

Impact Statement

Katelyn Lowe, Grade 12

An Artist's Modernization of American Indian Art, 2025

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

George Washington High School, Charleston, West Virginia

Unsung Hero: Oscar Howe

As an inspiring artist, it did not take me long to realize that Oscar Howe was one of the most creative and groundbreaking Native American artists of the 20th century. In fact, his depiction of Native American art through his modern techniques changed the acceptance throughout the world of traditional Indian art. Howe's modernization of Native American Art was more importantly revered by his own Dakota Indians and other indigenous people. Howe accomplished this all while remaining true to his roots and the storytelling of his people. However, his achievements from primitive art to modernization were not without setbacks. In 1958, he submitted the "War and Peace Dance," reflecting modern art to the Indian Annual Art Show. Unfortunately, it was rejected as it was "not representative of Native American art." Usually shy, Howe wrote to the committee: "Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, that is the most common way? ... Well, I am not going to stand for it." His letter precipitated change regarding how American Indian art was perceived allowing freedom for future generations of tribal artists not to be stifled by the typical stereotypes of his people. Oscar Howe is truly an Unsung Hero to me.

Oscar Howe was a Yanktonai Dakota born in 1915 in poverty. He was stricken by an illness as a child and spent much of his time with his grandmother "Shell Face." She taught Oscar many things about his culture and background. These stories always influenced Howe, and he was determined to remember and carry these traditions through his art in the years to come. As one of the earliest students in the arts program in the Indian School in New Mexico, Oscar Howe learned the styles and subjects which were considered to be traditional to American Indian art. When Howe was exposed to Western artistic methods while studying for his bachelor's degree at Dakota Wesleyan University and then his master's degree at the University of Oklahoma, he began to discover his own unique style. His art resulted in one of electricity, energy, and movement. He influenced many generations of Native artists as a Professor at the University of South Dakota with many of his programs. He won many awards, and his work remains relevant today.

In my creative interpretation, I sought to illustrate the movement and life behind Professor Howe's paintings that showcased his culture identity. Additionally, I wanted to incorporate elements such as horses, dances, and drums that depicted Howe's Yanktonai heritage that he so honored. For my choice of material, I employed a vibrant

color palette illustrating his artistic movement. I also included the front of the Mitchell Corn Palace, which Howe was commissioned by the United States with the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (USWPA), to show that his impact did not just reflect on paper; but moreover, in his design elements. Specifically, the "World's Only Corn Palace," a city auditorium, celebrated worldwide entertainment performances including many Indian tribes reviving the traditional fall harvest and corn dances that were attributed to Howe's Corn Palace design. But I would be derelict in my duty as an artist if I failed to include the teachings of his grandmother, Shellface, and her terrible ordeals. Thus, I chose as my centerpiece of my project a painting which was inspired by his grandmother.

In conclusion, I believe Oscar Howe was an artist of great spirit and the soul of the Native American Indian refusing to dismiss his roots as a Dakota Indian, all while attaining stature as an American Modernist. It was his desire for Indian culture to live forever through art. For myself, I see a lot of my own beliefs as Professor Howe did. He dared to have his own vision of his Native American traditions depicted in a modernistic design. I plan to share Oscar Howe's Indigenous artwork within my educational community illustrating his vision of conflict, culture, and survival. I hope to contribute my own unique artwork in my State by sharing my own views of life in Appalachia.