

Impact Statement

Steven Chung, Grade 10

Mazuha Hokshina, 2026

Colored pencil, marker, acrylic on paper board, 12 x 16.5 inches

Providence Christian Academy, Seoul, South Korea

Unsung Hero: Oscar Howe

The first time I saw an Oscar Howe painting, it was piercing. A horse erupts sideways across the page, all angle and velocity: lines so sharp they felt cut. I never knew "Native American art," but I'm grateful to have experienced it.

Oscar Howe (1915-1983) was a Yanktonai Dakota painter from the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota. His Dakota name was Mazuha Hokshina, Trader Boy. For my painting's title, I wanted to pay him my deepest respect and homage. He was trained at the Santa Fe Indian School under Dorothy Dunn, who taught her Indigenous students to make flat, decorative scenes of ceremonial life in a uniform style that collectors found palatable. Howe followed the program for a while and then stopped following it. By the late 1950s he was working in a mature style all his own: casein on heavy paper, dense geometries of motion, bright pristine color, and compositions that owed respect to Dakota hide painting and Tohokmu spider-web design as to anything in the European modernist canon he was often compared to.

In 1958 the Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa rejected a painting he had submitted to their annual American Indian competition. That was the turning point. That stereotype of... "your work does not look Indian enough" made Howe irritated. He asked, in defiance, whether Indigenous painters were to be herded like sheep with no right to individualism, dictated to as Native people had always been dictated to. He refused to let anyone else define his authenticity. The Philbrook created a new category in its competition the following year. A generation of Native artists who came after—Fritz Scholder, T. C. Cannon, Robert Penn, and many more—walked through the door Howe had kicked open.

He is unsung in the sense that most people outside the Plains and outside the Native art world do not know his name. I sincerely believe that he should be as familiar as Rothko or Pollock. He is not, and the reasons are themselves part of the story I wanted to tell. My piece is titled after his real name, Mazuha Hokshina. I painted Hokshina at the center in his South Dakota work shirt, haloed by a red sun whose rays carry the cadence of his own words. I wanted the painting itself to enact the rupture of 1958. The left side is the world he was told to stay inside. The right side is what happened when he refused.

The brushes and pigment jar at the bottom are for the teacher he was outside the painter's identity. He spent twenty-three years at the University of South Dakota and mentored so many

Native students into the arts that his influence compounds every year he is gone. The Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute still runs. His students' students now teach there.

I am a Korean American artist who lives in Seoul. I did not come to Oscar Howe through any claim of shared heritage. I came to him purely through the fate of encountering his work, which stopped me. What I recognized, and what I hope others recognize when they stand in front of this piece, is the courage of an artist who is told his tradition has a ceiling and who then paints through the ceiling. Hokshina made a language that was TRULY Dakota and TRULY modern at once, and he did it while people kept telling him those two things could not coexist. If this painting does anything, I hope it sends one person to look up his name. That is how unsung heroes stop being unsung. One viewer at a time, one (lone) howl answered.