

## George Morrison *Paintings and Works on Paper, 1950s–1960s*

September 12–November 2, 2024  
606 N Western Avenue, Los Angeles



George Morrison, *Untitled*, 1953. © George Morrison Estate. Courtesy the George Morrison Estate and Bockley Gallery

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by George Morrison (Grand Portage Band of Chippewa, 1919–2000), on view at the gallery's 606 N Western Avenue location in Los Angeles. Organized in collaboration with the George Morrison Estate and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, this marks the first solo presentation of the artist's work in Los Angeles.

Morrison is celebrated for compositions that convey both a phenomenology inspired by his birthplace and the fervent creativity of the early period of abstract expressionism. Upon moving to New York in 1943 to begin his studies at the Art Students League, Morrison promptly entered the fold of the dynamic downtown art scene, forging close friendships with artists such as Franz Kline, Louise Nevelson, and Herman Cherry, and becoming acquainted with contemporaries including Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. The artist's participation in this nascent, influential milieu is evident in his works from this early period, which demonstrate a nuanced integration of his myriad influences with the gestural expressionism of mid-twentieth-century abstraction. Incorporating aspects of cubism and surrealism, Morrison's decidedly abstract expressionist style invokes an intuitive subtlety with colors and textures while demonstrating a deep understanding of the interconnected effects of light and form.

The works on view in the exhibition date mostly to the 1950s—a significant, generative, and itinerant period in Morrison's early career, when the artist lived and worked primarily in New York and elsewhere on the East Coast, with sporadic visits to the Midwest. He had spent a formative year in France on a Fulbright Scholarship from September 1952 until the fall of 1953, where he studied in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, and Antibes. He worked frequently on paper, using wash, ink, gouache, tempera, and occasionally oil. This period in particular shows Morrison beginning to privilege the support's intimacy and material possibilities—a choice that was both artistic and practical, as smaller-format paper was easier to transport during this very active and mobile decade. He considered these small works as important as his larger-scale paintings on paper and canvas, with each practice informing the other throughout his career.

Exhibited works such as *Summer Spectrum II* (1958) are dominated by warm hues of goldenrod, bright vermilion, and vibrant orange, their gestural marks complemented by swaths of cool lavender or deep indigo. In paintings on paper defined by achromatic or muted palettes, energetic combinations of geometric and organic abstract forms suggest urban space and movement. Other, more colorful compositions anticipate and complement Morrison's experimentation with abstractions that evoke a defined horizon line. Mostly associated with the artist's later career, this recurring motif derived from his lifelong relation to coastal horizons—from his childhood and later, his studio, in Grand Portage, Minnesota, on the north shore of Lake Superior, to the Atlantic coastline when living in New York and Rhode Island, to the serene Mediterranean he experienced in the south of France.

For Morrison, landscape was inclusive of natural, built, and imagined realms. While the genre constitutes a long-standing facet of the artist's oeuvre, this exhibition highlights an important and migratory period during which his focus was abstraction, his aesthetic emphatically nonrepresentational. As Morrison stated: "My own sensibilities, the influences, and the attitudes that shaped my art were broad in scope.... I have never tried to prove that I was Indian thru [sic] my art; yet, there may remain deeply hidden some remote suggestion of the rock whence I was hewn, the preoccupation of the textual surface, the mystery of the structural and organic element, the enigma of the horizon, or the color of the wind."<sup>1</sup>

Together, the works in this presentation exemplify the significant early career of a modernist whose diverse and ever-evolving oeuvre is increasingly relevant to an expanding art-historical canon.

George Morrison was born in 1919 in Chippewa City, on the north shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota. He studied at the Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design) from 1938 until 1943, and upon graduation was awarded the Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Traveling Scholarship, which enabled his move to New York, where he studied under Morris Kantor at the Art Students League (1943–1946). In 1952, Morrison received a Fulbright Scholarship and spent a year in France. As his artistic career progressed, he continued his career as an educator, teaching at various institutions on the East Coast and the Midwest until returning to Minnesota in 1970, where he became a member of the American Indian Movement and was appointed to a dual position at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, as founding faculty in the first American Indian Studies program in the United States and as faculty in the Department of Art. Morrison retired in 1983 and lived and worked at Red Rock, his studio on the Grand Portage Reservation, until his passing in 2000.

The artist had over fifty solo exhibitions during his lifetime, the first at Grand Central Moderns in New York in 1948; the gallery mounted eight more solo shows over the following decade. Institutional solo exhibitions include *Paintings by George Morrison* (1955) and *George Morrison: Drawings* (1973), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; *Standing in the Northern Lights: George Morrison, A Retrospective*, Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul (1990; traveled nationally); *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison*, Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota (2013; traveled nationally); and *George Morrison In Focus*, Minneapolis Institute of Art (2018). In 2004, *Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser* was one of the inaugural exhibitions at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC.

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<sup>1</sup> George Morrison, artist statement, January 1972, George Morrison Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

Morrison participated in his first group show in Manhattan in 1945. In 1947, his work was included in annual or biennial exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Morrison exhibited regularly in group shows at institutions in the United States throughout his career, and his work has been included in posthumous exhibitions including *Before and after the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC (2013); and *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas (2018; traveled nationally). Since 2019, a painting by Morrison has been on view as part of *The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 – 1965* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

In 1997, Morrison's sculpture *Red Totem* (1980) was installed in the Jacqueline Kennedy Sculpture Garden at the White House as part of *Honoring Native America*, which was the sixth iteration of the exhibition series *Twentieth-Century American Sculpture* and marked a milestone in the history of Native American art. Morrison was recognized with an Honorary Doctorate from Rhode Island School of Design (1991) and was the inaugural Master Artist awarded by the Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art (1999). In 2022, the United States Postal Service honored Morrison with a set of five stamps, each featuring the artist's variations on landscape.

Morrison's work can be found in prominent museum collections, including Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; Dayton Art Institute, Ohio; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Minneapolis Institute of Art; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Seattle Art Museum; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

In 2024, the George Morrison Catalogue Raisonné Project was established by the George Morrison Estate and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis.

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