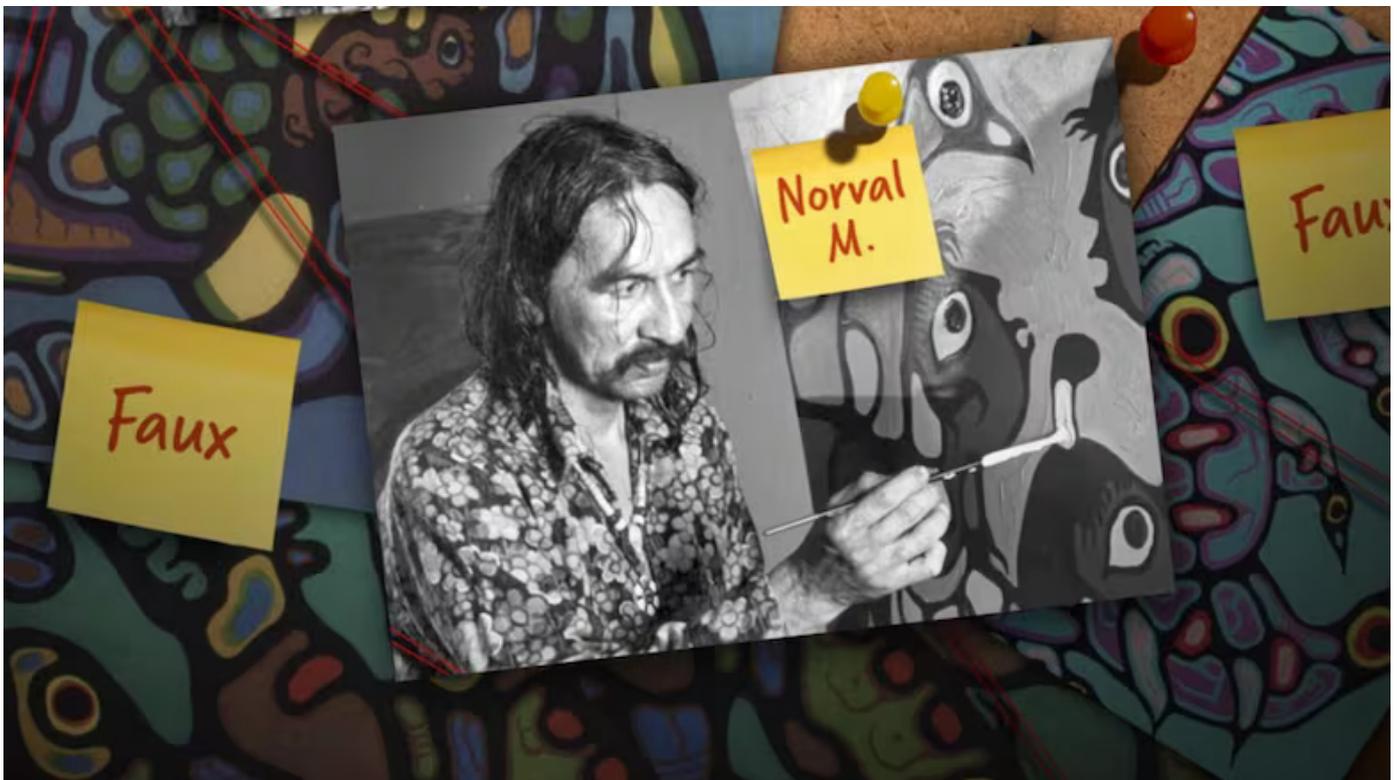


# Norval Morrisseau family, estate rep have long said they're art fraud victims. Court docs question that

Radio-Canada investigation driven by civil and criminal court documents

[Ismaël Houdassine](#), [Dominique Degré](#), [Michelle Allan](#) · CBC ·  
Posted: Aug 18, 2025 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: 11 hours ago

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/morrisseau-art-investigation-1.7602607>



The late Indigenous artist Norval Morrisseau's children may have allegedly played a role in art fraud they've never faced charges for, according to claims in court documents for a civil lawsuit. (Ian Samson/McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives)

A Radio-Canada investigation that included looking into a civil lawsuit indicates members of Norval Morrisseau's family and the man representing the late Indigenous artist's estate — who for years have presented themselves as the main victims of forgers and art dealers — might have played a role in this system that continues to undermine his legacy.

Ritchie Sinclair, Morrisseau's former apprentice, said he can't help but feel relief after learning about a [\\$1.45-million lawsuit filed by a Calgary art gallery against Norval Morrisseau Estate Ltd.](#)

EA Studios (Jasper) Ltd.'s claim takes aim at Morrisseau's children — Victoria, Peter, Eugene and Lisa, and their three siblings who are now deceased, Christian, David and Michael.

"From at least the early 2000s on, for financial gain, the adult children supported and promoted the authenticity of many of the fraudulent works and assisted, by spreading false information, in undermining efforts to expose and stop the fraud," alleges the claim.

"This is huge," Sinclair told CBC. "This is the first time [the Morrisseau children] have been named in a lawsuit. The truth must get out."

[Norval Morrisseau Estate Ltd. firmly denies all allegations,](#)

which have not been proven in court.

Ritchie Sinclair, Morriseau's former apprentice, has long fought against the proliferation of counterfeit works attributed to the artist. (Ismaël Houdassine/Radio-Canada)

## James White and the Morriseau Family Foundation

Morriseau was from Ojibway Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek First Nation in northwestern Ontario and [died in 2007 at age 75](#). As a prolific artist who did not keep records of his works, [Morriseau's catalogue has become a popular target for forgeries](#).

Morriseau witnessed the proliferation of forgeries, fighting against it until his death. His efforts included sending cease and desist letters to galleries that sold fake paintings

[When they pleaded guilty](#), some of the [main actors of the fraud](#) collectively identified more than 2,000 forgeries that they either created, sold or acquired over the years. Various experts say there could be as many as 10,000 forgeries in circulation, [making Morriseau one of the most counterfeited artists in the world](#).

James White looks at a painting titled Thunderbird at an exhibition in 2010. This painting is a forgery produced by the forger David Voss. (Submitted by Ritchie Sinclair )

Radio-Canada reached out to academics and museum

curators who specialize in Indigenous art and/or Morrisseau's work but they refused to be interviewed, citing fear of reprisal.

Sinclair said he's not afraid to speak out. For the past 20 years, he has been sorting, archiving and publishing online lists of alleged fakes and various court documents pertaining to the forgery rings.

He's faced multiple lawsuits, mostly for defamation, from those who dealt in the market of forgeries. In one of these cases, the court ordered him to pay \$25,000 to a plaintiff, art dealer James White.

White recently pleaded guilty to counts of uttering forged documents and possessing property obtained or derived by crime for the purpose of trafficking. The 84-year-old Ontario man has always staunchly denied the existence of forgeries. The agreed statement of facts said White bought over 500 fake Morrisseaus between 2016 and 2021, for a combined sum of over \$450,000, and would then sell or consign the paintings to third parties across the country.

***WATCH | In this 2005 The National report, Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau is seen painting:***

Bogus Norval Morrisseau paintings pop up in 2005

Painter Norval Morrisseau designates a Toronto gallery as the only legitimate source of his work. Aired April 16, 2005 on CBC's The National.

White also admitted to having sold prints of some of the forgeries he acquired. Police seized 114 prints of 15 counterfeit paintings at White's residence, each accompanied by a certificate of authenticity made by his company, White Distribution Ltd.

These certificates bore the seal of the Morrisseau Family Foundation, an organization created by Morrisseau's children shortly after his death, with the mission of protecting his legacy. Authorities also recovered, from White's home, a device used to put the foundation's seal on the certificates.

White, through his lawyer, has declined to comment.

## **Police approach was Morrisseau's kids 'taken advantage of'**

White is one of eight individuals arrested and charged in March 2023 in the wake of Project Totton, [a widescale police investigation to take down the Morrisseau forgery networks.](#)

Thunder Bay, Ont., police Insp. Jason Rybak and his team interviewed nearly 300 people, and seized hundreds of

alleged and confirmed forgeries from private collections and public institutions.

They dismantled two forgery rings in the Thunder Bay area and one in southern Ontario.

Thunder Bay Police Service Insp. Jason Rybak, who had no previous experience with art crimes before the Morrisseau case, led one of the most significant investigations ever conducted in Canada in this field. (Ismaël Houdassine/Radio-Canada)

Many of the people charged following Project Totton have pleaded guilty and others are awaiting trial. The Morrisseau children were never charged during the investigation.

"They were taken advantage of, and that was really the approach that we took. They weren't culpable for this," said Rybak, adding that investigators questioned the Morrisseau children.

"They're from northern communities and it's just not something that was ever in our interest.... What would be the purpose of trying to defame them or go after them?"

Rybak said it was more practical to focus on prosecuting the subjects with the strongest evidence against them.

"Otherwise, like lots of massive fraud investigations, they'll never see the inside of a courtroom because [the cases] are so big."

# Lawyer alleges 'proximity' between children, forgers

While Rybak presents the role of the children as being secondary, a lawyer who specializes in art fraud disagrees.

Jonathan Sommer co-founded Art Experts Canada Inc., which specializes in authenticating Morrisseau paintings. He has also [represented clients who claim they were sold fake paintings](#). Sommer said he believes there was "a surprising proximity between [the Morrisseau children] and people who have been charged with fraud."

Jonathan Sommer co-directs a law firm that specializes in art fraud law. (Ivanoh Demers/Radio-Canada)

In a 2017 affidavit filed in another civil court case, White indicated that he has "since in or about 2006 developed a relationship with the Morrisseau family." The relationship began before the fraud cases started receiving widespread attention.

"I have held several Norval shows across Canada and I often incorporated the paintings of his son, Christian, into those shows, and Christian himself would often appear at those shows to promote his and his father's art," wrote White in his statement.

On July 15, 2010, the Morrisseau Family Foundation signed a

contract with White. The art dealer would get the exclusive right to produce and sell prints of 14 artworks attributed to Morrisseau and deliver certificates of authenticity for them. In exchange, the foundation would receive \$3,500 and 10 per cent of the proceeds.

Sommer pointed out that around that same time, the Morrisseau Family Foundation's website prominently displayed White's email address.

An archived image of the Morrisseau Family Foundation's website says 'the Morrisseau Family Foundation has authorized White Distribution Limited to reproduce Norval Morrisseau's work on canvas and paper [...] Any other reproductions of Norval Morrisseau's work in any medium is fraudulent.' (Wayback Machine)

A stamp bearing the foundation's logo was found at White's residence when police executed a search warrant in 2021.

[David Voss](#), a prominent forger who pleaded guilty to producing counterfeit paintings in June 2024, identified White as a "major distributor" of fake Morrisseaus.

The agreed statement of facts in his case details how White operated and listed over 1,600 fake artworks produced between 1996 and 2019.

However, "no criminal responsibility is attributed to, or admitted by, Mr. White in relation to his dealings in that artwork," said White's agreed statement of facts.

Research on various online classified ad sites indicates that prints of these forgeries still circulate abundantly on the second-hand market. They are often accompanied by certificates of authenticity featuring the name of White's company and the Morrisseau Family Foundation's seal.

"As a tribute to his father and the teachings bestowed upon him, Christian [Morrisseau] has personally authorized the fine art reproduction," state the certificates.

Christian died in 2022.

Christian Morrisseau, right, was also a painter, one of three of Norval's children who are now deceased. His name appeared on many certificates of authenticity linked to forgeries. In this 2016 photo, he poses with the buyer of a forgery titled Brothers on Green.  
(Auctionnetwork/Instagram)

"Some of [Norval's] kids were paid \$50 just to sign the back of paintings, saying their dad did it," said Rybak. "David Morrisseau is one example. You find lots where he's written on the back. Well, we interviewed David — he never saw his dad painting any of those."

In Voss's agreed statement of facts, the list of forgeries he identified contains 15 paintings that either bear David's signature on the back or have certificates of authenticity signed by David.

David died in July 2024.

The Morrisseau children went as far as using the image of a forgery "authenticated" by David Morrisseau, titled *Great Thunderbird*, for their logo and seal of authenticity. That same seal is featured on the certificates produced by White.

"I've been following the traces of these paintings and stamps for decades, and the children for sure contributed to promoting them," said John Zamanovich, who specializes in the authentication of Morrisseau paintings and co-directs Art Experts Canada Inc. with Sommer.

Eugene Morrisseau, one of Norval's surviving children, travelled to Asia to promote works attributed to his father, but several of these paintings — such as the one pictured — bear many similarities to counterfeits, say experts. (Eugene Morrisseau/Facebook)

In 2015, a Chinese buyer acquired around 300 fake paintings and paid Eugene Morrisseau to travel to Asia in order to promote them, according to Rybak, the detective. Eugene posted about the experience on social media two years later, sharing a picture of himself in front of a painting that bears numerous similarities with Voss ring forgeries.

## **The murky origins of Morrisseau Family Foundation**

In January 2007, less than a year before Norval's death, his children were seeking to establish the Morrisseau Family Foundation. They said they wanted to defend their father's artistic legacy, but also to "establish the rights of the blood

children of Norval Morrisseau, his art and artistic legacy," states a sworn declaration signed by Christian.

Neither Christian nor any of his siblings owned any copyright over their father's work. [Norval excluded them from his will](#) as early as 1999. Instead, he bestowed everything unto [Gabor Vadas, his adopted son.](#)

We do not believe there is a fraud ring...- *Morrisseau's children in an open letter published in 2014*

Norval publicly and firmly disavowed his biological children's initiative two months before his death when he was made aware of their intentions.

"This foundation does not have my authority or consent to authenticate my art or to otherwise hold itself out as representing me or my interests in any manner whatsoever," Morrisseau said in a news release dated October 2007.

His biological children had enlisted the help of Joseph McLeod to register their foundation. McLeod, who died in 2017, was a well-known Toronto art dealer who was denounced by Norval for selling forgeries. The artist sent him cease and desist letters on a number of occasions for using his art, without permission, in promotional material and for selling counterfeit paintings.

In 2003, Norval sent McLeod a formal notice listing 37 paintings falsely attributed to him.

Radio-Canada examined the catalogue targeted by the artist in his complaint and confirmed that 36 of the paintings are on a list of forgeries compiled by David Voss. Among those is Self Portrait as Christ Figure, pictured here. (Agreed statement of facts of David Voss)

McLeod helped create and register the foundation.

He also supported the children in 2009 to register the copyright to "The Artistic Legacy of Norval Morrisseau." They made McLeod an agent on the copyright registration, giving him the authority to act on their behalf.

"Nearly two years after Norval Morrisseau's death, his children registered a copyright on the entirety of his work, despite the fact that they knew their father's will gave the copyright to Gabe Vadas," said Sommer. He said he believes the children's copyright registration and any subsequent deals made thanks to this copyright are invalid.

"We do not believe there is a fraud ring [...] Throughout the decades Mr. McLeod has been a friend to the family of Norval Morrisseau," Morrisseau's children said in an open letter published in 2014.

## **From the foundation to the estate**

In 2010, the Morrisseau children [contested the validity of their father's will in court](#). After two years, [they came to an agreement with Vadas, the original sole heir](#). All of Norval's

artworks, the marketing rights to these pieces and the copyright to his work would be split into two shares: one for Vadas and another one to be divided equally between his seven biological children.

Since then, the estate of Norval, led by Cory Dingle, has perpetuated the same ambiguity surrounding the management of Norval's works as the Morrisseau Family Foundation, according to Sommer.

[The EA Studios lawsuit](#) alleges Dingle called into question the authenticity of its Morrisseau collection with potential buyers in order to sell them works from his own collection.

Cory Dingle is president and CEO of the Estate of Norval Morrisseau Ltd. (Guelph Storm)

Officially registered in 2022, the Norval Morrisseau Estate Ltd. is comprised of Norval's four living biological children, Vadas and a CEO, Dingle.

Sinclair and some other people who knew the artist told Radio-Canada they found it hard to understand why Dingle became head of Morrisseau's estate.

Contacted by Radio-Canada, Dingle recounted that he met Norval in British Columbia around 1988. The exact nature of Dingle's role in Norval's entourage is not well documented.

Some people exaggerate the extent or nature of their past

relationships with Norval for a variety of reasons, said Morrisseau expert John Zemanovich.

"In talking to Mr. Dingle, I believe he was around Norval, but I haven't seen any historic evidence that explains the nature of their relationship."

Sinclair, standing, is seen with Norval in this old photo the artist's former apprentice submitted for this story. Sinclair questions the circumstances that allowed Dingle to take control of the estate. (Submitted by Ritchie Sinclair)

Dingle "was an assistant caretaker of Norval for a couple of years. He cleaned up, did dishes, took care of Norval," said Sinclair. "He was a friend of Gabe Vadas."

Dingle was ultimately appointed by both Vadas and the Morrisseau children to "represent the estate with respect to various matters," according to the estate's statement of defence in the EA Studios lawsuit.

Contacted by text message, Vadas declined to comment.

"How was the fraud allowed to prosper for over two decades without any real opposition?" Sommer asked. He said the estate has failed to make any meaningful effort to fight the fraud.

"Not only did the estate not act with due diligence, but for years it has been under the influence of people who worked

closely with those who have admitted to, or were found liable for, participating in the fraud."

Radio-Canada was unable to reach any of Norval's children, except for Victoria, who declined to comment after a brief telephone conversation.

Since Dingle was made aware of the nature of this investigation, he has ceased all communications with Radio-Canada.