

Impact Statement

Fuhan (Lila) Xue, Grade 8

Breaking the Chains by Brushstroke, 2025

Digital Art, 11 x 18 inches

Chaparral Middle School, Diamond Bar, CA

Unsung Hero: Oscar Howe

I chose Oscar Howe as my Unsung Hero because he challenged the stereotypes of Native American artists and fought for the right to express his own artistic vision. His personality, creativity, and courage make him an inspiring role model. Howe refused to be constrained into the expectations of how Native art should look like in traditional public views. He insisted that identity could evolve which included Native Americans. I admire that he discovered paths and inspired possibilities and potentials with his talent and voice under the obstacles of racism and exclusion.

Oscar Howe (1915–1983) was a Yanktonai Dakota artist in South Dakota. He completely changed the views towards Native American art in the US. Early in his career, Native American art exhibitions often only accepted work that followed old traditional styles. In 1958, Howe was excluded from a Native American art exhibition for not following the expected Native American style. He responded with a letter arguing that Native artists should be free to explore techniques and expression, instead of being boxed to stereotypes of authentic Native art. Howe utilized modern styles like Cubism and Expressionism in his work while incorporating the Dakota cultural elements. Pieces like *Dance of the Heyoka* (1954) used bold, angular forms and vibrant colors, breaking away from the traditional forms expected from Native artists at the time. Howe's protest was able to force the art institutions to rethink Native American arts. His bold, vivid, and dynamic paintings demonstrated that Native art could be innovative, and contemporary while still strongly connected to heritage. His effort strongly influenced the art circle and society. Later Native American artists' works from that point on were able to be recognized as modern art.

In my own work, I wanted to capture Oscar Howe's artistic energy and his fight for the change of prejudice and stereotypes. I created a digital painting showing him holding a brush, surrounded by broken chains and vibrant swirling colors. The broken chains represent the limitations and stereotypes he fought against. The swirling colors are inspired by Howe's own works and style, symbolizing his creativity, courage, and cultural pride. I used digital painting techniques to blend realism (in Howe's portrait) with backgrounds consisting of Oscar's works, combining smooth brushwork and vivid color usage. Researching Oscar Howe's paintings, interviews, and historical letters helped me design the setting and emotional tone of the piece. I wanted viewers to feel the force of change that Howe represented, and to see him not only as a painter but as a breaker

of chain barriers. I hope to share this artwork through school art exhibitions and social media to raise more awareness about Oscar Howe's legacy. Besides, I plan to explore more mediums in the future to recreate the work, such as using ceramic or colored pencil. I also plan to submit this piece to a local community arts center's annual youth show, connecting Howe's message of freedom to a broader audience.

Oscar Howe's story reminds me that art is not just about the image; it has deep meanings in the context of history, in this case, fighting for the right to exist, to be seen, and to define yourself on your own terms.