
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

Spring 2015

Storming Canada: Carl Ray and The Indian Group of Seven

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/matthewryansmith/88/>

Storming Canada

Carl Ray, Indigenous Representation, and the Sacred Legends

By Matthew Ryan Smith



INSET: Sandy Lake First Nation Reserve, Ontario. Photo: Morgan Bentham (CC BY-SA 3.0). BACKGROUND: Photo: Nathan Kostegian (CC BY 2.0)

What you are looking at is ancient and sacred. In fact, what you see could be described as a part of my soul. —Carl Ray¹

CARL RAY EXISTS IN A CONTRADICTION; a somewhere place where many recognize his name but don't know who he is, where the events of his life tend to overshadow the work he left behind. It seems no longer enough to talk around Ray, the Canadian Cree artist who passed on in 1978, as he continues to face the threat of falling into relative obscurity—this while many of his closest friends and colleagues encounter success and anchor their legacies. Ray deserves more than a passing reference in books or exhibition catalogues or during conversation. His work is among the most inventive and poignant of that generation of First Nations artists who fought against the designation of handicraft, wanting instead to be considered contemporary artists in their own right, and doing so while facing an unceasing tide of racism, stereotyping, and pigeonholing.² Ray's deconstruction of sacred stories and legends transforms traditional histories into fantastical and hyperrealistic imagescapes, which not

only reenergized Indigenous visual culture but Indigenous communities as well.

Born on Sandy Lake Reserve in Northeastern Ontario in 1943, Ray was sent to attend McIntosh Indian Residential School, near Kenora, Ontario at age seven. Although it is believed that instructors encouraged him to paint and draw, Ray was also privy to the colonial project of cultural assimilation endorsed by the Canadian government. His experience at McIntosh during the 1950s ignited a political acumen that later influenced his approach to art making and educational work. Ray was forced to leave the residential school at age 15 due to the death of his father and returned to Sandy Lake to provide for his mother by trapping animals for fur.

During this time, Ray listened to stories and legends told by the elders of Sandy Lake. These encounters were

foundational in Ray's development as a visual artist and as a young man—not only did the elders inform Ray about his Cree ancestry, but they also provided source material for his work. While details are uncertain, apparently word spread throughout Sandy Lake that Ray based his paintings and drawings on these sacred stories and legends, which was condemned as sacrilegious by members of the community who perceived the act as an assault on tradition and the spirits themselves. Even Ray's grandfather, a respected medicine man, was unable to alleviate the intensity of the repercussion. Ostracized by his community, Ray was, more or less, driven out. At first he abandoned a career in visual art to work in physical labor—initially as a logger, next a commercial fisherman, then as a gold miner in Red Lake, Ontario—despite the fact that he remained creatively unfulfilled. Reflecting on these years, Ray commented, “I am a person who must be free in order to live. I am a good worker so they say. I used to work in logging and I've worked in the gold mines. But I could not accept a foreman standing behind my back. I guess I have always been searching for what I am doing today.”³

At Red Lake, working conditions combined with drinking contributed to a steady decline in Ray's health, and he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. During recuperation he picked up the brush and pen to reintroduce himself to art making but this time for the sake of meaningful self-employment. He worked feverishly, so much so that at the height of his production he completed a painting a night.⁴ When Ray finally returned to Sandy Lake following his convalescence, seminal Ojibwe artist Norval Morrisseau visited the reserve. Morrisseau nearly exhausted the taboo of depicting sacred stories and legends.⁵ Freed to reexamine the oral history of the Sandy Lake Cree in visual form, Ray soon gained a reputation as a “Legend Painter,”⁶ but this moniker consequently pigeonholed the eclecticism of his practice and marginalized him outside the sphere of contemporary art. Ultimately, Ray did not appropriate sacred imagery but instead sought to reclaim it as an ancient form of visual storytelling.⁷

Morrisseau's friendship with and mentorship of Ray achieved mythical proportions, though unfortunately it has yet to yield a sustained academic study. On the one hand, Morrisseau helped to reconcile Ray's fascination of sacred stories and legends with developing an identity and style as an artist. Morrisseau also represented a strong and formidable figure that Ray, having lost his father at a young age, could



Carl Ray (Cree). Image courtesy of Joseph Sanchez (Tewa descent).

look to for counsel, to the extent that Morrisseau addressed Ray as his “little brother.”⁸ And, finally, Morrisseau demonstrated that rule breaking could become the status quo (albeit Ray lacked Morrisseau's self-assurance). On the other hand, Morrisseau's affiliation with Ray may have stripped the latter of some of the critical and institutional attention he deserves.

All written accounts credit Morrisseau with apprenticing Ray, whose international exposure first occurred when Morrisseau was commissioned by the Canadian Government to paint murals for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. There, after Morrisseau had completed preliminary sketches, Morrisseau's “little brother” stepped in to complete the mural for him. Expo 67 was not only a turning point in Ray's career, but a critical moment for Indigenous art and visual culture in Canada because it afforded Indigenous peoples a venue to present autonomous political critiques of colonialism, rights, and government.

1. James R. Stevens and Carl Ray, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), xi.

2. As Michelle LaVallee, Associate Curator of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, notes, “the time period when these artists were operating and producing work was very contentious. There was extreme racism, they were definitely battling for not just mainstream acceptance but even just recognition as contemporary artists. There were a lot of doors closed to them, there was a lot of pigeonholing, or stereotyped expectations around what Indigenous artists should be doing or not doing.” Michelle LaVallee, telephone conversation with author, October 10, 2014.

3. Beth Southcott, *The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 21.

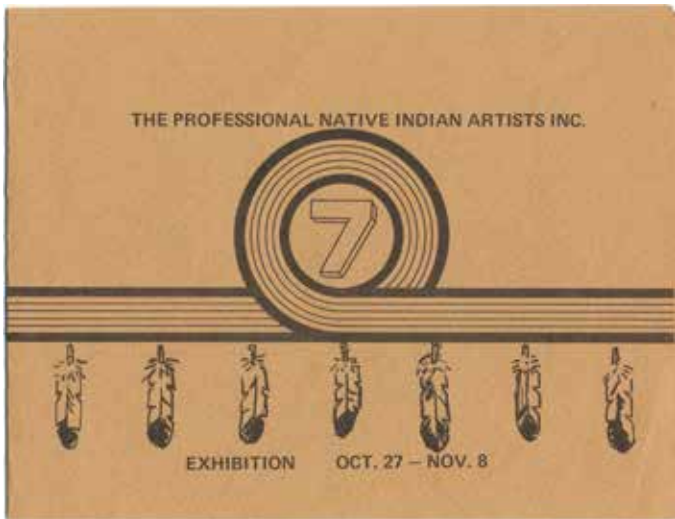
4. Ibid., 18.

5. Elizabeth McLuhan, Tom Hill, and Norval Morrisseau, *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers* (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), 84.

6. Ibid.

7. Sherry Farrell Racette, “Algonkian Pictographic Imagery,” in *Selected Proceedings of Witness: A Symposium on the Woodland School of Painters*, ed. Bonnie Devine (Sudburg, ON: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and Witness, 2009), 45.

8. Carl Schubring, “Carl Ray: Library Now Displays His Pen-Ink Sketches,” in *7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.*, ed. Michelle LaVallee (Regina, SK: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2014), 101.



Several years later, in 1971, Ray teamed up with writer James R. Stevens to co-author the book *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree*. In the celebrated book, Ray provides narrative accounts of ancient oral histories with accompanying drawings used to provide visual cues. These tiny illustrations remain among the most refined, spirited, and truncated of Ray’s oeuvre. The result is a captivating record of the Sandy Lake Cree’s complex spiritual practices, honor, and survivance. However, what also stands out from its pages is Ray’s dedication that reads, “TO MY PEOPLE,” followed by “Their stories are recorded in this book before all is lost in the void of the white man’s civilization.”⁹ Historian Mary E. Southcott observes that during the 1960s and 1970s there existed (and still exists) an urgent impulse to document and publish Indigenous histories. “When it appeared that their culture was on the verge of being extinguished by the onslaught of ‘white’ civilization, there was a move by several individuals to preserve the ancient oral traditions by recording them in writing and art.”¹⁰ It is clear from Ray’s dedication in *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* that Ray became increasingly disturbed by the intrusion of colonialism and Western religion on the Sandy Lake Cree, specifically as it related to increasing disenfranchisement and cultural loss. By writing and illustrating the oral histories of his community, Ray could resist their disappearance forever.

A self-taught painter, draftsman, and illustrator, Ray worked predominantly in acrylics on paper. He was a dedicated colorist, concerning himself with the play of color on figuration, while his two-tone blue-and-black and brown-and-black palette is among the strongest painting produced

by an Indigenous contemporary artist. These two veins of Ray’s work tend to engage a pictographic visual language, which leads many critics and scholars attribute his work to the Woodland Style school;¹¹ however, this connection is somewhat misleading and necessitates a rethinking because it conflates artists whose intentions and concerns remain heterogeneous, at times even oppositional. For curator Michelle LaVallee (Ojibwe), artists such as Ray have “been lumped together or mislabeled [a member of] the ‘Woodland School’ or misinterpreted or misidentified that they all do the same thing, but if you look at what they produce, particularly at that time period, all their works are very distinct [...] There’s probably more closeness between Carl Ray and Norval Morrisseau’s work because they worked so closely together, but even if you look at Norval’s work and Carl Ray’s work [...] what they were doing was very individual.”¹²

Indeed, Ray’s work lacks a polished finish, yet this is due to an inherent pictorial tension therein—most of his paintings and illustrations reconcile story with form, line, and color. For instance, in *Spirit Fish* (1975), Ray sweeps the body of the open-mouthed creature from right-to-left-to-right to produce a “C”-shaped composition, which consequently envelops the image in a dynamic impression of movement comparable to that of a thrashing fish. In the background, thick strokes of phthalo blue advance to a lighter tint that frames the fish’s form as it lunges towards the viewer. The fish’s heart radiates arteries with a quivering line—the same quivering line that runs through a vast majority of Ray’s work and is used to express spontaneous movement. Scales, fins, and teeth are rendered in heavy black line, while organs are demarcated in blocks of framed color. As a colorist, Ray reveled in acute contrasts between light and dark while employing complementary colors to generate luminosity. Ray likened painting with an expression of his people and the blood of his soul, instead of drawing connections to beauty, which he associated with an event or place happening in real time. “Beauty to me is a cry of a loon in the evening. The quietness and peace of my surroundings at Sandy Lake.”¹³ For Ray, beauty was an experiential quality rather than a pictorial one, closely tied to the comfort of community and place.

Windigo (1972) represents a quintessential example of Ray’s two-tone work because it oscillates between utter flatness and three-dimensionality while never resolving it fully. For the Cree and Ojibwe, the Windigo Spirit was once a human who

became possessed and now terrorizes through cannibalism during the five moons of winter. According to Stevens and Ray, “When a human is possessed by Windigo, ice forms inside the human body, hair grows profusely from the face, arms and legs and an insatiable craving for human flesh develops.”¹⁴ In Ray’s anthropomorphic representation of Windigo, it is clear that the Spirit has consumed a figure and its tipi; they reside trapped in the belly of the creature. The figure stands frozen, a victim of the Windigo’s scream, which immediately paralyzes a human being. The Windigo reaches upwards as snow (or ice) hangs from its arms, and the Spirit’s claws curl inwards toward its human-like head. Ray’s quivering black line appears again, this time to accentuate dynamic vertical movement. His two-tone color palette—black to demarcate line and brown to suggest form—is used sparingly in order to emphasize pictographic qualities. The “X-Ray” aesthetic is not only a means of rendering the interior and exterior transparent, but capturing the Windigo’s inner character as well.

In effect, what paintings such as *Spirit Fish* and *Windigo* do is reenergize ancient oral histories while transforming each into idiosyncratic visions. Likewise, for Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill, “Ray’s painting confirms the face that traditional Cree myths can be updated as powerful contemporary allegories, and can generate broad universal response.”¹⁵ For other theorists, such as Bruce Bernstein, Indigenous visual art and material culture must change to develop, grow, and prosper:

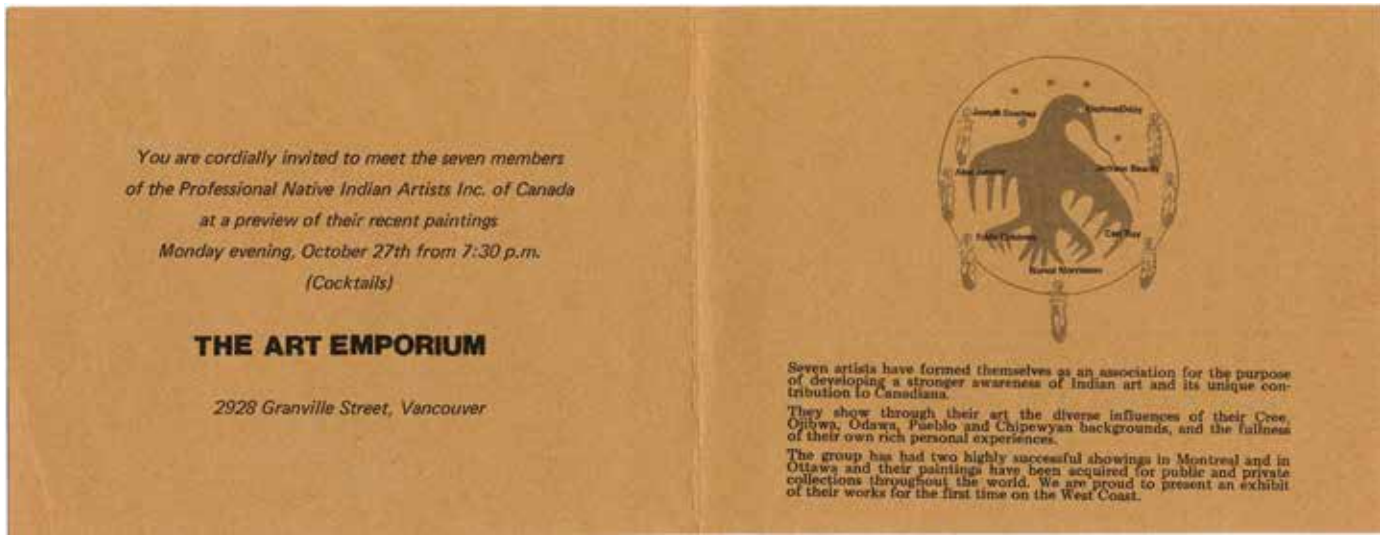
As a form of communication, art must and does change. This is as true for Native art as for other arts, despite the fact that an overemphasis on ethnographic purity with its corollary that therefore the art itself is immutable has generated restrictions both internally and externally. Tradition and traditional art can be seen as restrictive and stultifying concepts, but this is to misunderstand the service they can render to creativity. For Native people and their art, tradition is not a stagnant set of rules and practices but rather a set

*of principles and values that provide a foundation for change—a wonderful and vital part of art-making, a strength of Native communities.*¹⁶

By changing, evolving, and updating the traditional stories and legends of their people, Ray and Morrisseau were among the first generation of First Nation visual artists to not only evoke backlash from their own communities through the depiction of such subject matter,¹⁷ but also from non-Indigenous communities as well; namely, through their steady incursion into the Eurocentric world of 1960s and 70s contemporary art. As a strange paradox, breaking the art rules of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike became a means for Ray and other artists of garnering appreciation and respect,¹⁸ not only for their work but for all Indigenous artists.

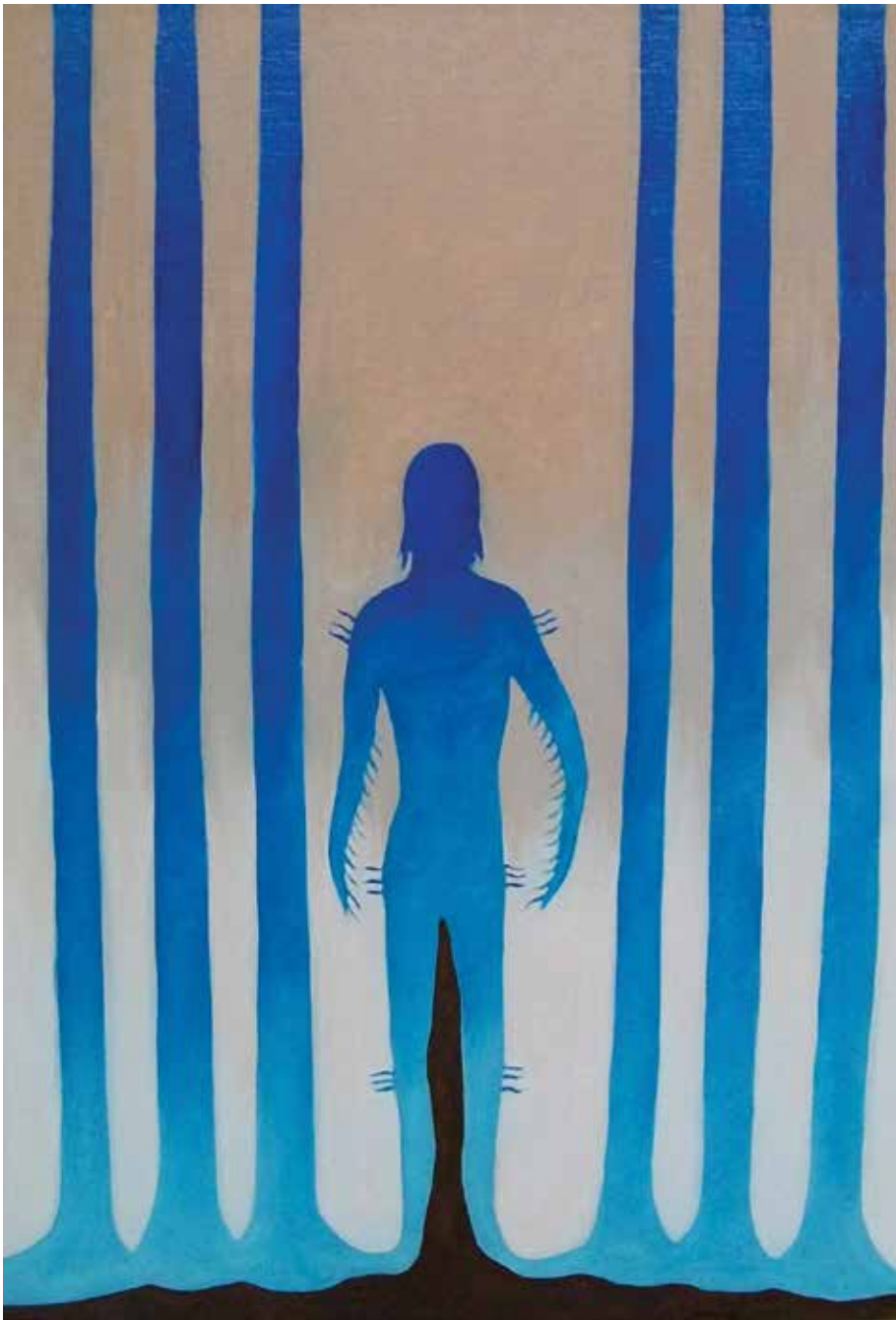
Another critical moment in the history of Indigenous art in Canada came when Ray and Morrisseau attended informal meetings with several of their colleagues and friends with the

14. James R. Stevens and Carl Ray, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), 122.
15. McLuhan and Hill, *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, 91-92.
16. Bruce Bernstein, *Shapeshifting: Transformation in Native American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 30.
17. According to Michelle LaVallee, “Both Norval and Carl Ray probably the most within that group, definitely did venture into documenting sacred imagery and stories that pushed boundaries, not just within the non-Indigenous community but within the Indigenous community. So I think that was important, I think it was something that the artists were doing for themselves, but it also had a beyond the self-intent to it as well.” Michelle LaVallee, telephone interview with the author, 10 October, 2014.
18. This legacy has been re-evaluated by LaVallee in the recent exhibition 7: *Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.* at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan (September 21, 2013 to January 12, 2014). The exhibition is also touring the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Kelowna Art Gallery, and the McMichael Art Gallery.



OPPOSITE and ABOVE: Invitation to a 1975 group show by the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. at the Art Emporium, Vancouver, British Columbia. Images courtesy of Joseph Sanchez (Tewa descent).

9. James R. Stevens and Carl Ray, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), vi.
10. Beth Southcott, *The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 9.
11. The brochure accompanying the exhibition From Wigwas to Canvas: Generations of Woodland Art describes the Woodland Style as follows: “Sometimes referred to as the x-ray style, legend painting, or pictographic style, Woodland art resists such confining labels and instead engages viewers with its contemporary artistic expression. Mythological and secular images combine with a rich colour palette to convey narration, and themes of resistance, emancipation, and prophecy.” Carmen Robertson, ed., *Wagwas to Canvas: Generations of Woodland Art* (Regina, SK: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2002), 2.
12. Michelle LaVallee, telephone interview with author, October 10, 2014.
13. Beth Southcott, *The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 24.



Joseph Sanchez (Tewa descent), detail of *Long Tall Poplar*, 1980, oil on linen, 24 × 20. A portrait of Carl Ray and part of the *Ghost Dance* series. Image courtesy of the artist.

specific purpose of redefining the future trajectory of contemporary Indigenous art. According to LaVallee, the time period when this group of artists were operating was contentious:

There was extreme racism; they were definitely battling for not just mainstream acceptance but even just recognition as

*contemporary artists. There were a lot of doors closed to them; there were a lot of pigeonholing, or stereotyped expectations around what Indigenous artists should be doing or not doing. These seven artists, but many of the artists who were operating during the late 60s and early 70s, were not being recognized by mainstream art institutions.*¹⁹

19. Michelle LaValle, telephone interview with the author, October 10, 2014; Matthew Ryan Smith, “Indian Group of Seven,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

20. Matthew Ryan Smith, “Indian Group of Seven,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

21. Michelle LaVallee, ed. 7: *Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.* (Regina, SK: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2014), 51.

Members of this group, who would become the Professional Native Indian Artists, Inc., included Jackson Beardy (Anishinini, 1944–1984), Eddy Cobiness (Ojibwe, 1933–1996), Alex Janvier (Dene Suline–Saulteaux, b. 1935), Daphne Odjig (Odawa–Potawatomi, b. 1919), Joseph Sanchez (Tewa descent, b. 1948), and, of course, Morrisseau and Ray. They joined forces soon after Expo 67 and the 1969 release of the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian policy, which was criticized by Indigenous communities for its blatant support of colonial projects in addition to its suppression of Aboriginal rights and freedoms.

In 1973, members Beardy, Janvier, and Odjig were included in the group exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Treaty Numbers 23, 287, 1171*, a title referring to the numbered treaties of their bands. The exhibition was successful and helped to establish other Aboriginal artists in contemporary art from Canada. Essentially, this group of artists sought to rupture cultural and political stereotypes by demanding recognition as professional artists, by challenging established meanings of contemporary Indigenous art, and reconsidering social relationships for Aboriginal peoples. They fundamentally helped to change the preconceived Western notion that Indigenous artists were preoccupied with handicraft as opposed to “fine art.”²⁰

According to Odjig, Carl Ray was the first to joke about becoming a “group of seven,”²¹ a reference to Canada’s “Group of Seven,” a collective of Canadian painters—including Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, and A.J. Casson—who idealized the Canadian landscape during the 1920s and 1930s.²² An article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* announced the Group’s first exhibition, from June 18–22, 1974, on the eighth floor of Eaton’s department store in Winnipeg.²³ Reporter Gary

Scherbain described the Group as “The Indian Group of Seven” in order to distinguish it from the original. The appellation “The Indian Group of Seven” is evidence of a continuing tendency to marginalize Indigenous artists as Other. It wasn’t until April 1, 1975, that the Group was officially incorporated as the Professional Native Indian Artists, Inc. (PNIAI), solidifying their place in the canon of art history. Though they did not release an official manifesto, PNIAI was primarily concerned with supporting Indigenous artists and their communities through advisement, discussion, and teaching.²⁴

Historians and artists often view Ray as the leader of a younger generation of Indigenous painting in Canada, a bridge between Morrisseau and the next wave of artists.²⁵ The observation is warranted. In 1971, Ray and Morrisseau were hired by the Ontario government’s Ministry of Education to instruct and inform Aboriginal youth of their cultural heritage. Together, Ray and Morrisseau traversed Ontario, from north to south, visiting destinations such as Timmins, Wawa, Bruce Mines, Elliot Lake, Sudbury, North Bay, Bracebridge, Whitby, and Oshawa. Later the same year, Ray taught at the influential Manitou Arts Foundation on Schreiber Island in Ontario, where he advised students including, Shirley Cheechoo (Cree), Randy C. Trudeau (Odawa–Ojibwe), Blake Debassige (M’Chigeeng Ojibwe), Leland Bell (Wikwemikong Ojibwe), and Martin Panamick (M’Chigeeng Ojibwe).²⁶ In 1972, the Department of Indian Affairs (now the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development) sponsored a second educational tour through northern communities and reserves.²⁷ Under Ray’s teaching and leadership, students learned Anishinaabe stories and visual languages, the same stories and languages now being reinterpreted and renewed more than a generation later by artists such as Robert Houle (Saulteaux), Keesic Douglas (Mnjikaning Ojibwe), Bonnie Devine (Serpent River Ojibwe), and Michael Belmore (Ojibwe).

In his seminal work *Conflict Between Good and Evil* (1975), Ray’s aesthetic sensibility confronts his personal life. The two-toned, blue-and-black painting on paper of a water spirit and a thunderbird embroiled in battle represents a universal moral conundrum that Ray himself was not exempt from.

For those who knew him well, Ray fought against good or evil at one time or another; nevertheless, critics and historians are guilty of sensationalizing Ray’s death and

the circumstances surrounding it rather than preoccupying themselves with critiquing the body of work he left behind. As a consequence, whether they know it or not, they help perpetuate the myth of Ray as an archetype of the “tragic artist.” It was little surprise to his friends and peers that he suffered from demons and attempted to confront them through his work. Ray’s close friend, the Anishinaabe poet and playwright George Kenny, addresses Ray’s suffering in an open poem that reads as a personal letter:

I wonder
if those paintings you painted ever satisfied your
demons that drove you to paint as you did paint,
Carl.
Didn’t you realize that fame only comes at the
meeting of one of those demons – DEATH? Fame
as in the sudden rush to buy all and any paintings
you created.

Now we’ll never know the extent of your greatness.
For of this there was no question –
you were the best of your kind.
Some artists know about the proper mixtures of
oils on a canvas after a lifetime and even then there
is no greatness to their finished canvases
but you, Carl, though it’s a cliché,
it seemed that you were born to paint, to create
that hard fine line of art in each and every Cree
legend you gave to the goddamn world. Carl, you
were born to greatness, though some people said
that you were ‘mad as the night-owls’ but then the
same was said of Van Gogh.²⁸

In 1978, Ray’s body was found dead and frozen in the snow outside a bar in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, after a violent encounter. Since 1978, we have been left in that liminal space between what could have been and what is—much like Ray and his work, it too cannot be fully resolved. What we can say for certain is that his short life was more than enough time to cement a legacy, change the status of Indigenous art in Canada, and influence generations of Indigenous artists—not a tall order for the man nicknamed in his Cree community as Tall Straight Poplar. My writing, like Ray’s own, moves against forgetting. He, too, was deeply invested in the transcription of oral histories into visual ones, recording the stories and legends when the threat to them was so real.

22. The “Group of Seven” have since become scrutinized by contemporary Indigenous artists including Kent Monkman (Cree) for presenting the Canadian landscape as one completely void of Indigenous peoples and culture.

23. Michelle LaVallee, ed. 7: *Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.* (Regina, SK: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2014), 55.

24. Matthew Ryan Smith, “Indian Group of Seven,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

25. David T. McNab, “Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 4 no. 1 (1984): 162.

26. Teresa Jones, “Manitou: Celebrating the Spirit of the People,” *WKP Kennedy Gallery*, November 4, 2014, s.

27. Elizabeth McLuhan, Tom Hill, and Norval Morrisseau, *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers* (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), 86.

28. George Kenny, “Note to Carl Ray from George Kenny,” in *The Sound Of The Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec*, ed. Beth Southcott (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 17.