

Summer 2015

## Focusing on First Nations Art

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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**EDWARD MORASSUT** is an art collector based in London, Ontario. Working closely with art dealers, other collectors and the artists themselves, Morassut has assembled an important collection of Canadian Indigenous pieces by artists including Carl Ray, Alex Janvier and Joseph Sanchez, who collaborated and influenced each other as members of the famous artist collective Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. Many of the works in his collection demonstrate a strong connection to the land and nature, which reflects his own interest in wilderness conservation and preservation. Matthew Ryan Smith spoke to Morassut in April.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** *Can you tell me a bit about your background?*

**Edward Morassut:** I grew up in Sault Ste. Marie and I've gained an appreciation of the natural beauty Northern Ontario has to offer. In terms of collecting, I was always drawn to native art because it has simplicity while still conveying a tonne of meaning. I've spent a lot of time on Manitoulin Island and enjoy scouting out the native art. Wikwemikong is one of the only unceded reserves in the country, occupied by the Ojibwa, Odawa and Potawatomi peoples. Their legends and the warmth of their stories always resonated with me.

*What was the first piece you collected?*

It was a Stan Panamick painting. We were travelling from Toronto to the Sault, and near Serpent River there's a Woodland studio that sells native art. We stopped in

and found many great pieces of Indigenous art. The Panamick piece is a face with two loons flowing from its hair. I probably couldn't even afford it at the time, but I had to have it, you know?

*Whose work are you most interested in collecting?*

I've collected from all members of the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated, also known as the "Indian Group of Seven."


*Whose work would you say is the most difficult to locate?*

I would say Jackson Beardy. I don't think he was as prolific as the other members, and he also died young. You can find some of his prints, but the originals, especially the oils, are very difficult to locate. You have to buy from reputable galleries and art dealers. Once you start collecting, people tend to find you, too. What I eventually did was reach out to the living artists directly – Joseph Sanchez, Daphne Odjig, and Alex and Jacqueline Janvier. All good people.

*Do you have a favourite in your collection?*

I really like the tribute painting Joseph Sanchez did of Carl Ray called *Long Tall Poplar*. Another is Carl's self-portrait – *My Name Sake at Birth, Tall Straight Poplar*. He painted himself as a poplar and it's interesting to see the two interpretations. I don't really have one favourite; it's the collection as a whole and what I was able to learn putting it together. Each artist has developed their own unique style and they've influenced each other; learning these influences and picking them out in the paintings makes collecting even more meaningful.

*Are any of the works in your collection on display now, or slated to be shown somewhere in the near future?*

I had two works in the 7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. show when it was in Regina; one was a Beardy, one a Sanchez. They were trimmed from the exhibition when it started travelling but you can still see them in the catalogue. I don't mind sharing my collection because this art needs to be seen and appreciated. 

**Matthew Ryan Smith** is a freelance writer, independent curator and educator based in London, Ontario.

**7: Professional Native Artists Inc.** is at the McMichael Gallery in Vaughan, Ontario, until September 7, 2015.



**Long Tall Poplar** (detail) | Joseph Sanchez | 1980, Oil on linen, 24"x20"