

PASSAGE 1

Oscar Howe was a Native American artist of the Dakota Sioux people. He was one of the first Native American artists in the early 1900s to paint in a modern style.

The Man Who Painted Truth

by Kathleen M. Hays

Lines of Magic and Beauty

- 1) Oscar Howe was born on South Dakota's Crow Creek Reservation in 1915. Starting at age three, he began to draw lines on paper. "Each line had a fascination for me," he said. "I thought of magic and beauty."
- 2) Oscar's parents did not understand his lines. The lines were abstract and did not seem to represent familiar objects like people and animals.
- 3) His parents took away his pencil and paper, so Howe began to draw with charcoal. When they forbade him to draw with charcoal, he drew on the ground outside. Though he was very young, Howe had already begun to develop his own artistic vision and style.

Studio Style

- 4) Howe attended high school in New Mexico, where he won a place in the Santa Fe Indian School's painting program. The program, which became world famous at the Studio, was run by Dorothy Dunn. Dunn encouraged Howe and other students to paint subjects from their tribal backgrounds. She taught everyone to draw with firm outlines and little or no shading, to keep background details to a minimum, and to use natural colors. The style Dunn taught became the style all Native American painters were expected to use.

Finding His Own Truth

- 5) Early in his career, Howe painted in the Studio style. He painted pictures of Sioux boys on horseback, buffalo hunts, and deer bounding across the prairie. But as he became more confident, his work began to change.
- 6) He experimented with the traditional "point-and-line" technique of Dakota painters. Designs were created from point to point. Curved or straight lines connected each point. The pictures that emerged were filled with geometric shapes and bursting with color and emotion. They were not at all like the pictures he had learned to paint at the Studio.
- 7) Critics complained that his new style looked too modern to be Native American. Howe disagreed. "I have taken the straight line out of the Dakota past and used it as a part of my art," he said. "Its meaning remains the same — the truth." In Dakota pictographs and sign language, a straight line stood for truth. Howe had begun to paint his own truth.
- 8) Howe returned to the reservation often to talk to the old people. "I heard the truth from them and responded by painting them in like manner of their words," he said. But his work continued to draw criticism. In 1958, he submitted a painting to a Native American art competition. The painting was rejected. The judges did not think it fit the rules for Native American art.
- 9) Howe wrote a letter of protest to the museum: "Are we to be held back forever...with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian has always been...?"

- 10) His words made museum directors, art critics, and teachers all over the world stop and think. Shouldn't Native American artists be treated like other artists, free to paint as they wished?

Changing Native American Art

- 11) The next year, the museum changed its rules to allow different styles of painting for their competition. Howe was awarded the grand prize. In his independent way, he had won a battle as dramatic as any fought by his Dakota ancestors.
- 12) "In art I have realized a part of a dream," Howe once said. "To present a true image of the Dakota Indian as I understood him and his culture." By the time of his death in 1983, Oscar Howe's efforts to paint his vision of the truth had forever changed Native American art.

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