The exhibition, *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison*, documents, celebrates, and investigates the artistic achievement of a distinguished Chippewa modernist (1919-2000) whose work is held in numerous important public and private collections. Morrison’s journey from impoverished rural origins to regional, national, and international acclaim was a remarkable one, made by a shy, intelligent, and confident man whose art and self-awareness were complex in equal measure. His is a (Native) American story about regionalism, expatriation, urbanity, and homecoming, in which the significance of place is frequently reified in drawings, paintings, collages, prints, and sculptures, both talismanic and monumental. The consistently high quality of Morrison’s art—provocative, sometimes quirky, often radiantly beautiful, and always inspiring—is such that it deserves both a wide audience and a critical place in the history of twentieth century art.

Despite his early acclaim as an exhibiting artist, he refused to be influenced by the clichés and stereotypes of a market-driven Native style. Because of that, he risked and experienced marginalization at the hands of the non-Native arbiters of “Indian art” for many years, even as he achieved (in an ironic reversal of the norm) “mainstream” success. Thus his embrace of modernity—he called it being “liberal”—had both costs and benefits. A culturally informed discourse on Morrison’s art, therefore, must consider certain historical assumptions about the authenticity or degradation of aboriginality. Morrison possessed substantial manual skills and natural intelligence that, when combined with a soft spoken insistence on personal integrity, helped him create what the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor has termed a strategy for Native “survivance” in the modern era. Equally important, the process by which Morrison became a Native artist over time is inexorably linked to his evolving relationship to his Chippewa heritage. Understanding that process and the resulting transformation is a primary goal of this essay, which relies on biography, connoisseurship, close reading of works of art, and a comprehensive analysis of the historiography on Morrison’s art, conducted here for the first time.

**Emergence**
Born and raised in Chippewa City, a now-vanished Indian fishing village on the north shore of Lake Superior, near the Grand Portage Reservation, Morrison spoke his Native language until he began grade

1 Although many Great Lakes indigenous peoples now refer to themselves as either Ojibway, or Anishinabe, many still self-designate, as did Morrison, as Chippewa. He was an enrolled member of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

2 Writing about Anishinabe [Ojibwe or Chippewa] artists, including George Morrison, Gerald Vizenor observed, “Regrettably, the essentialist notion that traditional culture marks the value of creative art has been used to exclude certain artists. Clearly, racist representations and the politics of suitable traditions diminish the value of creative art.” See Gerald Vizenor, *The Everlasting Sky: Voices of the Anishinabe People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), xii.

school at age six. During a yearlong recovery from hip surgery while attending an Indian boarding school in his youth, he took up reading, drawing, and carving, and was supported subsequently by appreciative teachers. After graduating from high school, he attended the Minneapolis School of Art (now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design) on a scholarship from 1938-1943. His Dirt Track Specialist (c. 1940), a realistic portrait of a sulky driver from the Minnesota State Fair, dates from this period. In creating this profile image, Morrison spread the pigment roughly yet exactingly with a palette knife, and the thickly impasted surface is an early manifestation of his penchant for texture and tangibility. The painting was a reaction, he explained, to the slick academicism practiced by some of his teachers. Indeed, the following year Morrison was impressed with a Pablo Picasso retrospective at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, later recalling that he “had a tendency to like more modern concepts.”

But, like numerous American artists of his generation, including Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache) and Jackson Pollock, Morrison began as a Regionalist, as witnessed by two more-than-promising student works: a painting titled Mt. Maude (c. 1942) and Duluth Corner (1942), a small but detailed pen and ink drawing. The latter is a precisely rendered urban scene that showcases Morrison’s sharp and controlled draftsmanship. Mt. Maude, which is a “portrait” of a place near Grand Portage, was painted plein air during a period when, after his first year of art school, he was back home in Chippewa City recovering from a second surgery. In his memoir, Turning the Feather Around: My Life in Art (1998), Morrison recalled this as a time of increasing artistic self-awareness.

It was always good to come home and see my family. At the same time, I was anxious to get back to school and resume the art thing. I was developing my own ideas about what I wanted to be, even thinking about New York. So I must have felt a little apart from the others in the family, a little more educated or advanced.

Even though he understood Mt. Maude as an example of Regionalism, comparable in some respects to the work of such American Scene painters as Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton,
it is by no means a jingoistic agrarian fantasy. Not over-determined by a political vision, it sings a rustic pastorale based on direct observation.

**New York City**
From 1943-1946 Morrison studied at the Art Students League (hereafter, ASL) in New York City where his “conversion” to a modernism that synthesized Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism was swift and complete. He was aware also of the influence of non-Western traditions on modernist primitivism, recalling with specificity the impact of African, Polynesian, Eskimo, and American Indian art on “modern painters, particularly the cubists.”

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8 Quoted in Katz, *Song Remembers*, 56.