



February 14, 2014

### "The Return of the Native Son: George Morrison's Artistic Journey": An evening with curator W. Jackson Rushing III, Thursday, February 20



George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), *Cumulated Landscape*, 1976. Wood, 48 x 120 x 3 in. Minnesota Museum of American Art, gift of Honeywell Inc. 2000.01

*Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison* closes at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York on Sunday, February 23. The exhibition pays homage to the renowned modernist (Chippewa, 1919–2000) with key works—78 paintings, drawings, prints, collages and sculptures, to be exact—from all of his periods in every medium he employed over a nearly six-decade career. In conjunction with the show, curator W. Jackson Rushing III will give a lecture entitled "The Return of the Native Son: George Morrison's Artistic Journey" Thursday, February 20, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the museum.

Rushing, Adkins Presidential Professor of Art History and Mary Lou Milner Carver Chair in Native American Art at the University of Oklahoma, will provide an overview of the exhibition, emphasizing Morrison's personal and artistic journey, beginning in the woodlands of Minnesota and continuing through his time in New York and Paris, among other places. Rushing will also explore the major themes and styles of Morrison's career and how Morrison's abstract expressionist paintings and abstract collages embody indigenous content. Rushing contends that Morrison's understanding of who and what he was shifted, as it does for many people, throughout his life.

According to Rushing, Morrison experienced a gradual change in his thinking about his Chippewa (the word Morrison always used) heritage. "When he returned to Minnesota to teach in 1970, after being based on the East Coast for nearly 30 years, the American Indian Movement was underway, and he became active in urban Indian life more than he had been before." His background became increasingly important in his life and art. "Similarly, the art world's perception of him as 'Native' artist (or not) also changed over time," says Rushing. "That he 'made it' is clear, and my sense is that many younger Native artists hold him in high esteem."



George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), *Whalebone*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 25 x 24.75 in. Collection of Kevin and Kathy Kirvida.

While Morrison was committed to modernist expression in his art, Rushing won't commit to saying that he was the first Native American artist to embrace it. "Figuring out who was 'first adopter' in the art world is a tricky business and may suggest, wrongly, that some sort of game is being played, with the winner being the one who 'got there' first. 'Likely' allows for the possibility that someday we will discover that some other artist as yet unknown to us was the first Native American artist to use modernist principles. Frankly, I think that's unlikely. All my research indicates Morrison was first in that regard, but was followed, not long after, by a distinguished group that includes Joe Herrera, Allan Houser, Pablita Velarde (briefly), Dick West, Terry Saul, and certainly Oscar Howe."

Before this curatorial opportunity came his way, Rushing had written about Morrison. He also knew him briefly and says that he was multi-faceted and complex: "[He was] plain-spoken, perhaps, but not simple at all. He was very well read and so knowledgeable about many subjects, the history of modernism being chief among them. His journals reveal his passion for poetry, philosophy, and science. He had a sly sense of humor and was a gourmet cook!"

So, what does one need to know to put a show like this together? Rushing has had an illustrious career. He trained in art history at the University of Texas at Austin, focusing his Ph.D. research on the history of ideas in modern art. That and his interest in 20th- and 21st-century Native American art made Rushing a natural fit to curate *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison*.



George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), *Red Painting (Franz Kline Painting)*, ca. 1960. Oil on canvas, 47 x 79 in. Loan courtesy of Dorit and Gerald Paul.

"In my teaching and scholarship I have been interested in two interrelated subjects. When, how, and why did Native American artists adopt modernist strategies and principles in order to best express contemporary indigenous content? In other words, why did George Morrison, for example, think of modernism as a tool for expressing his own complex experience as a Chippewa Indian from the north shore of Lake Superior?" Rushing has also "sought to understand when, how, and under what circumstances did Euro-American artists derive nourishment (formal, intellectual) from Indian art, myth, and ritual."

Kristin Makhholm, executive director of the Minnesota Museum of American Art (MMMA), is a long-standing friend of Rushing and knew of his interest in the subject matter. She approached him about putting together a Morrison exhibition based on her museum's collection. "I was very keen on the project from the beginning," Rushing says. "Once I had an opportunity to review the MAAA collection, I understood immediately the incredible potential for an in-depth retrospective survey of his remarkable career. My role was to develop a curatorial vision, develop a checklist, and write and edit the catalog."

Rushing's interest in Native American art began when he was just five years old. He found himself captivated by a picture of a Plateau Indian parfleche, and the rest is history. In his 20s, he became an expert on Native American art while working as an art dealer, marketing primarily Southwestern traditional and contemporary works. In the mid-to-late 1970s, Rushing developed an interest in the work of Joe Herrera, Allan Houser, George Morrison, Dan Namingha, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and early modern Pueblo painters, such as Awa Tsireh. At the same time, he began to learn about 20th-century Native painters from Oklahoma, including the Kiowa Five, Dick West, and others.



George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), *Red Totem I*, 1977. Stained redwood panels on plywood form, 144 1/4 x 15 1/4 x 15 1/4 in. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund. 2012.5

Although Rushing says he could never pick a favorite piece in the show—because that's like asking a parent, "Which of your children do you love most?"—he does point out that spectators frequently identify closely with the large wood collages Morrison began making on the Atlantic shore in the summer of 1965. "The natural materials and the nature—pardon the pun—of his creative process are revealed directly in these objects, and people seem to fall in love with them." Rushing also highlights as must-sees for museum visitors Morrison's Horizon Series of paintings and his Surrealist works on paper.

New Yorkers, in particular, will find common ground with George Morrison. "Manhattan was one of George Morrison's home places," says Rushing. "He attended the Art Students League and had a dozen solo shows in the city, beginning in 1948. He was included in numerous group shows in New York City and was friends with many important artists, including Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning."

Morrison was also a key figure in the history of the New York School, according to Rushing, something he would like to see more widely known and understood. "He matured as a modern artist in the city, and his work reflects that fact in an intimate way."

While there's a lot to learn about Morrison, no previous exposure to his art is required to attend the free event. Rushing insists, however, that his lecture "is guaranteed to make people want to see the show!"

—Paul Niemi

Paul Niemi is an arts and culture writer and a volunteer at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. The quotations in this article are from Paul's recent email interview with Dr. Rushing.

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Prof. Rushing's presentation, "Return of the Native Son: George Morrison's Artistic Journey," is free and open to the public. Click [here](#) for a listing of this program and other upcoming artists' talks at the museum.

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