



# NORVAL MORRISSEAU

## THE RED LAKE YEARS



Norval Morrisseau standing in front of a mural at the old Red Lake Indian Friendship Centre, 1960s. The painting in the centre was done by Morrisseau, while Carl Ray and Joshim Kakegamic, also Woodland artists of the area, painted the works on the left and right respectively (Red Lake Museum). The following exhibit is a reproduction of the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition. During 2001, this show travelled to the following communities in Manitoba: Leaf Rapids, The Pas, Thompson, Brandon, and Winnipeg. It received rave reviews everywhere it went.

The Red Lake Museum gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Department of Canadian Heritage for this project.

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A special exhibit of the Red Lake Museum, June - Sept. 2000



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea that the Red Lake Museum would host an exhibit of the art of Norval Morrisseau began with the Red Lake Museum Board of Directors in the summer of 1999. The endorsement of the idea by both the Museum Board and members of the local Aboriginal community provided a basis to initiate contact with local collectors. They have been not only willing but wonderfully enthusiastic in loaning their art and sharing the stories of its acquisition. Townspeople, many of them Red Lake pioneers, have also been generous with their time and their memories. There has been strong support and guidance from local professionals who have freely shared with Museum staff their expertise related to the visual arts.

This project has also received invaluable assistance from larger museums and galleries, among them the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, the Glenbow Art Gallery, Kinsman Robinson Galleries and the Maslak-McLeod Gallery. Their staff have offered encouragement, advice and patient instruction as often as it was requested. Individuals who once lived in Red Lake or knew Morrisseau in other places have willingly agreed to interviews and have shared interesting insights. The Red Lake Museum gratefully acknowledges all of the different forms of assistance it has received with the preparation and presentation of its exhibition:

Norval Morrisseau: The Red Lake Years.



## FOREWORD

The purpose of this exhibition is to offer the public - both local and beyond our borders - a chance to experience the life as well as the work of Aboriginal artist Norval Morrisseau, who emerged dramatically as an international talent while living and working in the Red Lake area, from 1950 to 1975. Until now, this part of Morrisseau's story has received little attention. It was our belief that this cultural heritage deserved exploration and celebration by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, in the landscape and the social environment which inspired the artist during his formative years. As the innovator of the "Woodland School of Art" Morrisseau broke with Ojibway tradition in presenting to the general public depictions of traditional legends, spiritual beliefs and a world view of his people. His work, and that of those who followed his path, continues to provide a richness of information and opportunity for cross-cultural understanding.

The Red Lake Museum is committed to advancing knowledge, appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal art and culture, as well as the First Nations' contribution to the Red Lake District. We hope that this story will encourage and support current and emerging artistic talent, especially among Aboriginal youth from the region, by highlighting Morrisseau's connections with Red Lake at an important point in his development.

Due to space restrictions only some of the stories compiled during our research have been recorded in this publication. Since this story is essentially a living history, this is in no way the final word on Norval Morrisseau. If you want to know more about this remarkable artist, we suggest you talk to the people of Red Lake. This was where the idea of this project was born: to use the rich oral tradition of the area to reveal a story that shaped the future of Aboriginal art in Canada.

Michele Alderton Director/Curator Red Lake Museum

Nancy Phillips Researcher/Project Co-Ordinator

## ARTIST PROFILE

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“Among the Indians, as among other nations, some people are born artists, but most are not. I am a born artist. I have as much interest in my people as any anthropologist, and I have studied our culture and lore. My aim is to reassemble the pieces of a once proud culture, and to show the dignity and bravery of my people(1).”

These are the words of Norval Morriseau, Aboriginal Canadian artist, storyteller, Grand Shaman and founder of the Woodland School of Art. Morriseau has accomplished his aim and more. This brief biographical profile takes a closer look at the years 1959-1975. This period marked the start of his career as an artist and a meteoric rise to fame in art circles, both nationally and beyond. It also spans most of the years of his married and family life, a large part of which was spent in the Red Lake area. Hence, Norval Morriseau: The Red Lake Years.

Dates and locations of Morriseau’s birth and birthplace differ - March 14, 1931 in Fort William, Ontario or March 14, 1932 at Sand Point Reserve near Beardmore, Ontario. He was the eldest of five boys born to Abel Morriseau and Grace Theresa Potan Nanakonagos. Baptismal records show his name as Jean Baptiste Normand Henri Morriseau with yet another birth date - March 26, 1933. These interesting discrepancies are mere details about the life of the man now known as Norval Morriseau. He describes “soul travel” which takes him to other dimensions. His life reflects clear extremes of physical, emotional, spiritual and economic states of being. He has been a ‘larger than life’ figure who has survived on the street. Here are some parts of the story of the ‘storyteller’.

After a short period in residential school in Thunder Bay, Morriseau returned to Beardmore to rejoin his grandparents, who were raising him, an Ojibway tradition for the firstborn son. The influence of his maternal grandfather, Moses “Potan” Nanakonagos, has been well documented. Moses was a storyteller/shaman among his people and Morriseau absorbed the oral legends and beliefs from his earliest years.

In 1957 Morriseau married Harriet Kakegamic - now remembered as a tall, attractive, likable woman - who was from Sandy Lake Reserve northeast of Red Lake. They met in Fort William (now Thunder Bay) at the tuberculosis sanatorium while Morriseau was receiving treatment. The “Red Lake Years” began in 1959 when Morriseau arrived in Cochenour, Ontario to work in the Cochenour-Willans gold mine. He was tall, slim and soft-spoken. His job in the mill was as a “flotation operator,” watching and adjusting a large vat of liquid gold ore and chemicals. This two-year span has been referred to as the longest period of steady employment Morriseau experienced. Fellow employees recall Morriseau painting during slack times on the job. The art, sometimes on mill filter paper, was left rolled in a corner of the mill when he had to attend to the flotation mix. Although lacking any formal art instruction, he had no inhibitions about how to paint. His early materials included birchbark, hide, plywood, building paper, fabric scraps - anything that was at hand. There was resistance to his art because he was breaking a taboo by depicting beliefs and traditions of the Ojibway culture but Morriseau believed this task had been given to him in a vision and was sanctioned by his grandfather.

Dr. Joseph Weinstein began to practice medicine in Cochenour in 1955, moving his family from Montreal to this remote area. At that time McKenzie Island, a short boat ride across the Bruce Channel from Cochenour, provided the nearest grocery store. His wife, Esther, was shopping in Fergus McDougall’s store and spotted some art resting on the floor. The Weinstains were widely travelled, and studies in



archaeology and an interest in the art of various cultures sparked her curiosity. She bought the painting, and this marked the beginning of an important and supportive relationship between Morrisseau, the young artist, and the Weinstein family. When they left the area six years later, Morrisseau sent with them a gift of one of his paintings to present to Picasso, with whom the couple was acquainted.

Selwyn Dewdney, artist and author, visited Red Lake several times. In 1960 he was to spend a summer visiting and recording rock painting sites. He had heard via a friend, OPP officer Robert Sheppard, that there was an interesting Native artist in the area. He and Morrisseau met on McKenzie Island and, after time spent together paddling through northwestern Ontario, collaborated on a book *Legends of My People, The Great Ojibway*, published in 1965. These rock paintings are an expression of the same legends, spiritual beliefs and history which underlay Morrisseau's art.

In the summer of 1962 Morrisseau was in Beardmore. Jack Pollock, a young art gallery-owner from Toronto, was teaching art in Northwestern Ontario on a government-sponsored programme. On the second day of his classes in Beardmore Pollock looked up to see Morrisseau, with art rolled under his arm. Pollock was "stunned" at the quality of what he saw (2). He arranged for a show of Morrisseau's work at his gallery in Toronto in September, 1962. It was a complete sell-out. But the response of the Toronto art world was not reflected in Red Lake for several years. However, Morrisseau did prepare for another exhibit soon after by confining himself to the basement of the "What-Not Shop" in Red Lake as he painted non-stop. His life as an artist of renown had begun.

Over the next decade there would be exhilarating peaks of fame and monetary reward followed by valleys of impoverishment and neglect of his family. In the midst of this, some saw evidence of a deep affection between husband and wife. Others saw a very unequal relationship which allowed one partner to pursue his destiny and the other to attempt to raise six children with minimal support. The family often experienced the frustration of being presented with extravagant but useless gifts (such as a set of Spode china) while there was no food or in the house. Harriet's baseball arm helped to dispose of the china!

The children were born from 1957-1975 as the family moved between Beardmore, Cochenour, Sandy Lake, McKenzie Island and Red Lake. Morrisseau reportedly enjoyed children and one large portrait of his daughter, Victoria, with his first grandson, conveys pride and love. An interesting paradox is that in his art children are shown richly-dressed with looks of wonder and contentment, while his own children experienced neglect and poverty.

Harriet's parents and siblings provided help but she also found herself dependent on government support and the kindness of the townspeople. Only one son, David, also an artist, speaks publicly of his father, and his comments are mostly negative.

From 1965 to 1975 the rising popularity of "Woodland Art" with Morrisseau as the founder began to make itself felt in Red Lake. However, there was a dilemma for townspeople. Many were reluctant to buy Morrisseau's paintings when he was intoxicated because they did not want to take advantage of him. Others hesitated for another reason: they did not want to hand him cash when they suspected the money would be spent on alcohol, rather than to support his family.

The difficulties experienced by the Morrisseau family were not all the result of Morrisseau's behaviour. Many families from reserve communities further north moved to larger centres such as Red Lake for





employment, and to avoid sending their children to attend residential school. When Morrisseau quit mining in the early 1960s and became a full-time artist, his family moved from a Cochenour Mine housing compound, locally known as “Hiawatha Drive”, which was designated for Native people, to a small cabin on the hill of Mckenzie Island. They later spent some time in very inadequate housing in Red Lake. Although there was awareness of a housing crisis, various levels of government were slow to respond, and their attitudes were paternalistic. It was even difficult for Morrisseau, with money but with no steady employment, to open a bank account.

However, in 1973, there was government support for the formation of the Triple K Cooperative in Red Lake. Three of Harriet Morrisseau’s brothers - Henry, Joshim and Goyce Kakegamic - were the founding triumvirate of this Native-run silk-screen endeavour, which was located in a modest building on Howey Street (now Panis Productions). Although working with relatives proved to be challenging, Triple-K experienced success by producing high quality art prints which were both affordable and available. This gave great impetus to the group of young artists who worked in the style that Morrisseau had originated and to the ever-increasing popularity of “Woodland Art”. Morrisseau had provided the spark which ignited a movement. It happened in Red Lake because he came here almost twenty years earlier and the community provided recognition and encouragement for a remarkable talent.

Today, Morrisseau, the born artist, continues to paint, despite the difficulties of living with Parkinson’s disease. From his modest beginnings in remote locations in Northwestern Ontario, Morrisseau is now recognized as “the inspiration for one of Canada’s most vibrant exciting national art movements, the Woodland School of Art” (3).

#### Footnotes

(1) Herbert T. Schwarz, *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibways*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969) 6-7.

(2) Jack Pollock, *Dear M : Letters from a Gentleman of Excess*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989) 38.

(3) Norval Morrisseau, *Norval Morrisseau : Travels to the House of Invention*, (Toronto: Key Porter, 1997) jacket flyleaf.



## IMAGE CONVENTIONS IN MORRISSEAU'S ART

**Lines of Power:** Figures of animals and people may show “lines of power” radiating from heads or bodies. They are short lines whose variations in length and intensity indicate the quality of the power. They can both transmit and receive information.

**Lines of Communication:** Animals and people are joined with these flowing lines which indicate relationships. They reflect the artist's perception of the nature of the interdependence.

**Lines of Prophecy:** Some creatures of power may have frond-like curling lines issuing from their mouths. They mean more than ordinary speech. They are an indication of prophecy, often associated with shaman talk.

**Lines of Movement:** These are very short lines which show important physical movement near an organ (heart) or a shaking tent.

**The Divided Circle:** Morrisseau makes repeated use of the “divided circle”, often showing several in one painting. Usually, they are connected with the main image by lines of communication. This symbol carries a great deal of meaning. It represents all of the dualities present in Morrisseau's view of the world. They may be good and evil, heaven and earth, day and night.

**X-Ray Decoration:** This term describes the artist's depiction of inner structures for animals and persons. These structures may show internal organs such as the heart or womb. They may show representations of inner spiritual life. Clothing is seldom indicated and then is usually elaborate robes or costumes.

**Use of Colour:** Colour is very important in Morrisseau's art. For most of his career he has painted with unmixed acrylics. Morrisseau believes that colour reflects an inner reality. It also transmits a harmony through nature to the material world. For Morrisseau colour placement is intuitive.

[Note: The above information has been paraphrased from - Lister Sinclair, and Jack Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*. (Toronto: Methuen, 1979) 51-58.]



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### Norval Morrisseau's Thunderbird



(thunderbird), ca. 1960

Acrylic on kraft paper

76.84 x 158.12 cm

#### **Red Lake Museum Collection**

The Thunderbird is an image which represents a protector or a powerful guardian. Morrisseau describes being given the name of “Copper Thunderbird” when, as a youth, he needed help to overcome an illness. The substance “copper” joined with the beliefs associated with the thunderbird results in a very powerful combination. This is the translation of the name written in syllabics on Morrisseau’s paintings.

This Thunderbird clearly radiates “power” from his eye and wing tips with strong connections to the five divided circles around him. He carries a medicine sac on his neck.

Ken McLeod, owner of McLeod’s Transportation in Red Lake, purchased this piece circa 1960. It hung in his office for years, viewed by customers and those who dropped in for coffee and conversation on a Sunday morning. When Ken became Reeve of Red Lake in 1964, he moved the painting to the Municipal Office. It remained there until it was donated to the Red Lake Museum in 1995, just prior to the demolition of the Municipal Office.





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### K. Tingley Collection

This “Thunderbird” was likely painted in 1964, shortly before it was acquired by the present owner, Mrs. Kay Tingley. The image is in complete profile. There are six “divided circles”, a very consistent symbol in Morrisseau’s art. They represent dualities - opposing (or complementary) forces, such as good and evil. There are “lines of communication” between all exterior divided circles and the main image, the “Thunderbird”. It is unusual to see Morrisseau’s signature in syllabics within one of these circles.

(thunderbird) 1964  
Acrylic on paper 55 x 75 cm  
Kay Tingley Collection



(mother loon and baby) 1964  
Acrylic on paper 53.5 x 67.5 cm  
Kay Tingley Collection



The second work, showing a mother loon and baby, uses more subdued colours and shows simple lines of communication between the creatures. Both mother and baby show x-ray or internal structures, which may represent actual organs or depict more abstract ideas.

The details surrounding Kay Tingley’s acquisition of this art arise from everyday life in Red Lake, of which Morrisseau was a part. A town water supply was fairly new in 1964, and so was Hyslop’s Laundromat.

Morrisseau happened to meet Ron Tingley there and asked to borrow some quarters for the machines. They knew each other as Ron worked with Motorways, a trucking company which often carried freight for Morrisseau. When it was clear that he needed more than a few coins, Morrisseau went outside and returned with two rolled paintings tied with a child’s stocking and offered them to Ron. They settled on a price of twenty dollars and Morrisseau was able to continue with his laundry. Although they were not married at the time, Ron knew Kay was interested in this artist’s work, and he gave these two paintings to her as a gift.

One or the other of these two pieces have hung in Kay and Ron’s house in Red Lake since then. Most years, Kay would take her art and photos to Morden, Manitoba, (the family home) as the “fire season” approached. Safely stored under a bed they made the return journey in the fall. One of the few years Kay did not transport the art and photos to safety was 1980, when there was a serious fire. However, Kay’s treasures survived the ordeal although some people did not.



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### F. Carlson Collection

Florence Carlson is a Red Lake area pioneer and this work, which she thinks of as “The Owls”, has hung in her living room for thirty years. She received this painting as a Christmas gift from her son, Hugh, circa 1962. She believes Morrisseau gave it to Hugh in return for favours Hugh did for him. Florence recalls that her interest in Morrisseau’s art was spurred by the fact that he was living in the area. She did not know him but has a sense of the contribution he has made to Canada and the world by originating a “new style of art”. Her husband Arthur, deceased since 1996, framed this work himself with oak flooring strips left over after he had finished building their house.

This work, shows lines of communication encircling the mother and baby owls with a divided circle on either side. It conveys a maternal protectiveness and security.



(the owls), ca. 1962

Acrylic on paper

95.88 x 90.17 cm.

Florence Carlson Collection

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### H. Carlson Collection

The paintings on these facing pages are similar in support, size, type of paint and colours used and each has a hand-written title or description on the back. This one reads “the thunderbird Embodys (sic) the Indian to show the Indian as Spirit Protection. Protection for the Indian Needed this Protection for his well being. “ It is numbered with a “2”.



(thunderbird), ca. 1966 (above)  
Acrylic on paper 30.72 x 50.45  
Hugh Carlson Collection



(thunderbird and shaman), 1966 (right)  
Acrylic on paper 50.45 x 30.72 cm  
Hugh Carlson Collection

Hugh Carlson, who has loaned these two pieces, also graciously agreed to have them re-framed which offered the opportunity to view what was written on the backs. This one has the words “Thunderbird the Protector of all the Indian people of North America” and the number “5”. He believes they were given to him circa 1966 in return for acting as a “go-between”. That is, he was willing to travel between McKenzie Island, where Morrisseau was living then with his family, and Red Lake, where an associate of Morrisseau’s - Jim Stevens - lived. Hugh was a part-time student/miner with an affinity for interesting people. Hugh’s contact with Morrisseau continued when the artist moved to Sandy Lake for temporary periods. Hugh was asked to purchase food and art supplies and ship them north.





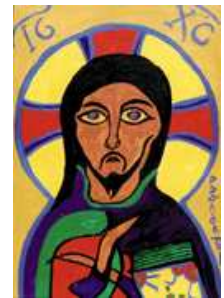
# NORVAL MORRISSEAU THE RED LAKE YEARS

## Ron Joensen Collection

There are five Morrisseau paintings on loan from Ron Joensen, of Cochenour, Ontario, who inherited them from his parents. As a child, Ron lived on McKenzie Island. His parents, Peter and Rose (Lennard) Joensen, owned and ran the store/cafe called McKenzie Meats from 1954-1974. They lived on the top floor. Ron and his sister, Mavis, remember that Morrisseau, who lived in a small house up the hill from McKenzie Meats, was often in the store conversing with their father.

Peter, as well as others, tried to help Morrisseau control his alcohol use by refusing to buy art from him when it seemed his intention was to drink. Ron remembers that his mother formed a bond with two of Morrisseau's younger children who continued to visit her after their parents separated in 1975. Rose was not sympathetic to Morrisseau when his children seemed to do without, while he spent money elsewhere. He may have been trying to gain her approval when he specifically gave her the "Jesus" (Christ's head) piece.

These paintings were acquired circa 1968 but did not hang in the Joensen home until the family moved from McKenzie Island to Cochenour in 1974. They show clear, simple images with indications of the "lines of movement" near the internal organs. The larger fish painting shows more complex x-ray decoration. The teepee shapes on the beaver's back represent the traditional importance of this animal to Ojibway survival



(Christ head), ca. 1968  
Acrylic on paper 34 x 23.6 cm  
Ron Joensen Collection



(beaver), ca. 1968  
Acrylic on paper 26.3 x 36 cm  
Ron Joensen Collection

(Four loons), ca. 1968  
Acrylic on paper  
75 cm x 98 cm  
Ron Joensen Collection



(fish), c. 1968  
Acrylic on paper  
76 cm x 111 cm  
Ron Joensen Collection

(moose), ca. 1969  
Acrylic on paper  
26.3 x 36 cm  
Ron Joensen Collection





# NORVAL MORRISSEAU THE RED LAKE YEARS

## E. Shushack Collection

Fred and Evelyn Shushack arrived in the Red Lake area in 1966 when Fred was hired by the Red Lake School Board. They lived in Cochenour and Evelyn remembers Morrisseau coming to her door six or more times to use the phone for a cab or to talk to Fred who found him interesting and admired his art. Fred Shushack and Morrisseau may have met at the School Board office when Norval dropped in with art to sell.

This is the “serpent” or “Mishipizhiw” (water spirit) painting which Fred bought from Sharon Barnes in 1968 or 1969. This large piece, in muted browns and greens, shows a fierce creature turning to grab its own tail with sharp teeth. The “Mishipizhiw” can be translated as “the Great Lynx” although often is compared to a serpent. It represents a demi-god of the water, feared and revered. This painting hung in the School Board Office until Fred left that job in 1981.

The two pieces - “loon family” and “ loons and fish” form a pair which Fred Shushack asked Morrisseau to paint, in 1969 or 1970. The colours are muted greens, blue and brown (suggested by the purchaser). There are lines of power reaching out from the backs of the “loon family” and lines of communication connecting them with a very small solid circle at the halfway point.

The loons and fish also show a line of power between each of them, and lines of communication flowing between fish and loon and between other loons, with prominent divided circles on each major connection. These two pieces hung in the Shushack recreation room when they moved to a new home on Lakeview Drive, until the family moved to British Columbia in 1981 and they were hung in that house. There is a small hole in the mouth of the fish. Fred inserted a fishing lure there with a line running to a fishing rod mounted on the wall nearby. A sportsman’s touch!



(serpent or Mishipizhiw), ca. 1968  
Acrylic on paper  
101.6 x 106.5 cm  
Evelyn Shushack Collection



(loon family), ca. 1969  
Acrylic on paper 81.28 x 127 cm  
Evelyn Shushack collection

(loons and fish), ca. 1969  
Acrylic on paper  
81.28 x 127 cm  
Evelyn Shushack Collection







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### Murielle & Jack Goodwillie Collection

The owners of this painting, Murielle and Jack Goodwillie, believe that the title “Tree of Life” is written on the back but are not sure if Morrisseau put it there or someone else did. It was given to them by Jack’s father, John Goodwillie, early in their marriage. It was likely painted in the mid-to-late 1960s. John Goodwillie owned and ran the Lakeview Restaurant in Red Lake, and he purchased this painting from Morrisseau there. The senior Goodwillies sold the restaurant in 1976/77 so it seems this piece was completed before then. (The Image Makers dated this type of painting by Morrisseau later than these dates at 1979). Jack and Murielle hung this art in their home in Red Lake for almost twenty years.

There is a strong link between this image and traditional Ojibway beadwork designs. The “Beaded Bag” (which originated in the Red Lake area) is also on display as part of this exhibit, and highlights this link. The use of European glass beads, rather than the more traditional quills or moose hair, began to dominate the craft by the nineteenth century (Image Makers, p. 70 and designs became more colourful with flowing lines). Morrisseau would have seen these as he grew up and reflects them in art pieces such as this one. Morrisseau was living on McKenzie Island at this time but would be in Red Lake often. The Lakeview Restaurant was (and still is) known as a coffee spot likely to offer the latest “town-news-of-the-day.”



Tree of Life, ca.1968

Acrylic on paper

123 x 56.4 cm

Murielle and Jack Goodwillie Collection



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### Evelyn Shushack Collection

The evidence of bright blue, red and green in this large painting is very different from the earth tones seen in most of the earlier works available in this exhibit. Morrisseau's use of strong, primary colours increased dramatically during the seventies and later. Most often, adult or child figures in Morrisseau's art were clothed in ceremonial robes such as these, including the elaborate headdresses.

Purchased in 1975 but not framed until 2000, the painting labeled "Human figure with children and a bird" is known by the Shushacks as "Madonna." At this time Morrisseau and his wife Harriet were experiencing serious conflict, which resulted in separation. The strong use of blue, red and green is very different from the earth tones in the earlier works. Most often, adult or child figures in Morrisseau's art were clothed in ceremonial robes such as these, including the elaborate headdresses.

(human figure with children and bird), 1975  
Acrylic on paper  
1124.46 x 92.08 cm  
Evelyn Shushack Collection





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[Many of these books, articles and videocassettes are available in local libraries or on the internet.]

To learn more about Morrisseau's international career visit the Kinsman Robinson Gallery  
<http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artist.asp?ArtistID=11>