If It's Not Shamanic, Is It Sham? An Examination of Media Responses to Woodland School Art

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Cet article étudie les réactions des média d'information face à la peinture de "l'école Woodland" et face à son fondateur Norval Morrisseau. Les auteurs évaluent les réactions des média, des musées, des galeries d'art y compris leurs difficultés à classer cet art considéré tantôt comme matériau ethnographique et tantôt comme échantillon d'art moderne. Elles distinguent deux thèmes dominants dans l'interprétation de l'art de "l'école Woodland" par les média, le thème de la survivance et celui de la renaissance. Pour finir, elles critiquent la manière dont ces interprétations déforment les intentions et les buts des artistes.

This paper examines media responses to both "Woodland School" painting and that of its founder, Norval Morrisseau. Reactions of the media, museums and galleries, and their confusing classifications of Woodland School art as both ethnographic material and modern art are assessed. Two dominant themes in media treatment of Woodland School art, the survivalistic and the revivalistic, are identified. Finally, the ways these responses misrepresent the intended meanings and goals of the artists are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the responses of the journalistic media to the contemporary art of Canadian Indians. This art is produced by native people who have been colonized and now comprise dependent part-societies in a nation state where they lack control over their collective lives. Thus the contemporary art of Canadian Indians is an example of what has been called Fourth World art (Graburn 1976). As such, it is directed toward two distinct audiences—internally to native communities and externally to non-Indian viewers. Images are projected which have meanings for both artists and viewers. Often, however, the "messages" intended by the artists are not understood by viewers who interpret the imagery in terms of their own cultural biases. Economic factors further complicate this situation. Although these native artists hope to earn a living through their work, most Canadian Indians cannot afford to purchase art at gallery prices. Thus, members of the non-Indian public constitute the major market for this art, and their aesthetic preferences influence what Indian artists produce.

In considering journalistic coverage of contemporary Indian-produced art, we must recognize the link between the media and the activities of mainstream art institutions. Both the timing and amount of media coverage of native art are largely determined by shows which are organized by public and commercial galleries and museums, since most press articles appear as reviews of exhibitions. Thus, media responses reflect the collection and exhibition policies of these Euro-

Canadian dominated institutions. In this paper, we will examine the perceptions of contemporary Indian art which are put forward in the media and reflected in the activities of museums and galleries. We will also explore the implications of these perceptions for the goals of Indian artists, and, more generally, for the goals of Indian people in Canada.

The examination of these issues in relation to the many different stylistic and conceptual currents which are being explored by contemporary Indian artists is a task far beyond the scope of a single paper. Rather, our discussion will focus on the "Woodland School" of contemporary Indian art. In particular, we will consider responses over the past two decades to the work of Norval Morrisseau, the man who is generally regarded as the founder of the Woodland School (see Figure 1). Morrisseau is an Ojibwa Indian from northern Ontario who rose to sudden fame in the Euro-Canadian art world after an extremely successful first show at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto in 1962. His commercial success, combined with the freshness of his forms, proved a powerful inspiration to other Indian artists such as Daphne Odjig, Carl Ray, and Jackson Beardy, and it stimulated many younger Cree, Odawa, and Ojibwa Indians to begin painting. These other artists have borrowed and elaborated many of Morrisseau's seminal artistic ideas and comprise with him what can accurately be regarded as an artistic school.

The media's response to Woodland School art has, at best, been one of enthusiastic misunderstanding (cf. Stedman 1982). The works of Morrisseau and other members of this school have commonly been treated by the media/gallery/museum complex as surviving remnants of a dying culture which Indians are attempting to revive through their artistic activities. We will argue that these "survivalistic" and "revivalistic" views misrepresent both the aesthetic qualities and the intended meanings of Woodland School art. Such distortions work against the stated goal of many Canadian Indians to maintain distinctive cultural forms within the context of a multi-cultural Canadian society. We will argue that these two dominant views of the art of Morrisseau and the Woodland School are identifiable in articles about their art which have appeared in Canadian newspapers and news magazines since 1962. Our primary sources of these articles were the artists' files maintained by the library of the National Gallery of Art in Ottawa, where over seventy articles were examined. In approximately half of the articles, themes of "survivalism" and/or "revivalism" were explicit. In many others, these themes appeared to be implicit.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE WOODLAND SCHOOL

In order to assess media responses to Woodland School art, it is important to understand the relationship of the school to both traditional Ojibwa art and contemporary Western art. We will begin, therefore, with a brief examination of the emergence of this school which, as noted above, was largely the result of the work of Norval Morrisseau.

A key issue in evaluating Morrisseau's contribution to contemporary Indian art is the degree to which his painting resembles traditional Ojibwa art. Morrisseau has stated that in his youth he was deeply interested in the engraved birchbark

scrolls which served a mnemonic function in the shamanistic activity of the traditional Ojibwa Midewiwin Society. "All my painting and drawing," he has written, "is really a continuation of the shaman's scrolls" (Sinclair and Pollock 1979:45). Such scrolls were incised with pictographic designs depicting zoomorphic and anthropomorphic spirits, diagrammatic representations of Midewiwin lodges, schematic maps, and other motifs. The practice of Midewiwin rituals appears to have declined sharply after World War II; however there is no reason to doubt Morrisseau's account of his exposure to its beliefs and artifacts during the 1930s and 1940s when he was growing up. Although it is wise to be somewhat skeptical about the recollections of artists regarding their own work, there is considerable documentation in the work of Hallowell (1960), Landes (1968), Dewdney (1975), and others of continued Midé activity in northern Ontario during the 1930s and 1940s which included the use of birchbark scrolls.

An early drawing of 1959 entitled "Legendary Scrolls Motifs" provides evidence of both Morrisseau's direct knowledge of traditional graphic art and the personal reinterpretation which he had already begun. This point is an important one because it makes of Morrisseau himself a direct link between an indigenous Ojibwa art and the acculturated art form which he and his followers were to build on it. Unlike Morrisseau, many other Woodland School painters were educated in missionary-run boarding schools with the result that they lacked Morrisseau's more direct experience of traditional art.

Even Morrisseau's earliest work, however, shows numerous signs of divergence from traditional prototypes. The drawing referred to above is neither a copy nor a version of an original scroll, but rather a recombination of motifs which occur on a number of different ritual scroll types. Morrisseau elaborated and personalized the traditional forms, developing the simple schematic outlines into fuller pictorial images. As his painting developed, he continued to invent new motifs which often provide a visual form for traditional and sometimes personal ideas which had not previously been expressed graphically. The best known of these invented motifs, the divided circle, is related to such shamanistic articles as rattles and drums rather than to traditional two-dimensional sources. Furthermore, Morrisseau's characteristic use of pools of vibrant color divided by heavy black outlines is an innovative approach to painting which is not found in earlier Ojibwa art.

As Morrisseau's art developed through the 1960s, a far more fundamental break with traditional art became evident. Images and motifs such as the Thunderbird, which are found in traditional Ojibwa art as isolated symbolic images, were incorporated by Morrisseau into fully-described narrative compositions. In indigenous Ojibwa art visual motifs constituted a code which referred to a cosmology that was universally understood within the culture. There, images could operate as symbols because the related oral tradition was known to the audience. As symbols, furthermore, depictions of various spirits could be highly schematic in style without losing their communicative value. In 1960, however, Morrisseau was addressing a very different audience. The oral tradition was by then unfamiliar to most Ojibwa people and it was virtually unknown to the general Euro-Canadian

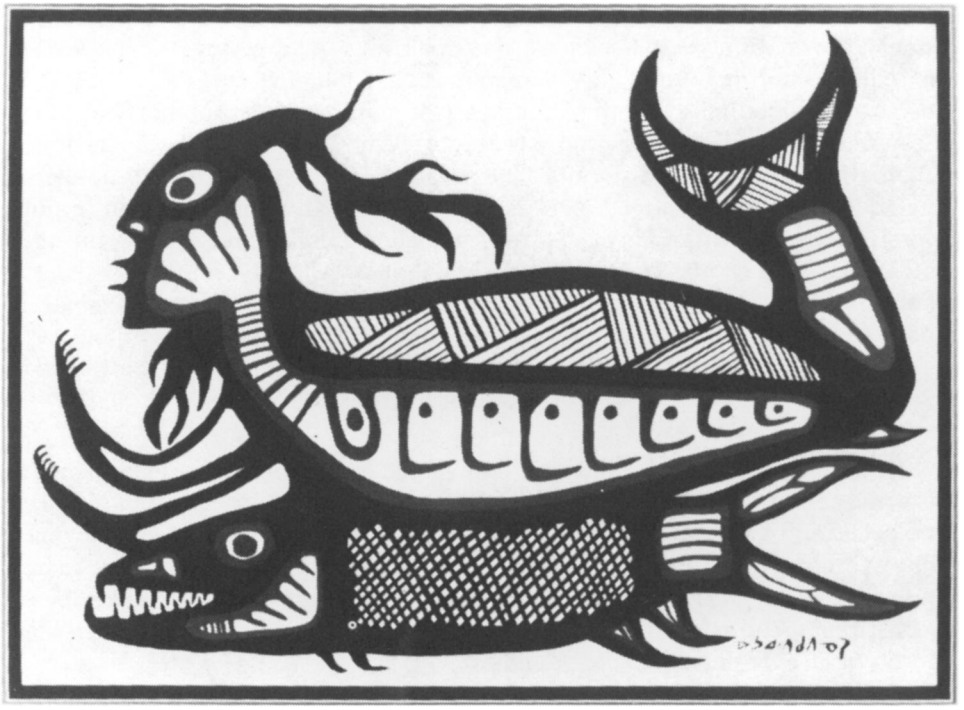

Figure 1. Norval Morrisseau: *The Mermaid and the Fish Spirit*, 1976. Oil on paper, 53.5 x 74 centimeters. Ottawa, Ontario: Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Indian Art Centre.

public which constituted the potential market for native art. Morrisseau's purpose, many times stated, was didactic. He wanted to record knowledge which was in danger of being forgotten and, in the process, "bring back the pride of the Ojibwa which was once great" (Sinclair and Pollock 1979:45). A more fully representational and narrative painting style was obviously adapted to this purpose.

As Morrisseau's work matured his thematic range expanded. Whereas his early work depicted primarily totemic and legendary beings and shamanistic experiences, social and political themes occur in the paintings of the 1970s. A painting of this period entitled "The Gift" shows European intruders giving not only Christianity to Indians, but also smallpox. Such themes depart radically from the traditional iconography of aboriginal Ojibwa art, but they are important aspects of the modern Western secular tradition. Equally modernist has been Morrisseau's recent exploration of his own psychological states through the genre of self-portraiture. Morrisseau often paints himself in the moment of visionary experience, so that the work is anecdotal rather than iconic. In contrast to earlier Ojibwa artists who would have recorded the actual vision or located symbolically in graphic designs the nexus of cosmic forces where such visions could be achieved, Morrisseau recounts specific incidents. The artist steps outside the frame to tell a story; he brings visionary experience into pictorial perspective.

Thus, both stylistic and thematic developments in Morrisseau's work present a great contrast with aboriginal Ojibwa art. Where traditional Ojibwa images are schematic, Morrisseau's painting is richly descriptive; where prehistoric motifs communicate as symbols, Morrisseau's art communicates through narrative. Contemporary artwork is, furthermore, public, consisting of easel paintings and prints made for sale on the open market. In contrast, aboriginal art was intentionally enigmatic and private, often hidden on rock surfaces or enclosed within medicine bundles. These contrasts, together with the stylistic synthesis we have discussed, should make it clear that Norval Morrisseau is not a "primitive" artist. He is *not* naïve with regard to the mainstream of modern art, having had access during his formative years in the late 1950s both to a small library of art books and to advice from a number of white mentors (Sinclair and Pollock 1979; Doherty 1982). After his 1962 show in Toronto, his exposure to mainstream art became even more direct as he came to know the art galleries and museums of the metropolis. Nor is Morrisseau a tribal artist living in a small-scale society and creating within a strictly defined set of artistic conventions. To regard him in either light is to do him a fundamental injustice, for both the "naïve" and the "tribal" labels obscure his real achievement—the creation of a new and viable synthesis out of styles and images from two artistic and cultural worlds.

RESPONSES TO WOODLAND ART

The Survivalistic Perspective

The commercial success of the work of Norval Morrisseau and his followers has been accompanied by a confused and confusing critical reception. As we have suggested, Woodland School painting ought properly to be considered in the context of contemporary Canadian painting. However, a more common response has been to view this art as the last flowering or remnant of a tribal tradition, and to portray the artists as surviving primitives. For example, Norval Morrisseau has often been referred to as a "shaman" as though he lived in a pristine tribal society, and his works have been commonly referred to as "primitive art." Rarely have Woodland School artists been presented as living in the twentieth century. Instead, they have been romanticized at the same time that the demise of their Indian culture has been proclaimed (cf. Price 1978).

Press coverage of Norval Morrisseau over the past two decades illustrates this perspective, which we call *survivalistic*. Note the following examples: Morrisseau's work is referred to as "an expression of what is still an almost totally primitive people,"[1] "un art primitif authentique,"[2] "primitive painting at once both crude and decorative, obvious and inexplicable,"[3] "a form of art from the past,"[4] "the symbolic paintings of a primitive culture,"[5] "d'un peintre primitif un peu special,"[6] art which reveals a "primordial Asiatic root,"[7] the works not of an "artist in the white sense of the word" but the "visionary images of shaman or seer,"[8] and "the last great outpouring of a dying culture."[9] Morrisseau is said to have the "keen eye of an Indian hunter," and it is considered fitting that earth colors should predominate in his work.[10] Without exception, the "noble" rather than the "savage" view of the primitive has been put forward by the media. Thus,

a review of one of Morrisseau's shows in the Montréal *Gazette* on December 3, 1966 stated that "It is a late gift and an unexpected privilege to be thus permitted to share in a fading culture's last secrets." This review continued by commenting on Morrisseau's painting of an Ojibwa shaking tent ritual as a "valuable ethnological document."

The survivalistic theme found in media coverage of Woodland School art typifies the way mainstream art historians and critics have generally viewed contemporary Indian art. Native works are identified as "serious fine art" or "high art" only if they fit the straight-line development from the narrative and representational canons of earlier European art to the abstract and subjective modes of modern Western art. Woodland School painting does not fit easily into this scheme. Particularly in its earlier phase, Woodland School painting often illustrated stories. It also employed stylized representational forms which are popularly associated with ideas of the "primitive." Thus, the progressivist bias in modern art history and criticism has usually excluded Woodland School art from the category of mainstream contemporary Canadian painting. As a result the assumption is frequently made that Woodland School painting is "traditional" and "tribal" and belongs *outside* of the history of Western art.

When Woodland School art is seen as a tribal form, it is said to belong properly to the curators of ethnography as it finds its place in the history of art at the end of the line of development of a strictly-defined tradition. The easel paintings and prints produced by Indians are categorized as anthropological artifacts. However, certain curators have recognized the acculturated nature of Woodland School painting, and they have occasionally included examples in the collections of fine art galleries. As a result of this ambiguity, no publicly-funded institution in Canada has a truly systematic and representative collection of Woodland School art. The collection of the Department of Indian Affairs, now one of the most valuable, has grown erratically from its beginnings as office decoration and the by-product of economic incentive programs. Major public collections of Indian art in Canada are subject to confusing and overlapping mandates from government agencies. The largest collections of Woodland art are currently housed in ethnographic institutions, most notably the National Museum of Man in Ottawa and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, where the paintings have been collected together with nineteenth-century drums, moccasins, and birchbark containers. Major public art galleries in Canada have largely steered clear of contemporary Woodland School painting. An important exception to this rule is the McMichael Canadian Collection in Toronto, where native art is included within the context of twentieth-century Canadian art. A second exception is the Centre for Indian Art recently established under the National Museums Corporation as part of the National Exhibition Centre in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The centre has a mandate to form a systematic collection of contemporary Indian art on the basis of its aesthetic merit and to mount serious exhibitions in a modern gallery space.

Both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada have apparently experienced discomfort when challenged regarding their failure to collect or exhibit contemporary Indian art. This was made clear in an article by art

critic John Bentley Mays which appeared in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* on March 10, 1984 (p. 17), and was headlined "One Artistic Risk Deserves Another." Mays' article covered the opening of a show at the Art Gallery of Ontario titled "Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers" which constituted the first significant exhibition of Woodland School painting to be organized by a major museum of fine arts in Canada. The Chief Curator of the gallery was quoted as saying that the exhibition was the result of outside pressures, particularly from the provincial government, and that he was unhappy about the exhibition and considered it inappropriate for an institution specializing in mainstream Western art.

Contradictory views over which cultural institutions should collect and exhibit Woodland School art have compounded the widespread misunderstanding of contemporary Indian art and culture. As some Indian artists have claimed, when their paintings are collected by Canadian ethnological museums primarily as ethnographic objects, the notion that they are products of some remnant Indian culture is perpetuated, and the stereotype of Indians as surviving primitives is reinforced. Such a "museum view" freezes Indians in "history," and the opportunity to challenge this stereotype by placing Indian art with other expressions of contemporary Canadian culture is lost.

The Revivalistic Perspective

The view of Woodland painting as the art of surviving primitives is related to a second perspective which has frequently appeared in media coverage. This perspective, which we call *revivalistic*, not only presents Woodland art as a survival from the past but asserts that it is in danger of being lost and must be retrieved and revived. The underlying logic of this perspective appears to be that although Indian culture is dying, it can be preserved and given renewed vigor by the production of traditional arts and crafts. Terms such as "revival," "renewal," "recording," "revitalization," and "renaissance" commonly occur in references to Woodland School art. Over the past two decades, there have been many instances of this in the press. For example, Morrisseau's paintings are frequently said to record Indian folklore (*London Free Press*, London, Ontario, September 29, 1962), or to "set down the tribal myths of the Ojibway Indians" (*Fort William Times Journal*, Fort William, Ontario (later renamed Thunder Bay, Ontario), September 5, 1962). An article titled "Artist Paints Ojibway Ideals for Posterity" in the *Sault Ste. Marie Star*, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario on July 21, 1971, stated that "...destiny for the artist is 'to promote Indian culture through Indian art'." This article also quoted Morrisseau as saying that "his art will be a 'cornerstone' upon which to rebuild his culture." On May 29, 1974, an article titled "Morrisseau's Art Work on Exhibit in Toronto" in the *Chronicle Journal* of Thunder Bay, Ontario, noted that "Morrisseau and a group of younger artists who paint in his style explain visually and give renewed dignity to the legendary lore of the people." A cover story in *Maclean's* magazine by Christopher Hume titled "The New Age of Indian Art" noted that Morrisseau's art was "nothing less than a renaissance...," and that although his "old tribal ways were almost obsolete" when he was growing

up, he had helped a "new generation of Indians to reach back to their almost forgotten heritage" (Hume 1979).

As is the case with all stereotypical views, the problem with the revivalistic perspective on contemporary Indian art is not that it is totally false, but that it distorts the nature of this art (cf. Price 1978:217-218). It is true that many Indian artists link their artistic activities to goals of cultural preservation, but this does not mean that they are advocating a return to some nearly-forgotten way of life. The stated goals of many Indian artists can be better understood with reference to the concept of revitalization as developed by anthropologists such as Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956, 1961). Over the past few decades, many Indian people have begun to reassess their position in Canadian society. As a result, some have rejected assimilation into the dominant Euro-Canadian lifestyle, and have sought instead to preserve their own cultural identity. Indians have challenged negative and contradictory stereotypes of themselves which both they and members of the dominant white society have historically held. In their attempts to redefine Indianness in more positive and unambivalent terms, they have looked to their own traditional cultural values and patterns of behavior. This mining of tradition, however, has been highly selective and innovative.

Euro-Canadians have misunderstood these revitalization efforts on the part of Indians. They have assumed that only two alternatives are available to contemporary native people—either they must conform to an earlier way of life, or they must assimilate into the dominant Euro-Canadian lifestyle. Many Euro-Canadians have equated "traditional" culture with "Indian" culture. This limited view of Indian cultural options draws support from a misunderstanding of Indian history (see Patterson 1962, and Berger 1981). The only change through time for Indian cultures that many non-Indians can envision is progress toward a Euro-Canadian lifestyle. This viewpoint has important implications for the perception of contemporary Indian-produced art because it maintains that if Indian art is not recognizably "tribal," it cannot be considered authentic, and is instead the art of an assimilated person who has lost his or her sense of Indian identity. This premise was put forward by one of the few unenthusiastic articles we encountered, a review by Art Perry of a 1980 exhibition of the work of Morrisseau in Vancouver which appeared in the *Vancouver Province* on May 1, 1980. Perry's review was headlined "It's Sham Rather Than Shamanism" and noted that people on the west coast "have been blessed with first-hand access to the best native art in Canada," which was specified as that housed in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Perry was referring, of course, to traditional rather than contemporary art, and he went on to say that "Current coastal native art too often lacks the soul and vision of its great masters of the past" because "times have changed; the audience and the initial raison d'être have long disappeared," and the spiritual significance of this art is no longer relevant to contemporary native peoples. He then focused on the Morrisseau show: "Yet nowhere is this problem of compromise more prevalent than in the work of...Morrisseau...Morrisseau and a group of other Woodlands native artists show the unfortunate demise of a once-

sincere art form. They've changed their original dies [sic] and natural materials for acrylic paints but they still attempt an old story...."

This viewpoint implies that unless Indian-produced art has the same form and *function* as it had in its prehistoric setting, it is not authentic but constitutes a "compromise." There is no recognition that Indians are producing a modern art form which draws on both traditional and Western aesthetic sources and can address current issues. There is no allowance for the existence of distinct but changed cultural forms on the part of non-assimilated Indians. As Strickland writes, "It is hard for whites to imagine Indians who identify themselves with native cultural and tribal values as energy entrepreneurs, as doctors, as lawyers, as business executives, as computer programmers, and as government officials..." (1982:xii-xiii). To this we might add the occupation of "artist." The implication of such a simplistic and limiting view of culture change for Indian-produced art is clear: if it doesn't look as "primitive" as "traditional" Indian art should, it cannot be considered a part of contemporary Indian culture.

Rather than striving for either assimilation or a return to the past, many modern Indian leaders have sought to define lifestyles that are distinctly Indian, but which at the same time constitute adaptions to the modern world. Woodland School artists have been in the vanguard of these revitalization efforts. A number of younger artists such as Blake Debassige, Leland Bell, Roy Thomas, John LaFord, Mel Mahdabee, James Simon, and Michael Robinson (to name only a few whom we have had the opportunity to meet and talk with), have expanded the scope of Morrisseau's art forms. Through their images, these artists have addressed the relevance of traditional Indian beliefs to life in the modern age. Rather than perpetuating an unchanging past, the imagery of a great deal of Woodland art symbolizes continuity with the past and also attempts to project a message to both non-Indians and Indians that Indian culture is distinct and valuable in the modern world. As Graburn has written of such Fourth World art forms, "...they carry the message: 'We exist; we are different; we can do something we are proud of; we have something that is uniquely ours'" (1976:26).

An example of such a revitalization intent is a gigantic mural by Daphne Odjig titled "Indian in Transition" which is executed in a style that combines Woodland School motifs and stylizations of the human figure with the compositional complexity of modern Western painting (see Figure 2). Commissioned by the Candian National Museum of Man, this mural is now on display at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. The Indian artist and art historian Robert Houle calls Odjig's mural "the first commissioned work to make a direct statement regarding the Canadian Indian by a Native artist in this country" (1978:46). This mural is divided into four panels and depicts Odjig's version of history from an Indian point of view. The first panel shows Indians in an idealized pre-contact setting and then gives way to a second panel which shows the degeneration and demoralization of Indian society which accompanied European colonialism. The last two panels depict a resurgence of native pride and a better future for Indian people. One of Odjig's stated reasons for undertaking this project was to balance the history books and create a more positive image to which native people could relate. In a Cana-

Figure 2. Daphne Odjig: *The Indian in Transition*, 1978. Acrylic on canvas, 2.4 x 8.2 meters. Ottawa, Ontario: National Museums of Canada Photographic Negative Number 79-3072.

dian Broadcasting Corporation television documentary aired in 1982, Odjig commented on her own experiences as an Indian growing up on the Wikwemikong Reserve on Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario, and how her experiences have affected her artistic goals:

> In my childhood we had no Indian heroes. If you read...your history books, you learned about the Indian savages. So what was there to be proud of? And...you knew that that couldn't have been true because you'd look at your own parents and your own background and think, gee, we...really aren't that bad. And it couldn't all be one-sided, you know. We must have had our heroes. We must have had our people that we could have looked up [to] but the history books told us...that this wasn't so. We were heathens...I would like to leave something for the native people to be proud of...[so] the children can say she is a native person, and that would be an inspiration to the young people coming up today (transcript of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation *Spectrum* series television program "Spirit Speaking Through" 1982).

Odjig's "Indian in Transition" is far more than her personal version of history; it also projects a model for a new Indian social order. This model involves a strong rejection of assimilation into Euro-Canadian society and provides instead a model of a contemporary Indian society with its own sense of pride and distinctiveness. The makers of "Spirit Speaking Through" allowed Odjig to give a detailed explanation of her intentions for her work and for the future of Indian peoples in Canada. Unfortunately, the media rarely present such revitalization intentions, especially presentations which are this clear. For example, a review of "Spirit Speaking Through" by Jeremy Ferguson titled "Our Indian Group of Seven" dealt summarily with Odjig's intent by referring to her mural as "upbeat on the Indian destiny" (The Star Week Magazine of the Toronto Star January 2, 1982:6).

There is a further aspect to the revitalization goals of some Woodland art. A point rarely made by the media is that this art addresses Indians as well as other Canadians. Thus, while expensive Woodland-style paintings are marketed to galleries and museums as fine art, Indian-run institutions make use of the Woodland School style to address native viewers. For example, on Manitoulin Island the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation produces inexpensive posters executed in the Woodland-style. The posters convey revitalization messages in the an-

thropological sense (for a further discussion of revitalization and art production on Manitoulin Island, see Blundell and Phillips 1982, and Vanderburg 1982.) The Ojibwe Cultural Foundation posters constitute blueprints for the future in that they visually and verbally project models for a more satisfying Indian culture (cf. Wallace 1956, 1961). For example, a poster with imagery by Blake Debassige and the printed motto "The Voice of the Land is in Our Language" links the painted image to a programmatic attempt to sustain distinct Indian cultures within Canadian society (see Figure 3). This poster emphasizes the importance of Indian language in the preservation of distinct cultural identities.

Figure 3. Poster produced by the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, West Bay, Manitoulin Island, Ontario, with imagery by Blake Debassige.

The above examples show that the meaning of the imagery of Woodland art goes far beyond a salvage of surviving knowledge and customs. As the Indian artist and social critic Marty Dunn reminds us: "The anthropological fact that these [artistic] symbols spring from ancient cultures is secondary to the fact that modern Native artists use these symbols as an expression of today's living Native cultures" (1981:1). For Woodland School artists, the actual extent of continuity with past artistic and cultural traditions is not the most significant consideration. What is important and what is coming to sustain many of them is the sense of cultural continuity that they now feel with their Indian cultural heritage together with a renewed sense of *communitas* which was formerly eroded by centuries of oppression and domination (cf. Weber 1946). Let us recall that Wallace noted that

just such a sense of continuity, whatever its empirical basis, is a defining characteristic of revitalization movements (1961:159-163). Today, Woodland School artists are asserting continuity with the past by using a distinctive art style, whose motifs have meaning for contemporary Indianness.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued in this paper that the failure of media commentators to understand and accurately report the intentions of contemporary Woodland School painters results in both a misinterpretation of the artistic imagery of Woodland artists and a mistaken classification of their art. As stated earlier, contemporary Woodland School painting is linked only loosely to traditional Ojibwa art. The artist Norval Morrisseau achieved an eclectic resolution between mainstream twentieth-century painting and his Ojibwa inheritance which younger artists have continued to develop. George Rouault and Picasso are as much present in this contemporary art as is the graphic figure style of the Midewiwin scrolls, yet the two artistic traditions coexist harmoniously. Indeed, in modern Woodland School painting the wheel has turned full circle, since modernism itself was heavily influenced by the extreme stylizations of "primitive" art.

According to this analysis, it would be more logical to include contemporary Woodland School painting in collections of contemporary art than in ethnographic museums. Yet, as we have seen, the major public collections of this work belong to repositories of ethnological material or to institutions outside the art establishment. Media responses are conditioned by the context within which this art is exhibited, and coverage thus tends to focus on iconographic links to the past rather than the artistic expressions of the present. Exhibitions of this work almost never receive serious critical discussion comparable to that given to the work of contemporary non-Indian painters. The aesthetic qualities of Woodland School art, including its handling of space, color, form, and line, are rarely analyzed. The assumptions underlying much media treatment of this art are that the artists are naïve, untutored, and concerned only with simplistic narrative or crude symbolism. Even in discussions of imagery, the new is lost in the celebration of the old. Media coverage often focuses on romanticized biographies of Woodland School artists rather than on the content of their work. Indeed, the term "legend painting," which is so often applied to Woodland School art, implies a naïve repetition of stories out of an oral tradition rather than the original and creative efforts which many Woodland artists are now making to discover the relevance of old beliefs to modern life. For example, although the Ojibwa artist Blake Debassige uses some of the conventions of Woodland School figure painting in a work titled "Patience," this painting does not deal with a mythical hunter of the past. Instead, it deals with the virtues of his own father-in-law which Debassige believes to be vital in modern life. Similarly, in Jackson Beardy's well-known painting "Rebirth," the regenerative processes of nature are expressed through the images of birds in order to comment on universals of life rather than on any specific Indian legend.

The factors that influence media coverage of contemporary Indian art are complex and paradoxical. It must be recognized that artists themselves contribute

to media responses to their art. Morrisseau's own poetic and metaphorical statements in which he proclaims himself a shaman have been quoted at length in press coverage of his work. Such declarations are often taken too literally and rendered absurd by a lack of the same degree of critical understanding that would be accorded to any Euro-Canadian artist making similar remarks. It is also the case that along with many Euro-Canadian viewers, there are Indians who do not "read" Woodland art works as syncretistic and revitalistic models of distinct and valued Indian identity. These Indian viewers are people whose own life histories have included exposure in reserve settings to the dominating and discriminatory ideologies of Euro-Canadian institutions such as schools and Christian churches. Furthermore, the Euro-Canadian aesthetic preference for "primitive-looking" art, together with the common view that contemporary Indians are a remnant tribal culture, often block an understanding of the revitalization message of the art.

Paradoxically, the use of a Woodland School style may have the unintended effect of perpetuating the very conditions which many Indians are seeking to change through their artistic statements. Some Indian artists regard their cultural stance as more compatible with such mainstream modernist styles as expressionism, surrealism, and pop-art which are more readable by the non-Indian public. The use of such styles, they argue, permits artists to challenge more directly Euro-Canadian misconceptions about Indians. But even though modernist artistic statements may attack stereotypic views of Indians, they may not be as commercially viable as those executed in the more "primitive-looking" Woodland School style. Nor are more modernist styles of art as readily accepted by the institutions which presently curate and exhibit Indian-produced art because, as we have argued above, the ethnological viewpoint of these institutions requires Indian art to have the "appearance" of "tradition." At present, Indian artists are often caught in a double bind: if they paint in an "Indian-looking" style, they may reinforce the view that they are surviving primitives; if they paint in more recognizably modernist styles, they may be excluded from the only institutions which are presently willing to exhibit art produced by Canadian Indians.

Exceptions to the discouraging pattern of critical response to Woodland School painting are beginning to emerge. Toronto's *Globe and Mail* art critic John Bentley Mays provided some serious critical comments on Morrisseau's painting in a review of an exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in 1981 (in a July 9th article entitled "Morrisseau's Art Explores Magic Forests of the Mind"). Though justifiably assessing Morrisseau's technique as relatively unskilled and "rarely adventurous," Mays admired Morrisseau's "beautifully rhyming colours and shapes" and his "richly symbolic allegorical art." The 1984 landmark show at the Art Gallery of Ontario also stimulated an article in *Maclean's* magazine by Gillian MacKay titled "Salute to a Vibrant Revolutionary" (March 5, 1984:62-63). MacKay's article was far more sensitive than a cover story on Morrisseau which had appeared in *Maclean's* five years earlier (Hume 1979). In her article, MacKay remarked that Morrisseau was a "radical...innovator" and discussed his stylistic development in historical perspective. If this trend in critical response to Woodland School painting continues, future media coverage may provide more accurate reflections of

the genuine concerns of Woodland School and other Indian artists, and thus challenge rather than perpetuate distorted stereotypes of Indians and their cultural productions.

In conclusion, we must ask whose interests are served by the view of Indians as surviving primitives valiantly reviving a nearly lost culture through their artistic activities. Does this misconception shield Euro-Canadians from "flesh and blood" Indians and prevent their knowing about the lives of poverty and dependency which are led by so many native Canadians? Clearly, Indian people are very different from the images reflected in and reinforced by the media/museum/gallery complex. Clearly, distorted views of Indians and their contemporary cultural forms obscure the many serious social and economic problems which native people, including native artists, are now facing. And what about the interests of these individual Indian artists who, like other Canadians, must earn a living in order to purchase goods and services? Some critics accuse Woodland artists of "selling out" and "playing Indian" in order to cash in on non-Indian demands for the "primitive" (cf. Stedman 1982:244). Furthermore, when media critics suggest that Indians can "keep their culture going through their art," are they not advocating a narrow view of "culture" which isolates it from economic and social life? (see, for example, the article on Woodland School artist Rocky Fiddler by Mark Frutkin titled "Young Indian Creates Art While Preserving Culture" in the *Ottawa Citizen,* April 30, 1981.) Usher has written that according to such a view, culture "is not seen as rooted in a particular economic and social system," and that the "only relation this type of culture has to economics is its contribution to 'the economy' (or the GNP), by generating handicraft sales and tourism" (1982:4). In a similar vein, Berger has argued that Euro-Canadians too often view Indian culture as consisting only of "crafts and carvings, dances and drinking...[so that] it is at best a colourful reminder of the past" (1981:4). Will such members of the public remain confused and continue to link their support of Indian-produced art to the perpetuation of such a narrowly conceptualized notion of "Indian culture?" If so, they may merely facilitate the retention of an "Indian" ethnic identity rather than the articulation of contemporary Indian cultural forms with distinctive social and economic dimensions as well as artistic ones within a multi-cultural Canada (see Usher 1982). These are difficult questions which extend the discussion of contemporary Indian art into the arena of political debate; surely they are worthy of further consideration.

NOTES

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[1] Comment by Elizabeth Kilbourne, author of a *Toronto Daily Star* column called "The Art and Artists." Quoted in an article titled "Morrisseau Paintings Receive High Praise" in the *Fort William Times Journal*, Fort William (later renamed Thunder Bay), Ontario, September 5, 1962. This article reports on Morrisseau's first Pollock Gallery show in Toronto, and views his work as "decorative" rather than "true" art.

[2] In a review of a private gallery show titled "Exposition Morrisseau chez Agnès Lafort" in *Le Devoir*, Montréal, Quebéc, April 23, 1963.

[3] In an untitled review of a showing at Hart House Gallery in Toronto in the *Toronto Telegram*, Toronto, Ontario, January 30, 1965.

[4] In a review titled "Indian Paintings at D.H.S. Friday" which quotes a Toronto Art Gallery curator in the *Dryden Observer*, Dryden, Ontario, December 9, 1965.

[5] In an article titled "Ojibway Artist Goes on Display at Gallery" in the *North Bay Nugget*, North Bay, Ontario, January 6, 1971.

[6] In an article titled "L'Exposition Morrisseau au Musée du Québec" in *Le Soleil*, June, 1966.

[7] In a news story titled "Norval Morrisseau, Indian Painter Visiting Area" in the *Kenora Miner and News*, Kenora, Ontario, April 12, 1972.

[8] In an article by Wayne Edmonstone in the *Toronto Daily Star*, Toronto, Ontario, November 3, 1972.

[9] In a *Maclean's* magazine cover story by Christopher Hume (see References Cited).

[10] In an article by Ann Daniel titled "Norval Morrisseau: Myth and Reality" in *The Challenge*, Montréal, Québec, December 11, 1966.

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