Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison
Educator/Interpreter Support

Suggested Reading:

Lowe, Truman, ed. Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian. This exhibition catalog features an introductory essay by sculptor Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk) placing the art of these two pioneering Native modernists in the context of Native American art in the early 20th century. An essay on Morrison by writer Gerald Vizenour (Chippewa) provides biographical details drawn from personal conversations and published interviews with Morrison.


Talking points for selected works likely to be of interest to novice viewers, with suggested comparisons to other works in the exhibition:

I. Whalebone, 1948

II. Red Painting (Franz Kline Painting), about 1960

III. Cumulated Landscape, 1976

IV. Untitled (Lake Superior Landscape), 1986

V. Red Rock Variations: Lake Superior Landscape, 1990
Invitation to Look:

- What do you recognize in this picture? What seems lifelike? What does not?

About the work:

- Still life—an important tradition in Western art since the early Renaissance—paintings of artfully arranged objects on a table, a showcase for displaying artistic talent

- Still life—a favored genre among Cubist painters as a way to investigate “the nature of perception through the tactile and transitory world of everyday objects”

- Inclusion of whalebone—not a common subject for still lifes!—harkens back to Morrison’s youthful fondness for gathering found objects along the shore of Lake Superior

Look for:

- Juxtaposition of lifelike objects (bottle and bone) and ambiguous space (“background” formed from planar patches of color—natural-seeming table on left dissolves into patches of color on right)—Surrealist interest in “cognitive dissonance”
• Objects that do not follow natural laws—forms behind the wine bottle tip up in space, bone seems to tip forward instead of sitting naturally on table—Cubist interest in questioning the nature of perception

Compare with:

Duluth Corner, 1942
Notice the strong sense of receding space in this drawing from Morrison’s student days, created using the principles of perspective. Contrast that sense of depth with the flat space of the still life environment.

Untitled (Green and Brown Whorls), 1949
Look for abstract organic shapes that echo the shapes of the whalebone, now in a mostly abstract context. How are they similar? How has Morrison treated the background here? Does the horizontal line near the bottom suggest a horizon line to you? Why or why not?

Painting #10, Abstract, 1952
Compare Morrison’s treatment of the background in Whalebone with the way he has used shape and color to divide the canvas into horizontal and vertical sections here.

Untitled, 1958
Watch for continuity in Morrison’s color sense throughout his career.
**Invitation to Look:**

- Quick, what is your first impression of this picture? Now take a long, close look. What do you notice that you didn’t at first?

**About the work:**

- Reveals Morrison’s engagement with the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, just emerging as he arrived in New York in the mid-1940s

- “Action painting”—a favorite mode of many Abstract Expressionists—clear traces of the artist’s gestures, no interest in making marks that suggest something identifiable in the visible world

- “Color field” painting—another mode of Abstract Expressionism—broad expanse of solid color that does not seek to represent anything other than the color itself and the emotional response it produces

- Subtitled “Franz Kline Painting” because it once hung in the home of Abstract Expressionist painter Franz Kline, Morrison’s good friend and godfather to his son, Briand. It was intended to be half of an artist’s exchange, but Kline died before the trade could be completed.

**Look for:**

- Enormous, “heroic” scale—embraced by Abstract Expressionists for the ability of vast canvases to produce an all-encompassing sensation for both artist and viewer

- Thick paint surface, clear traces of the artist’s tools and gestures
• “Endless space”—a picture plane that seems like it could, in Morrison’s words, go “on and on in all directions” beyond the edges of the canvas

• Consider the effect of the golden yellow line visible across the top of the canvas—how would the painting be different without it? Does it have the effect of a horizon line, in your opinion? Why or why not?

Compare with:

**Untitled, 1958**
Look closely to compare the surfaces of this picture and *Red Painting*. Does the paint seem to have been applied the same way in both cases? What do you see that makes you say that? What physical gestures can you imagine the artist making as he painted each?

**Cumulated Landscape, 1976**
Compare the monumental scale of Morrison’s wood collages with the “heroic” scale of *Red Painting*. How are they similar? How are they different?

**Untitled (Lake Superior Landscape), 1986**
Morrison reintroduced pictorial references to the physical world later in his life. What qualities of abstract expressionism persist even when his work is not fully abstract?
**Invitation to Look:**

- What is this artwork made of? How do you think the artist decided where each piece of wood would go?

**About the work:**

- Earliest wood collages made with pieces of driftwood scavenged from the Atlantic shore while summering in Provincetown, Rhode Island

- Morrison enjoyed the element of chance in the scavenging process—an extension of his interest in Surrealist cultivation of the accidental as source of art (e.g. refining drawings from scribbles)

- Morrison would later also “weather” pieces of wood himself to achieve a desired color or texture

- Reflects his friendship with Louise Nevelson, who constructed assemblages from materials scavenged on the streets of New York City

- Morrison has said he was “painting with wood” with his wood collages. What do you think he meant by that?

**Look for:**

- An underlying grid pattern forming horizontal and vertical sections
• A horizontal line that stretches across the width of the artwork formed where long edges align with each other—deliberate “horizon line” to establish that this is an abstraction of a landscape

• Areas where Morrison displays the end grain of the wood pieces and areas where he displays the flat grain. How are they different?

• Areas where Morrison clusters curved and irregular shapes and areas that are more regularly geometric

**Compare with:**

*Sun and River*, 1949
Notice how Morrison divided this recognizable landscape into horizontal bands with vertical subdivisions. Do you see any similarities with the underlying grid structure of *Cumulated Landscape*?

*White Painting*, 1965
Morrison’s interest in a textured paint surface dominates this painting, thick with many layers of paint. How is its surface similar to the textures of *Cumulated Landscape*?

*Provincetown-Sky/Seascape*, 1970
Morrison also made small wood collage landscapes by simply joining two pieces of wood to create a horizon line and allowing the grain of the wood to suggest water and clouds. Does it look like a landscape to you? What do you see that makes you say so?

*New England Landscape II*, 1967 (New York and Indianapolis only)
Morrison made several variations in the monumental wood collage series. How is this one similar to *Cumulated Landscape*? How is it different?
Invitation to Look:

How would you describe the red form that stretches diagonally across this picture? What do you think it is?

About the work:

- Morrison had been living at Red Rock, his home and studio on the shore of Lake Superior, since his retirement from teaching in 1983.

- The red “cloud” form represents Manido-Gree-Shi-Gance, the 300-year-old Spirit Little Cedar Tree near his home at Red Rock, which many regard as sacred with healing powers. Generations of Chippewa have revered the tree.

- Painted the same year that Morrison received two Indian names in a healing ceremony performed by his cousin Walter Caribou. The names are Wah Wah The Go Nay Go Bo (Standing in the Northern Lights) and Quay Ke Ga Nay Ga Bo (Turning the Feather Around).

Look for:

- Thickly textured paint built up in layers of color. What colors appear through gaps in the primary color in each horizontal band?
• Horizontal bands represent the sky, water, and land. Which is which? Do the colors Morrison used affect your interpretation?

• Examine the way the tree shape has been painted. How is it different from the way Morrison built up the horizontal bands of the landscape?

Compare with:

*White Painting*, 1965
Look for similarities in the way Morrison has built up a thickly textured paint surface with layers of color below the dominant top layer.

*Witch Tree Variation*, 1982
Compare the shape of this drawing of the Spirit Little Cedar Tree, here based on close observation, to the shape of the red cloud in *Untitled (Lake Superior Landscape)*. Would you have recognized the red cloud as a tree without this comparison?

*Witch Tree*, 1981
Compare this picture with *Untitled (Lake Superior Landscape)*. Here the Spirit Little Cedar Tree is depicted rooted to the rocky ground. Does that difference affect your interpretation of the pictures?

*Untitled*, 1995
Morrison would later produce a series of abstract floating shapes in front of a landscape. How are these later works similar to *Untitled (Lake Superior Landscape)*? How are they different?
Red Rock Variations: Lake Superior Landscape (1990)
Awakening, Time Edge Rising; Quiet Light Towards Evening; Spirit Path, New Day; Lavender Wind, The Beyond
Minnesota Museum of American Art, Acquisition Fund Purchases

Invitation to Look:

Morrison painted these pictures in his lakeshore studio at Red Rock. Do you think he was looking at the lake and painting what he observed? Why or why not?

About the works:

• As his health declined, Morrison continued to paint prolifically but produced small works on paper instead of larger paintings on canvas.

• Even with a studio steps from Lake Superior, Morrison insisted he was a "studio artist," not looking at the lake when he painted it.

• Although Morrison was not painting directly from observation, he was keenly observant of the changing views from his shoreline perch: "I am fascinated with the ambiguity, the change of the many moods and colors, the sense of sound and movement above and below the [horizon] line."
Morrison deliberately attempted to vary the techniques he used to give each painting a unique personality, “using the tricks and methods of applying paint that I had acquired through the years.”

Look for:

- Each of the pictures in the Red Rock Variation, Lake Superior Landscape series has the same structure. Can you find the horizon line in each? Is it always in the same position?
- What qualities has Morrison varied in each of these four paintings? How do those changes create a different mood or effect?
- What times of day, seasons, or other natural phenomena do you think Morrison was trying to evoke with each of these pictures?

Compare with:

Peruse the exhibition to see if you can find precedents for each of the various techniques you see here in artworks from earlier in Morrison's career.