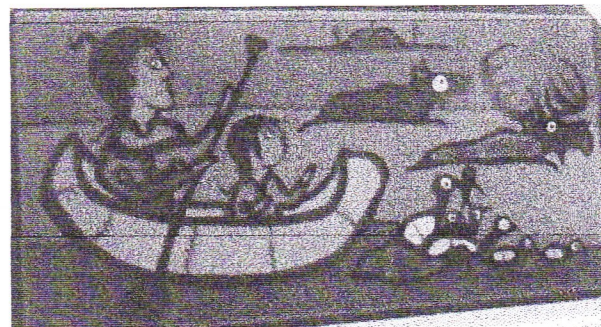


21.

Shaman Teaching Grandson

1931-32

Norval Morrisseau
 (Copper Thunderbird)
 Native Canadian
 1931-2007



“Today we wonder and are distracted by the white man’s ways that we cannot cope with. Those of us who are lucky have made it. But a lot of us are still behind, by trying to live like our white brothers and their religion, ignoring our great ancestors’ culture. If one has an intelligent mind we could live side by side with our ancient ways and same time get us where we should be.” *Norval Morrisseau*

Artist Highlights: An Anishinaabe, he was born March 14, 1932 on the Sand Point Ojibway reserve near Beardmore, Ontario. Some sources quote him as saying that he was born in Fort William, now part of Thunder Bay, Ontario, on the same date in 1931. His full name is Jean-Baptiste Norman Henry Morrisseau, but he signs his work using the Cree syllabics writing (Ozaawaabiko-binesi, unpointed: , “Copper/Brass [Thunder]Bird”), as his pen-name for his Anishnaabe name (Miskwaabik Animikii, unpointed: “Copper Thunderbird”). In accordance with Anishnaabe tradition, he was raised by his maternal grandparents. His grandfather, Moses Potan Nanakonagos, a shaman, taught him the traditions and legends of his people. His grandmother, Grace Theresa Potan Nanakonagos, was a devout Catholic and from her he learned the tenets of Christianity. The contrast between these two religious traditions became an important factor in his intellectual and artistic development. At the age of six, he was sent to a Catholic residential school, where students were educated in the European tradition, native culture was repressed, and the use of native language was forbidden. After two years he returned home and started attending a local community school. At the age of 19, he became very sick. He was taken to a doctor but his health kept deteriorating. Fearing for his life, his mother called a medicine-woman who performed a renaming ceremony: She gave him the new name Copper Thunderbird. According to Anishnaabe tradition, giving a powerful name to a dying person can give them new energy and save their lives. Morrisseau recovered after the ceremony and from then on always signed his works with his new name.

Morrisseau was a self-taught artist. He developed his own techniques and artistic vocabulary which captured ancient legends and images that came to him in visions or dreams. He was originally criticized by the native community because his images disclosed traditional spiritual knowledge. Initially he painted on any material that he could find, especially birchbark, and also moose hide. Dewdney encouraged him to use earth-tone colors and traditional material, which he thought were appropriate to Morrisseau’s native style. The subjects of his art in the early period were myths and traditions of the Anishnaabe people. He is acknowledged to have initiated the Woodland School of native art, where images similar to the petroglyphs of the Great Lakes region were now captured in paintings and prints.

His later style changed: he used more standard material and the colors became progressively brighter, eventually obtaining a neon-like brilliance. The themes also moved from traditional myth to depicting his own personal struggles. He also produced art depicting Christian subjects: during his incarceration, he attended a local church where he was struck by the beauty of the images on stained-glass windows. Some of his paintings, like Indian Jesus Christ, imitate that style and represent characters from the Bible with native features. After he joined the new age religion Eckankar in 1976, he started representing on canvas its mystical beliefs.