. Robinson says small details seem to be slightly off: Mr. Morrisseau's signature, painted in native characters, is not quite right. The titles, usually written on the back of the paintings, are so faded they are illegible, a characteristic Mr. Robinson says he has never seen in all his years of dealing with Mr. Morrisseau's paintings.

More than that, though, are the paintings themselves. Mr. Robinson, who described them as "shoddy," said they did not appear to exhibit Mr. Morrisseau's touch.

"There's a whole pile of clues, but mostly it's the images," he said. "Once you've seen hundreds of these, your eye gets attuned.

We know how he does faces, what the brush strokes look like, we're so familiar with his stuff."

Allegations of forgeries of Mr. Morrisseau's work are nothing new. "He's been telling us for years about the fakes, and even the people who were painting them," Mr. Robinson said.

The reason for Mr. Morrisseau's apparent popularity with forgers are many. When he started, Mr. Morrisseau was hailed as a true innovator, an inventor of a unique aesthetic that melded a traditional style of native art with contemporary painting. At the height of his popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his paintings would typically sell for \$15,000, a rare figure for a living Canadian painter.

In spite of that success, though, the market for native art soured badly in the 1980s. Only Mr. Morrisseau and a handful of others were still selling work.

Mr. Morrisseau's relative marketability may have made him a target, Mr. Robinson said.

"There are a large number of failed, unsuccessful, jealous and probably relatively poor native painters," he said. "It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to think that one of these guys might say 'OK, if I can't make it in the art world, then this is simple. Why not just make these up and sell them?'"

Mr. Rogozimaki, however, doubted that kind of effort would justify the payoff.

"He's a great artist and I respect him a great deal, but Norval Morrisseau's paintings are not worth so much money that it's worth someone's while to sit there and paint forgeries."

Mr. Robinson, however, says he supports Mr. Morrisseau unconditionally. "I wanted them to be real. We all did," he said. "But if someone brought one of those to me, I would say obviously that it's not authentic."

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NORVAL MORRISSEAU