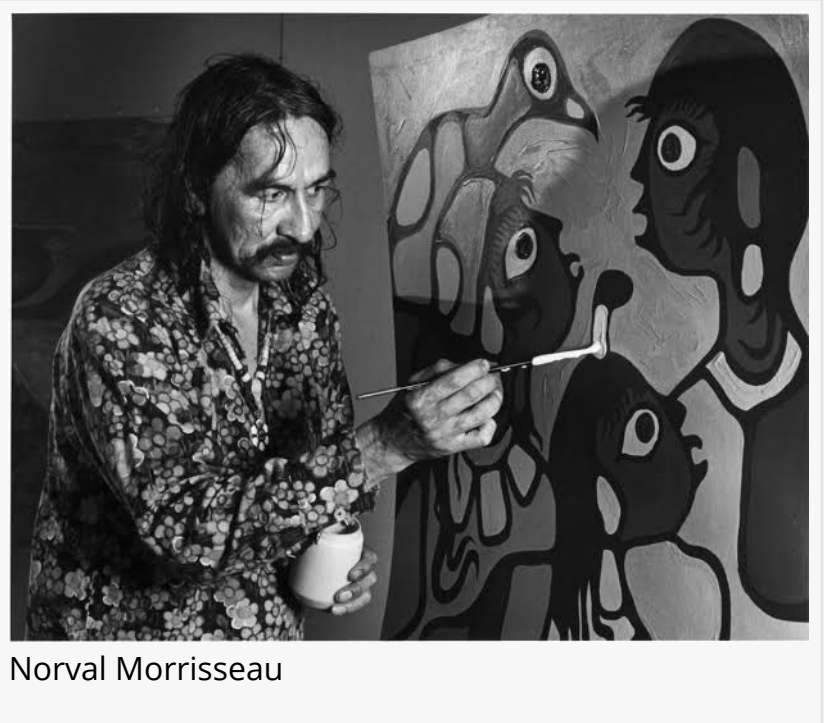


# Eight charged, over 1,000 paintings seized, in 'biggest art fraud investigation in history'

*Eight people face total of 40 charges, after years of police investigations into forgery of artwork by renowned indigenous Canadian artist, Norval Morrisseau*

ONTARIO, OJIBWAY, CANADA, March 7, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Norval Morrisseau is not only considered to be Canada's greatest ever artist, but he was also a cultural and spiritual icon, and the finest indigenous artist of all time.

Morrisseau, who died in 2007 at age 75, was from the Ojibway region of northwestern Ontario. He's known as the founder of the Woodland School of art, and his work has been exhibited in galleries and museums around the world, including at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.



“

In 1996 the scam started, and Norval Morrisseau fakes began appearing in genuine art galleries. I can tell you, we believe there's even a fake in the Smithsonian in Washington!”

*Det. Sgt. Jason Rybak,  
Thunder Bay Police*

Authorities have now charged 8 people as part of one of the biggest art fraud investigations in history, with between 4500 and 6000 fakes thought to be in circulation, totalling a staggering \$100 million.

The Thunder Bay Police Service in northwestern Ontario began the investigation in 2019 and later brought in Ontario Provincial Police due to the magnitude of the investigation, the TBPS told CBC News. Five of the accused are from Thunder Bay.

"I was looking into a murder case, and asked if I had seen a documentary called 'There Are No Fakes', which had information on the murder of her son,"

TBPS Det. Sgt. Jason Rybak said following a news conference in Orillia, Ontario. "I had not, so watched it. From there, I reached out to Kevin Hearn, the main victim featured in the documentary."

'There Are No Fakes', a film released in 2019, includes the story of Hearn — the Barenaked Ladies keyboardist and guitarist who purchased a purported Morrisseau painting from a Toronto gallery in 2005. Questions were raised about the painting's authenticity, and Hearn would eventually sue the gallery; he was later awarded \$60,000 in compensation by the Ontario Court of Appeal.

Barenaked Ladies member awarded \$60K in [legal battle over painting](#)

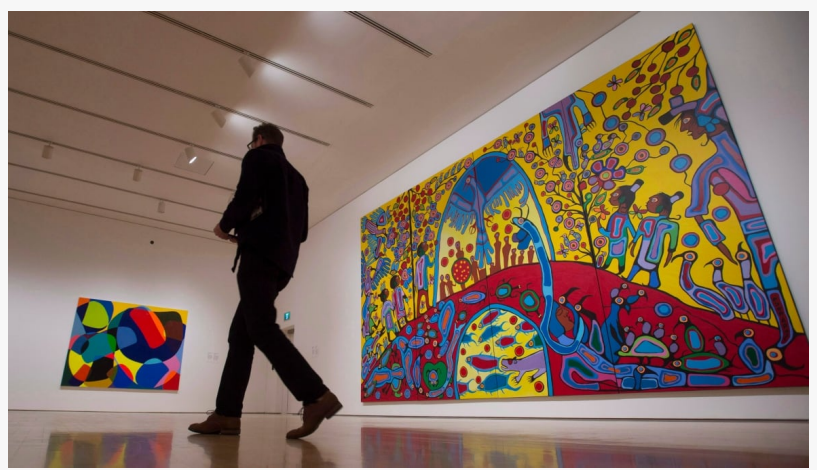
Rybak said the investigation led police to obtain a warrant to search the home of Gary Lamont, one of the eight people charged in the Morrisseau investigation, and during the 2019 search, police "started seizing painting, after painting after painting. And we we quickly realized the magnitude of what we were getting ourselves into."

Lamont is one of the five people from Thunder Bay who were charged as a result of the investigation: the others are David John Voss, Diane Marie Champagne, Linda Joy Tkachyk and Benjamin Paul Morrisseau.

Also charged are Jeffrey Gordon Cowan of Niagara-on-the-Lake, James White of Essa Township and David Paul Bremner of Locust Hill.

OPP Det. Insp. Kevin Veillieux said the investigation was "very difficult."

"We conducted a wide range of witness interviews that provided very valuable information," Veillieux said. "We reached out to many different groups that had the ability to do certain forensic testing for us."



Androgyny by Morrisseau, right, is shown in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 2017. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press )



OPP Det. Insp. Kevin Veillieux and Thunder Bay police Det. Sgt. Jason Rybak, left to right, stand in front of a series of fraudulent Norval Morrisseau paintings

The elaborate scheme explained:

Rybak said the eight accused were part of three distinct, yet intertwined groups that created the fraudulent artwork. The first group was launched in 1996 and operated in Thunder Bay "exactly like a production assembly line." Another group started in 2002, and brought in talented indigenous artists to create the paintings.

Finally, a third group began operating in southern Ontario in 2008. The three groups traded paintings back and forth, and two of the accused were involved in the distribution of paintings by all three groups. The alleged fraud also included creating fake certificates of authenticity.

In a media release, OPP said some of the paintings, prints and other pieces of artwork that were seized had sold for "tens of thousands of dollars to unsuspecting members of the public who had no reason to believe they weren't genuine."

Veillieux said the fake paintings were seized from various private collections and galleries.

"The Mom and Pop who may have purchased one, were completely devastated. They'd spent a substantial amount of money on these as somewhat of an investment," he said. "They were obviously very angry and upset."

"At times, he [Morrisseau] would just give paintings away to people for milk and eggs, and so the fraudsters knew there was no way in their mind of tracking legitimate paintings.."

Rybak said money was the main motivation for the fraud, but there was another reason Morrisseau's work was targeted.

"They knew his lifestyle," he said. "They knew that he had struggles. They knew he never kept a list of his paintings.

"There are many stories from people still alive in Thunder Bay, Red Lake and Beardmore about his struggles. At times he would just give paintings away for milk and and eggs. The fraudsters thought there was no way of tracking his legitimate paintings.

"In 1996 when the scam started, the fakes began appearing in genuine art galleries. I can tell you, we believe there's even a fake in the Smithsonian in Washington."

Cory Dingle, who runs the Morrisseau Estate, said he was aware of the investigation and suspects there are thousands of fake Morrisseaus on the market.

"This day is a vindication for all those people who have been attacked, harassed and had their character tarnished by lies online. There are so many false blatant lies to discredit the people speaking the truth for 24 years, do not trust those blogs. We finally have the truth".

Norval Morrisseau, who created Woodland art style, has been [featured in a Google doodle](#)

Think you have fake art? Seek legal advice:

Veillieux said people who suspect they may have a fraudulent Morrisseau painting are advised to contact legal counsel.

"We have to emphasize we cannot take paintings to determine real versus fake from anybody that brings them," he said.

[The Norval Morrisseau Estate](#) asks everyone concerned about their Morrisseau work to visit the official website OfficialMorrisseau.com and upload images in the Verification section.

All media inquires should be made to the official Estate, and any images must be validated first.

ENDS

Case Number: CR-21-00000149-00MO

Title of proceedings: LAMONT ET ALL

Location: Trial Room 4, Thunder Bay Courthouse, Ontario

Date: 21st April 2023

Cory Dingle

The Norval Morrisseau Estate

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