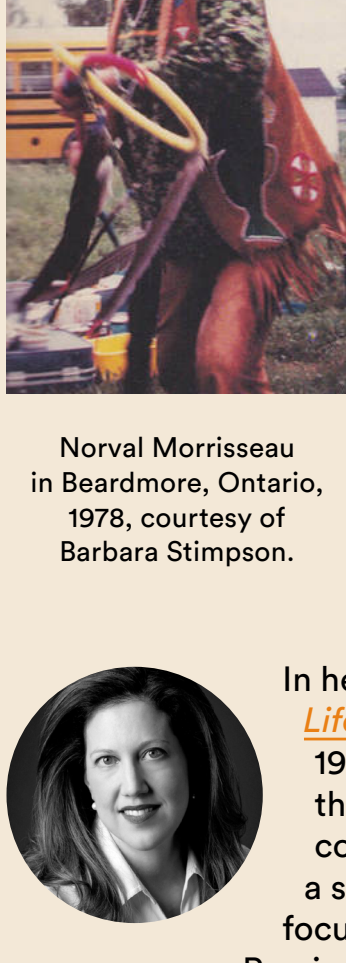


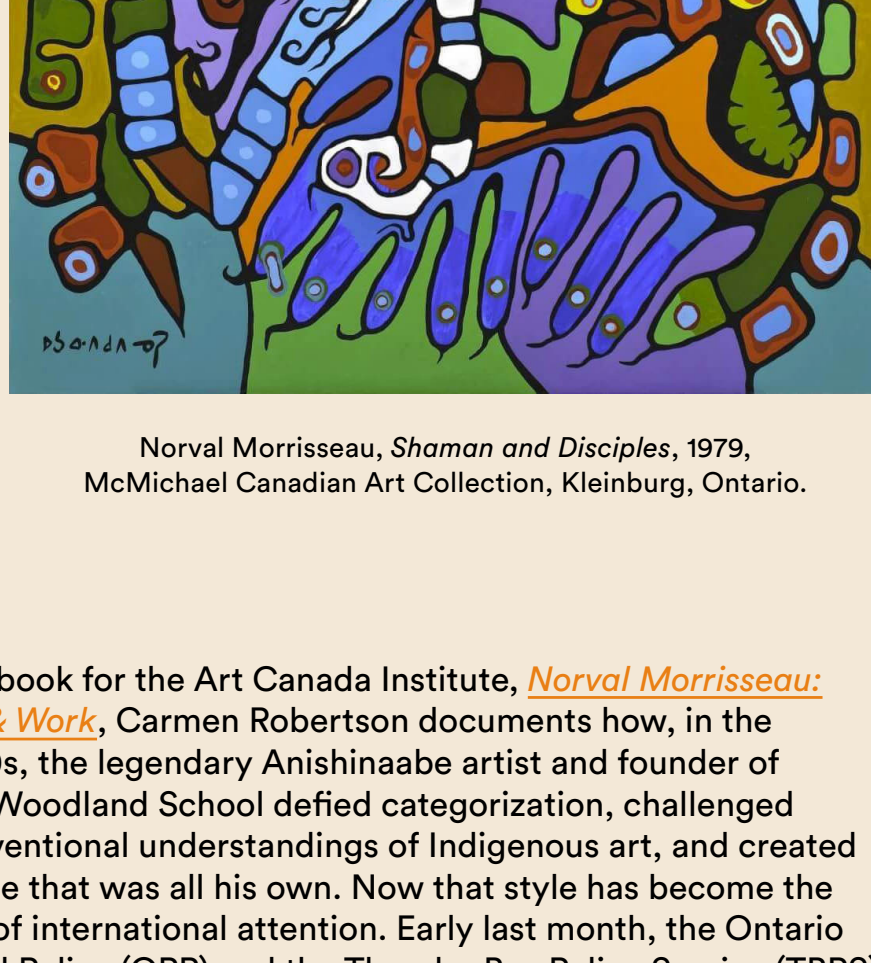
APRIL 21, 2023

# ANATOMY OF A CRIME THE NORVAL MORRISSEAU ART FORGERIES

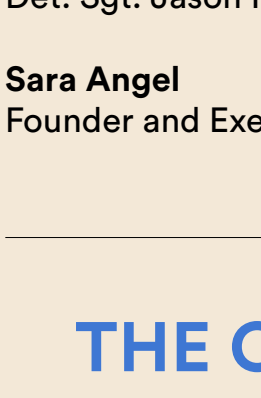
*Investigators are calling it “the biggest art fraud in world history.”  
The primary victim is the “grandfather” of contemporary Indigenous  
art in Canada, Norval Morrisseau.*



Norval Morrisseau  
in Beardmore, Ontario,  
1978, courtesy of  
Barbara Stimpson.



Norval Morrisseau, *Shaman and Disciples*, 1979,  
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

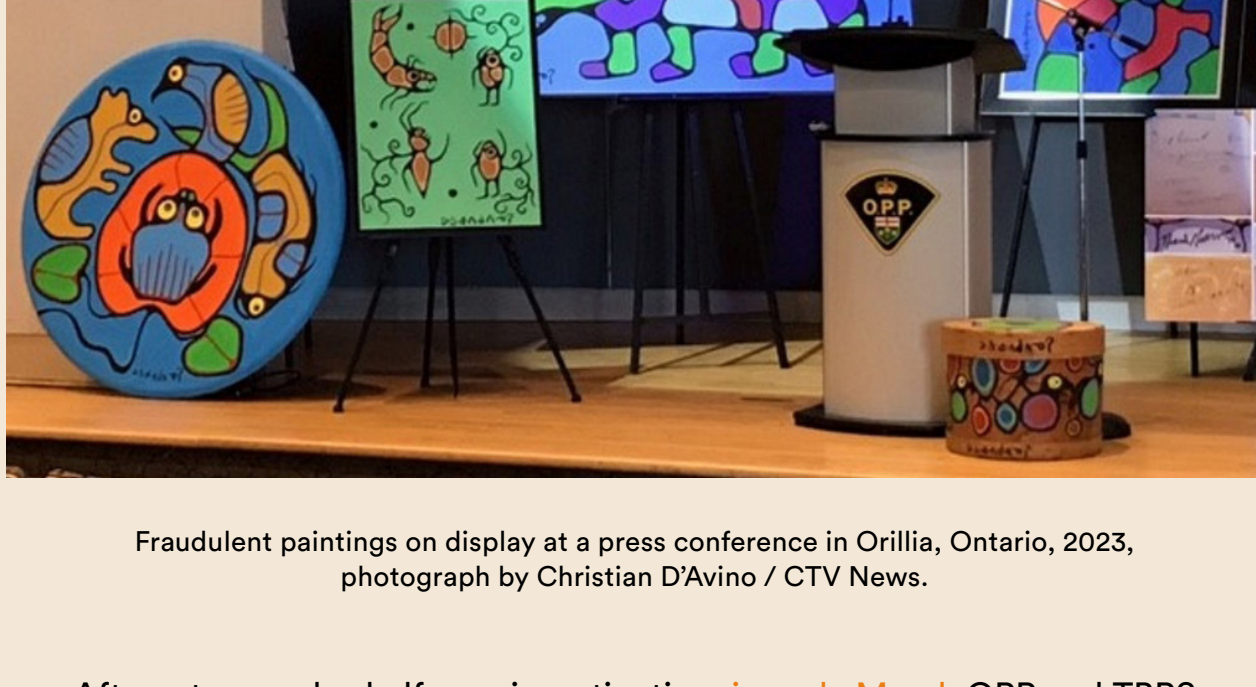


**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

In her book for the Art Canada Institute, [Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work](#), Carmen Robertson documents how, in the 1960s, the legendary Anishinaabe artist and founder of the Woodland School defied categorization, challenged conventional understandings of Indigenous art, and created a style that was all his own. Now that style has become the focus of international attention. Early last month, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and the Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS) charged eight people allegedly involved in an organized crime network that has seized more than 1,000 works. The investigators say there are likely thousands more imitation Morrisseau paintings still to be found. The accused, ranging in age from forty-seven to eighty-one, face a total of forty charges related to forgery, fraud, and criminal organization.

How did this situation come to pass, and what does it mean for the artist's legacy? Below, a look into what TBPS Det. Sgt. Jason Rybak calls “the biggest art fraud in world history.”

## THE CRIME AND THE CRIMINALS



Fraudulent paintings on display at a press conference in Orillia, Ontario, 2023,  
photograph by Christian D'Avino / CTV News.

After a two-and-a-half year investigation, [in early March](#) OPP and TBPS charged eight individuals in connection with the decades-long forgery ring and seized more than 1,000 works. The investigators say there are likely thousands more imitation Morrisseau paintings still to be found. The accused, ranging in age from forty-seven to eighty-one, face a total of forty charges related to forgery, fraud, and criminal organization.

For more, watch [Thunder Bay Police Service and Ontario Provincial Police announce the arrest on APTN News](#)

## HOW THE CRIME CAME TO LIGHT



Barenaked Ladies keyboardist and guitarist Kevin Hearn with the  
painting *Spirit Energy of Mother Earth*, photograph by David Leyes.

“The jump-off point for this investigation,” Det. Sgt. Jason Rybak at the TBPS [told the CBC](#), was the 2019 documentary *There Are No Fakes* by Jamie Kastner (airing now on CBC Gem). The film centres around the story of Kevin Hearn (above), a member of the pop-rock band Barenaked Ladies. In 2005 Hearn purchased what he believed to be an authentic Norval Morrisseau painting—*Spirit Energy of Mother Earth*—from Maslak McLeod Gallery in Toronto. “Little did I know the spider web was around me,” he later told [CBC's Day 6](#). More than a decade later, when Hearn learned that his purchase was a fake, he sued the gallery. Although the case was initially dismissed, the musician was later awarded \$60,000 in compensation by the Ontario Court of Appeal. “There is a misconception that art crime is a victimless crime,” says Hearn, “and that people aren't getting hurt by it.”

For more, watch the documentary [There Are No Fakes](#)

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## HOW COULD THE CRIME GO ON FOR SO LONG?



Dr. Carmen Robertson.



Norval Morrisseau in front of one of his paintings in Red Lake,  
Ontario, c.1968, courtesy of Red Lake Museum.

While Morrisseau's work is collected and revered both nationally and internationally, he did not keep a list of his paintings and there has been no comprehensive catalogue of his work, making him a target for fraudsters. Noting this gap in academic study, Dr. Carmen Robertson—Art Canada Institute author, Carleton University professor, and the Canada Research Chair in North American Indigenous Art and Material Culture—has created “The Morrisseau Project, 1955–1985.” The initiative is described by Carleton University as “a comprehensive investigation of Morrisseau's life and work during the decades that he produced many of his best known artworks, and ... the first such study of a contemporary Indigenous artist in Canada.” “This study is different from other art history projects,” says Robertson. “In addition to using art historical tools for research and analysis,” it “draw[s] from Indigenous methods to identify concepts of visual communication, story, and memory through partnerships with Anishinaabeg communities.”

[Learn more about “The Morrisseau Project, 1955–1985”](#)

## MORRISSEAU AND THE MARKET

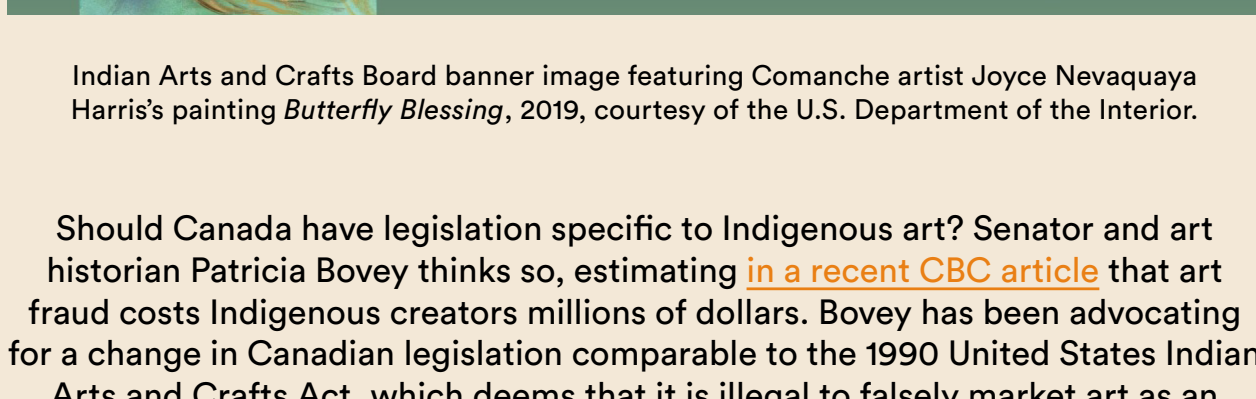


Norval Morrisseau, *Animal Unity*, 1978, courtesy of Cowley Abbott, Toronto.

Despite claims that the flood of forgeries has led to a devaluation of Morrisseau's work, his monumental painting *Animal Unity*, 1978, sold for an all-time high at Cowley Abbott's Spring 2022 Live Auction in Toronto: the purchase price of \$312,000 greatly outstripped the previous record of \$71,500. According to Rob Cowley, President of Cowley Abbott, the market for Morrisseau remains viable. “*Animal Unity* is a monumental canvas that has impeccable provenance. It can be traced directly to Morrisseau, by Morrisseau's first dealer Jack Pollock, which was published in 1979 (a date that precedes the forgeries).” In other words, if a Morrisseau is proved to be authentic, it is of particular value. Adds Cowley: “The recent news has provided some relief to collectors and to those who sell Morrisseau's work. There is hope that we are now heading toward a market with greater transparency and confidence to support the painter's legacy.”

[Learn more about \*Animal Unity\*](#)

## HOW CAN CANADA CURB FORGERIES?



Indian Arts and Crafts Board banner image featuring Comanche artist Joyce Nevaquaya Harris's painting *Butterfly Blessing*, 2019, courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

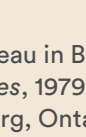
Should Canada have legislation specific to Indigenous art? Senator and art historian Patricia Bovey thinks so, estimating [in a recent CBC article](#) that art fraud costs Indigenous creators millions of dollars. Bovey has been advocating for a change in Canadian legislation comparable to the 1990 United States Indian Arts and Crafts Act, which deems that it is illegal to falsely market art as an Indigenous work. Violations of the act can be prosecuted and receive fines as high as \$1 million. The Act also created a fund to assist Indigenous communities and artists with legal fees; Bovey suggests implementing a similar fund here in Canada could have a significant positive impact for Indigenous artists.

## THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

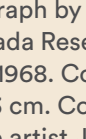
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**Image Credits:** [1] Norval Morrisseau in Beardmore, Ontario, 1978. Courtesy of Barbara Stimpson. [2] Norval Morrisseau, *Shaman and Disciples*, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 180.5 x 211.5 cm. Collection of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario (1979.34.7). [3] Examples of fraudulent paintings seized by the Ontario Provincial Police on display at a press conference in Orillia, Ontario, 2023. Photo credit: Christian D'Avino / CTV News. [4] Barenaked Ladies keyboardist and guitarist Kevin Hearn with the painting *Spirit Energy of Mother Earth*. Photograph by David Leyes. Courtesy of Cave 7 Productions Inc. [5] Dr. Carmen Robertson. Courtesy of the Canada Research Chairs Program. [6] Norval Morrisseau in front of one of his paintings in Red Lake, Ontario, c.1968. Courtesy of Red Lake Museum. [7] Norval Morrisseau, *Animal Unity*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 127 x 274.3 cm. Courtesy of Cowley Abbott, Toronto. [8] Indian Arts and Crafts Board banner image featuring Comanche artist Joyce Nevaquaya Harris's painting *Butterfly Blessing*, 2019. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior.