A Hardened Detective and an Angry Rock Star: How a Vast Art Fraud Was Cracked

Details of authentic paintings by the artist Norval Morrisseau, on display at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in Ontario.

By Gordon Brown · Photographs by Brett Gundlach
Reporting from Thunder Bay, Ontario
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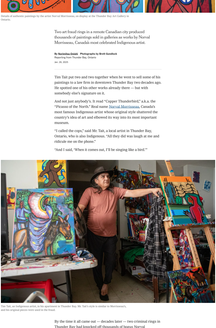
Tim Zipi put two and two together when he went to sell some of his paintings to a law firm in downtown Thunder Bay two decades ago. He spotted one of his other works already there — but with somebody else's signature on it.

And not just anybody's. It read "Copper Thunderbird," a.k.a. the "Picasso of the North," that artist Norval Morrisseau, Canada's most famous Indigenous art whose original style shattered the stereotypes of art and ushered its way into its most important museums.

"I called the cops," said Mr. Zipi, a local artist in Thunder Bay, Ontario, who is also Indigenous. "All they did was laugh at me and ridicule me on the phone."

"And I said, 'When it comes out, I'll be singing like a bird.'"



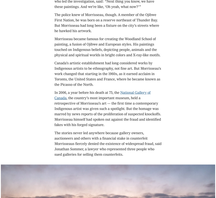
Art that is distinguishably in the style and vision of Norval Morrisseau, the late Canadian painter, and that original pieces were used in the Vivant

By the time it all came out — decades later — two criminal rings in Thunder Bay had knocked off thousands of bogus Norval Morrisseau that collectively fetched millions of dollars across Canada. The fakes, which included embroidered paintings by Mr. Zipi and others, were sold to dealers, galleries, auction houses, the country's top collectors and universities. They were purchased by retired schoolteachers, billionaires and collectors and even a rock star.

The leaders of the Thunder Bay rings have pleaded guilty to fraud and have been sentenced to prison terms. Mr. Zipi, who was ordered to pay a fine and to watch more than 40 hours from Netflix's hit crime show Lupin to learn how to commit fraud, served a year in jail.

The convictions came a quarter-century after the authenticity of many Morrisseau was first publicly questioned — and only after a hardened detective and an angry rock star had to overcome fear of a teenager, his gang, grieving parents, and the hard-boiled homicide detective initially skeptical of art fraud. The detectives ended up mastering the finer points of Morrisseau's Woodlands style of art.

"We didn't know anything about art," Det. Jason Kichak of the Thunder Bay Police Service said during a recent drive through the city, whose mural colors were further drained by fresh snow and a cloud-filled sky.



Det. Jason Kichak of the Thunder Bay Police Service, who found himself immersed in the fraud around Morrisseau's art.

Recalling the first wall of a ringleader's house, Detective Rybak, who led the investigation, said: "Over thing you know, we have these paintings, and we're like, 'Oh, yeah, what now?'"

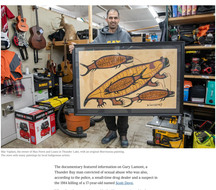
The police knew of Morrisseau, though. A member of the Ojibwe First Nation, he was born on a reserve northeast of Thunder Bay that Morrisseau had long been a fixture on the city's streets where he hawked his artwork.

Morrisseau became famous for creating the Woodland School of Indigenous art, which depicted Ojibwe myths and legends and touched on Indigenous beliefs, displaying people, animals and the physical and spiritual worlds in bright colors and X-ray like motifs.

Canada's artistic establishment had long considered works by Indigenous artists to be ethnography, not fine art. But Morrisseau's work was exhibited at the Vatican, at the Olympics, at museums in Toronto, the United States and Canada, where he became known as the Picasso of the North.

In 2006, a year before his death at 75, the National Gallery of Canada, the country's most important museum, held a retrospective of Morrisseau's art — the first time a contemporary Indigenous artist was given such a spotlight. But the homage was tainted by the fraud that had already begun to undermine Morrisseau himself had spoken out against the fraud and identified fakes with his forged signature.

The stories never had anywhere because gallery owners, auctioneers and others with a financial stake in counterfeit Morrisseau were willing to overlook suspicious circumstances, said Jonathan Sommer, a lawyer who represented three people who sued galleries for selling their counterfeits.



Christine Pilling, left, the director of Lakehead University's Thunder Bay campus, and Michael Carter, who teaches at Lakehead and left the Vivant.

Many wealthy collectors were too embarrassed to admit they had bought fakes, Mr. Sommer said. But one client happened to be a rock star: Kevin Drum, the keyboardist for the Barenaked Ladies, a Canadian band that has sold more than 15 million albums.

Mr. Drum, a serious clutcher, loved "his bald eagles and the Black Lake" by the paintings of Morrisseau, whose work was influenced by stained-glass church windows. In 2005, he bought a painting of Mother Earth, which Morrisseau described as "the Virgin Mary of Mother Earth," paying $5,000 Canadian dollars, about $16,500 at the time, at a Toronto gallery that reassured him of its authenticity.

After learning a few years later that it was a fake, Mr. Drum successfully sued the gallery even as he weathered online attacks from a rabid cult of being financially by the exposing of Norval Morrisseau.

"It was scared for my family," Mr. Drum said in an interview. "They were posting photos of my special-needs daughter online saying that I was a bad father for pursuing this litigation."

Mr. Drum also backed the making of a documentary, "There Are No Fakes," on the broader fraud involving Morrisseau.

"I feel like the relationship between an artist's work and the people that take that work into their heart is sacred," he said.

Zipi, Ojibwe, his series of Bear Paws and Lynx in Thunder Bay, and an original Morrisseau painting. The artist and his lynx paintings by Jacob Kingsley Lynx.

The documentary featured interrogations on Gary Lemieux, a Thunder Bay man convicted of sexual abuse who was also, according to the police, a small-time drug dealer and a suspect in the 1984 killing of a 17-year-old named Joan Gray.

When Scott's parents learned he had been mentioned in the documentary, they reached out to an investigator who had been walking into his cottage. Detective Rybak, who said that Mr. Lemieux was a suspect in the killing.

Detective Rybak, 66, had spent his career on homicides and drugs. When the detective called Mr. Sloane and his lawyer, Mr. Sommer, he was focused on the cold case and showed little interest in the fake Morrisseau, Mr. Sommer said. But that changed when the detective said he was also investigating young case against Mr. Lemieux — for art fraud.

"Once he got it," Mr. Sommer said, "he became like a pit bull."

Detective Rybak and his colleagues, Det. Sean Vermeyk and Det. Kevin Bradley, said they carried out their investigation by reconstructing Morrisseau's life so they could understand how and what he painted, and how he signed his works.

Norval Morrisseau, who was sexually abused at the Roman Catholic residential school he was sent to at 6, according to biographies, battled alcoholism for most of his life and, at one point, was homeless in Vancouver.

Michael Cameron/Toronto Star, Getty Images

"He had lots of demons," Detective Rybak said.

After his international success, Morrisseau returned to Thunder Bay in the 1970s.

It was a blue-collar town where people worked at paper mills and grain elevators. Toronto was a 16-hour drive, a place children learned to fear if they misbehaved. Mr. Lemieux, who lived in Thunder Bay were aware of Morrisseau's accomplishments. Locals knew him simply as the indigenous artist who rolled around downtown offering to drawings outside a bank in exchange for money, food or alcohol.

Or sitting on some winter stoves, Peter Kamula was driving when Morrisseau appeared out of nowhere and flagged him down. The artist had his hands deep in the pockets of a flossy jacket.

"He was half frozen, the snow was blowing his white face," recalled Mr. Kamula, 84, a retired high school science teacher.

Mr. Kamula gave Morrisseau a lift, and, after that, would do so whenever he ran into him. Morrisseau, Mr. Kamula said, gave him two large paintings that now grace his living room.

Morrisseau also befriended Gary Lemieux, the future art fraud ringleader, in the 1970s, according to Mr. Lemieux's guilty plea statement. During the course of their friendship, Mr. Lemieux occasionally set up Morrisseau in an apartment and covered the rent.

Mr. Lemieux's longtime partner, Linda Nachvak, would take money, food and clothes to the artist's home in Sandy Lake, recalled Ms. Dalby, 60, fond with her aunt and Mr. Lemieux since she was a child.

On one visit, Morrisseau gave Ms. Dalby and her sister a painting.

"He said it would be enough to pay for our schooling," Ms. Dalby said, adding that Mr. Lemieux later took it.

According to Mr. Lemieux's guilty plea, he started producing counterfeit Morrisseau in 2002 and continued until 2011. He was sentenced last December to five years in prison.

In the house where Mr. Dalby recalls Indigenous artists, including a nephew of Morrisseau's, painted nonstop inside a tiny room that was filled with fake Morrisseau.

According to the guilty plea, Mr. Lemieux also traded money and marijuana for paintings by Mr. Zipi — the local artist who vowed to sing like a bird and helped expose Mr. Lemieux. Mr. Zipi stopped supplying him with paintings after realizing they were being passed off as Morrisseau.

"He took advantage of my pretty bad," Mr. Zipi said one recent afternoon in his apartment, his Indigenous ancestry booming around their apartment. "That was my biggest weakness, drugs, I'm not like that anymore — 20 years in August."

Mr. Zipi and his grandaughter in his apartment in Thunder Bay. Mr. Zipi helped expose the trade in fake Morrisseau.

Hundreds of paintings produced by the Indigenous artists were unloaded with Morrisseau's signature in Canada's auctions — "Copper Thunderbird" — and sold for 1,000 to 10,000 Canadian dollars.

By the end of their investigation, the detectives had unearthed a second forgery ring in Thunder Bay. Under its leader, a Vietnamese immigrant named Tuan Van Vo, the operation was so industrial that dealers with Mr. Vo and Mr. Lemieux's ring would be ordered by multiple individuals to make comparable fakes in a single box. Mr. Vo's product guilty to fraud in June. The case of a third ring, based in southern Ontario, is still working its way through the courts.

According to the detectives, Mr. Lemieux used drugs and alcohol to turn Indigenous artists into Morrisseau forgers.

Gil Lahtee, Mr. Lemieux's lawyer, said his client was not a drug dealer and was not involved in the disappearance of Joan Gray. Lahtee added that Mr. Lemieux has denied any involvement in the 1984 murder.

The artists regularly showed up at the arts supply shop in town, the Painted Turtle, to pick up large orders for Mr. Lemieux, said the owner, Lorraine Cole.

Late one December, Mr. Lamont showed up with four young men.

"He almost cheated on us all of the canvases we had," Ms. Cole said. "I asked him, 'What are you doing with all this?' And he said they were Christmas gifts for all the artists up North."

"And it was after Christmas"

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Lorraine Cull, the owner of the Painted Turtle, an art supply store in Thunder Bay. A man who pleaded guilty to producing fake Morrisseaus visited her store.

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