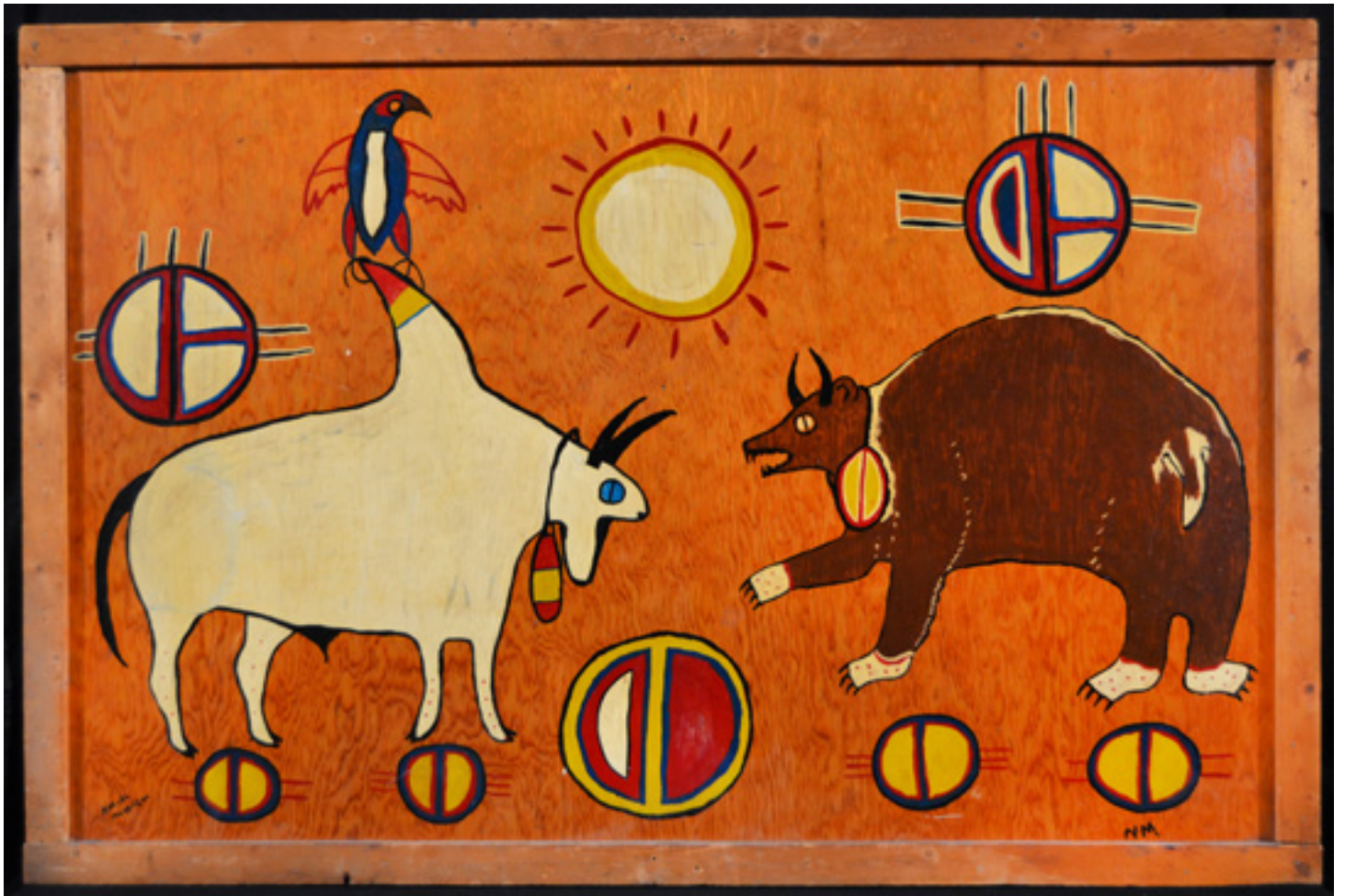


A NORVAL MORRISSEAU

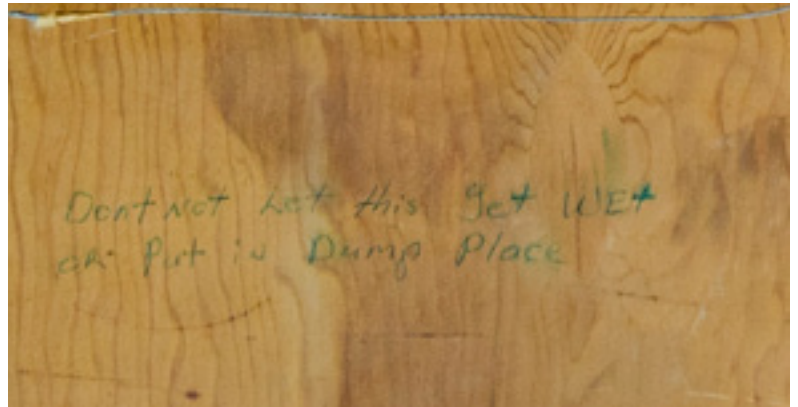
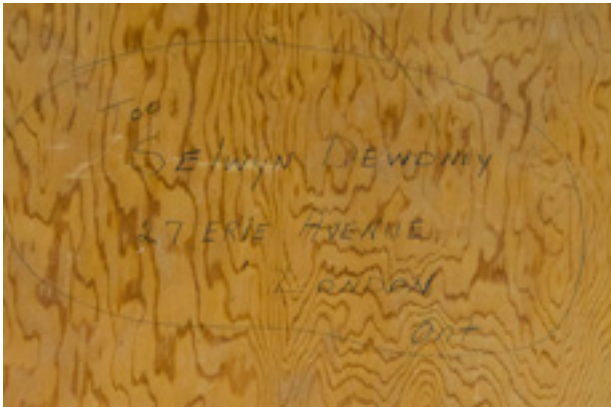


Norval Morriseau, *Untitled*, 1963, oil on plywood, Collection of the N'Amerind Friendship Centre.

From the
N'Amerind Friendship
Centre Collection

Essay by Miriam Jordan

In 1963 Norval Morrisseau mailed this painting to his friend the anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney. Written on the back of this painting in Morrisseau's hand are the words "Contains Ojibwa Indian art." The return address indicates that the artist mailed the painting from his home in Couchenor, Ontario, to Dewdney who was residing at 27 Erie Avenue in London, Ontario. Below the address, Morrisseau adds further delivery instructions, almost as an after thought: "Do not let this get wet or put in damp place."



Norval Morrisseau, *Untitled*, 1963, (back) . oil on plywood, Collection of the N'Amerind Friendship Centre.

Across an expanse of unpainted plywood a white bull and brown bear stand facing each other. Morrisseau's use of plywood marks the transitional period between the birch bark and hide paintings of his early career and the canvases of his later paintings. The paw of the bear is raised and its mouth is open as if it is speaking. On the head of the blue-eyed bull sits a Thunderbird, it looks at the bear, listening, functioning as a messenger between the spirit world and the world of the living. Floating between the heads of these three creatures is a glowing sun that represents a meeting of the minds and the mingling of knowledge and experience. What we witness in this scene is the dialogue that unfolds when cultures meet. Morrisseau idealizes this exchange between beings as one that is balanced and marked by harmony. This is visualized in the seven multi-coloured circles split by lines that are evenly arrayed among the three talking animals. The lines that radiate out from the circles are lines of communication and represent the interdependence of the self and other beings. Likewise, around the necks of the bear and bull are collars with multi-coloured circles. These divided circles are Anishnaabic symbols of unity and are representative of the balance of nature. Finding a balance between the self and the world is essential to the well-being and happiness of every individual. Morrisseau highlights the importance of balance in the composition of the painting, which is almost perfectly symmetrical, equally balanced between bear and bull.

The colour palette is typical of Morrisseau's early career and consists mainly of natural earth tone colours with the occasional bright splash of colour. Of special significance is his choice of colour for the bull, which is painted white, a colour he typically used to represent spirituality. His use of blue in the body of the Thunderbird, the divided circles and the eyes of the bull is also important as Morrisseau received the colour blue in a vision and he consistently used it to represent spiritual protection.

This painting is emblematic of the friendship between Morrisseau and Dewdney. This is evident in the way Morrisseau signed the painting in English with his name Norval Morrisseau, the same way he signed his letters to his friend. The back of this painting is addressed as if it was a personal letter between two friends, which opens it to a possible reading as a portrait of the two friends in dialogue, with Morrisseau taking the form of a bear (his guiding totem who visited him on his boyhood vision quest) and Dewdney as the blue-eyed bull.

The relationship between Norval Morrisseau and Selwyn Dewdney was an important one for both. They met in 1960 when Dewdney traveled by canoe through the Red Lake district searching for petroglyphs along the waterways. Morrisseau signed on as a paddler and guide. Together they explored the petroglyphs of the Great Lakes, which proved to be influential in his paintings, helping Morrisseau to formalize the stylized visual vocabulary with which he created his iconic paintings. The journey was fruitful for both and culminated in their collaboration in 1965 on a book of Ojibway stories that Morrisseau wrote and illustrated with his fluid drawings and Dewdney edited, called *Legends of My People, the Great Ojibway*. At all times in Morrisseau's art, the artist is conscious of including the narrative of his own life and context, searching for a way to make intelligent use of his ancestral culture and his own life in a rapidly modernizing Canadian landscape. For Morrisseau, Dewdney was a friend and colleague who provided him with an artistic vocabulary, a means of expressing his Ojibwa heritage from his perspective as a 20th century Ojibwa negotiating the barrier between the white world and the aboriginal world.

This painting marks an early point in Morrisseau's artistic career, a journey on which he set out to record the legends, songs and beliefs of his aboriginal culture in visual form. His paintings are the records of an Ojibwa man who moved across Canada on his own journey through life recording his story along the way. A consistent theme of Morrisseau's paintings is the interdependence of human life and other living beings.

What are the three beings saying to each other in this painting? The message that we are left with is that we should never silence ourselves, our talk about who we are and where we come from is what makes us who we are. In speaking to each other, like the beings in the painting, we allow ourselves to construct our world. In the painting the Thunderbird cocks its head listening to the spirit world and the world of the living. We too hear a message, one that journeys through time carrying the voices and wisdom of our ancestors to be intermingled with our voices and the voices of our children's children.

-Miriam Jordan (Oneida, bear clan)

This exceptional Norval Morrisseau painting from the N'Amerind Friendship Centre collection was stored at McIntosh Gallery, Western University, during renovations in 2012. This provided the Gallery a unique opportunity to commission Dr. Miriam Jordan (Oneida, bear clan), to conduct research on this rare, early work, and the artist's relationship to London anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney, whose name and address appears on the back of the painting. McIntosh Gallery gratefully acknowledges the collaboration of the N'Amerind Friendship Centre, and funding from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts, which has made this project possible.



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