

A blue circular badge with a yellow scalloped border and two yellow stars. The text "Activity Guide" is written in a yellow, rounded font.

Activity
Guide

Dakota Modern:

The Art of Oscar Howe

The background features a vibrant, abstract composition of overlapping organic shapes in shades of yellow, orange, red, and blue. Two prominent dark blue shapes with white speckles, resembling galaxies or stars, are positioned in the lower right quadrant. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-century modern or abstract expressionist art.

MAP

1

Yanktonai Dakota ancestral lands where the Minnesota River meets the Mississippi River

2

Joe Creek, Crow Creek Sioux Reservation, South Dakota, where Howe was born in 1915.

3

Pierre Indian School, Pierre, South Dakota, where How was sent at age 7 and again as a teenager.

4

Santa Fe Indian School, Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Howe attended high school and studied painting.

5

University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, where Howe earned his Master of Fine Arts.

6

Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma, which hosted the Indian Art Annual exhibition.

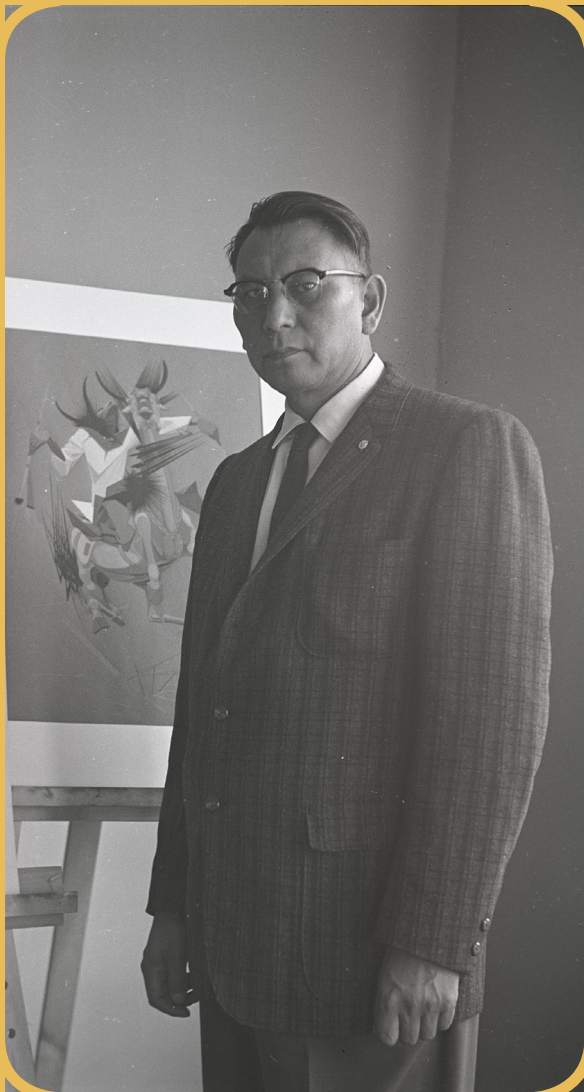
7

Corn Palace, Mitchell, South Dakota, where Howe designed new murals every year, 1948–1971.

8

University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota, where Howe taught and lived from 1957 until his death in 1983.

Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe



Oscar Howe was a Yanktonai Dakota artist and educator who dedicated himself to the preservation, relevance, and ongoing expression of his Dakota culture. He proved that art could be simultaneously modern and embedded in customary Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux) culture and aesthetics—to him there was no contradiction.

Howe challenged the art establishment's preconceptions and definitions of Native American painting. In doing so, he catalyzed a movement among Native artists to express their individuality rather than conforming to an established style. This legacy of innovation and advocacy continues to inspire generations of Native artists to take pride in their heritage and resist stereotypes.

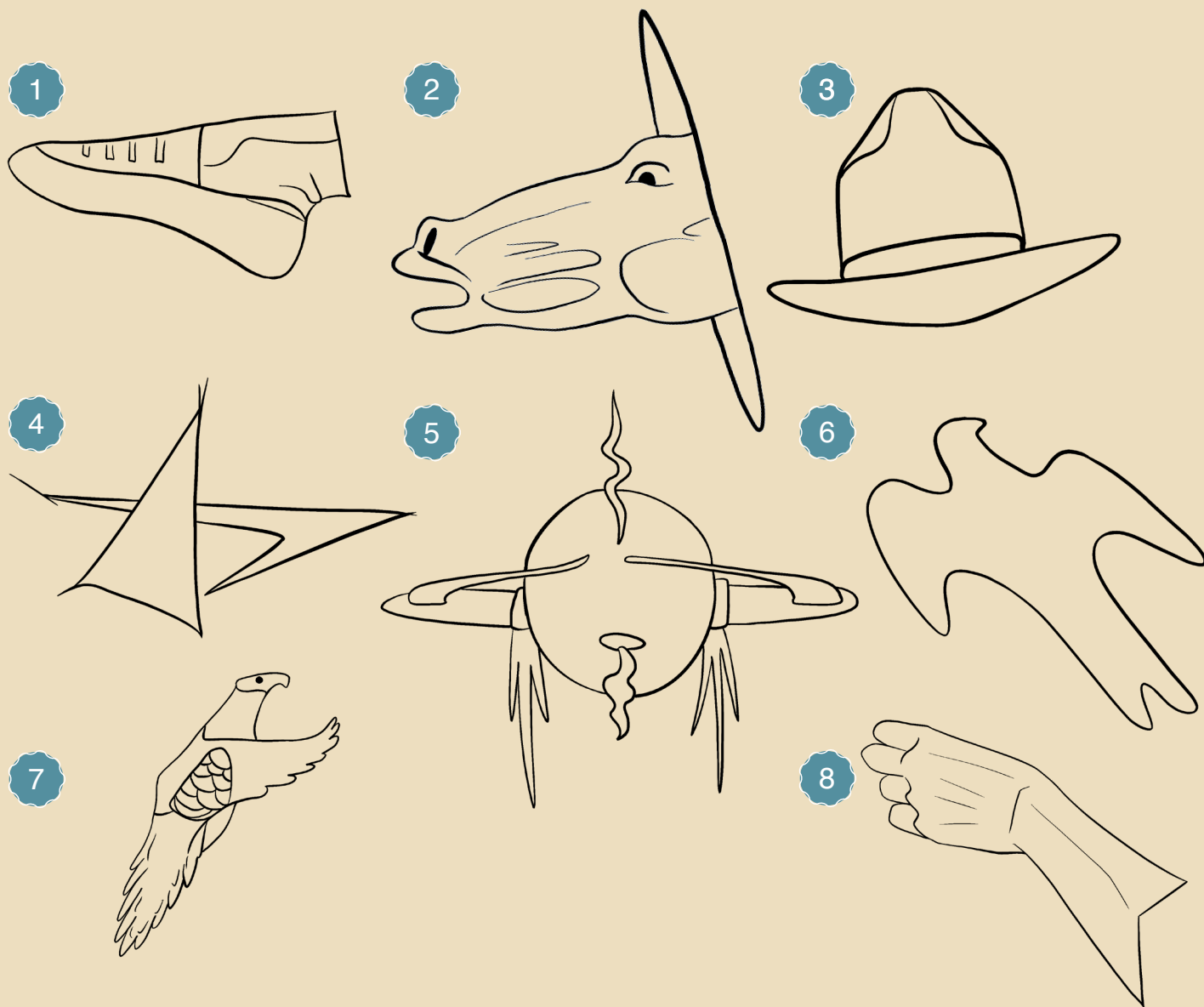
Throughout *Dakota Modern*, we will trace how Oscar Howe's artistic style evolved over his lifetime, while always centering the practices, beliefs, stories, and history of his people. As you move through the exhibition, find the artworks featured in this guide, read the prompts, and take some time to respond to them. Feel free to sit on the sofas or the floor to make yourself comfortable or to view an artwork from a new angle. The longer you look, the more you'll see.

We are glad you're here!

Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, also written Oceti Sakowin (pronounced oh-CHEH-tee shaw-KOH-ween), means Seven Council Fires. It is the preferred name used by many of the Indigenous peoples whose traditional homelands encompass North and South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin and are generally known as the Santee (Eastern Dakota), Yankton (Western Dakota), and Lakota. In Howe's lifetime, people most often used the term Sioux. Howe's paternal ancestors were members of the Lower Yanktonai band of Western Dakota. His maternal ancestors were Santee. Howe consistently referred to himself as Dakota or Sioux in interviews and his writings. Many of his artworks drew from shared beliefs and practices among the Lakota and Dakota.

Seek and Find

Search for these details in the exhibition. Circle each item below when you find it in the artwork. Add color to these details at home.

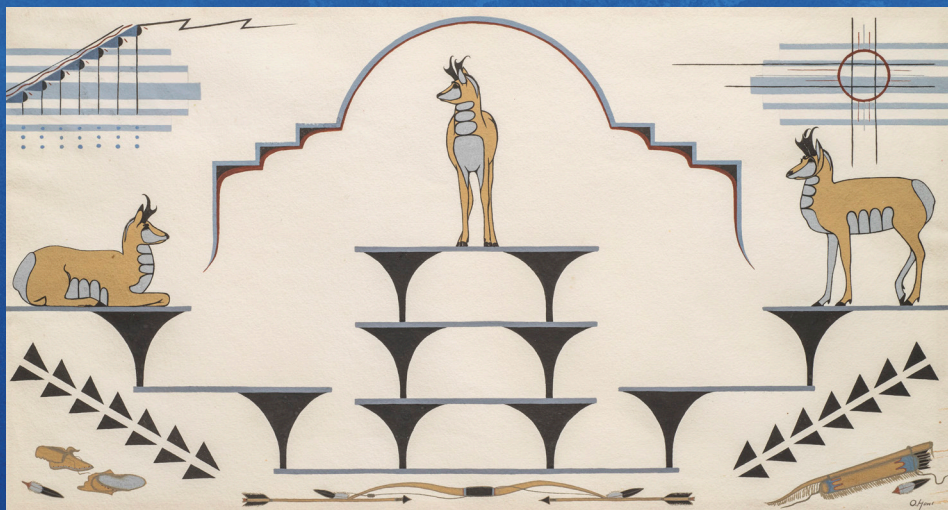


Answer key:

1. Shiny Dance
2. Horses
3. Untitled (Man with briefcase)
4. War Dancer
5. Origin of the Sioux
6. Dakota Teaching
7. Dance of the Heyoka
8. Sioux Women Grooming

Early Years: The Santa Fe Indian School

Oscar Howe's early paintings reflect the style taught where he first trained to be an artist: the Santa Fe Indian School's studio art program—or the Studio, as it came to be known. The Studio emphasized the use of conventions found in historic Pueblo painting. Students were taught to depict traditional cultural practices, to use flat colors (without shading), and avoid background or three-dimensional modeling.



Hunter's Dream, ca. 1934–38

These designs were inspired by designs on Pueblo pottery and paintings. You can find Pueblo pottery in the Portland Art Museum's permanent collection (outside this exhibition) on the second floor of the Museum.

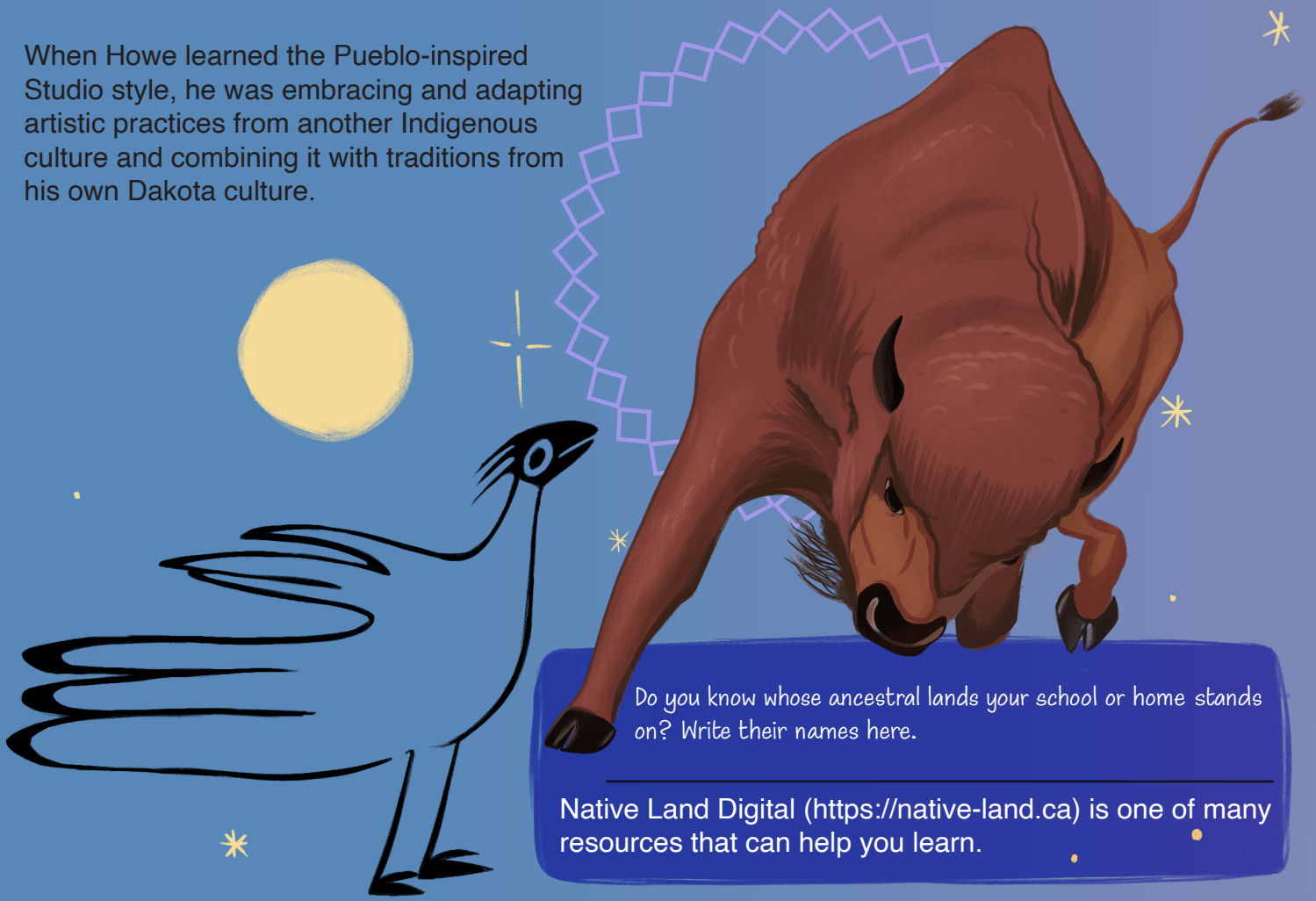


San Ildefonso Pueblo artist, Jar, ca. 1910/1920

Look closely at Howe's early painting *Hunter's Dream*. What designs or patterns can you find? Draw a few of them here.



When Howe learned the Pueblo-inspired Studio style, he was embracing and adapting artistic practices from another Indigenous culture and combining it with traditions from his own Dakota culture.



Do you know whose ancestral lands your school or home stands on? Write their names here.

Native Land Digital (<https://native-land.ca>) is one of many resources that can help you learn.

Find the ancestral lands of the Dakota people on the map at the front of this guide—both their birthplace at the meeting of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers and the lands to the west, where the United States government forced many Dakota to move following the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862.

Did you know that there are 574 American Indian tribes currently recognized by the United States?

Moving Beyond the Studio Style

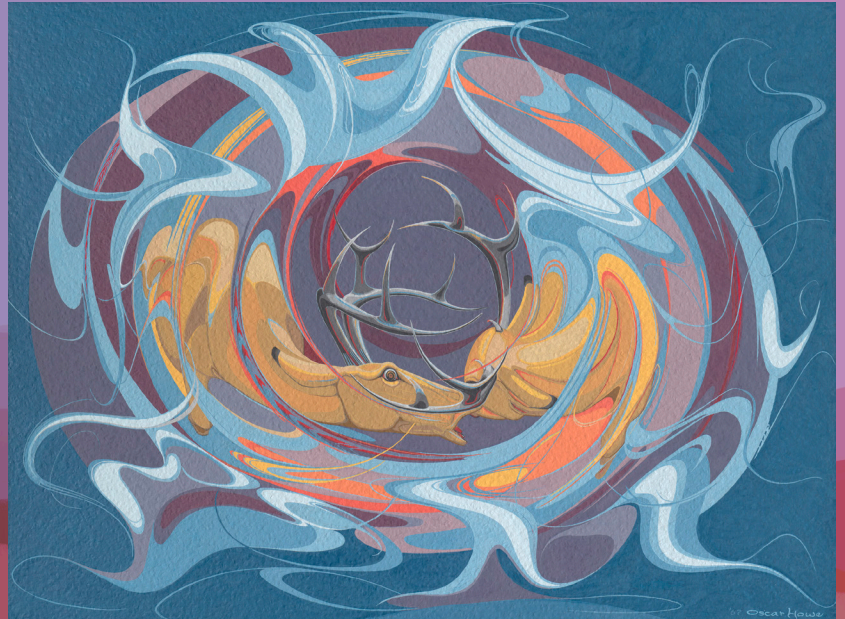
After Howe graduated from the Santa Fe Indian School, he continued to use many principles of the Studio for more than a decade but began to push its limits: his paintings began to burst with energy and dynamic action.

Compare *Flouting the Totem* with *Hunter's Dream*. What differences and similarities do you notice? Use your pencil to annotate these images in this booklet.

Think about the titles of the works *Hunter's Dream* and *Flouting the Totem*. What do you think they mean? Write your reflections here.



Flouting the Totem, 1949



Fighting Bucks, 1967

Keep these works in mind to compare to Howe's later paintings of animals, like *Fighting Bucks* and *Deer Dance*. What changes do you notice in his artistic style? What is missing? What has been added?



Dakota Duck Hunt, ca. 1949

In both *Flouting the Totem* and *Dakota Duck Hunt*, Howe depicts practices and clothing that would have been common a century earlier, but rare or done differently in his time in the mid-twentieth century.

Think about something that was part of your grandparents or great-grandparents everyday life—something they did or clothes they wore. If you don't know, ask a family member or use your imagination.

Why do you think Howe chose to portray these traditional practices? Write your ideas here.

Draw a picture here.

Howe portrays traditional duck hunting practices in this painting. Ducks were a valuable source of food and their feathers could be used on arrows and in clothing and headwear. How many ducks can you find in this picture?

To create a watercolor painting like *Dakota Duck Hunt*, Howe would first create the drawing with pencil and paper. Then, he would lay tracing paper over the drawing and redraw the image on the tracing paper. Finally, he laid the tracing paper over his watercolor paper and traced the drawing again, pressing firmly to transfer the design onto the watercolor paper. Only then did he add paint and color.

Try tracing a duck with your pencil in this guide to get a feel for Howe's technique. In the space below, add more ducks and scenery. You can copy Howe's painting or create your own picture. When you get home or back to school, add color. You could follow the natural colors of the mallards or invent your own colorful ducks.



Onktomi and Ducks, No. 2, 1976

Onktomi (also written Iktomi) is a trickster character who has many adventures in Dakota and Lakota legends. Read or listen to different accounts of how he tried to make a meal of a flock of ducks in Zitkala-Ša's collected stories and on the Wolakota Project website.

www.wolakotaproject.org/oseu-five/the-story-of-iktomi-and-the-ducks-with-velma-kills-back/

The Letter

With *Dakota Duck Hunt*, Oscar Howe won the Grand Purchase Prize at the Philbrook Art Center's Indian Annual, a major national painting competition and exhibition. Howe's career flourished and he became an important leader in the world of Native American art. However, in 1958, the Philbrook jurors rejected from competition one of the two paintings he submitted that year. They referred to it as a fine painting, but "not Indian."

Howe was generally a reserved and soft-spoken person. But this rejection prompted him to write an impassioned letter protesting restrictive, institutional definitions of what Native American art could be. He took a stand in defense of Native artists' right to define Native American art for themselves.

Find the letter from Oscar Howe to curator Jeanne Snodgrass, April 18, 1958, reproduced in the exhibition and available online. Write a sentence summarizing Howe's argument in your own words. Think of a time when someone made assumptions about what you could do based on an aspect of your identity.

How did you feel? How did you respond?

*Who ever said,
that my paintings are not
in the traditional Indian style,
has poor knowledge of Indian Art
indeed... Are we to be held back forever
with one phase of Indian painting, that
is the most common way? We are to be
herded like a bunch of sheep, with no
right for individualism, dictated [to] as
the Indian has always been.*

—Oscar Howe, 1958

The original painting that the Philbrook rejected has been lost, but we have a similar painting which Howe created around the same time: *Umine Dance*, or "war and peace" dance. How does Howe create a sense of dance and the sound of drumming in this painting? Circle details in the image that suggest movement and music to you.

Why do you think a painting like this was unacceptable to the Philbrook jurors as "Indian art"? What assumptions were the jurors making about what Native artists should create?

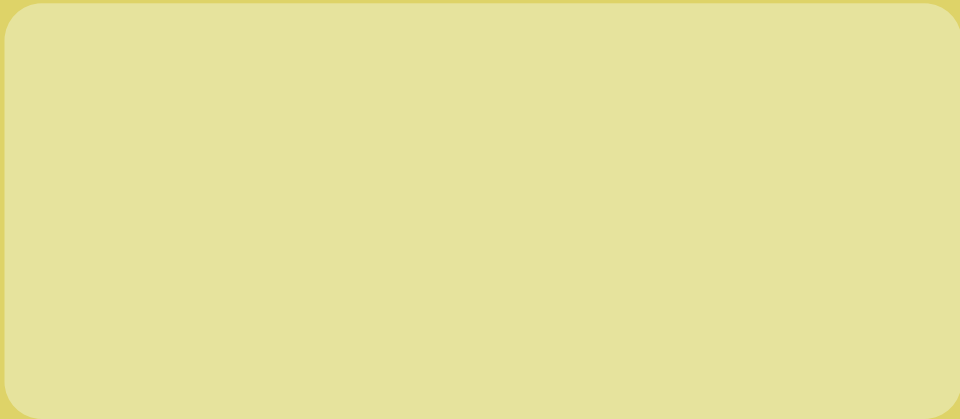


Umine Dance, 1958

Master of Color and Design: Sun Dance

The Sun Dance is an Indigenous ceremony in which Dakota people place themselves in alignment with their commitment to their people and their spiritual practices. Over the course of his career, Howe returned to the subject of the Sun Dance many times, always focusing on the ceremony at its center.

Compare the Sun Dance paintings in the exhibition. How does the viewer's perspective or viewpoint move with each one? Use the black and white striped pole in the center of the image as your reference point. What other changes do you notice in Howe's representations of this ceremony and its transformational energy?



Sacro-Wi-Dance (Sun Dance), 1965



Sun Dance, ca. 1949

The Storyteller



Through decades of artistic growth and innovation, Howe remained a storyteller. The narratives within his paintings referenced sacred, secular, and historical Očhéthi Šakówin knowledge. He believed it was his responsibility as an artist to record and share these stories with the public. By sourcing imagery from Lakota and Dakota culture and beliefs, he explained, he could bring “the best thing of Indian culture into the modern way of life.”

Oscar Howe, 1973

Can you find this painting in the exhibition?
Write the title here.

Answer key: Oscar Howe is painting
Abstraction After Wakapana in this photograph.

[My grandmother] would tell these stories, true ones, about culture and life and everything that was fine and good about the Dakota culture. In her native formal tongue, she told [about] the beautiful and wonderful [ceremonial] events. . . . I still remember them so clearly. . . . The language she used was so poetic and beautiful in song and in words, that I now try to equal them by giving them visual forms.

—Oscar Howe, 1977

While recovering from an illness as a child, Howe spent a great amount of time with his grandmother, Shell Face, who taught him about Dakota culture and beliefs and about her own experiences. In the painting *Fleeing a Massacre*, Howe portrays a young girl who cries out as she rides a bloodied horse whose nostrils flare from stress and fatigue.

Howe based this painting on the story of his grandmother Shell Face, who, as a child, was probably a survivor of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Howe said that Shell Face “herself had been in attacks by the whites, she had a scar on her hand where she had been shot through the hand by white soldiers.”



Fleeing a Massacre, 1969

Look closely at this painting. How does Howe convey the girl's emotions? What do you think the horse was feeling? What details do you notice in the shapes that swirl around her and the horse? How does this painting tell his grandmother's story?



Lines, Shapes, and Figures

Oscar Howe's paintings appear increasingly abstract during the second half of his career. Sometimes shapes and lines seem to take on a life of their own. Yet Howe almost always makes reference to a figure—a person or animal—in some way. *Can you find the figures in the paintings below?*

Howe argued that his lines and shapes are not purely abstract because they carry symbolic meaning. For Dakota people, ***“there was no abstract art because everyone grew up learning all symbols and meanings of all forms of art. They knew the main purpose of art for it was part of their daily life.”***

Create your own drawing, emphasizing lines and geometric shapes. Have you hidden a figure inside?

[T]he straight line construction is a personal concept of expression to gain individuality. The technique idea derives from the old quill and beadwork, and from an old Indian belief that ‘a straight line symbolizes unrelenting truth or righteousness.’

You use the circle as the symbol of unity and then [use] all these little arcs to express movement.... You see all the lines are related to each other by motion.

—Oscar Howe



Woman War Dancer, 1970



He Came from Fire, 1965

The Legacy of Oscar Howe

Howe's numerous paintings constitute an extraordinary legacy that he left the world. His legacy is also found in the generations of Native artists who have followed his lead, embracing their heritage while creating work that is diverse, expressive, and culturally sophisticated. After you leave the *Dakota Modern* exhibition, seek out works by contemporary Native artists in the Portland Art Museum's collection: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Dyani White Hawk, Wally Dion, Joe Feddersen, Lillian Pitt, and many more. Experience Jeffrey Gibson's *They Come From Fire* and *To Name An Other*, on view through February 2023. In what ways do you see the ideas that Oscar Howe championed—artistic innovation, freedom of expression, honoring and preserving Native cultures and ways of knowing—manifest in their work?

"Divide and fill the space he said."

*The problem is space
he said.*

I have studied space.

How do you study space?

You take a piece of paper.

You study the paper.

The paper is space.

*What he was saying
is that the space itself
is the important part of the painting.*

*The actual drawing and coloring
divides and fills the space.*

Almost as in a religious ceremony.

*This is the Howe method
of teaching.*

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, 1980



This is our art . . . and here is where we are making our last stand. . . The least we can do is to fight this last battle, that Indian Culture may live forever.

—Oscar Howe, 1959

Thank you for visiting the Portland Art Museum! Come back soon!

Youth 17 and under always have free admission.

We are deeply grateful for the collaboration and advice of the educator advisory group for this guide, including Trevino Brings Plenty (Mnicoujou Lakota enrolled Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe), Karen Kitchen (Osage Nation), Renea Menchaca (Pascua Yaqui, White Mountain Apache), Ben Taylor, Ezra Whitman (Nez Perce) and others, and for the thoughtful contributions of U.S. History students at NAYA Many Nations Academy.

Illustrated and designed by Chanti Mañon
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The note on Očhéthi Šakówiŋ terminology, Oscar Howe quotations, and much of the information included in this guide are drawn from the exhibition catalog, which we highly recommend as a source for further research.

Kathleen Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes, editors.
Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe.
Smithsonian Institution: Washington, DC,
2022. Pp. 11, 55, 126.



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

--- Art Credits ---

All works listed, other than photographs, are by Oscar Howe.

Abstraction after Wakapana, 1973. Casein on paper, 24 7/8 x 20 3/16 in. Oscar Howe Family Collection, University Art Galleries, University of South Dakota, HF OH 1, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Oscar Howe, ca. 1960–69. Oscar Howe papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University Libraries, University of South Dakota.

Hunter's Dream, ca. 1934–38. Watercolor on paper, 12 1/4 x 22 1/2 in. Private Collection, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Flouting the Totem, 1949. Casein on paper, 28 1/2 x 22 in. Private Collection. Sharon Pennington and her daughter Shannon, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Fighting Bucks, 1967. Casein on paper, 20 1/4 x 26 15/16 in. NMAI 27/0217, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Dakota Duck Hunt, ca. 1945. Watercolor on paper, 15 15/16 x 25 3/8 in. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Museum purchase, 1947.28, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Onktomi and Ducks, No. 2, 1976. Casein on paper, 19 5/8 x 24 1/2 in. University Art Galleries, University of South Dakota, PC OH 23 (O.H. 79.002), courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Umine Dance, 1958. Casein and gouache on paper, mounted to board, 18 x 22 in. Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Sun Dance, ca. 1949. Watercolor on paper, 29 1/4 x 21 7/8 in. Philbrook Museum of Art Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Gift of Clark Field, 1949.29.9, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family

Sacro-Wi-Dance (Sun Dance), 1965. Casein on paper, 28 x 22 1/2 in. University Art Galleries, University of South Dakota, PC OH 29 (OH 99.1), courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family

Oscar Howe, working on *Abstraction after Wakapana* in his studio, W. H. Over Museum, University of South Dakota, 1973.

Fleeing a Massacre, 1969. Casein on paper, 24 3/4 x 20 3/4 in. BankWest Inc., Pierre, South Dakota, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Woman War Dancer, 1965. Casein on paper, 22 7/8 x 18 7/8 in. Oscar Howe Family Collection, University Art Galleries, University of South Dakota, HF OH 51, courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

He Came from Fire, 1965. Casein on paper, 21 3/8 x 19 1/2 in. University Art Galleries, University of South Dakota, PC OH 19 (OH 76.023), courtesy of the Oscar Howe Family.

Oscar Howe, seated in front of a selection of his paintings at South Dakota State University. March 30, 1958. Oscar Howe papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University Libraries, University of South Dakota.