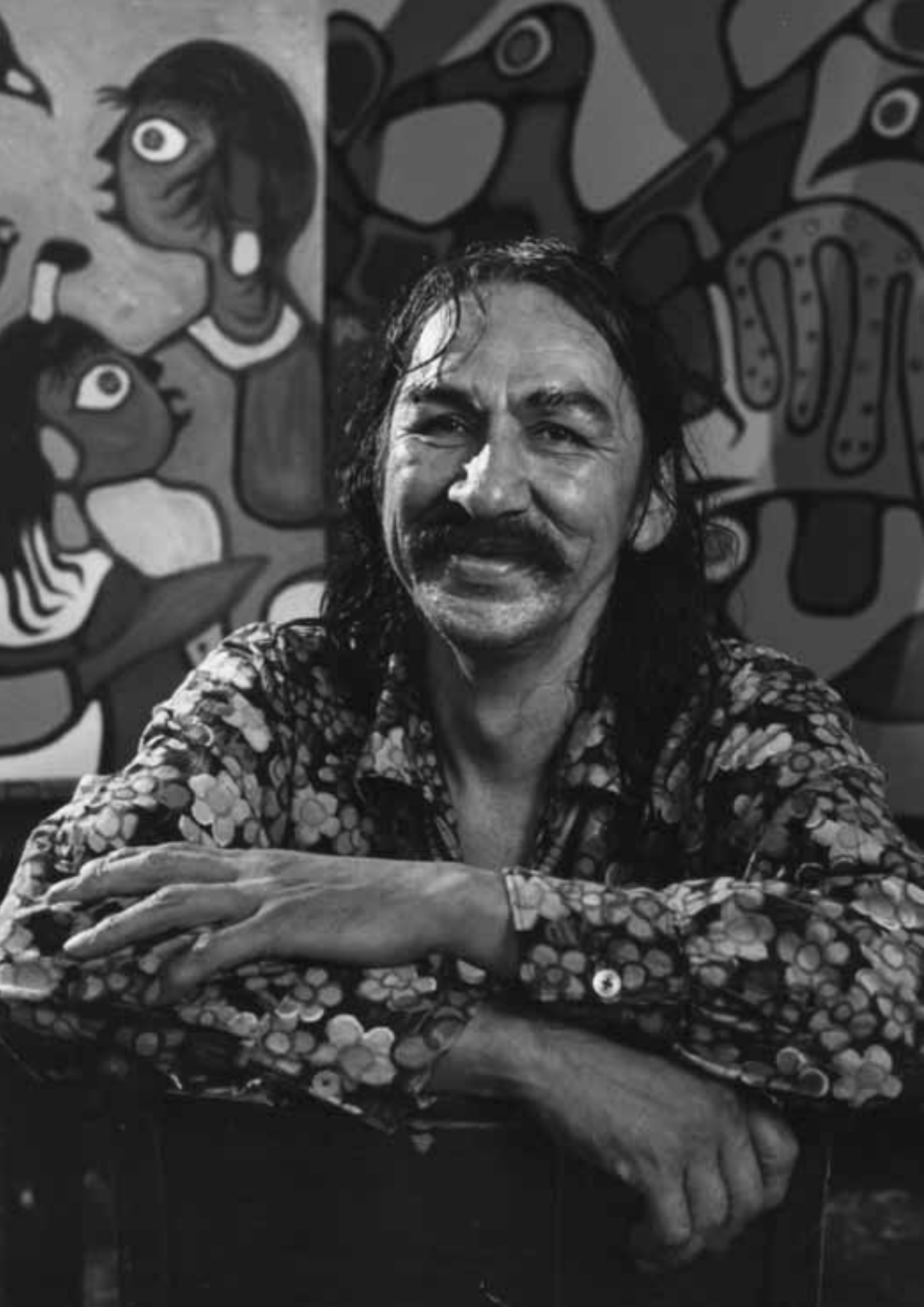




Thunderbirds and Concepts of Transformation in the Art of Norval Morrisseau

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Over the course of his fifty-year career, Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) or Copper Thunderbird (Miskwaabik Animiiki) fashioned a unique visual language that articulated a wide variety of artistic themes, including shamanistic conceptions. He explored three main spiritual directions in his life – traditional spiritual teachings within the Anishinaabe culture, Christianity, and Eckankar – and these are also reflected in his art.

Morrisseau's oeuvre is typically infused with an intense spiritual force, but his imagery related to thunderbirds and notions of transformation most clearly expresses his engagement with art and religion. The power of his Anishinaabe name, Miskwaabik Animiiki – Copper Thunderbird – resonates in his thunderbird imagery. In 1965, with editor and anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney, he wrote *Legends of My People: The Great Ojibway* in which he explains the significance of the thunderbird: “The Ojibway believed the thunder to be a great massive bird called a thunderbird, whose eyes shoot out lightning and thunder. The first thunder in early spring was something good to hear, for the Ojibways welcomed their protector again from its home in the south where it had been all the winter. Offerings of tobacco were placed on the ground ... or sacred pipes were smoked by the elders to the thunderbird in the early spring.”¹

Morrisseau produced a number of iconic images related to thunderbird transformation during his career, including two early examples from between 1958–1960, painted on birch bark, *The Shaman Riding a Thunderbird* in 1972, and the six-panel *Man Changing into Thunderbird* from 1977. Starting from a basis in Anishinaabe ways of knowing and proceeding through different life experiences, including, beginning in 1976, his embrace of Eckankar, Morrisseau shapes and incorporates disparate elements of spiritual transformation in these thunderbird paintings, each of which reveals diverse and significant moments in the artist's own changing spiritual understanding. This essay seeks to analyze the ways Morrisseau articulates unique notions of spiritual and personal transformation through his own visual aesthetic language.

Ian Samson, *Norval Morrisseau*, 1979, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives.

The Visual and the Oral: Placing the Anishinaabe

The Ojibway First Nations of the Great Lakes region call themselves the Anishinaabe, or the original people. The Anishinaabek believe their people were born on the continent they call Turtle Island.² This differs from the problematic, yet still recognized, Beringia or Bering Strait theory that claims that all of North America's Aboriginal peoples came from Asia from 10,000 to 25,000 years ago. Recent scholarship suggests that human habitation in the Americas can be dated as far back as 250,000 years ago, which calls into question scholarship surrounding the Bering Strait theory. Noted indigenous scholar Vine Deloria Jr. has been a vocal opponent of the Bering Strait theory, arguing that most Western scholarship begins with it as a premise and proceeds without questioning its validity.³ Indigenous peoples in the Americas, including the Anishinaabe, disregard the Beringia theory in favour of their own creation stories. Indigenous studies scholar Leanne Simpson argues that the structure of Anishinaabek language and its creation stories provide both collectively and intellectually transformative knowledge.⁴

The dominant religion of the Anishinaabe, the Medaewaewin (sometimes spelled Medewiwin), was a society of medicine men and women dedicated to the study of the curative properties of plants, healing, and the pursuit of balance and well-being, according to Anishinaabe scholar Basil Johnston.⁵ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as art historian Ruth Phillips explains, Anishinaabe shamans, "became concentrated in the Midewiwin Society, whose members recorded their oral traditions, esoteric knowledge, and complex rituals of initiation by incising pictographic symbols on birch bark panels and scrolls."⁶ Norval Morrisseau's grandfather, or Mishomis, Moses "Potan" Nanakonagos, was a widely known Mide and visionary shaman and Morrisseau spent hours listening to him and learning, absorbing oral traditions and developing an understanding of shamanistic ritual practices.⁷ Morrisseau explains that the visions and dreams of the Anishinaabe, as captured in their pictographic drawings on birch bark scrolls and as rock art, allowed people to heal themselves.⁸

The Anishinaabe recognize a wide range of non-human persons who possess power. Johnston confirms that the thunderbird was the most revered of the *manitous*, or spirits, for the Anishinaabe.⁹ Manitou beings were created by Kitchi-Manitou, the creator and Great Mystery, who endowed them with virtue and wisdom and infused them into beings and objects.¹⁰ The Anishinaabe live in harmony with the manitous, addressing them and asking for favours. In *The Manitous*, Johnston focuses his discussion on figures who had "lived among the Anishinaabe people in human form in the early formative age of the people," including a number that were human or half-human.¹¹ He explains that while men and women could not

enter the world of thunderbirds, these manitous occasionally appeared as human beings.

Understanding the role of the thunderbird in Morrisseau's art demands a cultural context: it is more than just an idea for a painting as it is part of a larger symbolic order. His early works in particular operate within an Anishinaabe cultural frame. Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz explains how indigenous oral traditions reflect a belief system and consciousness: "The oral tradition of Native American people is based upon spoken language, but it is more than that too. Oral tradition is inclusive; it is the actions, behaviour, relationships, practices through the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people."¹²

Educator Margaret Kovach adds that Aboriginal oral stories "tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations."¹³ The notion of storytelling involves far more than simply telling a tale. Cree scholar Neal McLeod emphasizes the centrality of narrative and memory, arguing that stories are analyzed and "brought to life by being integrated into the experience of the storyteller and the audience."¹⁴ Johnston is one of the few writers from northwestern Ontario to compile Anishinaabe oral narratives, which he has gathered since childhood, and notes that he had difficulty finding many of the stories about the spiritual heritage of the Anishinaabe as he endeavoured to set the stories down "as they were told in the old days."¹⁵ *The Manitous* includes a story about thunderbird transformation and thus is integral to this analysis.

Johnston shares a story about a man who unwittingly fell in love with a thunderbird woman and succeeded in becoming a thunderbird himself.¹⁶ Norval Morrisseau recounts a similar version of this same narrative in two separate texts to explain *Man Changing into Thunderbird*.¹⁷ In Morrisseau's accounts, the youngest in a family of seven brothers falls in love with the thunderbird woman but the oldest brother kills her, triggering a series of events that sends the youngest brother on an odyssey that stretches from Lake Nipigon or Lake Superior to a very high mountain, "maybe the foothills of Alberta ..."¹⁸ where the man became "afraid because he didn't know what was beyond there."¹⁹ In each of the versions, the man enters the realm of the thunderbirds and the thunderbird woman convinces the others to allow him to become a spirit being.

Placing Morrisseau and Transformation

Morrisseau often painted the thunderbird and saw this manitou as one that spoke to him symbolically. Over the course of his life and career as an artist, his painting style and his ideas about spiritual transformation

changed. As this happened, paintings of the thunderbird transformation also changed.

Born in 1931 in northwestern Ontario, Norval Morrisseau grew up with his Anishinaabe grandmother Grace, a Catholic, and grandfather Moses “Potan” Nanakonagos, a sixth-generation shaman in the Midewiwin society. The artist had a solid understanding of both English and his Anishinaabe language. As a young boy, Morrisseau attended a Catholic residential school where, according to curator Greg Hill, he suffered both physical and sexual abuse.²⁰ After two years, he returned to his community where he continued his schooling but also, significantly, spent hours listening to and learning from elders. The story of Morrisseau’s life has usually been cast within a romantic narrative that has tended to ignore the historic ills of colonialism, such as poverty and the policies of the Indian Act. Yet, clearly, his residential school experience and the racialized treatment he experienced as a Native man in Canada influenced him and his art.

His strong early exposure to Anishinaabe teachings and language provided the basis for his artistic translation of spiritual ideas. When he was twelve, his grandfather took him to an island for his first vision quest. Vision quests are common ceremonial rites of passage undertaken by Anishinaabe boys after years of apprenticeship and preparation.²¹ Morrisseau describes this pivotal and life-changing event in the National Film Board documentary *The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau*.²²

Morrisseau’s paintings of transformation are invested with a sense of revelatory experience. His pictorial influences as a youth were rock paintings of vision quests, ceremonial images, and, most significantly, the noted Midewiwin birch bark scrolls. It is in these sacred drawings that Morrisseau embraced an aesthetic that shaped his own representations of the body. Using heavy black outlines and reference to interior bodily segmentations, Morrisseau began to produce contemporary art that reflected these influences.

In 1950 Morrisseau was stricken with a severe illness that led to his receiving the name Miskwaabik Animiiki or Copper Thunderbird. A medicine woman performed a ceremony to heal the young man and in the process honoured him with the powerful name.²³ During a healing ceremony such as this, Anishinaabe shamans invoke the assistance of the manitous to achieve a form of metamorphosis through transformative power for both the healer and the patient.²⁴ This naming ceremony forged his connection to the thunderbird manitous.²⁵ Morrisseau subsequently chose to sign his works of art with this name, written in Cree syllabics.²⁶

At different points in his career, Morrisseau’s creative style has been criticized by both First Nations and mainstream communities. In the 1950s,

local elders chided him for exposing ceremonial images to mainstream audiences. However, Morrisseau resisted challenges from Anishinaabek traditionalists, arguing that his images were unique, not merely copies of sacred images. He also argued that his personal aesthetic served to help decolonize artistic practice and social issues and eventually community members agreed. In a 1979 essay Morrisseau explained the pressures he felt from community members: “My grandfather showed me how to do interpretations of the shaman beliefs on birch bark. When I was playing with the other children, I was already playing the role of the shaman ... The majority of these people were against me getting involved [in drawing shamans’ scrolls].”²⁷ With the support of his grandfather, Morrisseau continued to paint subjects that spoke to him.²⁸

In the late 1950s, Morrisseau’s work centered on vision-derived images of spiritual experiences and animals painted on what Phillips calls, “commodity genres such as birch bark containers and replicas of drums.”²⁹ These works were clearly connected to Anishinaabe teachings and therefore represent a transformative process aligned to those ways of knowing. This is the case with the two paintings of thunderbird transformation done prior to 1960.

The artist painted at least two early versions of *Man Changing into Thunderbird* on birch bark between 1958 and 1960 after his first introductions to Western art by his patrons and mentors Dr. Joseph Weinstein and anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney. One version shows two thunderbirds facing each other.³⁰ The thunderbird on the left side of the painting has both wings spread and is perched on a salamander. The bird/being on the right appears in a state of transformation. With a bird head, a left wing, and a thunderbird body, the being is bisected so that the right half remains male, complete with muscular chest, arm, hand and fingers, and a leg wearing a leather mukluk. The symmetrical composition of the overall image includes a representation of the sun, radiating between the two manitous. The thunderbird eyes emit lightning strikes, as described by Morrisseau in *Legends of My People*.³¹

The two forms are framed by circular symbols that include the moon and a segmented circle that may reference *megis*, the cowrie shell – a sacred symbol that appeared in the sky to the Anishinaabe during an early period of exile to signal their return to their homeland.³² Overall, this early work represents a less stylized example of Morrisseau’s later aesthetic language – black lines are less intense and the interior portions of the two beings add a sketch-like quality to the many detailed aspects of the two figures. The articulation of feathers and fingers, for example, is a convention Morrisseau discarded in his emerging visual aesthetic.

Morrisseau completed a second version of this painting during this period.³³ This work includes a frame, made from birch sticks fixed together

with strapping to resemble a stretcher frame for furs. It was common for Morrisseau to paint on birch bark during this early period and to frame work in a way that conforms to ideas of craft rather than to contemporary art conventions. Both of these early works demonstrate an instructive representation of Morrisseau's conception of spiritual transformation.

In the second version, Morrisseau reverses the transformational process, showing a progression of change from manitou to man. In this work, the thunderbird on the right is perched on the salamander. The arching, radiating aura that had surrounded the transforming man in the other work now frames the thunderbird/man. Clearly the salamander and radiating auras serve as signifiers for delineating a being that is undergoing transformation. This version does not include the lightning rays. It is unclear whether Morrisseau completed these two works as part of a larger narrative of transformation or if these pieces are simply configurations of the same theme.

The noted version of *Man Changing into Thunderbird* has been published twice. In 1979, the image was included in *Morrisseau* by Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, paired with a textual version of a thunderbird transformation story. Preceding this narrative is an explanation of the role of the thunderbird. In Sinclair and Pollock's interpretation of Morrisseau's fascination with these beings: "Morrisseau sees his Thunderbirds as strong, exciting, bringers of energy and fertility. Under the right circumstances a man of power, a shaman, can assume the formidable attributes of the Thunderbird. The man who changes into a Thunderbird is Norval Morrisseau – Copper Thunderbird."³⁴ This work was also included in the seminal exhibition mounted by Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1984, which led to publication of *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*. McLuhan explains that between 1958 and 1960 Morrisseau "set out the themes and concerns he would deal with for the next twenty years."³⁵ She argues that the themes are self and transformation and relate back to his 1950 naming ceremony. Clearly, these two works demonstrate a nascent sense of his artistic language but also reveal a strong relationship to specific Anishinaabe teachings about the thunderbird manitou.

As evidenced in works painted from the 1960s on, Morrisseau accepted the advice of early patrons such as Weinstein and Dewdney, both trained artists, who pushed him to move his art onto paper and canvas. Weinstein, according to Phillips, provided the otherwise untrained artist with an introduction to "modernist artistic sensibility and the values and conventions of the art world."³⁶ Easel painting afforded Morrisseau a level of seriousness that conformed to Western notions of "high" art and would have been unattainable had he continued to work in birch bark or hide.³⁷ This instruction marks the first transformation of the artist as he began to navigate an art world beyond northwestern Ontario.

When Morrisseau met Dewdney in 1960 they began an important relationship that culminated in a research and writing project published in 1965 as *Legends of My People, The Great Ojibway*. Morrisseau's two extended narratives and description of thunderbird and beliefs surrounding this manitou provide evidence of the artist's understanding of these beings.³⁸ Morrisseau also includes a personal narrative of an encounter he had with a woman from Red Lake, Ontario. He relates that the woman confronted him and said that since his name was Copper Thunderbird he must be powerful. "Then she told me, 'I am powerful, too. Also I have known the thunderbirds. Let us try our sorcery to see who is the stronger.'"³⁹ Morrisseau explains that her aggressive challenge is anathema to Anishinaabe protocols and tells her so. This story reveals both the perceived power of his Copper Thunderbird name and his understanding of the duty that comes with such a name.

Toronto gallery owner and art instructor Jack Pollock met Morrisseau in 1962 in Beardmore, Ontario. According to *The Globe and Mail*, "Pollock found the young native artist living and working in a shack on the edge of the Beardmore, Ont., garbage dump."⁴⁰ This meeting led to an important relationship between the two and to a solo show of Morrisseau's work at Pollock's gallery. At this moment, Morrisseau's art was reframed, moving from commodity genre work, as described by Phillips, to contemporary art in a mainstream sense. Critics judged his work in two ways: his art was contextualized within a Modernist art aesthetic that focused on formal aspects while the so-called Primitivist elements of his work captivated both critics and the public, who had not seen art like this. The art exhibition launched him into the art scene and inspired the artist to reach beyond his Anishinaabe ways of knowing for his inspirations.

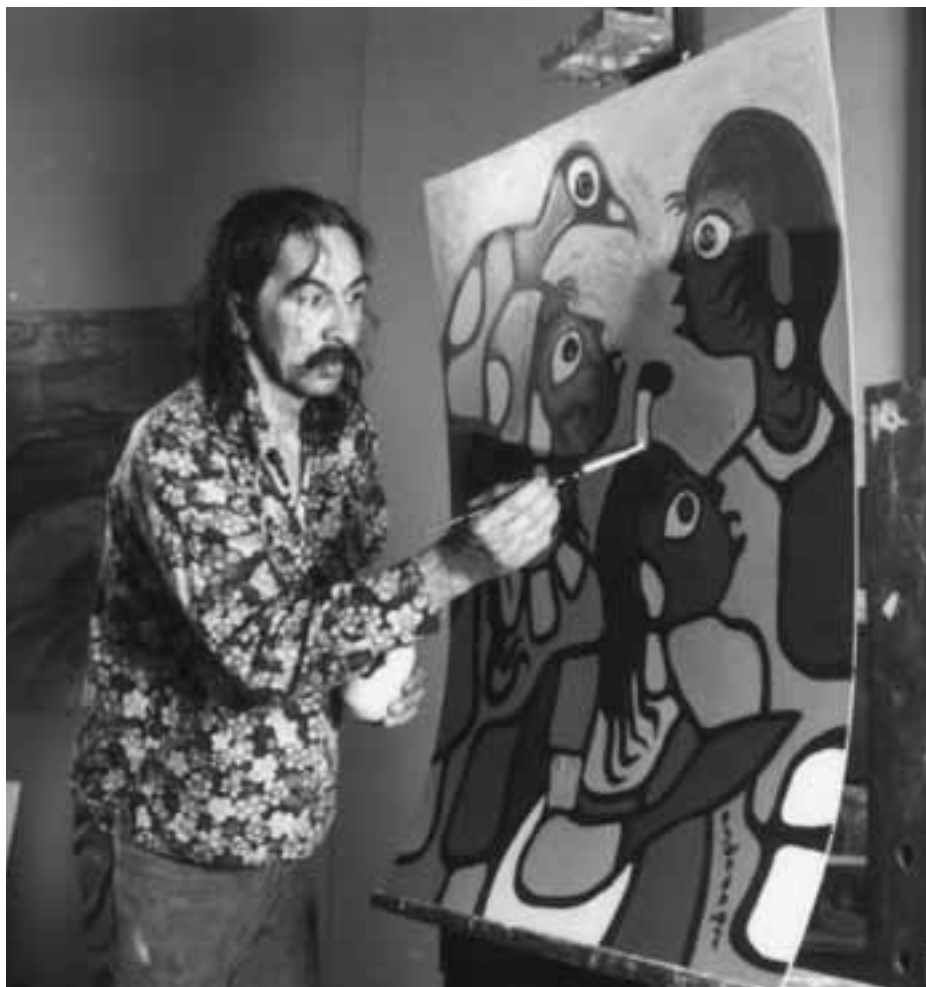
In his 1990 autobiography, Pollock confirmed the importance of this pivotal exhibition. "The exhibit made both him and me," he explained. "It brought him to international attention and it made the Pollock Gallery a public name."⁴¹ Morrisseau's work found immediate commercial success – his show at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto in 1962 sold out. Curator Greg Hill suggests that even in the venue of a contemporary art gallery the idea of Morrisseau as "exotic other" remained a significant factor in his entry into the art establishment. "He was received simultaneously as both a primitive and modern artist," writes Hill.⁴²

Critics positioned Morrisseau within a decidedly stereotypical racialized discourse. According to art historian Bill Anthes, Primitivist aspects of his art could be inserted into an already well-established Modernist art discourse because of the work of American Modern painters such as Barnett Newman. "Newman believed that he had found in Native American culture the solution to the crises of modernity. Newman believed that he found in the 'primitive' arts of the Americas a model and a resource for a new 'inter-American'

culture.”⁴³ An ongoing fascination with Primitivism was well established in the United States by the late 1940s, with exhibitions such as “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” (1940) and “Indian Art of the United States” (1941) mounted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. According to Anthes, Newman’s 1946 exhibition “Northwest Coast Indian Painting,” at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, claimed Indigenous artists as “the spiritual and aesthetic ancestors of modern American artists.”⁴⁴ This Modernist art discourse spilled over into Canadian art criticism and clearly contributed to the framing of Morrisseau’s art by art critics writing in Canadian newspapers and magazines.

The Globe and Mail art writer Pearl McCarthy wrote “Explorers Discover New Ideas” in August 1962 to announce Morrisseau’s upcoming exhibition. The title succinctly captures a colonialist discourse of claiming and discovery. The short report provides a number of constructions that demonstrate the unfamiliar terrain Morrisseau had entered. “Ontario’s hinterland has afforded an exciting discovery in the work of a 31-year old Ojibway Indian,” implying that Jack Pollock had, like a New World explorer, entered the wilds of Ontario and discovered his artist.⁴⁵ Despite the racial discourse, McCarthy posits that Morrisseau has done something remarkable, “he has devised his stylized semi-abstraction to express the mysticism of the culture.”⁴⁶ The art writer recognizes an artistic genius that trumps his confining racial construction and argues strongly that his work overwhelms a facile construction of identity, situating it within the universalizing discourse of American modernism advanced since the late 1930s. “Morrisseau’s genius for unifying or breaking space in his designs is astounding, as is his sureness of line. It cannot be classed as primitive art.”⁴⁷ Once Newman and others began to utilize Indigenous elements in their work, modern art criticism presented Indigenous art as a pan-Indian assortment of styles and motifs that could be co-opted for individualized art practices. The appropriation of these stylistic elements was heavily influenced by Jungian psychological theory.⁴⁸ It seemed that Morrisseau’s art could easily be inserted into the universalized modern art movement with little regard for his Anishinaabe roots or the cultural signifiers he drew upon.

In 1963, *Montreal Gazette* art writer Dorothy Pfeiffer grouped Morrisseau with Emily Carr and anthropologist Marius Barbeau as figures whose legacy was to provide Canada with more of the “marvelously imaginative legends and rituals of our authentic ‘First Canadians.’”⁴⁹ Pfeiffer romantically describes the artist as an untutored but important “link” and notes that his *discoverer* was Dewdney, an authority on Stone Age art in Canada – suggesting that Morrisseau was more closely aligned with the past than with contemporary Canadian culture.



1 | Ian Samson, *Norval Morrisseau as artist-in-residence in the Thomson Shack at the McMichael Gallery*, 1979, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives.

While art critics and pundits attempted to position the artist and his work, Morrisseau continued to paint images that reflected his personal conception of transformation. Unlike painters of the New York School who looked to Jungian philosophy for ideas of transcendence, Morrisseau melded his personal understandings of Anishinaabe spirituality to articulate notions of change.

The early, somewhat clunky, images created on birch bark are replaced by more fluid and visually powerful imagery in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Elizabeth McLuhan describes Morrisseau's changing aesthetic language toward thunderbirds as "strong, individualistic, and calligraphic."⁵⁰ The introduction of a confident black outlining reformulates images in a more compositionally unified form. This assured expression also reflects

Morrisseau's own transformation as a contemporary artist. Aesthetically, his work exhibits a shift away from the limiting stylistic conventions he used in the late 1950s and hails his entry into the contemporary art scene (Fig. 1).

In 1972 Morrisseau painted *Shaman Riding a Thunderbird*.⁵¹ This painting offers another perspective on transformation, expressing a less fixed interpretation of the thunderbird narrative. Featuring a shaman astride a thunderbird, Morrisseau's aesthetic language reveals a more successful visual fusion of his style and the spiritual subject matter. The thunderbird, an energetic profiled form articulated with thick black line and decorative interior segmentations, has become emblematic of Morrisseau's work. The stylized shaman, also in profile, rides the dynamic bird. Gone are the stilted, sketched details found in the two early birch bark examples.⁵² The two figures, encased and surrounded by two birds and energy lines, meld as separate but united characters. McLuhan describes the work as an example of one of his "most graphically realized Indian images."⁵³ Indeed, the overall painting demonstrates a visual dynamism that symbolically integrates the two beings into one, subtly expressing shamanistic transformational process in new ways.

During this creative period, both urban experience and greater exposure to the art world affected Morrisseau's aesthetic handlings of spiritual conceptions of transformation. The artist integrates Anishinaabe cultural references by synthesising transformational notions related to his many life experiences. Morrisseau also began to migrate toward Christianity. His grandmother, a devout Catholic, had long ago introduced him to these teachings. The artist's interest in this religion was mediated by Anishinaabe ways of knowing. His further investigations of Pentecostal, Russian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic beliefs affected his art. While serving a six-month jail term in Kenora, Ontario, in 1973 for public drunkenness, his art production once again reflected his shifting spiritual ideas. The prison superintendent provided him with an additional cell to use as a studio and Morrisseau emerged from his incarceration with a new body of rich works, including *Indian Jesus Christ* (1974). Morrisseau commented on this body of work, "I went through a phase of painting Christian religious pictures, but yet I always saw them with the eyes of the Indian ... I have always been attracted to religious paintings, but only the ones that had that mystical or supernatural quality in them."⁵⁴

When he was released from the correctional facility the National Film Board of Canada was waiting in Kenora to shoot a planned documentary. *The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau* shows a tortured artist struggling with a number of issues that are presented through a series of stereotypical signifiers but that also reveal the artist as having a close connection to

nature and a spirituality that attempts to connect Ojibway traditions and Christian teachings.⁵⁵ One of the more successful moments in the film occurs when Morrisseau relates the details of his vision quest. The connection to Anishinaabe tradition and his captivating storytelling style combine to give Morrisseau credibility in a film that otherwise thwarts unmediated efforts to learn from the artist. Morrisseau also describes an incident in which he is transported into a thunderbird nest, though the director edited much of this story, leaving little of the narrative intact.⁵⁶

By the 1970s, performing a role that both fed his own interest in shamanism and satisfied aspects of the stereotype he was labelled with, Morrisseau began to feature spiritual shaman figures in his art. The artist attempts to erase the ignoble aspects of the tropes that plague him in the media and visually channels his energy into the embodiment of the shaman artist: Morrisseau promotes shamanism in his art and writings in part to thwart negative, stereotypical reports that tend to present him as both violent and drunken but also to fulfill his own spiritual needs. A 1976 news article by James Purdie in *The Globe and Mail* confirms the success of his branding attempt. The art critic describes *Sacred Bear* (1971) as a “classic Indian experience,” explaining that the artist, who “sometimes believes he would have been a shaman if he had been born 200 years earlier,” had had a vision a year earlier.⁵⁷ This form of reportage positions the artist and his work within a mystical frame, albeit a stereotypical one. “The latest canvas indicates that Morrisseau is continuing to develop a new phase in his work – an approach that seems to be leading him away from direct depictions of the teaching of the elders and toward a more densely populated world of symbols and mysticism.”⁵⁸

The universalizing influence in this critique again categorizes Morrisseau’s work within an acceptable Modernist art discourse. Accentuating the “noble” aspects of the Noble Savage construction, stereotypes that represent Indigenous peoples as being one with nature and inherently spiritual, Morrisseau created an identity that capitalized on universalized mainstream notions of shamanism.

Religious scholar Mircea Eliade, in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, describes shamans as: “those individuals who stand out in their respective societies by virtue of characteristics that, in the societies of modern Europe, represent the signs of a vocation or at least part of a religious crisis. They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their religious experience.”⁵⁹ Religious scholar John A. Grim adds that Anishinaabe shamans provide “the members of the tribe with the ritual means to aggressively foster their own independent existences.”⁶⁰ This sense of religious intensity and rugged individualism resonates in Morrisseau’s work

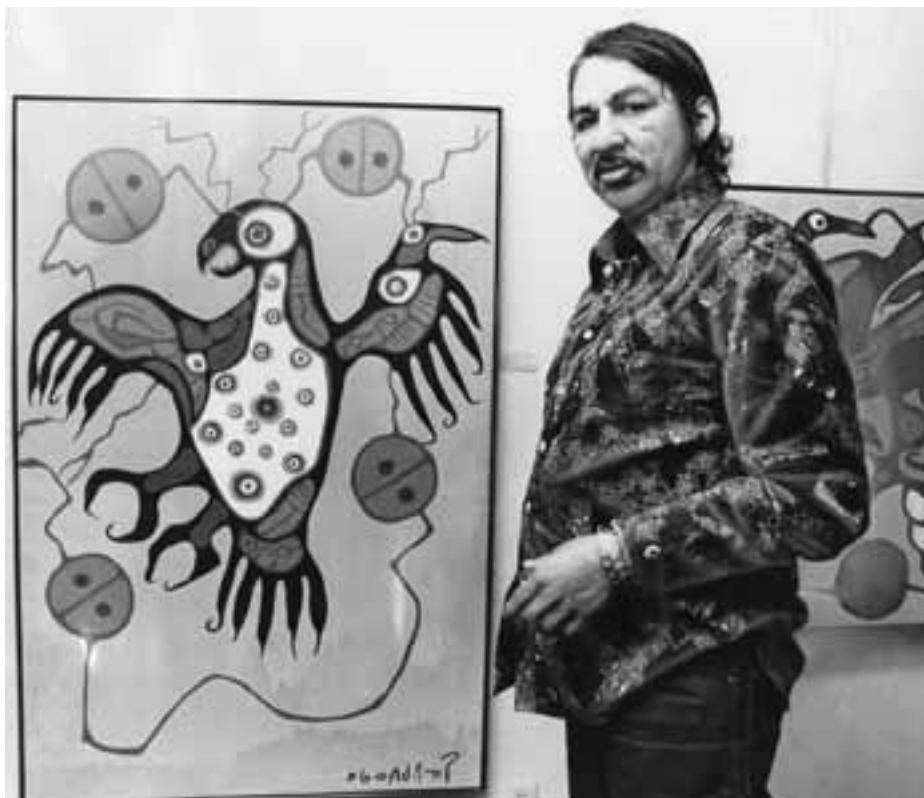
as it does in his actions. While the artist champions his shaman role, it is a performance that shifts away from Anishinaabe conceptions of the shaman as spiritual leader. The ceremonial rites and apprenticeship necessary for such an identity within the Anishinaabe cultural milieu eluded him. Instead, Morrisseau searched for ways to achieve his spiritual aims outside these cultural confines and beyond the limited stereotypical sense promoted by mainstream popular culture. Morrisseau's identity transformation affects his artistic articulation of transformational imagery.

In 1976, Pollock's gallery assistant Eva Quan introduced Morrisseau to Eckankar, a spiritual pursuit that combined both Eastern and Christian concepts and gave the artist a vehicle for his brand of shamanism. A controversial organization founded as a variation of the Radha Soami Sant Mat, a religious tradition in the Punjab area of northern India, Eckankar was formed in 1965 by Paul Twitchell, a former student of Sant Mat Master Kirpal Singh. In a series of writings published to promote and increase the credibility of Eckankar, self-proclaimed ECK Master Twitchell explains that divine light is the key to understanding because the group's teachings were shared with him by a ageless spiritual guide who had appeared before him in light form.⁶¹

In 1997 Morrisseau wrote that Eckankar allowed him to make sense of the many spiritual directions he had pursued till then, "It was not until I came into Eckankar that I was able to understand."⁶² After this dramatic spiritual conversion, Morrisseau's work underwent both stylistic and thematic change.

Eckankar promotes a concept of inner light and shamanistic astral travel that Morrisseau interpreted in his art. Through his intense colour palette, Morrisseau infuses his work with a combination of illuminating light and symbolic associations to transformation. Hill argues that: "through Eckankar, Morrisseau develops a vocabulary for his shamanism. His incorporation of this 'new age' religion brings his ancient knowledge of Anishinaabe traditions into the present day while at the same time allowing him to explore new imagery – the Eckist identity of soul travel."⁶³ The adoption of Eckist ideas sparks a pivotal shift in Morrisseau's articulation of transformation in his large-scale investigation of *Man Changing into Thunderbird* (Fig. 2).⁶⁴ Described by *Toronto Star* art critic Gary Michael Dault as "the best work of his career," this monumental work captures the nuanced spiritual and artistic changes that Morrisseau had experienced in his life to that point.⁶⁵

The multi-panel work confirms Morrisseau's personal shamanistic transformation into Copper Thunderbird and reads as a visual biographical primer for his shifting vision of his conception of this spiritual pursuit. Morrisseau explains, "I've wanted to paint this picture for fifteen years but I couldn't do it in those days. This is the ultimate picture for me and I'm sharing it. Sharing it is wonderful."⁶⁶ Morrisseau expands his visual aesthetic language with Eckist concepts, arriving at a unique formula for expressing



2 | Dick Loek, *Norval Morrisseau in front of one panel from a six-panel series, Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1977. (Photo: *Toronto Star*, Photo Archives)

his new ways of spiritual knowing. In the first five panels Morrisseau paints himself as shaman undergoing transformation. “It took me two months,” said the artist. “I didn’t think I’d finish it. But I went slow. I relaxed and worked at it in my home bit by bit ... and everything worked out.”⁶⁷

The young man in the first panel represents an early stage of Morrisseau’s spiritual apprenticeship in Anishinaabek teachings. His naming ceremony and his receiving the name Copper Thunderbird is implicit in this first canvas. Positioned in profile, the figure looks to the right, or to the eastern quadrant, of the panel to a representation of the sun, which is connected to him by energy lines that surround the figure, birds, and fish. Four bisected circles unite the composition in the lower frame of the painting. The young man cradles two birds and holds a staff in his right hand.

Significantly, Morrisseau infuses each of the six panels with lightness, as he chooses a bright copper colour for much of the field of the works. Dault describes it as being “painted against about an acre of bright orange (‘a very spiritual colour’).”⁶⁸ The bottom third of the painting is an earthy mustard colour that demonstrates an earthly grounding – suggesting it is still early

in his spiritual apprenticeship. While Morrisseau renders the objects in this panel in strong colour, there is little articulation of decoration or intense colour pairings.

The second panel displays a critical metamorphosis in that his right arm has now morphed into a wing, painted in bright blue feathers. The figure remains interconnected to fish and birds as he raises the staff skyward. Compositionally, the figure still fills the left side of the canvas, though the rendering contains more ornamentation, with an accentuated eye and an infusion of colour. In the right quadrant, the moon, rather than the sun, delineating another phase of his life, is linked to him by a uniting line, signifying energy and oneness.

A bird claw has been added to the ongoing process of transformation in the third panel. Morrisseau celebrates the visual changes by further accentuating the decorative elements of the composition – adding additional colour and shapes to the segmentations of the thunderbird wing and the bodily elements of the included animals. The mustard colour shrinks, replaced by more of the copper colour to signify his increasing connection to his role as Copper Thunderbird. In panel four, the entire canvas background is painted copper. The sun radiates, once again, in the top left quadrant. The transformation process continues, as Morrisseau re-articulates the human form as a bird-shaped one. The hair headdress of the first three panels is replaced by a more dramatic bird headdress. Morrisseau begins to visually acknowledge his embodiment as thunderbird. An electric blue fills many of the segmentations, pulsating with life, like the now organically wrought energy lines surrounding the transformational being.

The fifth panel demonstrates the liminal stage prior to full conversion. The figure displays two wings that cradle his staff, birds, and fish and hold up a large mass of the mustard-coloured earth. His hair headpiece has been replaced, as the final traces of human form are erased.

Looking from panel to panel, a slow but constant progression appears. When the eye finally settles on the sixth and final panel, a majestic thunderbird captures full attention. It looks left, back toward the man changing form. Now a completed form, the transformed thunderbird manitou pulses with spiritual colour and energy. Ornate segmentation and intense colour pairings imbue the canvas with a spiritual light. Morrisseau masterfully elicits his visual aesthetic language to convey the story of his own transformation into Copper Thunderbird. Utilizing form, colour, composition, and six separate panels, the artist advances a personal, spiritual, and artistic conversion that is shared with the viewer.

Continually positioned within a romantic Primitivist genre, correspondingly linked to stereotypical binaries present in constructions of the Other, Morrisseau satisfies popular culture by delivering an artistic

masterpiece that appeases the universalizing force of modernism, just as his celebrated shamanic actions conform to stereotypical notions. John Bentley Mays, in a 1981 article titled “Morrisseau’s Art Explores Magic Forests of the Mind,” argues that the artist’s recent work “transports us into a shadowy archetypal realm”⁶⁹ and that his identity was continually constructed as both “tortured” and “powerful innocence.”⁷⁰ A 1979 *Maclean’s* magazine feature describes him as an “extremely religious man,” whose work is “reaching out beyond the Indian world.”⁷¹ *Maclean’s* critic Christopher Hume says, “shifting from one shade of religion to another, Morrisseau has nonetheless stayed a shaman, or medicine man.”⁷² Further, in his 1979 essay published by Sinclair and Pollock, Morrisseau presents himself as “being a shaman as well as a spiritual person.”⁷³ Embodiment of the non-descript shamanistic identity provided some measure of agency to Morrisseau, though clearly this confining identity remained within a racialized discourse that was a distortion of universalized notions of Indigenous shamanism reflected in the artistic Primitivism movement.

Conclusions

The six-panel *Man Changing into Thunderbird* exemplifies an artistic conveyance of visual and compositional shifts in Morrisseau’s spiritual teachings as the artist takes what he learned from his Mishomis and embarks on his spiritual journey within the context of Eckankar. Morrisseau understatedly confirms his transformation from his Anishinaabe roots to a unique, personal understanding of shamanism across six panels, far removed from the early explorations on birch bark.

Works envisioning transformation punctuate Morrisseau’s body of work, often painted when changes in his career and his own spiritual understandings occurred. From Anishinaabe teachings to his infusion of Christian and Eckankar spiritual lessons, a *mélange* of transformational revelations blossom in his work. The thunderbird transformation images discussed above fully actualize the artist’s personal and artistic evolution. A storyteller, Morrisseau forges unique concepts of change, conjuring the thunderbird narrative as an illustrative force for his personal convergence as Copper Thunderbird.

Man Changing into Thunderbird, through colour, form, and composition, archives Morrisseau’s sense of transformation that solidly defines his hybrid metamorphosis as an artist. The illuminating light and astral travel Morrisseau appropriated from his understanding of Eckankar, integrated with his early cultural teachings and his interest in Christianity, results in a lifelong exploration of transformation. Adhering to no specific religious doctrine but his own, Morrisseau creates compelling works that offer layers of meaning

and connections that reveal his rich identity, informed by the past, present, and the future.

NOTES

I had hoped to include images of the pictures discussed here but the Norval Morrisseau estate had not provided permission by the time of publication. Photographs that give some idea of Morrisseau's style have been included instead.

- 1 Norval MORRISSEAU, *Legends of My People: The Great Ojibway*, ed. Selwyn Dewdney (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1965), 4.
- 2 Basil JOHNSTON, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), xvi.
- 3 Vine DELORIA JR., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Jr., Reader*, Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner and Samuel Scinta, eds. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1999), 80–83.
- 4 Leanne SIMPSON, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011).
- 5 Basil H. JOHNSTON, *Anishinaubae Thesaurus* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007). Johnston has published more than a dozen books on the Anishinaabe. There are a number of spellings of Anishinaabe and I have chosen the one used by the Ojibway Cultural Foundation as my standard.
- 6 Ruth PHILLIPS, "Morrisseau's 'Entrance': Negotiating Primitivism, Modernism, and Anishnaabe Tradition," *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, ed. Greg Hill (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 52.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 8 Norval MORRISSEAU and Donald ROBINSON, *Norval Morrisseau: Travels to the House of Invention* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1998), 22.
- 9 JOHNSTON, *The Manitous*, 121.
- 10 *Ibid.*, xxi–xxii.
- 11 *Ibid.*, xxii.
- 12 Simon J. ORTIZ, *Woven Stone* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 7.
- 13 Margaret KOVACH, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 94.
- 14 Neal MCLEOD, *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2007), 8.
- 15 JOHNSTON, *The Manitous*, xiii.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 17 Lister SINCLAIR and Jack POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979). See also: MORRISSEAU, *Legends of My People*, 4–11. Morrisseau and Johnston collaborated on an exhibition project titled *The Art of Norval Morrisseau, The Writings of Basil H. Johnston*, mounted by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, in 1999.
- 18 SINCLAIR and POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 68.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 See HILL, *Norval Morrisseau*.
- 21 See Basil JOHNSTON, *Ojibway Ceremonies* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1982), 41–56.

- 22 Duke REDBIRD and Henning JACOBSEN, directors, *The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau* (documentary film) National Film Board of Canada, 1974. Anishinaabe poet Armand Ruffo also describes this event in his poem “Norval Morrisseau: Man Changing Into Thunderbird,” ed. HILL, *Norval Morrisseau*, 78–92.
- 23 For Morrisseau’s description of his acquisition of the name *Copper Thunderbird*, see HILL, *Norval Morrisseau*, 17.
- 24 John A. GRIM, “Ojibway Shamanism,” *Shamanism: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), 96.
- 25 JOHNSTON describes a naming ceremony (Wauweendaussowin) in *Ojibway Ceremonies*, 11–31.
- 26 Cree syllabics were devised by the Reverend James Evans at Norway House (in present-day Manitoba) in 1840. He had designed a similar alphabet for Ojibwa, a closely related language, in 1836. Evans produced considerable printed material in syllabics, largely hymnals and prayer books. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Accessed 25 Sept. 2012, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/james-evans>
- 27 SINCLAIR and POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 45.
- 28 Pressure to cease painting spiritual imagery eventually dissipated but not before a number of the artist’s early works were destroyed.
- 29 Ruth PHILLIPS, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 266.
- 30 Norval MORRISSEAU, *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1958–1960, watercolour and ink on birch bark, 63 × 101.3 cm, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec (III-G-1099). Please see comment at the beginning of the notes.
- 31 MORRISSEAU, *Legends of My People*, 4–5.
- 32 JOHNSTON, *Anishinaubae Thesaurus*, 19.
- 33 Norval MORRISSEAU, *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1958–1960, oil on birch bark, 84 × 90.5 × 3 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (2002.14). Please see comment at the beginning of the notes.
- 34 SINCLAIR and POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 66.
- 35 Elizabeth MCLUHAN and Tom HILL, *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers* (Toronto: Methuen, 1984), 32.
- 36 PHILLIPS, “Morrisseau’s ‘Entrance,’” 60.
- 37 PHILLIPS, *Trading Identities*, 266.
- 38 MORRISSEAU, *Legends of My People*, 4–14.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 78–81.
- 40 John Bentley MAYS, “Morrisseau’s Art Explores Magic Forests of the Mind,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 9 July 1981, 17.
- 41 Jack POLLOCK, *Dear M: Letters from a Gentleman of Excess* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 40.
- 42 HILL, *Norval Morrisseau*, 21.
- 43 Bill ANTHES, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 60.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 45 Pearl MCCARTHY, “Explorers Discover New Ideas,” *The Globe and Mail*, 25 Aug. 1962, 25.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*

- 48 ANTHES, *Native Moderns*, 84.
- 49 Dorothy PFEIFFER, "Ojibway Indian Artist," *The Montreal Gazette*, 27 Apr. 1963, 28.
- 50 MCLUHAN and HILL, *Norval Morriseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, 56.
- 51 Norval MORRISSEAU, *Shaman Riding a Thunderbird*, 1972, acrylic on kraft paper, 101.6 × 161.3 cm, Collection of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau, Quebec. Please see comment at the beginning of the notes.
- 52 A pencil sketch of this same subject included in the Canadian Museum of Civilization collection is more closely aligned to the birch bark paintings mentioned here. See Hill, *Norval Morriseau*, 168.
- 53 MCLUHAN and HILL, *Norval Morriseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, 65.
- 54 SINCLAIR and POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morriseau*, 42–44.
- 55 See Carmen ROBERTSON, "The Reel Norval Morriseau: An Analysis of the National Film Board of Canada's Paradox of Norval Morriseau," *International Journal of Learning* 11 (2004): 315–21, for further discussion.
- 56 This section of the film is heavily edited and difficult to understand. See REDBIRD and JACOBSEN, *The Paradox of Norval Morriseau*.
- 57 James PURDIE, "Traditional Value Systems Challenged," *The Globe and Mail*, 3 July 1976, 30.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Mircea ELIADE, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1964), 8.
- 60 GRIM, "Ojibway Shamanism," 96.
- 61 Paul TWITCHELL, *Dialogues with the Master* (San Diego: Illuminated Way Press, 1970). Controversy surrounds Eckankar and it has been referred to as a cult. Religious scholar Lucy DuPertuis argues that Eckankar and over twenty other similar spiritual organizations sprang up in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s because of the influence of Sant Mat, Radhasoami, or the Divine Light Mission (DLM) tradition, the Hindu concept of charisma. Eckankar borrows liberally from the DLM for notions of illumination and light as direct symbolic paths to enlightenment. See Lucy DUPERTUIS, "How People Recognize Charisma: The Case of *Darshan* in *Radhasoami* and Divine Light Mission," *Sociological Analysis* 47:2 (1986): III–24.
- 62 MORRISSEAU and ROBINSON, *Norval Morriseau*, 16.
- 63 HILL, *Norval Morriseau*, 26.
- 64 Norval MORRISSEAU, *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, 1977, acrylic on canvas (six panels), 153.5 × 125.7 cm each, private collection. Please see comment at the beginning of the notes.
- 65 Gary Michael DAULT, "Painter Gives Canadians a Masterpiece," *Toronto Star*, 29 Aug. 1977, D5.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 MAYS, "Morriseau's Art Explores Magic Forests of the Mind," 17.
- 70 DAULT, "Painter Gives Canadians a Masterpiece."
- 71 Christopher HUME, "The New Age of Indian Art," *Maclean's Magazine* 92:4 (22 Jan. 1979): 24.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 SINCLAIR and POLLOCK, *The Art of Norval Morriseau*, 45.

L'Oiseau-tonnerre et le concept de transformation dans l'art de Norval Morrisseau

CARMEN L. ROBERTSON

L'artiste anishinaabe Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007), ou Copper Thunderbird (*Miskwaabik Animiiki*), a construit, au long d'une carrière de cinquante années, un langage visuel unique qui formule une grande variété de thèmes artistiques, y compris des concepts chamaniques. Morrisseau a exploré au cours de sa vie trois directions spirituelles principales qui sont reflétées dans son art : les enseignements spirituels de la culture anishinaabe, le christianisme et Eckankar. Chacune de ces forces spirituelles influence l'artiste de diverses manières, et il en réunit des aspects pour informer son sens personnel de la spiritualité.

Morrisseau a produit un certain nombre d'images iconiques liées à la transformation de l'Oiseau-tonnerre au cours de sa carrière, y compris deux exemples du début, 1958–1960, peints sur écorce de bouleau noir, ainsi que *Shaman Riding a Thunderbird* en 1972, acrylique sur toile, et les six panneaux de *Man Changing into Thunderbird* de 1977. Chacune de ces peintures révèle des moments divers et signifiants dans la transformation de la propre compréhension spirituelle de l'artiste. Partant du savoir anishinaabe et à travers diverses expériences de vie jusqu'à son adhésion à Eckankar en 1976, Morrisseau forme et incorpore des éléments disparates de transformation spirituelle dans les représentations de l'Oiseau-tonnerre mentionnées plus haut. Le présent essai analyse de quelle manière Morrisseau exprime des notions originales de transformation spirituelle et personnelle à travers son propre langage esthétique visuel.

Le grand-père, ou *Mishomis*, de Norval Morrisseau, Moses 'Potan' Nanakonagos était un chaman bien connu, et Morrisseau passait des heures à l'écouter et à apprendre, absorbant les traditions orales ; c'est de lui qu'il a appris à comprendre les rituels chamaniques. La religion organisatrice des Anishinaabe, le *Medaewaewin* (qu'on épelle parfois *Midewiwin*), était une société d'hommes et de femmes médecine qui se consacraient à l'étude des propriétés curatives des plantes, à la guérison et à la recherche de l'équilibre et du bien-être, selon l'ethnologue anishinaabe Basil Johnston. Pendant le XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e, nous dit l'historienne de l'art Ruth Phillips,

les chamans anishinaabe « ont formé la société Midewiwin dont les membres enregistraient leurs traditions orales, leurs connaissances ésotériques et leurs complexes rituels d'initiation en gravant des symboles pictographiques sur des panneaux d'écorce de bouleau et des rouleaux ».

L'artiste a peint au moins deux premières versions de *Man Changing Into Thunderbird*, entre 1958 et 1960, sur de l'écorce de bouleau. Sinclair et Pollock interprètent la fascination de Morrisseau pour ces êtres : « Morrisseau voit ses Oiseaux-tonnerre comme des êtres forts, dynamiques, porteurs d'énergie et de fertilité. Si les conditions sont bonnes, un homme de pouvoir, un chaman, peut assumer les formidables attributs de l'Oiseau-tonnerre. L'homme qui se transforme en Oiseau-tonnerre est Norval Morrisseau – Copper Thunderbird ».

Les premières images, plutôt maladroitement conçues sur écorce de bouleau, ont été remplacées par une imagerie plus fluide et visuellement puissante à la fin des années soixante et au début des années soixante-dix. L'introduction d'un ferme contour noir redéfinit les images d'une manière plus unifiée au plan de la composition. Une interprétation de l'art de Morrisseau – aussi bien au plan de la forme que de la performance – à travers le concept de transformation démontre l'importance dans son art d'influences qui se meuvent au-delà de ses premières racines culturelles anishinaabe.

En 1972, Morrisseau a peint *Shaman Riding a Thunderbird*. Cette œuvre offre une autre perspective sur la transformation, en exprimant une interprétation moins didactique du récit de l'Oiseau-tonnerre. En montrant un chaman chevauchant un Oiseau-tonnerre, le langage esthétique de Morrisseau révèle une relation mieux réussie en fusionnant son style et le sujet spirituel. L'Oiseau-tonnerre, forme dynamique, vue de profil, au contour tracé d'un trait noir épais et à l'intérieur décoré de segments colorés, est devenu emblématique. Le chaman stylisé, aussi vu de profil, chevauche le dynamique oiseau. Disparus, les détails esquissés avec raideur que l'on retrouve dans les deux premiers exemples sur écorce de bouleau. Morrisseau est un conteur et il forge des concepts de changement originaux, conjurant le récit de l'Oiseau-tonnerre comme une force illustrant sa convergence personnelle en tant que Copper Thunderbird – Oiseau-tonnerre de cuivre.

L'œuvre grand format en six panneaux intitulée *Man Changing into Thunderbird* (1977), forgée visuellement à travers la couleur, la forme et la composition, récapitule le sens de la transformation qui définit solidement la métamorphose de Morrisseau en tant qu'artiste. La lumière illuminatrice et le voyage astral que Morrisseau a acquis de sa compréhension d'Eckankar, passés au tamis de ses premiers enseignements culturels et de son intérêt pour le christianisme à célébrer, résulte en une exploration de la transformation

tout au long de sa vie. N'adhérant à aucune doctrine religieuse autre que la sienne, cette œuvre nous saisit, offrant des niveaux de sens et de connexions qui révèlent la riche identité de Morrisseau, nourrie du passé, du présent et du futur.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette