




## Morrisseau moves to authenticate art

Committee created to vet the works of the now-ailing native painter

-  Article
-  Comments 

AMES ADAMS  
FROM WEDNESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL  
MARCH 23, 2005 AT 7:28 AM EDT

A committee of authentication is being formed to help establish an authorized inventory of the works of Norval Morrisseau and stanch the flood of allegedly fake Morrisseau paintings that have entered the art market in recent years.

Aaron Milrad, Toronto-based counsel for Morrisseau, Canada's most famous and influential first nations artist, said this week that the committee, composed of five Morrisseau experts, should be in place no later than the end of April. The experts will function much like the famous four-member Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board, which has been the sole arbiter of genuine Warhols since the pop-art master's death in 1988: If you think you have a real Morrisseau but want to know for sure, you'll have to submit it to the committee for determination. And once you do, you'll have to sign a contract by which you absolve Morrisseau, his family and Milrad of "any liability if the committee comes back and says, 'It's not a Morrisseau.'"

Milrad and the Morrisseau family also have hired a private investigator to try to track down the source or sources of forgeries they say have cropped up across Canada. It's part of an effort to bring order to the messy legacy of Morrisseau, who turned 73 last week in a nursing home in Nanaimo where he's being treated for the Parkinson's disease that's slowed his artistic output to virtually nothing since 2001.

Last weekend, Morrisseau put an ad in The Globe and Mail saying, "for the record, I would like to state that Kinsman Robinson Galleries are my sole authorized representatives in Canada. Artworks sold by Kinsman Robinson are guaranteed to be by the artist Norval Morrisseau."

Based in Toronto, Kinsman Robinson has dealt in Morrisseau paintings since late 1989, succeeding the late Jack Pollock, the Toronto dealer who introduced the Ojibwa artist to the larger Canadian public in the early 1960s. (No representative of Kinsman Robinson will be on the authentication committee, Milrad said, to avoid "charges of being tainted.") Morrisseau's colourful pictographic paintings, sometimes referred to as Woodland Indian art, have been lauded for their fusion of native themes with the European easel-painting tradition. By the early 1970s, they were selling for tens of thousands of dollars and, in 1978, their creator was named a member of the Order of Canada.

However, the artist's life has often been torturous and this, Milrad acknowledged, has contributed to his problems in the marketplace. In the late 1980s, for instance, Morrisseau was living and sleeping on the streets of Vancouver, selling paintings and sketches for as little as \$10 to \$40 to buy bottles of tequila and red wine, sometimes even giving them away.

Although Milrad said Morrisseau's mind "is still sharp," he admitted his client probably produced a lot of work to support his bad habits - works that, whatever their artistic merits, are nonetheless "genuine" Morrisseaus and may still be in circulation in the resale market. "We're also affected by the first nations 'problem,'" added Milrad, "in that they [native people] may have a different view of what's a Morrisseau than we do." It's known, for instance, that Morrisseau worked with other native painters. Moreover, by the early 1970s, many first nations artists saw what he was doing as a tribal rather than a personal style. They began to emulate his themes and techniques, Milrad said, "much in the manner of the Chinese and Japanese traditions of 'the honourable copies.'"

At the same time, Milrad said there are considerable numbers of bogus Morrisseaus out there that "people are buying in good faith. . . . But it's not his hand, it's not his image, it's not his colour and one day they're going to find out what they have is not what they thought they were getting."

Milrad hopes some semblance of order will start to take shape by early next year. Starting Feb. 3, Morrisseau will be the subject of a three-month retrospective, subtitled "Shaman Artist," at the National Gallery in Ottawa. In the meantime, Milrad hopes to create a centralized repository of Morrisseau archives and records in Toronto that will help the authentication committee in preparing the catalogue raisonné, or authorized inventory, of the artist's genuine work.