MODERN INDIVIDUALISM: PAINTINGS BY OSCAR HOWE BEFORE THE ANNUAL NATIONAL INDIAN PAINTING COMPETITION AT THE PHILBROOK MUSEUM OF ART, 1958

by

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In 1958 Yanktonai Sioux painter Oscar Howe's (1915-1983) submission to the Annual National Indian Painting Competition at the Philbrook Museum of Art was rejected for deviating too far from the established conventions of "traditional Indian painting." Howe's innovative use of style and his subsequent declarations against the premises of his rejection established the artist as a major figure in the development of Native American painting in the twentieth century. The existing literature on Howe is predominantly biographical and lacks contextual or stylistic analysis. In particular, an under-analyzed relationship is prevalent between his mature style and his early works. This thesis aims to address the social, cultural, educational, political, and stylistic influences that prepared the artist to evolve the formal aspects of his painting. This discussion will expand the discourse on Howe by revealing trends of continuity in the artist's transition from his earlier style to an experimental style and showing that neither is without the influence of the other.

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In the memory Oscar Howe, who painted the truth.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Who Is Oscar Howe?

For those familiar with Native American modern painting, Oscar Howe is known for the unique style seen in his work from the 1950's through the 1970's. This period is considered his mature career, however Howe had practiced and sold his paintings since the mid-1930's. Since the artist was continuously commercially successful, it raises the question why his nearly forty-year career is commonly reduced to only twenty years of significant aesthetic production? This thesis will provide an analysis of the issues of politics and history that shape Native American modern art and how these issues particularly affect the work of Oscar Howe. Through this process, the artist's statements and paintings will provide evidence of the continuity in his artistic method. Though Howe's work from the latter half of his artistic practice is more often recognized as evidence of the painter's unique aesthetic, the primary documents reveal his adherence to personal beliefs and concepts throughout his entire career.

In 1915 Oscar Howe was born of the Yankton Sioux tribe on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota. In his early childhood, he spoke only Dakota language and lived the traditional culture with his family. He was educated in the United States federal Indian boarding school system, graduating from the Pierre Indian School at eighteen in 1933. At age 20 in 1935 Howe relocated to the Santa Fe Indian School to study studio

painting under Dorothy Dunn, a young American art teacher from Kansas. Through her art program, named "the Studio", Dunn educated a diverse group of Native students in a particular genre of illustrative painting. Howe would later gain international fame in the early twentieth century for his remarkable skill in the genre of "Studio Style" painting. After graduating in 1938 he became commercially successful as a professional artist and continued to paint in this genre through the 1940's.

Howe explains that in his painting, "he wished to honor and examine the best of Indian culture" but while his art "involved Siouan motifs and subject, the main goal of [his mature art] was formal, technical exploration".[1] His Studio Style pieces, ascribing to the tenets of the style, were preoccupied with the purpose of documenting nineteenth century Sioux culture through illustration. As his career progressed, Howe experimented beyond the techniques of Studio Style and favored painting linear and geometrical compositions. At that time, Studio Style was the only accepted and exhibited technique of studio painting for Native artists, making Howe's unique explorations of form an unprecedented development twentieth century American art. This deviation from the expectations for "Indian painting" has marked Oscar Howe as the first Native American distinctly modernist painter for many scholars and artists.[2]

After his graduation from the Studio in 1938, Howe completed two tours of duty in World War II, earned a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from Dakota Wesleyan

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[1] Oscar Howe, "Areas of Discussion", undated typewritten notes, Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

[2] Jeanne Snodgrass King, "The Preeminence of Oscar Howe", *Oscar Howe: A Retrospective; Catalogue Raisonné,* (Tulsa, OK: Thomas Gilcrease Museum Association, 1982), 19.

University and a Master's degree from the University of Oklahoma in Studio Painting. The works he completed during this time are the most clearly indicative of stylistic change and experimentation. While his earlier and later styles appear radically different in approach and composition, the artist consistently used his work as a tool to express to specific cultural knowledge and explore form. Elements of this continuity will be explored throughout this project and the analysis of Howe's work will be contextualized to represent the artist as a participant in and respondent to a variety of developments in modern art and culture.

Objectives Of This Analysis

In a history already obscured from the received canon of American Art, the narrative of Native American painting is further confused by stringent definitions and categories. Throughout the nineteenth century, artifacts by Native artists were collected and shown throughout the western world in major expositions and museum exhibitions, familiarizing the general public with the traditional items of a purportedly "vanishing" lifestyle. The early twentieth century European and American art centers, like Paris and New York, erupted in avant-garde reconceptualizations of the medium of studio painting. Meanwhile, the Native American painters at the Studio, although exploring the same medium at the same time, were not considered participants of the American avant-garde. America's Native population would ascend to greater visibility in the 1970's after the Civil Rights and American Indian movements, when mainstream culture began to recognize the cultural diversity of contemporary artists. The historic and contemporary

creative enterprises of American Native peoples were then written into the grand scheme of American art history, largely overshadowing the developments of the early twentieth century Native American artists such as Howe.

Native American studio painters of the modern century were directly engaged with the artistic explorations of Euro-American modern art. Just like their mainstream counterparts, Native modernists experimented with design, composition and new media as a means of exploring the formal and material elements of art. Out of these pursuits developed a new visual language expressing self-definition as modern individuals, integrating participation in existing traditional ways of life and contemporary mainstream culture. Native modernists responded in myriad ways to twentieth century social and political circumstances, to trends in Euro-American theory and style, while also drawing on the depth and pride in their knowledge of their specific cultures. The visual responses of these artists and the contexts must be recognized to accurately describe the narrative of Native painting in America.

Between the 1930's and 1960's a community of professional Native artists emerged and began to establish the expression of tribal values as an existing part of general American art and culture. Native artists had limited exposure to metropolitan Euro-American culture due to lack of interaction in the early years of colonization and forced exclusion during the removal and reservation eras. Reform in the federal education system under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the effects of the international wars and war industry of the early twentieth century afforded travel to reservation inhabitants, broadening their access to arts education and professional careers in the arts.

The Native artists of the early and mid twentieth century typically receive less recognition for their innovation than those working the cultural revolution of the late 1960's and thereafter. However, it was the earlier artists who traveled away from their communities that initially embedded issues of Native identity and modernity in the conventionally Euro-American visual medium of studio painting.

Oscar Howe was able to access all of the facets of his very particular circumstances through his art. His body of work is one that shows reconciliation of identity, involving what it meant in the twentieth century to simultaneously be an American, a Native person, a modern studio painter, Dakota Sioux, and an evolving individual. Howe worked in the Studio Style for a number of years, but eventually found that innovative abstraction allowed him to the fluidly involve the exchanges of the dimensions of his identity and artistic vision.

Howe's contribution to American art is undeniable, and the narrative of his development can be unpacked to demonstrate the specific circumstances that led to the artist's innovations. Most of the major publications on Howe use biographical representation rather than stylistic analysis or socio-historical contextualization. This thesis aims to address the social, cultural, educational, political, and stylistic influences on the artist that prepared and motivated him to expand and evolve the formal aspects of his painting.

The presentation of Howe's life and career must be reframed by providing accuracy through historical contextualization including the artist's personal perspectives in the discourse. This project will focus on the particular issue of stylistic transition in the

larger narrative of Howe's work, to complicate and expand the conversation. The first part of this process will entail pointing to problematic ways in which Howe's transitional period is represented, both in current and past literature and within the museum and exhibit environment. Following this, a narrative with greater texture surrounding Howe's evolution can be given. This section will give context to Howe's experimentation with form examining his academic training, his relationship to the movements in the mainstream of modern western art, his own cultural identity, and his commercial pursuits. However, while the focus will be on a period of drastic stylistic change, the aim is to demonstrate the unique theoretical, thematic and stylistic elements that remain constant throughout Howe's career. The following section will draw on Howe's personal theories in relation to his work, to show his consistent methodological framework throughout his career. The resulting analysis will provide an increased understanding of the relationship between his two visual styles, and ultimately a better knowledge of Howe's unique artistic approach.

CHAPTER II

OVERVIEW OF HOWE'S CAREER

Howe's Early Biography

Howe's relationship to Dakota culture is the foremost influence on his work as a painter. Reviewing the artist's personal reminiscences of his childhood helps to understand the shaping of his artistic vision and his later objectives and achievements in his work: "As a child on the Crow Creek Reservation, I understood and lived, to some extent, the experiences of the Sioux culture … a child such as I moved around the many relatives with a feeling of closeness and better understanding and assurance of everything. Dakota, my first language spoken formally and informally, completed the harmonious whole."[3] In this early period of childhood, Howe explains that linear composition appealed to his personal aesthetic:

> At about age three I liked to draw lines, plastic lines. They had overtones of color and black monochrome. The lines were usually about two inches long and slightly curved. Each was a precise, definite, vibrant line, not connected to another, but at times they intersected. The ends were close, but not close enough to form masses. Each line had a fascination for me. I thought of magic and beauty. To me they were beautiful, not because I made them, but because they were created as nothing like them before. These moments of making lines were for a short duration, perhaps half an hour, and then I would go play like any other kid. I had the urge to do the lines about once or twice a day. My father and mother didn't like my line making. The lines were abstractions, not representations of objects. [4]

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[3] Oscar Howe as quoted by Norma C. Wilson, ed., in "Observations on His Childhood" for the *South Dakota Rainbow* (Pierre: South Dakota Education Association, 2000), 14-17.

[4] Howe, "Observations on Childhood", 14.

Despite his parent's disapproval, Howe persisted almost obsessively in his abstractions, saying that to him the "lines seemed better than the representations of things."[5] When Howe's father took his drawing material away, he found various natural and household objects to continue making compositions. Howe describes when he was sent outside to play: "I would find a smooth, level piece of ground where I could continue my line making. I would make a little fence or frame a round my design, with sticks and stones. My father and mother left me alone with my outdoor designs. I would check them to see if they were still fenced in. Usually somebody would completely destroy them. But it didn't bother me, as long as I had the enjoyment of making them and finishing them. This period of line making lasted from age three to seven."[6] Even at this early stage, Howe valued the magic of his culture and the kinetic properties of linear abstraction. In his later professional work Howe used only subjects taken from Dakota culture emphasizing the linear structure.

In 1922, seven-year-old Howe was sent from his childhood home on the Crow Creek reservation in South Dakota to the state's capital, Pierre, to attend federal boarding school. Under the militaristic educational policies at the school, enforced by federal administrators provided by the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, Howe was prohibited to practice any part of his traditional Dakota culture, including speaking the Dakota language. Like many other Native American children attending federal boarding schools

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[5] Howe, "Observations on Childhood", 15.

[6] Ibid, 15-16.

in the early twentieth century, Howe fell ill and developed depression within a few years of isolation from his family. From 1925 until 1926, Howe returned to Crow Creek nearly blinded by complications due to his illness, too sick to continue at the boarding school. From the age of ten to eleven, Howe received traditional methods of health care and education from his grandmother, Shell Face.[7] Howe's sight was restored, though Shell Face, being blind herself, used language and stories to educate Howe "about culture and life and everything that was fine and good" about the Dakota way. The artist summarizes this belief in an article for the *South Dakota Review* on his personal theories in art:

> The formal Indian verbal poetic form is given a visual form. The intellectual impart a truth in culture while the emotive effect esthetic experiences. The [Dakota] Indians tell of their culture and activities, being actually there and experiencing and enjoying their lives in nature. They described in detail a beautiful culture – so beautiful and so precise with so clear a picture with words and songs. I have never read a book on Indians that equaled what I heard from these Dakota Indians. I heard the truth from them and responded by painting them in like manner of their words. So you see what my painting is – a visual response in the Dakota language to known facts: the Dakota Indian, his culture and activities, Indian art and processes.[8]

Howe's grandmother would also draw in the sand with her fingers to illustrate her stories, acquainting him with traditional Sioux uses of symbolism.[9] The belief in a strong connection between the didactic purposes of spoken and visual expressions, which are tied together by abstract poetic and symbolic devices, remained consistent throughout Howe's career as a painter.

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[7] John A. Day, Contextual Bibliography, Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

[8] Oscar Howe, "Theories and Beliefs- Dakota", *South Dakota Review* 7.2 (Summer 1969), 78.

[9] Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 156.

Howe's Early Career

Immediately after leaving the Santa Fe Indian School in 1938, Howe got work on a road crew at the Crow Creek reservation. In 1939, he returned to his primary school in Pierre, South Dakota, teaching art in exchange for room and board. Unsatisfied with the lack of wages by 1940, Howe wrote to the Indian Service in Washington, D.C. and was hired by the Works Progress Administration for the South Dakota Artists Project. The same year the WPA sponsored Howe's illustrations for a collection of Indian stories, *Legends of the Mighty Sioux,* published by the South Dakota Writers Project. In 1942 Howe was given a WPA commission to paint ten murals involving the subject "History Along the Missouri" at the Mobridge Municipal Auditorium in Mobridge, South Dakota. However, this project was cut short when the U.S. Army called him to active duty. After three and a half years touring North Africa, Italy, Sicily, France, and Germany he returned to the U.S. in 1945. Howe restarted his career in the Studio Style and, in 1947, produced illustrations for a book by Oscar Jacobson, chair of the Art Department at the University of Oklahoma, called *North American Indian Costumes* that was published in 1952.[10]

Through the G.I. bill, Howe was able to pursue a bachelor's degree in painting at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, South Dakota. He was soon offered a position as artist in residence and art instructor at the university. Howe's career and reputation continued to develop while he was in school. In his fourth year at DWU, he was named acting chair of the art department and later in 1952 received the title of "Artist Laureate

[10] John A. Day, *Oscar Howe: Catalogue Raisonne* (Gilcrease Museum Association: Tulsa, OK, 1982), 13-14.

of the Middle Border." It was during this time that his style began to show more experimentation, though he worked predominantly to satisfy the demands of the commercial market and the institutional value being given to the Studio Style. While some scholars have suggested that Howe's time abroad in Europe must have exposed him to the early modernists, causing an eventual shift toward Cubism[11], Howe himself denies that he practiced or thought much about art during wartime. When he came back from the war, he was working mainly to rebuild his skills and revenue in commercial painting, based in the tenets of his early training.[12]

From 1952 to 1954, Howe returned to Norman, Oklahoma, where he earned a master's degree in fine arts from the University of Oklahoma. The artist's greatest stylistic transition can be located to these two years, though the motivations for this rapid period of change in the artist's work have gone largely unanalyzed.

The Philbrook Annual Exhibition of Indian Art, 1958

As a Yankton Sioux person born on a reservation in the early twentieth century and educated in the federal boarding system, Howe's success as a studio painter on the main stage of American art seems surprising. Accessing Howe's work through cultural and educational biography is instructive to understanding his circumstances, however it should not overshadow the artist's persistent adherence to a unique worldview. Howe's artistic developments are often closely associated with certain aspects of his biography,

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[11] John Anson Warner, "The Sociological Art of Oscar Howe", *Oscar Howe: Catalogue Raisonne* (Gilcrease Museum Association: Tulsa, OK, 1982), 13-14.

[12] Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 157.

particularly the controversy surrounding his rejection from the Philbrook Annual Exhibition of Indian Art in 1958. The current scholarship on Howe predominantly frames this famous rejection as the most defining event in the artist's career.

The Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma began its national program for Native artists in 1946, sponsoring annual juried exhibitions to establish a competitive atmosphere, provide a platform for professional exposure and to generate commercial interest for studio painting by Indian artists.[13] Through the institution of the Annual Indian Painting Competition, the Philbrook unintentionally established standards of style ultimately preventing some artists from developing their individual abilities. The works typically featured illustrational and ethnographic scenes of "ceremonial or mystic themes relating to the life of the Indian peoples" rendered in "flat design and solid color areas". [14] Influenced by the prevalence of Studio Style among Native painters, the organizers of the Philbrook Indian Annuals followed Dorothy Dunn's lead and declared the characteristics of the style as the only "traditional" form of fine arts painting for Native artists.[15]

In fact, Howe's visual deviation from the Studio Style was so dramatic that his submission *Umine Wacipe: War and Peace Dance* was rejected from competition in 1958. [16] Howe's rejection from the Philbrook Annual, which had awarded his Studio

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[13] Jeanne Snodgrass King, *Visions and Voices: Native American Paintings from the Philbrook Museum of Art,* Wyckoff, Lydia L., ed., (Tulsa, OK: Philbrook Museum of Art, 1996), Foreword.

[14] Snodgrass King, *Visions and Voices*, Foreword.

[15] Ibid, Foreword.

[16] A published image of *Umine Wacipe: War and Peace Dance* can be found in *Native Moderns*. Due to the complex multiple issues regarding rights to Howe's images, being owned and held by public and private institutions and also by individuals, Howe's paintings are not reproduced in this study. They can be viewed in the publications cited and referenced in this thesis.

Style pieces Grand Prize in years prior to 1958, opened a discourse on the controversial institutionalization and outmoded restrictions imposed on the participating artists. This incident and Howe's reaction to it in letters sent to the 1958 Philbrook jury revealed him as a tenacious defender of the Native artist's right to individuality, innovation and self-expression.

By the mid-1950s the notion of a "traditional" style was becoming more and more contentious. The organizers of the Philbrook felt their regulations on style somehow guaranteed, or produced a measurable value of "authenticity" in an image. At this point Howe was a celebrated painter, having been honored with a one-man exhibition at the Philbrook in 1956.[17] This made the rejection from competition in the 1958 exhibition at the same institution even more inflammatory to the artist. He scolded the jury, asking: "Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, that is the most common way?" Howe argued for the importance of Native American art and he insisted, "Indian Art can compete with any art in the world, but not as a suppressed art." Howe's articulation of this unfair rejection challenges the jury's authority to authenticate his art. Bill Anthes suggests that this policing of cultural boundaries "by the ignorant gatekeepers of a white institution" recreated "a situation that recalled the violence and paternalism of the reservation system."[18] Howe frames this restrictive event as an example Native modernist lack of "right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian always has been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for

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[17] Day, Contextual Bibliography.

[18] Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 155.

him…One could easily turn to become a social protest painter. I only hope . . . the Art World will not be one more contributor to holding us in chains."[19]

The misdirected assumption that the cultural "authenticity" of an art object is quantifiable is a central issue to Howe's socio-historical analysis. Howe's early work, predominantly in classic Studio Style, provides an example of the Indian student's accommodation of the encouraged ethnographic romanticism in the curriculum at the Studio and the mainstream art market. His later work shows the eventual maturation and his recognition of his right to self-definition and individual style. The analysis of his early education and accomplishments in the Studio Style can be overlooked in comparison to his monumental achievement in his characteristic geometric composition. Yet, there is an under-analyzed and prevalent relationship between his earlier style and his later style. The discourse on Howe will be expanded by demonstrating trends of continuity in the artist's transition from Studio Style to experimental style.

[19] Oscar Howe, Letter to the Philbrook, 1958, Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

CHAPTER III

CONTEXTUALIZING HOWE'S CAREER

Depending on the publication date, previous literature on Howe frames either his early or late work as inherently more "authentically Indian". Earlier literature tends to cite the artist's accuracy in rendering costumes and rituals as evidence of the "authenticity" of the artwork. Beginning in the 1960's, Dunn's curriculum at the Studio was retroactively criticized for the stylistic limitations it imposed on its students.[20] Literature published after 1959 portrays Studio Style works as less "authentic" than contemporary works, because the programmatic approach undercut the expression of the student artists and was not a culturally traditional art form. This specious distinction of authentic expressions of Indian identity is based on a history of representation that emphasized the quantifiable cultural value in objects. Being a Native painter wanting recognition for individual value, Howe created work involving a discourse in problems of representation.

Neither Howe's work in Studio Style nor his later work is more nor less "authentically Indian"; the work simply involved different ideologies that are all relevant to the discourse of artistic cultural identity. This section will challenge and problematize

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[20] This discourse of criticism was codified by the 1959 conference "Directions in Indian Art" sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, under the administration of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. The conference was held at the University of Arizona and drew in Native American artists, educators and tribal council members, as well as non-Native academics, museum professionals, art dealers and employees of federal agencies. The various panels and talks addressed the problems and definitions of Native American art in the twentieth century. Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 172-173.

discussions of "authenticity" as applied to Howe's oeuvre and break down the categorizations that are based on this flawed system of separation. Furthermore, this discussion will strengthen the assertion that Howe's entire body of production equally engages and illuminates many, though various, aspects of the twentieth century Native American experience.

The commercial pressure of serving a market of largely Euro-American patrons and collectors complicates the theoretical issues surrounding authenticity in Native art. This market value was established around the turn of the century by the outsider fetishization of Native America as a critical antithesis of the modern industrial era. Several prominent collections of Native American artifacts were exhibited throughout the country, familiarizing the art-savvy public with nineteenth century Native visual culture. The circulation of these collections influenced mainstream artists to appropriate stylistic and thematic implements into the avant-garde milieu. Mainstream stylistic movements in painting that involved Native culture, like Primitivism in New York and the Taos Society of Artists in the 1910's-40's, stirred interest in Native subjects and genre scenes leading to the opportunity for Native painters to achieve market success.

Native artists of the early twentieth century faced a particular set of challenges created by the outsider perspective on their creative production. Native painters such as Howe were positioned to confront a history of misrepresentation involving issues of indigenous modern identity, simply by practicing their medium.

Bill Anthes's 2006 book, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting 1940-1960,* aims to recognize and integrate the work of Native painters into the fabric of a general

American modernism. The author states: "Native American modernism is crucial to our understanding of American modernism generally, because bringing Native American modernism to the foreground rewrites the canon and the key terms of American modernism....shifting notions of identity, citizenship, cultural property, and sovereignty are fundamentally an understanding of American culture in the postwar period".[21] In many disciplines, not just art history, the subject of the indigenous participation in modern society is either left out or written as an addendum to more important issues. Anthes stresses that rewriting the history of a modern Native painter, like Howe, cannot be a "recovery project with the goal of adding a few neglected figures to the canon of American modernism"[22] but should transform the received understanding of modern painting.

Since the industrial era, Native American traditional ways have been valorized for a purity of lifestyle that was being subsumed by technologically advanced society. Not until recently have anthropologists, ethnologists, social historians, art collectors and federal agents re-examined the crystallization of American indigenous culture as an entity untouched by time and progress. Both the actions of the assimilationists and the preservationists, militaristic and humanistic alike, aimed for the extinction of the objectified Native culture. Thus American Native identity is codified as an element removed from the narrative of American modernism, as if its spheres operated independently. This presumes that the Native/traditional individual cannot participate equally in Western society, which places value on progress, invention and individualism.

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[21] Anthes, Native Moderns, xii

[22] Ibid., et al.

Native traditionalism, falsely viewed as inherently antithetical to modern Americanism, refers to and participates only within itself. Therefore, when Howe, or other Native individuals, chose to participate in avant-garde studio painting, a medium canonized by Western society, the flawed presumption dictates that this must go against his traditional cultural framework. It also projects an inability to recognize authentic expressions of Native culture within or using contemporary terms.

Twentieth century artistic movements based on the foundation of cultural evolutionism, like Primitivism, reflect the political and social attitudes on a crystalline Native identity, with its digestible value located in the past. In addition to monopolizing the commercial and critical focus of the era, the artists of these movements also positioned themselves as representatives of Native culture, thereby mitigating the opportunities for Native artists to provide accurate self-interpretation. As art historian Ruth B. Phillips writes: "in standard accounts, the production of 'authentic' and 'traditional' art is perceived to end in the reservation period, while a contemporary art employing Western fine art media did not begin until the early 1960's."[23]

There are many alternatives to the narrowly defined standards of European and American modernism, following a trajectory of formalist development as promoted by the New York art critics such as Clement Greenberg.[24] In his 1955 essay "American-Type Painting" Greenberg gives special attention to artists in the New York avant-garde

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[23] Ruth B. Phillips, "Art History and the Native Made Object: New Discourses, Old Difference?" in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers Meanings, Histories,* edited by W. Jackson Rushing III (London: Routledge, 1999), 99.

[24] Other scholars influencing the definition of modernism at this time include Harold Rosenberg, Alfred Barr, and Alfred Stieglitz, though Greenberg's work had the most pronounced effect on American painting.

like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, praising their work in Abstract Expressionism and the emphasis on the flatness of the picture planes. These theories portray the modern painter as a social alien, hermetically pursuing individualism in style as an extreme version of the Parisian *flaneur* to the American middle class. Modern painters followed a linear progression toward a total, non-sculptural abstraction that emphasized the materials of the medium. Under this vision of modernism the practice of painting became completely separate from life, as it was forbidden to engage in figural representation or in social commentary, but rather a commentary on expression itself.[25]

Howe's work is caught between the legacy of ethnographic representation and alienation from mainstream American modernism. Thus, its interpretation is treated in a variety of outmoded and problematic ways that must be examined for their cultural assumptions.

Ethnographic Context

Ethnographic objects, unlike Greenbergian modern painting, have required contextualization and interpretations on their host cultures. The objects created by Native people were therefore created as carriers of culture that transmitted ideas of identity to the outside viewer. This ideology shaped the invention and practice of studio painting for Native artists, even though the painting did not have a specific traditional cultural function.

The stereotype of the indigenous American is largely formed from ethnographic objects and images of the tribal inhabitants in the Plains region during the colonization

[25] Anthes, *Native Moderns*, xix.

era, around 1800-1900. Federal and private sponsors funded expeditions into the American West that encountered the peoples of the Plains and brought back paintings and photographs to the East coast, such as Edward Curtis's series for *The North American Indian* begun in 1906. Stereotypes popularized by Hollywood films, Western genre novels, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show provided the foundation for myriad misconceptions and the reduction of a pan-Native American character based on this limited cultural and visual exposure. Only recently have scholars approached this problematic art historical phenomenon with an adequate representation of diversity and dimensionality.

Much of available literature on Native art in the Plains region distinguishes, explicitly or implicitly, types of objects that may be considered "art" and what is "artifact". This labeling process draws upon the tradition of distinguishing "fine art" and "craft", established by the European and American Art Academies. It is a flawed project to approach the art of the Plains this way since the western hierarchical system of aesthetic values does not apply to their general culture. In fact, it is problematic to impose any one system of values on collections of pan-indigenous art, because of the extremely diverse cultures the objects represent. However, to make the subject appealing to the outsider audience, with little or no cultural knowledge, the visual and textual material is condensed to provide a semblance of a general understanding. It is inappropriate to group objects similar in appearance without providing the precise cultural information. Scholars in the field of Native American culture and visual culture must grapple with answering the questions often neglected by this generalizing analysis.

No historical Native American culture practiced painting in the Western conception as an autonomous aesthetic endeavor. The foundation of painting and drawing by Native American artists is a system of patronage born from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century interaction of white settlers, anthropologists and collectors with the tribal communities west of the Mississippi River. The genre of "Indian Style" painting discussed in this project is non-ceremonial and serves no ritual function, but was largely conceived and practiced for collection by non-Native patrons.[26]

Jesse Walter Fewkes, the Smithsonian anthropologist, is the earliest of these white patrons who initiated the institution of the genre. At the turn of the century, Fewkes befriended and became a patron to four Hopi men, commissioning a series of pencil and watercolor drawings representing traditional Hopi Kachina spirits. The Bureau of American Ethnology published these drawings in 1903.

Though painting was a modern invention, there was a Native American pictorial tradition that predates these Hopi drawings. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries drawn designs, both abstract and representational, were popular among many tribes for decorative or documentary purposes. Generally, items made from buffalo hide, such as clothing and housing materials, were decorated with symbolic abstract designs. On the Great Plains in particular the parfleche, a rawhide storage container, and the tipi were known for their decorative and symbolic pattern work. The ancient and pre-Columbian traditions of the Southwest used more permanent means of decoration, such as the famous petroglyphs of Bandelier National Monument near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in Kiva murals such as the ruins of Awatovi in northeastern Arizona that date to the

[26] Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 1.

fifteenth century CE. Even more ancient traditions of polychrome painted pottery among the Anasazi, Hohokam and Mimbres traditions date to the twelfth century CE.

It was in the Southwest that Native American painting was institutionally established. New Mexico and Arizona continued (and still continue) to be centers for the production of studio painting tribal artists. This is due to the white supporters like Fewkes settling in this area and establishing relationships with Native individuals willing to learn and design with western media. Among the most prominent examples is Kenneth Chapman, the founder of the School of American Archeology in Santa Fe.[27] In 1901, Chapman purchased a number of colored pencil drawings by a Navajo artist named Api-Begay at a trading post at Pueblo Bonito, and thus entered into a patron-client relationship similar to Fewkes and the Hopi artists. In 1908 the founder of the Museum of New Mexico, Edgar Lee Hewett, "discovered" the artists Crescencio Martinez (Cochiti, 1879-1918) and Awa Tsireh (San Ildefonso, 1898-1955) at the pueblo of San Ildefonso. It was a small community of artists working for the Museum that established the characteristics of "Indian Style" painting. The Native artists Martinez, Tsireh and later Fred Kabotie (Hopi, 1900-1986), Otis Polelonema (Hopi, 1902-1981), and Velino Shije Herrera (Zia, 1902-1973) created illustrational ethnographic paintings rendered in crisp outlines and plain color against blank backgrounds, establishing a standard of style that lasted until the late 1950's.

The early paintings emphasized the scientific aspects of Native culture and identity that were felt to be disappearing around the turn of the century. The latter half of

[27] Later renamed in 1917 the School of American Research and presently the School for Advanced Research.

the nineteenth century brought the completion of Western settlement, and the beginning of the reservation period. Confinement to reservations forced disenfranchisement from the general public and resulted in rapid population and culture loss within Native communities nationwide, especially on the Plains. The paintings made to record the "vanishing" lifeways of the "wild Indians" for the new institutions of the Southwest became the basis of a mainstream market in a frenzy to collect culture before it was gone. Anthropologist James Clifford describes this "desire to rescue 'authenticity' out of destructive historical change," as the "salvage paradigm," or the romantic fascination with the links to the expanding Industrial Americas tribal past. [28]

By the first and second decades of the twentieth century, the romantic value of Native America was building. Part of the appeal of the culture for many New York expatriates was its roots in original American identity. [29] The process of collecting the nation's past morphed into using Native design and form as the basis for a nationalist aesthetic. In 1916, Paul Walter claimed that the American Southwest would become to the artists of New York what the rural regions of France became to the Barbizon painters, which inspired a school of nationalistic sentimentalism as urban painters turned to peasants and other rural exotica for artistic subject matter.[30]

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[28] James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage Paradigm", *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 1, edited by Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1987), 121. Also refer to James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture", *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1988), 215-51.

[29] William Rubin, ed, *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 23.

[30] Paul A.F. Walter, "The Santa Fe- Taos Movement", *Art and Archeology* 4.2 (July 1916): 333, quoted in Anthes *Native Moderns*, 8.

Beginning in 1920, the artist John Sloan organized exhibitions of Native American arts for the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Contemporary to these exhibitions were Amelia Elizabeth White's showcases of the genre at the Madison Avenue gallery, which was connected with the Eastern Association of Indian Affairs, a white-run Indian relief organization. In 1930, The Grand Central Galleries played host to the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, a collection of contemporary paintings by Native artists, also organized by John Sloan.[31] In 1941 the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, under the management of Renee d'Harnoncourt, sponsored the massive exhibition "Indian Art of the United States" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "Indian Art of the United States" was the culmination of the enthusiasm of earlier progressives and New Dealers for Indian arts and culture as the foundation for a reconstructed modern American identity.[32]

The curators of the exhibition grappled with "what values there may be in Indian thought and art" through their presentation of the material in the exhibition catalogue. They aimed to represent the flaws in militant approaches to the removal and re-education of the country's indigenous peoples as they were based on a specious idea that "Indian tradition was ... an obstacle to progress." They continue to attempt to reframe the outlawed and restricted cultures: "Only in recent years has it been realized that such a policy was not merely a violation of intrinsic human rights but was actually destroying values which could never be replaced, values so deeply rooted in tribal life that they arc a

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[31] Rubin, "*Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* ,28.

[32] Douglas and d'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941), 8.

source of strength for future generations. In recognition of these facts, the present administration is now cooperating with the various tribes in the efforts to preserve and develop those spiritual and artistic values in Indian tradition that the tribes consider essential."[33]

Aesthetic Context

The history of Native American painting in the twentieth century is woven into the developmental pattern of institutional projects and patronage, many of which operate under the control of state or federal government. Indian "secular" or commercial painting of the early decades was due to the patronage of large art institutions in Santa Fe like the School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico.

Similarly, southern Plains Indian style painting practiced by the Kiowa five in Andarko, Oklahoma, was overseen by Indian Service educator Susan Peters. Peters gave these Kiowa artists, Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope and Monroe Tsatoke, lessons until she coordinated their higher education with Oscar Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma.[34] These new Southwestern and Plains Indian styles of painting were synthesized and institutionalized at the Studio as flat, highly stylized, decorative watercolors or casein works on paper of genre scenes, depicting rituals, dances or hunting.[35]

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[33] Douglas and d'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* 12.

[34] Rubin, *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* , 9.

[35] Laurie Eldridge, "Dorothy Dunn and the Art Education of Native Americans: Continuing the Dialogue", *Studies in Art Education*, 42, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 320.

This style disseminated to the limited art programs available to Native students in the early twentieth century before the height of the influence of the Studio. Howe first encountered the legacy of the Kiowa five during his early education at the Pierre Indian School, where he was allowed to draw and paint. His teacher at Pierre recommended him to apply for the program at the Studio when he had finished his high school course work.

In the Fall of 1933, Howe enrolled at the Santa Fe Indian School. He took regular high school classes for half a day and then spent the other half painting in the Studio program, where he was the only Sioux student.[36] Dorothy Dunn had established and coordinated "the Studio" program at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932 to educate Indian students in academic style easel painting. Although Dunn, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago,[37] was the primary instructor at the Studio from only 1932 to 1937, she was the formative influence on the institutionalization of arts education for Indian students in the first half of the twentieth century. Her pedagogical approach to blending American Indian culture and the practice of academic fine arts initiated an interest and a theoretical discourse on what became known as "Studio Style" painting. Dunn believed it was the responsibility of the Indian school system to provide arts education a vein of "guidance" to "establish in the student a sense of values by widening his view of art" and "develop skills and resourcefulness in the creation of individuality and…self-reliance".[38] Her curriculum design influenced the art education practices of several later programs and

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[36] Anthes, Native Moderns, 156.

[37] W. Jackson Rushing, "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art", *Art Journal*, 51, no. 3, (Autumn, 1992): 8.

[38] Dorothy Dunn, "The Studio of Painting, Santa Fe Indian School", *El Palacio*, 67, no. 1 (1960): 19.

quite a few of her students, such as Oscar Howe and Pablita Velarde, went on to become well known, commercially successful painters. Her ideology disseminated from the Santa Fe School through critics, galleries, collectors, and museums, and ultimately shaped the way Indian painting was accepted and "authenticated" for many years.[39]

Howe's *Sioux Ceremonial* from 1937 is a primary example of the artist's work using the methods he learned at the Studio that would later be institutionalized by the competitions at the Philbrook. In this painting, as in others of Howe's or by his peers at the Studio, the subject is specific to Howe's traditional Siouan culture depicting pre-modern century dress in picturesque, simple detail. Howe later wrote on the formulaic, though unresearched pedagogy at the Studio: "It was a different kind of teaching in the art department," he later wrote. "There were no lectures at all on anything, not even hints of instructions. We weren't allowed to do research. The teachers ... said: 'Start painting.' I stayed there three years, but I never heard a word of instruction. The idea to figure out one's own way of doing drawings or detail work was … quite a challenge for me. I depended on my knowing of Sioux culture and things of symbolic meaning. It seems that we all did the same technique, whether he or she was a Navajo, Hopi, and Apache. Sioux, Kiowa, Cheyenne or what."[40]

Changes in federal policy also had a strong hand in creating the impetus for the curriculum at the Studio. The Meriam Report of 1928 shed light on the ineffectiveness of the boarding school systems education. This instigated reform under Commissioner of

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[39] Eldridge, 319

[40] Anthes, Native Moderns, 156

Indian Affairs Charles J. Rhoads and his appointed Director of Indian Education W. Carson Ryan. The educational reformist movement, spear headed by Ryan, who had been an author of the Meriam Report, sought to shift focus from the militaristic, "uniform course of study" in English classics, algebra, geometry and ancient history and to bring in courses supporting the students' cultural exploration.[41]

To provide educational opportunities in multiple traditional activities and techniques Ryan thought it best to enlist local Indian artists as teachers. For example, Maria Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo was brought into Santa Fe Indian School to teach pottery. In 1933 John Collier became Indian Commissioner and appointed Willard W. Beatty as Ryan's replacement; both Collier and Beatty were dedicated to continuing Ryan's progressive vision. They even began to emphasize the goal of the Indian student returning to their home community as opposed to preparing him or her to "succeed" in the non-Indian world. This shifting attitude was concurrent with the establishment of the vocational arts training at the Studio at Santa Fe Indian School. In addition to easel painting, students had opportunities to participate in silver smithing, woodwork, mural painting, weaving, embroidery and bead work in a newly built arts and crafts facility.[42]

Dunn began the separate painting classes in 1932, with the following as her objectives:

> 1. To foster appreciation of Indian painting among students and public; 2. To produce new paintings in keeping with high standards already attained by Indian painters; 3. To study and explore traditional Indian art methods and productions in order to continue established basic painting forms, and to evolve new motifs,

[41] Dunn, "The Studio of Painting", 19.

[42] Ibid, 20-22.

> styles and techniques only as they might be in character with the old and worthy of supplementing them; 4. To maintain tribal and individual distinction in the paintings.[43]

These tenets of production imposed on the students at the Studio proved extremely problematic in the long run. The third policy in particular was deeply criticized between her career at the Studio and the Rockefeller sessions at the University of Arizona in 1959. The questions of what constituted "traditional" or "new" motifs and styles was complicated by incidents such as Howe's rejection at the 1958 Philbrook Annual. Pieces like *Umine Wacipe* that deviated from the institutionalized guidelines for how Indian painting appear to violate Dunn's absolute principle for judgment: "the painting would have to be 'Indian'".[44]

Dunn dictated her understanding of quality from what she considered a knowledge of "established basic forms" in the Indian visual vocabulary. Many of these motifs were taken from petroglyphs and painted pottery of the southwest tribes and the Pueblo kiva murals excavated (and "restored") in the mid-1930's. As previously mentioned, there is also a direct relationship between the tenets of the Studio Style and the commercial success of the publicized easel paintings of the Kiowa artists from the University of Oklahoma. Through her understanding of these Dunn felt that "devices associated with European painting were needless in Pueblo painting where objective aspect was subordinate to vital idea." For example, "in the use of perspective," Dunn says, "scientific laws of optics were unexplored, yet convincing spatial relationships were

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[43] Dunn, "The Studio of Painting", 19.

[44] Ibid, 18.

achieved intuitively through relative placements rather than through mechanically determined position and scale. The employment of light and shade was ordinarily made unnecessary by manipulation of contour through skillful line rendering in situations where suggestion of a third dimension was desirable".[45] In addition, only "natural palettes" were used, thereby eliminating any concern for laws of color harmony and subject matter consisted primarily of that related to nature. Dunn's educational materials did not deviate from this "traditional" ideal. For the students' reference materials in the Studio she kept Bureau of Indian Ethnology reports, John Sloan's catalogue to the Exposition of Indian Tribal Art show, a set of Field Museum of Natural History portfolios entitled *Design in Nature*, and a Peabody Museum publication, *Mimbres Pottery Designs*. Dunn also made her own studies and examples of pictographic design that she found from these sources to illustrate the use and variety of visual symbols. In a similar manner she posted examples of student work that either achieved or did not achieve the standards of Studio Style painting, to encourage the peer group to learn from what was considered (i.e., what she considered) a success. While Dunn encouraged the use of tribal symbolism and specific cultural knowledge, she also taught general rules of style and line that were meant to apply to all compositions.

The classes took trips to the Laboratory of Anthropology and the Museum of New Mexico to experience the collections and artifacts. In class training consisted of sketching pictographic figures and free-line brush practice. A student was expected to use only subject material from their specific tribal culture, and borrowing from outside tribal

[45] Dorothy Dunn, "The Development of Modern American Painting in the Southwest and Plains Areas", *El Palacio*, 58, no. 11 (1958): 336.

groups was discouraged. The paintings were evaluated for their "appropriateness" of subject matter and "particular settings" with accuracy of costume and the relevance of visual symbolism.[46]

Joe Herrera, Oscar Howe, Allan Houser and Pablita Velarde were some of the most successful and influential artists of the Santa Fe Studio. With the exception of Velarde, each artist continued artistic training after WWII and developed their style beyond their early education at the Studio. Herrara studied with Raymond Jonson at the University of New Mexico where he completed a Master's degree, and Houser worked with Olle Nordmark and was the first Native American to receive a Guggenheim to study sculpture and painting.[47] Both artists, like Howe, used their art to reconcile the traditionalism taught at the Studio and mainstream contemporary American art.

Joe Herrera's tempera painting *Basket Dancer* from 1939 does little to suggest a precedent to his later abstract interpretations of traditional symbols and petroglyphs. An untitled work from 1951 demonstrates his simultaneous reverence for traditional symbols, and his imaginative vision and sense of design and color. The design elements build upon his own particular knowledge of symbolism, but this emphasis on pictography and cultural documentation is also evidence of his training at the Studio. Similarly, Pablita Velarde's early illustrations of Santa Clara culture, though characteristically finely executed, rarely foreshadow her later fascination with the abstraction and symbolism beginning in the 1950's.

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[46] Dunn, "The Development of Modern American Painting", 338-9.

[47] Strickland, *The Santa Fe Studio: A Chapter in the Emergence of the Native Fine Arts Movement*, 10.

Dorothy Dunn's understanding of American Indian visual culture is most clearly represented in her publications and primary accounts. In 1968 she published an "initial survey"[48] of Indian artists, artworks and styles called *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Area.* Dunn served as the editor of this compilation of essays on the topic of Indian Painting in general, though most of the subject matter deals with art and artists from the Pueblos and the Plains. The beginning portions of the book are devoted to "background" information that traces a trajectory of development in painting from the Paleolithic period to the Santa Fe incarnation of "modernism" in Indian expression. Dunn's own preface to the book states that she and the authors are aware that this survey, being the first of its kind, cannot make any decisive conclusions.[49] However self-reflexive this admission is, the "background" sections betray this notion by operating under generalized concepts of Native culture. For example, the second section titled "Basic Considerations" labels "formative painting" (no dates given, probably meaning pre-contact) in the Americas as fetishistic and elementary.[50] This is the type of scholarship that Janet Berlo examines in her book *The Early Years of Native American Art History*. Berlo points out that this early scholarship assumes a scientific ethnographic approach to art and artifacts from before colonization that glosses over a discussion of artistic and aesthetic value. Part of Berlo's charge in compiling the literary analysis is to eradicate these ethnocentric assumptions that still cloud our interpretation of pre-contact

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[48] Dorothy Dunn, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Area,* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1968), viii.

[49] Dunn, *American Indian Painting*,10-21.

[50], Ibid, et al.

works and styles. She urges her colleagues to integrate the disciplines of anthropology, preservation and art history to provide a more comprehensive, sustainable reading of pre-historic objects.[51]

One section of the Dunn's book is devoted specifically to a discussion of the art of the Plains. It follows in the general sympathetic tone of the rest of the text but to an extreme, framing the history of the Plains people as noble but extinct after the period of aggressive settlement in nineteenth century: "[The European] intruding horses and firearms provided the artificial stimulus to a quick brilliance of culture upon the Plains which was all too soon followed by a sudden blackout".[52] Thus, Dunn effectively divides the history of Plains culture by claiming its disappearance around the reservation period, ironically when those cultures were most desperately trying to survive. Janet Berlo views the divisive strategy as a result of the same ethnographic preservationist mentality of the major collectors of Native artifacts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Plains cultures were being treated by collectors as if they were already extinct and their art was treasured as vestiges of a lost world.[53]

Dorothy Dunn's literature in *American Indian Painting* on the historic art of the Plains shows the evidence of this predominant attitude shaped by the collections. The Plains Art chapter is divided into the subsections "Before the Modern School" and "The Rise of the Modern School". In the former, a list of art object types, such as hide

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[51]Janet Catherine Berlo, *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 12-15.

[52] Dunn, *American Indian Painting*, 125.

[53] Berlo, *The Early Years of Native American Art History*, 7-8.

paintings, clothing, and shields, are described in terms of their formal appearance: material, design, color, symmetry, figural representation, dimensionality, etc. There is little discussion of cultural significance or purpose of particular types of art. Dunn then describes the nineteenth century popularity of new paper and crayon media, accessible by European trade "at a time when Plains freedom was being destroyed by the conqueror".[54] Ledger book drawings, and cloth and paper paintings with the same rudimentary designs from hide painting precedents are located as the birth of the Indian expression of "art for art's sake".

Dunn seems conveniently to situate herself and the government-sponsored educational system as the saviors of the arts on the Plains. She describes the Plains Indian as an artistic character with trainable, though elementary talent by academic standards. By applying academic training to this raw penchant for creativity in the Plains artist, the "modern" school of painting is made incarnate. Only in academic "Studio Style" paintings were the Native artists believed to be able to access their full potential both technically and culturally. This presentation of the history of art on the Plains excludes the interpretation of forms showing a continuum of culture, not one that was reinvented when it was civilized or filtered by Western standards.

Dunn's role in the development of Indian painting has been highly criticized. Joy Gritton reports frankly: "Dunn's critics charged that at best she was imposing a stereotypical, ahistorical Indian painting absolute on her students and at worst she had created the style from non-Native sources (Hollywood animated cartoons, book

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[54] Dunn, *American Indian Painting,* 185.

illustrations of the 1930s, Midwestern regionalist paintings and Persian miniatures were all suggested)".[55] Some of the harsher voices among the Rockefeller sessions deplored the Studio style, calling it "unwarranted eclecticism" and "outright fraud".[56] The educator insisted that she drew from *only* Indian sources in her curriculum and viewed her teaching role as "somewhat like that of a gardener encouraging natural growth to a flowering of plants by the elimination of weeds".[57] Dunn's staunch denial of outside influences only seems to further implicate her lack of self-reflexivity in her perpetuation of limitation among Indian artists. No art is created in a vacuum, and certainly no studio easel painting can be practiced without the influence of its European academic lineage. To make the claim that her program had managed to completely separate Indian painting from European tradition is indexical of the distorted ideology that arose in "progressive" Indian educational policy of 1930's.

Native American artist informants may have been motivated to make their drawings out of a desire for cultural preservation. Traditionally, Pueblo ceremonies had never needed to be fixed in a permanent form because through practice they would be preserved for future generations. As white encroachment brought rapid and dramatic changes to Indian country, the drawings became necessary to preserve a culture that was threatened by the forces of progress and modernization. Moreover, the artworks circulated outside of Native American communities in the Southwest and traveled to New

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[55] Joy L. Gritton, *The Institute of American Indian Arts: Modernism and U.S. Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 38.

[56] Ibid, 39.

[57] Dunn, "The Studio of Painting", 20-24.

York and Europe, they played an important role by demystifying and aestheticizing Native traditional cultures and ceremonies at a time when government policy and official harassment by Bureau of Indian Affairs and local police still sought the destruction of Native cultural practices.

As Howe describes his art, the primary concern of early painting by Indian people was for documentary purposes. The practice of hide painting, whether for a winter count or making a parfleche, was largely for familial and tribal history keeping. After the introduction of western materials and techniques in the eighteenth century, the people of the Plains integrated western representational systems into their existing pictographic visual language, to produce images like those found in ledger books

CHAPTER IV

HOWE'S PERSONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

Howe's Role In The Narrative of Native American Art History

More than any other modern Native American artist Oscar Howe's biography mirrors the history of modern Indian painting — the institutionalization of the "traditional" style in the 1930s and its supersession by more innovative/individual styles after the Second World War. Bill Anthes begins a section on Oscar Howe for his book *Native Moderns*, by sketching Howe's family ancestry:

> Descended from Yanktonai Sioux chiefs, Howe was given the name Mazuha Hoksina, or Trader Boy, after his maternal great-grandfather, White Bear, who was known for his fairness and openness and who traded with white settlers. Howe's maternal grandfather, Fearless Bear (or Not Afraid-of-Bear), was a signatory at the Council of 1876 following the Battle of Little Bighorn, which reduced the boundaries of the Great Sioux Nation as well as the Northern Arapahoe and Cheyenne, and which seized the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota where gold had been discovered in 1874. Howe's paternal great-grandfather was Bone Necklace, head chief of the lower Yanktonai and a noted orator, his paternal grandfather was Unspensi, or Don't Know How, the last hereditary chief of the Yanktonai.[58]

Published in 2006, Anthes's book offers the most comprehensive and accurate discussions of the issues surrounding painting by Native Americans in the early modern century. *Native Moderns* seeks to equalize the treatment of artists working at this time as equal participants in the larger scheme of American modern art. However, Anthes's introduction of Oscar Howe, by providing the artist's family and military lineage, highlights a key problem in the biographical treatment of the artist's work. Because

[58] Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 155.

Anthes is providing a socio-historical analysis of Howe's career, this preface provides fluidity to the importance of this topic within the text and the importance of Howe within the narrative of Native modernism. The practice of inflating the value of an artist's work based on family standing is reminiscent of Vasarian methods, entrenched in the biographical approach to connoisseurship. While connoisseurship can be useful, this methodology can tend to emphasize value in an artist's work that exists separate from the formal or stylistic elements. It should be understood that this thesis seeks to emphasize the development of Howe's style through both biographical and exterior circumstances and events in order to provide a comprehensive and relevant frame. There will also be a preference to accessing the analysis of Howe's work using the artist's own statements, in an effort to rely on the issues immediately relevant to the artist's perspective.

Author Jamake Highwater of *Song of the Earth* builds on this approach and speaks to the importance of art in the identity of the Native American person. This book provides a personal, spiritual analysis of modern and contemporary native artists, up to its publication in 1976. The book comprises biographical profiles of significant artists. In each profile, Highwater situates the artist within their cultural and art historical context and then provides statements collected from personal interviews. The individualistic and primary presentation of the biographical information sets this book apart from previous scholarship. Also, in Highwater's profile prefaces, the historical situation of the artist is called into question. This critical perspective on recent art history is rare in the literature on this topic. For instance, in the preface to the statement given to Sioux artist Oscar Howe (1915-1983), Highwater provocatively asserts: "Oscar Howe unmistakably bridged

the gap between Indian art and mainstream art; he was the avant-garde of American Indian painters. Why, then, didn't he cause the kind of controversy that surrounded Fritz Scholder?"[59] This question challenges the academic and public environment willing to accept the modernist style of Scholder in the 1970s, but could not recognize the innovative qualities of Howe.

Highwater posits an interesting explanation to his own question by establishing Howe as a part of the continuum of Plains visual culture, and thus his products are less upsetting. The author believes that Howe reshaped the same romantic world visible in the Studio Style painting using structural planes and heightened colorism, but not a neo-cubistic style as some earlier scholars have suggested. Howe's view of Indians, though structurally revolutionary for Indian painting, hasn't deeply disturbed the development of modern expression.[60] Although this interpretation is not necessarily conclusive, it is one of the first to take up the issue of how Native Artists are received by both insider and outsider audiences.

In the 1998, the Oxford University Press published *Native North American Art,* a survey text on the subject written by art historian Janet Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips. Their chapter devoted to the history of art on the Plains also explains the predominant problems with our understanding of the people and their art. They believe that certain topics, such as the importance of art as an expression of complementary gender roles in society, have

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[59] Jamake Highwater, *Song from the Earth: American Indian Painting* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980), 151.

[60] Ibid, et al.

been neglected in favor of more generalizing subjects.[61] For tribal women, she examines the various ways in which quillwork, beadwork and fiber arts have been central to the expression of cultural values. In a section on men's art she seeks to eradicate the archaic image of the warrior that dominates the Euro-American imagination, and reduces the subjects to militaristic interpretations. In fact, cosmological concerns and a profound interest in history and time-keeping under-lie many of the pictorial arts made by men on the Plains.[62] Berlo and Phillips expand this analysis to allow room for the complex intellectual underpinnings of indigenous art and life.

Being a survey text, though, Howe's work is given very little attention by Berlo and Phillips for its transformative position in twentieth century art. The strength of this publication is its attention to the importance of diversity in scholarship and artworks. It shows awareness that the Native texts and images are not easily narrated by conventional art history scholarship alone. In the most recent phase of art historical research on the Plains many approaches are juxtaposed to provide comprehensive readings. For these reasons, a multitude of approaches must be must be employed, involving Native American artists and historians, academically trained art historians, anthropologists and others in order for us to appreciate the multivalent works.[63]

The most recent publication on Howe is the text accompanying a retrospective exhibition *Oscar Howe: Artist* at the University of South Dakota in 2004. John A. Day,

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[61] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford History of Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112.

[62] Ibid, 115.

[63] Ibid, 24.

chairman of the Oscar Howe Memorial Association, writes the heartfelt introduction and biographical content for the publication. This catalogue includes several good quality color plates of selections from the exhibition. Although nothing new is offered in the biographical portion of the book, interestingly each painting has a beautifully written piece of analysis compiled by the artist himself. For example, a piece from 1962 called *The Origin of the Sioux* is paired with a retelling of the Sioux legend about a maiden captured by an eagle and impregnated with twins. The twins she later bore are said to be the origins of the Siouan tribal groups. Not only does the legend seamlessly weave in cultural and historic context, it provides visual and iconographical analysis of the work:

> ... rays of light are chasing away the evil spirits of darkness and bringing out the varied tones of blue for sky and the traditional blue for peace. The symmetrical composition is used to give the group dignity. The ascending movement toward the attracting light of the center group denotes the significance of rising to a higher moral, social and spiritual level, while the twins are aloft to indicate the upward movement and potential quality of life. The yellow — a Sioux color for religion — is used here for a spiritual mood; in the attire of the mother and the twins it denotes the people as common and humble. The eagle becomes a symbol of power and authority and his feathers a symbol of good deeds. Each feather on a bonnet stands for a good trait of character. There is a belief that twins will always return to a family every third generation. The painting depicts a mother with a feather in her hand symbolizing the birth of the Sioux as the first good deed.[64]

The analysis demonstrates an integration of academic, artistic and cultural understanding that is a model of inclusive scholarship. The next generation of Native American art history must expand on this model, set in place by scholars like Berlo, to bring new analytical textures to the work of Howe and other neglected modern artists.

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[64]Oscar Howe and John A. Day, *Oscar Howe, Artist* (Vermillion, SD: University of South Dakota, 2004), 10.

The Development of Howe's Artistic Vision

The following section is meant to synthesize Howe's documented methodologies with the information that has been previously outlined, to demonstrate the continuity in his approach to art throughout his career in the face of the obstacles he encountered. This is meant to correct the inaccuracies in representation of previous literature on the artist by providing evidence of the contextual historical analysis that has already been performed. This evidence lies in the artist's various personal statements and through his art itself. A cross analysis of the artist's work will show that although the art appears visually very different, his underlying approach to his art form was based on consistent principles throughout his stylistic evolution.

Many scholars have suggested that Howe borrowed his technique and visual aesthetic from the canonized twentieth century masters of painting, such as Pablo Picasso and Vassily Kandinsky. Howe violently disagreed with these comparisons, taking offense to the suggestion that his style is derivative of any previous artist. Howe circumvents the controversy surrounding his relationship to European modernism by insisting that his art refers only to Sioux methods and content:

Howe explained his position on his stylistic development within a cultural context for his 1969 article for the *South Dakota Review*, "Theories and Beliefs-Dakota": "The evolvement from the Dakota skin-painting technique, such as the utilization of esthetic points, seems paramount in modern works. Flat-patterning stimuli of points evolve to shapes of Dakota cultural meanings.... One of my reasons for painting is to record visually and artistically the culture of the American Indian, particularly the Dakota

Indian. In sufficient means and quantity, this may establish a trend by individualistic transitions to depict objectively or abstractly the contemporary life of the Indian."[65]

Though the artist stipulates the distinction of his art from the cultural, methodological and technical framework of the European and American modernists visual comparisons can still be made. Howe's approach to his art was unique and specific to his Dakota culture: correlations exist in the visual qualities of the composition. These similarities suggest that Howe found the same liberation and dynamism in symbols and synthetic color as tools to explore the forms and spaces. As he says, "Traditional means of expressing forms in manner and spirit of the old art is a criterion at the onset. It is a school of art that deals primarily with true or versional use of historical forms and their qualitative aspects. *Eclecticism precedes individualism in this Indian art expression. My reason for painting, though it may become more plastic structurally, is to carry on what is traditional and conventional in art."*[66] Thus, through eclecticism Howe was able to access all of the facets of his very particular circumstances through his art. His body of work is one that shows reconciliation of identity, involving what it meant in the twentieth century to simultaneously be an American, a Native person, a modern studio painter, Dakota Sioux and an evolving individual. Howe worked in the Studio style for a number of years, but eventually found that innovative abstraction allowed him to the fluidly involve the exchanges of the facets of his identity.

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[65] Howe, "Theories and Beliefs-Dakota", 72.

[66] Ibid, et al.

Howe's work demonstrates his personal search for self-expression, as a member of many co-existing communities. He relied on Dakota tradition to provide appropriate and dynamic qualities to create both stylistic and symbolic content. He also relied on his traditional knowledge to situate himself as an artist within society, explaining: "It is a custom in Dakota culture to be a contributing member as to your talent and need. My knowledge of the Dakota Indian painting of the 'truth' ceremony, which contained esthetic and artistic value, has dictated my direction to creative work."[67]

Howe rationalizes his stylistic transitions noting that there are, as he says, "exceptions, like in any other group the artist is expected to be good and proper in his work and as one of them must fit in their society circle. He creates an image of the Indian as one meaningful to them, so the acceptance depends on how and what the artist portrays. Individualistic work may change to non-traditional art where it may become more private and impersonal; but if the change is a natural transition, I believe his art would be accepted by the majority of the Indians. As long as he is living according to standards, he is 'right' within the Indian society." Howe also points to his consciousness of his unique position between Native and mainstream culture. He considers his work as purposefully involved in certain aspects of both cultures, telling that 'The Indian painter's relationship to the white society depends on what kind of life he leads and also what kind of people he associates with. He is like a pioneer stepping from one society into another.

[67] Howe, Theories and Beliefs-Dakota, 72.

He retains some of the finer points or good parts of the first culture then he can compare the good experiences of the first to the second culture and it's like experiences.' [68]

Howe relates his development to a role within the traditional Dakota society. In 1969 Howe's work had become an object of discussion because of its enigmatic style. As discussed in the previous section, many critics and authors have represented the stylistic development as an effect of the artist's interest or academic exposure to European modernism. This suggests that he disregards his earlier training in the Studio Style at the Santa Fe Indian School. However, as the artist describes, his stylistic evolvements operated within a consistent framework influenced mostly by his Dakota Sioux ideology. Members of traditional society were expected to use their unique talents to contribute to the group's progress and success, any new or innovative ideas developed through this enterprise were reviewed and accepted by the group. Thus, Howe makes the subtle point that resistance to his innovative strides in the formal aspects of his art practice would actually go against the Dakota societal framework. He emphasizes that if the work was done in the right mindset and was conceived in the right spiritual context, then any aesthetic manifestation was acceptable.

A good deal of the information gathered for this chapter came from unaccessioned files at the University of South Dakota Art Galleries. These files include years of the artist's personal records, publications, lesson plans, mementos and even short handwritten notes. The wealth of information on the artist in these files is vast and cannot be fully addressed in the course of this current project. Much of the informal notes are left without any documentation as to their original purpose, although their content is

[68] Howe, Theories and Beliefs-Dakota, 72.

no less significant, eloquent or unique to any other published document. In fact, Howe's informal writing provides an even more intimate window into the artist's personal views on his own work, the state of art in America and his general life perspective. For instance, on a few three by five index cards written in his own script, Howe muses:

> At one time, even little Indian children knew their abstract art. Today, most adults do not know their ART. Did these adults become more practical or scientific? Intelligent people are conscious of their emotional needs....
>
> Arts reflect, define, or are themselves the emotional and spiritual aspects of life. Aesthetic and artistic manifestations are part of culture. Art of any Ethnic group should be understood as Art for Arts sake. Appreciation of beauty is abstractly the same for all forms, regardless of their source....[69]

The thoughts reveal Howe's frustration with the general public apathy toward art and also the division between American culture, art and life. The artist insinuates that a byproduct of Native culture loss in America is the inability to recognize or appreciate the value of abstract aesthetics. He also alludes to the assumption that valuing practicality and science is exclusionary to an understanding of art or even one's own emotions. In this simple statement he demonstrates how Native art functions to expand the concept of American modernism. He suggests that modernism does not need to exclude personal, spiritual and emotional purposes to fit within a technologically oriented society. Furthermore, he argues that art is inherently personal and cultural because it is an expression of the artist. Thus, Howe challenges the separation of Native art and modern art, by broadening the definitions of both.

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[69] Howe, undated personal notes, possibly in preparation for a lecture, with all punctuation and unfinished sentences original to the artist's own hand; Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

Howe's multicultural consciousness is inherent in his personal writings on the theories of art and his explicative statements on his paintings. Most of Howe's writings of this type are from during his time as Professor and artist-in-residence at the University of South Dakota from 1957 to 1972. The exception to this time frame are the statements he composed to accompany the works for his final exhibition at the University of Oklahoma to achieve his master's thesis. Thus he devotes most of his explanation to works completed after 1958.

While there are not many writings available to explain the motivations, influences, purposes, or artistic choices made in his Studio Style works, Howe is careful to extend his methodology later in his career to include his earlier perspective. Howe retrospectively interprets and explains his past production through subtle comparisons of his later works, drawing consistent themes through uses of color and composition, inspiration and content, and his overall motivations as an artist: "My reason and purpose for painting is to record Sioux culture. The culture as I once knew was beautiful and had much meaning for me. The worded beauty as sensed by the Indian and the use of the Indian form to express the spirit and soul of the Indian has been my ambition to paint." [70]

Howe repetitively uses figures like the horse and the dancer to balance his cultural and visual artistic purposes. His early Studio Style works focused on single figures, but emphasized the illustration of the costume and ritual implements, featured plainly on the blank background. As his explorations progressed, the artist began paying more attention to the angular and dimensional aspects he could extract from the representation. This

[70] Oscar Howe, typewritten "Prospectus" for video program "Oscar Howe: Artist of the Sioux", Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries, 2.

practice was based on the mapping of aesthetic points on the picture plane, to enhance the spatial and geometric relationships within the paintings.

Howe rarely painted historical or contemporary figures, though this portrait of the famous chief *Sitting Bull* from 1939 is one example. Others include Sacagawea from 1944 and Maria Martinez from the 1950's. Most of Howe's other work portrays figures with generic identities but specific ritual or ceremonial contexts. The Sitting Bull portrait shows classic Studio Style portraiture and would have been commercially successful because Sitting Bull was a recognizable and heroic political figure. The absence of embellishment, background, and the use of flat, pure colors is all true to the training at the Studio.

The comparison of the generic portraits such as *Sioux Warrior* from 1946 and *Praying Figure* from 1941 show the artist's development in the details of figure drawing. The positioning of the warrior's body is more complex as opposed to the praying figure that is just placed in a straight profile. This positioning, as well as the warrior's increased detailing muscle tone and dimensionality in the drapery, created more spatial depth and alludes to a sense of movement. Howe continues to build upon manipulations of modeling, shapes, angularities and shading to achieve new visual effects.

Much like the portrait of Sitting Bull, these works from the 1940's demonstrate Studio Style. They are both well within the definition of "Indian Style" painting and are examples of Howe's treatment of generic figures as ethnographic illustrations. This practice relates back to the ledger art of the Plains, though even ledger art and other hide painting, like Winter Counts, documented specific people and events.

Howe's Theories On Culture, Color And Composition

Howe explained he believed strongly "in teaching the fundamentals [of art] first, which means a solid foundation of principles, color schemes and preliminary theories in art. After that come techniques, individual problems, knowing art history and the special areas of art history. Learning from form and content, individual experiments and research in art. Now you are ready for individual expression. Within this whole process of learning each student is directed toward his cultural background, so he can reflect in his own version of expression".[71]

Howe demonstrated these principles in his hybrid approach to color and teaching color to his students. The aforementioned archives of Howe's papers contained scripts for his lessons, one document dated from 1967 outlined his presentation of the "Definitions and Sources of Color" for an undergraduate studio class entitled "Realism: Modes of Painting". On this script he makes shorthand notes to himself about color in tandem to a short lecture on "art appreciation for a studio class" without mentioning a reference to a text or a source of his color associations. These color associations seem to signify the conventional uses and emotional quality of colors while providing the opposing qualities of their complements. For instance he categorizes colors of "light" as "pure" separate from colors in "vision" as manifestations of the "psyche". This implies he believes colors have a true, or "pure" appearance that is not always in agreement with the subjective experience of them, clouded by personal vision. Howe's lecture notes read:

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[71] Oscar Howe, "Areas of Discussion", undated typewritten notes, Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

"Psychological meaning of color: yellow (gay) compliments blue (cold, subduing, dignified, meditative); yellow green (cheerful) compliments purple (subduing, depressing); green (restful, refreshing) compliments red (stimulating or irritating); blue green (cool, passive) compliments orange (warm stimulating)".[72]

Howe compartmentalizes his cultural knowledge and use of color for application to his own work. He explains:

> The basic colors used by the, Sioux Indians came from nature. Usually the source term indicates its meaning. The color blue came from the color of the sky on a peaceful, clear sunny day. Blue is symbolic of peace in nature. A small blue mark may mean that a prayer for a peaceful day was made In contrast to blue in visual meaning the color red means destruction. Red is associated "with heat and red fire, or its likely consequences if not controlled. In my painting titled "Peace Dancer" a young woman with a blue face, she represents peace in the Peace and War Dance. Other participants are young boys with their bodies painted red they represent war. They were rolled on the ground until the red paint rubs off... In this painting titled "peace and war Dancer" the leader of the dance, dressed in colors of red and blue with ragged blankets. Not a refined figure he represents peace and war. He crawls on the ground between the tipis. There are three tipis to crawl to during the dance. When he reaches a tipi the dancing stops.[73]

Howe's own perspective leads to an analysis of his work involving his multicultural reality. While there have been many scholar, as pointed out earlier in this project, who claimed that the artist abandoned old ways in favor of new ways, Howe's own words help to demonstrate that there is no need to view the various manifestations of his expression as being so dramatically opposed. As he suggests, through all art the spiritual and emotional realms are revealed and that beauty in the study of form transcends categorization, whether through cultures or artistic styles and movements. In

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[72] Oscar Howe, "Definitions and Sources of Color", typewritten notes for class lecture "Realism, Modes of Painting" 1967, Oscar Howe Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota Galleries.

[73] Howe, "Theories and Beliefs-Dakaota", 72.

short, Howe views art with extreme pluralism, in which trends and similarities are only loosely drawn together by means of superficial appearances. The only truth in painting is the expression of the self, and therefore there are as many movements in style as there are practicing artists, and each should be judged primarily in reference to itself. This is the methodology that will shape the analysis in the following section. This also shows that Howe viewed himself as fully engaged in multiple cultures, appreciating each for their unique, terrible, provocative and magical qualities. So often the assumption is that one culture will dominate the identity of a person and this should influence the lens in which we view their production, but Howe's example quietly disproves this assumed mental and emotional limitation.

Kini (Resurection) from 1953 is one of five works Howe included in his final exhibition for his master's degree in painting from the University of Oklahoma. Clearly between the years of 1946 and 1953, the artist's approach to figure design has changed drastically. This composition shows the beginning stages of the linear design that would be further developed in paintings like *War Dancer* from 1967 and *Dancers* from 1969. "My art work is not only an ethnic documentation, but actually the main involvement is art and its purpose. That is upper-most on my mind. Art communication that deals with the complexity of abstract feelings must be stimulated by some mean, irrespective of visual form — because the qualitative aspects are balanced esthetically, their visual aspects become an in-nerve thing"[74] Howe's emphasis on the formal exploration of composition seems to contradict previous statements that his reasons for painting were to

[74] Howe, "Theories and Beliefs-Dakota", 74.

document the best of Sioux culture. However, his innovative compositional techniques were also influenced by a personal understanding of cultural forms of design:

> The Sioux Indian took from nature many symbols and shapes, and some meanings came from experiences in nature. Symbols are meaningful as to their use in a decoration. There's a legend about the origin of Sioux design and colors. The designs evolved from a basic one called *Tahokmu*. There was once a young Sioux boy who thought he was brave and old enough to join a war party. The other warriors thought he was too young but was allowed to go a long with them. During the battle he couldn't prove his bravery. He could not kill or steal. After the battle he was shunned by the warriors. On the way back to camp they stopped to rest, but during the night as he slept the others left him behind. As he lay asleep on the ground he had a beautiful dream of seeing colors and designs. One particular design formed the focal point and others emerged from it. When he awoke in the morning he found himself peering into a dew- drop and behind it was a spider web. He had never seen such beauty of colors and designs and other meanings. For these were unknown among the Sioux Indians. He knew the warriors left him, as he was not worthy of being a brave. And so he sneaked back into camp. And he told the people of his dream. The old men held a meeting about the dream, for it was about things that they had never seen or known before. They said it was a "Vision"- A vision of knowledge on the first use of colors and designs with all their meanings. The young boy was declared a brave and given the honor of bringing into the Sioux tribe the 'first colors' and designs with meanings. The original and now a traditional design is called *Tahokmu* or a spider trap or web. This *Tahokmu* design as a decoration was used only by the chiefs or leaders of the Sioux Indians.[75]

Howe's *Buffalo Dancer* from 1960 also contains the similar elements of development between Studio Style and innovative style. The theme of the buffalo dancer has been popular in Studio Style since the 1920's, as it was a widely practiced dance that celebrated the sustainability of the traditional Native life for many tribes in the Plains that relied on and ritualized the buffalo hunt. As the buffalo herds in the plains diminished in the end of the nineteenth century, the dance and the symbol of the buffalo became more emblematic of the old ways of life that were rapidly changing during the early Reservation period. The motif of the buffalo dancer was frequently used by many artists

[75] Howe, Prospectus, 14.

because of its commercial success in the market for Indian Style illustrative painting, as it appealed to the romance of the nineteenth century Native life ways. The traditional elements of the costume are exaggerated and the body position is contorted to give the figure the appearance of an abstract symbol. While the exact concept is elusive, the artist elongated and sharpens the figure using straight lines, generally symbolizing the truth to Howe. As with the *tahokmu* design and in his early life, the straight line appealed to Howe's aesthetic and sense of traditional roles as a Dakota Sioux painter.

In *Dancers* from 1969 and *War Dancer* from 1968, Howe experiments with non-objective approaches to the dancer figure. In *Dancers*, Howe applies the *tahokmu* process to an extreme, where the figure becomes incidental to the compositional technique. As Howe explains this spider web method functions by providing a path for the composition, then the subject emerges within the shapes. This particular image demonstrates the *tahokmu* process ordering the layout of picture plane as the tightening of the web centers define parts of the body. For example, the largest dancer figure in the lower right is composed from a radiating web center that is also the dancers hand.

War Dancer from 1968 takes the same approach but disengages the fractals of design to become independent shapes. The angularity and sharpness of the design remains similar, in keeping with Howe's emphasis on straight line to define the dimensions of the picture plane. Contrasting to the *Dancers* from 1969, *War Dancer* does not fill the composition but the "figure" is placed on a flat, plain background. Also opposed to *War Dancer* from 1967, there is not a clear sense of orientation, as the elements of the body are abstracted and fragmented beyond recognition. "As a young boy

in the evenings I would watch the '*cu mahpiya'* dew clouds. Dark clouds silhouetted against the red evening sky near the horizon, like a colossal panoramic mural with an assortment of forms, gigantic and impressive. I would dream of painting, envisioning abstractions for at the time my small drawings were merely of lines but to me creatively magic, beautiful and alive".[76]

Along with his variations on the theme of the traditional dancer, Howe's compositions featuring horse subjects display his development in visual technique. "Nature was art to the Indian…In his language, the Indian spoke of nature as part of him."[77] The horse was not only a study of the beauty of the nature in the Plains, but was also emblematic of the kinship Howe saw in the cultural relationship to horse and other animals. The horse figures became a recurring theme in Howe's work, for their cultural, symbolic content, but also for the potential of their visual qualities that could be manipulated. Howe's "early painting", completed in the first year of his training at the Studio, 1935, shows his "traditional" treatment of the horse subject. The background and figures are rendered with little to no modeling or shading, in keeping with the doctrines of the accepted style. Even this early piece establishes a precedent for Howe's later innovations in figure work. Instead of representing each horse in simple profile, he positions each in different angles working in a sense of depth and dynamism into the very flat rendering. This is unlike other works like *Untitled (Warrior on Horse),* probably from the 1940's, which are more clearly influenced by ledger art. The horse was a very important figure in both traditional ledger art and hide painting, and is recognized as a

[76] Howe, Prospectus, 5.

[77] Howe, "Theories and Beliefs-Dakota", 68

symbol for prestige and power within Dakota culture. Out of these traditions, like the image of the dancer, the horse provides a generic and symbolic subject that can be interestingly manipulated in myriad compositions. This made the subject popular in the commercial market for Indian Style painting, especially for its pastoral, romantic elements. After two years of studio painting at the Santa Fe Indian school under Dunn, the influence of Studio style is obvious in Howe's compositions like *Sioux Horses* from 1937.

Howe expanded on the legacy of horse portraits by using them as a subject throughout his career, applying his different techniques to the subject. Howe painted *Sioux Chase* in 1950, before he returned for his MFA, but it applies a style beyond the formula of Studio Style. The treatment of the horse figures precedes the artist's work in paintings like *Horse Dancer* from 1956, two years after the artist has graduated with his masters in painting. This work is a testament to his interests in exploring movement and dimension in his composition.

Howe's Relationship To Western Modernism

Early New York avant-garde modernists from the early part of the twentieth century infused their own work with interpretations of indigenous culture. They saw the symbols and designs as "in unity with nature, unbridled psychic and mythic forces and continuity with the primordial origins of humanity".[78] As a collective, the Primitivists of the American avant-garde reveal a variety of interesting twentieth century American

[78] Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, xii.

perspectives on Native culture. The art and methods of this particular development crystallized the "valuable" aspects of Native culture that in turn influenced the value of art actually done by Native artists themselves.

As W. Jackson Rushing suggests in his volume on *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, that it is instructional to include pockets of American and Euro-American modernist painters, such as the Taos and Santa Fe Societies, in the definition of "New York avant-garde" as they were all influenced by similar ideologies. About the same time George Heye conceived of the Museum of the American Indian in New York around 1910 avant-garde art colonies at Santa Fe and Taos began a period of intense patronage and engagement with Native American art. Both artists collectives maintained a relationship with New York methods and trends, thereby extending the popular criticisms of modern urbanism into the Southwest.

The American and Euro-American artists in the Southwest, as well as those in New York, developed and supported a genre of fine art designed to promote and preserve Native culture. However, their explorations of indigenous symbolism to fulfill a romantic and primitivist desire, was not based in ethnographic purpose. Rather, the value of Native American design was inherent in its visual originality and its link to pre-industrial America. In this way, the visual exploration and interpretation of Native symbols, motifs and subjects by non Native artists, defined a genre of non-ceremonial high art which eventually included Native painters.

Crescencio Martinez began receiving commissions for watercolors by Edgar L. Hewett of the Santa Fe colony in 1910. In 1917, Hewett commissioned Martinez to

illustrate the cycle of summer and winter dances at his home pueblo of San Ildefonso, totaling twenty-three works later titled the "Crescencio Set". Fred Kabotie and Otis Polelonema were receiving artistic encouragement and commissions around the same time from Elizabeth DeHuff, the wife of the superintendant of the Santa Fe Indian School, John DeHuff. By 1920, the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe had established a special "Indian alcove" for exhibiting the new style of Pueblo painting by Native artists. Artists from New York, like John Sloan, visited Santa Fe and initiated an interest in the paintings by Native artists. This new genre of non-ceremonial painting was first shown in New York at the Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.[79]

In 1941, Renee d'Harnoncourt, general manager of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, organized the New York MoMA's exhibition of "Indian Art of the United States". Rushing describes this as the "watershed event in the history of Euro-American interaction with the Native American art in the twentieth century".[80] D'Harnoncourt's efforts were combined with the support of John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time. Roosevelt's Department of the Interior issued Collier a mandate of the New Deal to "promote the economic welfare of the Indian tribes trough the development of Indian arts and crafts and the expansion of the market for the products of Indian art and craftsmanship". [81]

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[79]Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 15.

[80] Ibid, 104.

[81] Ibid, 106.

Though most of the exhibit was devoted to the historic arts of the American Indian, the first floor showed a collection of "Indian Art for Modern Living". Here contemporary painting by artists like Fred Kabotie and Oscar Howe were displayed for their value as visual innovations and explorations in formal development.

Artists attending the MoMA show included Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, who were both influenced by the systems of Native aesthetics they saw. Pollock incorporated elements of indigenous symbolism into his abstract works, seeing similarities between Native pictography and his developing work in Abstract Expressionism. His 1946 oil painting *The Child Proceeds* is based on designs from sand paintings, Hohokam pottery and murals he saw at the exhibition containing Kokopelli designs. Pollock latched onto the pictorial and emotional power of the Kokopelli, which is a Hopi symbol for male generative power.[82] The painting is not only influenced by the psychological content of the symbol, but also the pictographic aesthetic. At least in visual genre, though from a non-native perspective, this work does engage and precede Expressionist work by later Native modernists like Herrera and Howe.

Oscar Howe arrived in 1952 to the graduate program of art at the University of Oklahoma seeking an MFA in Painting. Before he was accepted, Howe's portfolio and application was reviewed by the graduate program The program also required applicants take a placement examination in art history, consisting of essay questions and a variety of slide identifications representing the received canon of Western art. John O'Neil reminisces that "many applicants did poorly in the exam, although there were some brave

[82] Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 178.

tries: I remember one student (not Oscar) who, when confronted with a color slide of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* seemed sure that it was an early Christian mosaic."[83] The MFA degree requirements were a modest thirty credit hours, including a thesis, theoretically to be completed in a year. Many students, like Howe, stayed two years taking art history and studio courses while producing their a solo exhibition and thesis.

This information helps contextualize Howe's relationship to Western art history at the University of Oklahoma. Since he denied having had an opportunity to look at such works while on tour of duty overseas, and since the changes in his painting began during 1952-54 in Oklahoma, John O'Neil suggests ". . . two assumptions: first, that during those years there were available to him excellent art periodicals and books in the adjacent art library and that the reproductions therein had some impact, and that other such works in the form of color slides would have been studied by him in the slide library or in history of art courses. (Unfortunately Dr. Donald Humphrey who taught thesis courses cannot be consulted as he died last year in Santa Fe). [84] The second, and perhaps more likely assumption: creative invention."[85] In the spirit of the program atmosphere, Howe recognized and respected Western artistic conventions, but retained a personal approach. Under the guidance of O'Neil, though himself fond of Kandinsky, Howe was free to work in the stylistic idiom he saw fit. O'Neil also posits that "Its likely that this time does

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[83] John O'Neil in a letter to John Day, April 2004, Oscar Howe Collection, University of South Dakota Special Archives.

[84] This private correspondence was written in 2004, meaning Dr. Humphrey passed in 2003.

[85] O'Neil, letter to John Day.

not receive attention for its significance in the artists development because of the unrestrictive atmosphere and his lack of immediate commercial pressure. Thus he was free to experiment by opening up his painting and allowing his instinct for geometric organization to surface." O'Neil remembers that his, "advice to Oscar was to continue to use his own subject matter (tribal customs, tribal memories), but, in the method of Western painting to relate both foreground and background (figure ground) utilizing emotional, rather than purely descriptive color."[86]

The advent of Howe's completely unique geometry is the result of a supportive, creative environment and the artist's sense of professional freedom while pursuing his MFA from 1952-54. This suggests that the influence and similarities of Howe's work to European modernism is largely incidental. O'Neil distinguishes Howe's use of space and line from the Cubist style: "Howe's geometrical tendencies in this period are independent of Cubist doctrine even though the visual results were, at least somewhat superficially similar. The linear organization of the picture plane was a consistent aesthetic tendency for the artist, and was meant to increase the dimensionality of the subject, rather than flatten it."[87] This distinction is significant since O'Neil was Howe's main critic during his period of rapid development while working toward his MFA. Howe's painting implemented geometry to express cultural meaning, thus his subjects generally remained intact, unlike in Cubism where fragments of a figure are reorganized. Rather than seeking the creation of a new figure, Howe used geometry as a means of creating movement for the existing figure.

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[86] O'Neil, letter to John Day.

[87] Ibid, et al.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The period of Howe's career that is examined in this project reveals the artist to have consciously engaged in stylistic nuances and development. The very existence of his art, given his culture and his education, involves discussions of social and economic circumstances for Native Americans in the early twentieth century.

Howe's individualistic approach to composition compounds the complexities of the discourse by also forcing a reexamination of the restrictive artistic atmosphere during this era. Understanding Howe's circumstances and influences leads to a better understanding of his motivations in painting. After establishing a more complex understanding of Howe's relationship to education, the evidence of it can be seen in his works. The Studio under Dorothy Dunn emphasized cultural documentation, but also individual approach. Even in Howe's later career, this motivation was consistent:

> To use Sioux art means, I have studied and used the Indian creative process, technique, symbols, colors, art and Indian culture as subject matter…According to tradition the Sioux recorded their historical and biographical events on hides for documentation and decoration. The ceremony of documenting such important events was called 'the painting of the truth…The artist worked according to the verbal narration of the event. With a preconceived mental visual composition of the whole event and on established esthetic points, he connect points to objectify all visual forms and colors with traditional symbolic colors and completes the painting."[88]

[88] Oscar Howe, Prospectus, 15.

This cultural approach is revealed through examining Howe's works depicting traditional ceremonies, such as the famous composition *Umine Wacipe: War and Peace Dance* from 1958. While earlier Studio Style work like *Sioux Ceremonial*, form 1937, or *Victory Dance* of 1949 show less of Howe's individualistic style, the cultural framework remains the same.

"To define Indian art is almost impossible," stated Frederick Dockstader, assistant director of the Museum of the American Indian, at the 1959 Rockefeller conferences. He continues, that "whatever its definition, it must be a free expression of the artist, in whatever medium he chooses, and in whatever manner he may feel best expresses himself. It must be a living, growing, creative art with an individual flavor which in some degree reflects thousands of years of Indian tradition."[89] In keeping with this trajectory, it is appropriate to historically frame the individuality in the expressions of Native modern artists, as with any non-Native artist. Though Oscar Howe, and many of his Native colleagues did feel responsible to connect their art to "thousands of years of Indian tradition", they are not necessarily bound to the cultural interpretation at the expense of individual stylistic analysis.

Howe eloquently explains the significance of his art in the context of historic and contemporary Dakota culture: "Indian singing seems equal to sounds in nature: birds, animals, the wind and the falling rain. I know they are sounds of joy, peace and reality. It was what the historic Sioux enjoyed. In his time the Sioux had meadowlarks that sang phrase to him. If you listen closely you can hear the sounds that seem equal to Sioux

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[89] Frederick Dockstader, Conference address, in *Directions in Indian Art: The Report of a Conference Held at the University of Arizona on march Twentieth and Twenty-first, Nineteen hundred and Fifty Nine* (Tucson: University of Arizona press, 1959), 3.

words...Certain compositions when completed seem to emulate the Indian poetic beauty in life and nature."[90]

Painting for Howe was like singing or speaking a story. The traditional knowledge of language and song are taken from nature; painting is inspired by language and song. Howe traces a connection between his art, life and relationship to Dakota ways by comparing his work to language, the fundament of the culture. Painting, as in the arts of spoken word, was a way of engaging the world, of actively recognizing kinship with nature and by extension, his historic and present community through spiritual, cultural interconnectivity. The kinesthetic properties of drawn or painted line and the synthetic qualities of color and composition as applied to traditional Dakota subjects provided access to this connection.

[90] Oscar Howe, Prospectus, 5.

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