

Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison

W. Jackson Rushing III and Kristin Makholt;
foreword by Kay Walkingstick

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press with
Minnesota Museum of American Art, 2013.
181 p. Cloth, \$39.95; paper, \$29.95.)

When George Morrison died in 2000, he was widely honored as the great elder of Native American art. But his artistic identity was actually complex and, at times, controversial. Born in Chippewa City, Minnesota, in 1919, he trained at the Minneapolis School of Art before going to New York in 1943, where he joined the group of artists who became known as Abstract Expressionists. There, as friend and colleague of such artists as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, Morrison learned automatic drawing, which taps the unconscious, and a variety of techniques that gave his work “texture and tangibility.” Was his work “modernist,” like that of his colleagues, or “Native American”? This question is explored in the handsome catalog of an exhibition titled *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison*.

The exhibition features 85 works by Morrison from St. Paul’s Minnesota Museum of American Art. The book’s introduction by museum director Kristin Makholt recounts her own first encounters with this outstanding collection—paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and wood collages—and surveys the role that the museum’s exhibitions have played in the artist’s career.

The central essay is by W. Jackson Rushing III, a leading authority on Native American art, especially as it intersects with modernism. He firmly rejects formalist interpretations of Morrison’s work and instead uses a holistic approach that includes biography, critical reaction, and close analysis of specific pieces. In accessible prose, he evaluates the changing definitions and interpretations of modernism and Native American art, as well as Morrison’s own evolving view of his heritage.

Rushing recounts Morrison’s New York years, when he reveled in the jazzy life of Greenwich Village and left his sometimes demeaning identity as an Indian in Minnesota behind. Indeed, Morrison knew little about his Ojibwe heritage or the kind of Native American spirituality that the New York group exalted as primitivism. Nor was he eager to associate himself with the kitschy stereotypes of “Indian art.” He was at home in the company of those who embraced the surrealist idea of the unconscious as the source of art and techniques that showed the hand of the artist.

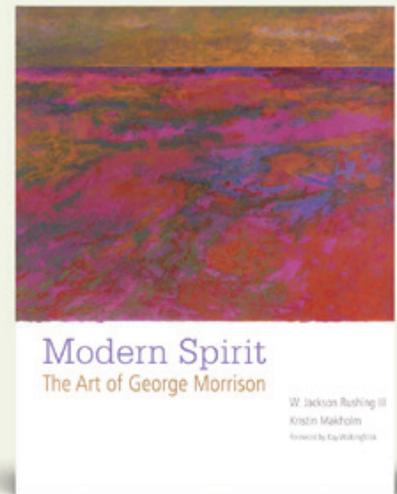
In time, however, Morrison’s work began to show more overt interest in his Indian heritage, a change Rushing traces in Morrison’s wood collages and later totems. The turning point was the artist’s permanent return to Minnesota in 1970, when he assumed a teaching position at the University of Minnesota’s new Indian Studies department. A particularly valuable part of Rushing’s essay is his analysis of Morrison’s

work of the late 1980s and 1990s done at Red Rock Studio, the artist’s home on the north shore of Lake Superior. Although these paintings derive from Morrison’s perceptions of the ever-changing lake, they also comprise techniques from his entire career. Works that might seem to be simple bands of color with Morrison’s trademark horizon line are shown to involve an astonishing array of materials and complex processes, resulting in combinations of radiant color. Imbued with a sense of place, these works also have autobiographical meanings of healing and reconciliation.

The late paintings demonstrate clearly how painting, for Morrison as for the early Abstract Expressionists, was an existential act of creating one’s own identity. He cannot, then, be defined exclusively as a modernist or a Native American artist: He is both. How art was self-creation for Morrison is dramatized in the book’s moving introduction by artist Kay Walkingstick, who visited Morrison to find out how he had coped with being an Indian in the white art world. This seemingly calm man with a complex inner life did not give her an explicit answer, but she inferred the truth: “to go home and be myself.”

Modern Spirit, a beautiful book with splendid illustrations and a detailed chronology by Netha Anita Cloeter, won the 2013 Minnesota Book Award in the Minnesota category. The exhibition begins this summer at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, then travels to New York, Indianapolis, and Phoenix before its final showing at the Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, from February 14 to April 26, 2015.

—Julie L’Enfant



JULIE L’ENFANT, PhD, is former professor of art history and chair of liberal arts at the College of Visual Arts, St. Paul. One of her specialties is Minnesota art. Her most recent book is *Other Realities: The Art of Paul S. Kramer* (2013).

St. Paul Union Depot

John W. Diers

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
285 p. Cloth, \$39.95.)

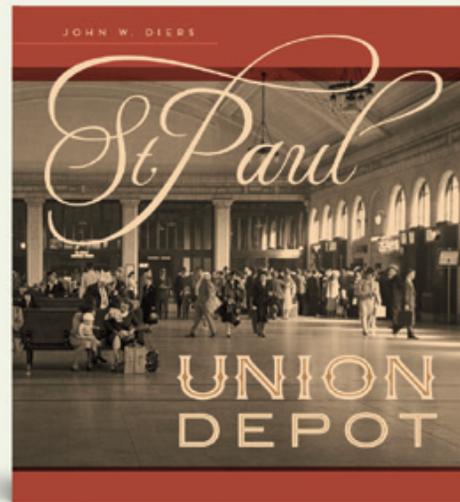
I have a fond memory from my childhood of reading *Seven Little Postmen* (A Little Golden Book) by Margaret Wise Brown, fascinated by the inner workings of the postal service and how a child's letter traveled from one point to the next. One of the images burned into my mind is a postman pulling a mail bag off of a railway mail crane and putting it onto a train car to await yet another sort. *St. Paul Union Depot* serves a similar fascination for me. Written by John Diers, who has worked in the transportation industry for 35 years, the book provides a glimpse behind the scenes of that depot and rail service during the twentieth century. The current depot was built after a disastrous 1913 fire consumed its predecessor.

The book reads as a series of vignettes, each highlighting a certain aspect of the depot's history. Diers includes contextual information about railroads in the United States and greater Minnesota, as well as basic information on each of the nine lines serving St. Paul. He gives life to several of the figures involved in the St. Paul Union Depot Company and tells how those personalities factored into the jointly run depot operation and into construction episodes. Railroad enthusiasts will enjoy the description of various positions within the operation and the specifics of passenger reservations and communications within the rail yard. In the end, however, each of these vignettes left me wanting more.

Despite a note early on in the book that the railroads and depot were susceptible to the whims of public policy and regulations, discussion of the Interstate Commerce Commission's impact on the St. Paul Union Depot is limited to a few years prior to the current building's construction and the demise of the railroad industry in the last half of the twentieth century. Some additional insight on regulatory constraints placed on railroad operations, provided in the epilogue, might have been better placed within the main text.

Unfortunately, the book's organization and design makes it difficult to follow the chronological and geographical history of the railroads, the depot, and transportation in the Twin Cities. The vignettes are presented as individual topics rather than as a logical history of development, requiring page flipping to see how the topics interrelate. A few chapters are jarringly interrupted with sidebars—some more than a page long—with the only graphic signal being a change in typeface. Readers without knowledge of the geography of Minnesota or the Twin Cities will need to find a map to better understand city and street references and the development of railroads in the region.

Illustrations are certainly one of the highlights of the



book. Black-and-white images of the earlier depot and the construction of today's building are brought alive with additional images of trains, railroad workers, and passengers through the years. Even the railway mail cranes are highlighted in the chapter on mail, bringing my inner child back into the story. However, some images were too small to effectively convey their content (this is particularly true of floor plans and other blueprints reproduced within the text).

The release of *St. Paul Union Depot* was perfectly timed to coincide with the revitalization of the beautiful historic structure and the building's triumphant return to use as a multimodal transportation hub. Although the last train left the depot in 1971, the building was rehabilitated and reopened in December 2012. Since then, it has hosted numerous local, state, and national events, including a visit by President Barack Obama earlier this year. The existing bus service will soon be joined by light rail and Amtrak, bringing back the passenger rail vitality envisioned when the building first opened in 1926.

—Barbara Mitchell Howard

BARBARA MITCHELL HOWARD joined the Minnesota Historical Society's historic preservation department as deputy state historic preservation officer in January 2012. She previously served in that position and as an architectural historian in Iowa and, before that, spent several years conducting architectural compliance surveys and working on public history projects throughout the upper Midwest.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).