



Essential Question for this lesson:

Why has Oscar Howe's artistic legacy inspired people around the world?

The Performing Arts Center of Rapid City houses and preserves two original paintings created by Oscar Howe, the brilliant twentieth-century Oceti Sakowin artist. Howe's work as a fine artist and as a professor earned him international recognition and respect. Howe was a leader in the American Indian fine arts movement, and his paintings are treasured as timeless examples of both his Oceti Sakowin culture and his intellectual expressions as a premier modern American painter.¹

In South Dakota and beyond, *Oceti Sakowin* (Oh-chay-tea Shaw-ko-ween) culture is significant and enriching. *Oceti Sakowin* means "the people of the Seven Council Fires." This includes Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people. Oscar Howe identified himself as a Yanktonai Dakota man; some of his relatives were also notable Yanktonai men. One paternal great-grandfather, Bone Necklace, was a Yanktonai chief who earned wide respect as an orator. Howe's maternal grandfather, Not Afraid of Bear, was also a Yanktonai chief, and his maternal great-grandfather was White Bear, who distinguished himself during the Dakota War of 1862.²

Oscar Howe was born May 13, 1915, on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He attended Pierre Indian School until 1933. This school was operated at the time under a strict military system that tried to assimilate American Indian students. "Assimilation" meant that these students were expected to become part of the dominant culture, which was Northern European immigrant culture. For example, it was against the rules for students to speak their own languages at school, and they were beaten for doing so. Oscar Howe spoke Dakota, not English, when he entered this school, so he endured physical abuse.³ Assimilation is disrespectful to people because it tries to force them to abandon their own cultures. Oscar Howe eventually overcame this disrespect and abuse through his own hard work and perseverance.

In addition to enduring oppression in his youth, Oscar Howe conquered illness. He developed an illness of the skin, which school doctors told him was incurable. He also developed trachoma, a painful eye disease. He was only ten years old, and people were not helping him get better. In fact, people avoided him and left him alone in his illness. Even his own brothers stayed away from him. He was sent home to the Crow Creek Indian Reservation, but his family could not afford medical treatment. Oscar Howe showed his determination: he carefully washed his skin with a particular soap, let it dry on his skin, and then he rinsed it off carefully. He repeated this daily treatment so faithfully that, after several months, he had cured himself of both the skin illness

¹ Howe, Oscar. "Buffalo Dancer." *Institute of Indian Studies* 1, no. 1. Vermillion, SD. (November 1, 1959): 1.

² Agogino, George, and Heidi Howe. "Oscar Howe, Sioux Artist." *Institute of Indian Studies* 1, no. 1. Vermillion, SD. (November 1, 1959): 1-4.

³ Ibid.



and the trachoma. He returned to school determined to become successful so that others “would be ashamed of ever being ashamed of him.”⁴ For Oscar Howe, creating art was the way to gain the respect of others and to show his own ideas.

Howe began making serious art while attending Santa Fe Indian School, where he completed his high school education in 1938. During his time at this advanced school, he exhibited his artwork across the United States and in Europe. Collectors began buying his paintings, and images of his work appeared in domestic and foreign magazines. After all this early artistic success, Howe returned to South Dakota, which was in the grip of the Great Depression. Jobs were scarce, so Howe accepted a position at Pierre Indian School as an art teacher. The school would not pay him with money, however: instead, they gave him a place to stay and food to eat.⁵

In 1940, Howe joined the South Dakota Artist Project, part of the Works Progress Administration that helped provide work for artists while beautifying public spaces in America. He began painting murals in public buildings like the Mitchell, South Dakota Carnegie Library, in which he painted the dome. This piece, “Sun and Rain Clouds Over Hills,” is preserved and treasured today. In fact, Mitchell and other communities like Mobridge, South Dakota, where Howe painted ten large murals, consider these public artworks priceless and preserve them for future generations.

Oscar Howe’s artwork continued to reach new audiences. He was commissioned to illustrate a two-volume book called North American Indian Costumes (1564-1950), written by Oscar Jacobson of the University of Oklahoma and still used by scholars today.⁶ In 1948, Dakota Wesleyan University selected Howe to be an Artist-In-Residence, which made him both a teacher and a student at that school. This same year, he was commissioned to design the eleven huge outdoor panels at the Mitchell Corn palace, which he redesigned annually until 1971. He continued to win awards as he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree and taught at Dakota Wesleyan. He then earned his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1954. For four years, Howe was the director of art at the high school in Pierre, SD.

In 1957, Oscar Howe was appointed to a professorship at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. He taught there for 25 years, admired by colleagues and honored by the students he mentored. Howe influenced more than just the people around him, though: he influenced the trajectory of American Indian art. In 1958, he submitted a piece to be exhibited in an important show at the Philbrook Art Center, but the artwork was rejected. Howe had exhibited art in this show before and had won prizes for the excellence of his work. Show organizers rejected the piece because they thought its style was not “traditional” enough. Howe wrote a letter protesting the

⁴ Agogino, George, and Heidi Howe. "Oscar Howe, Sioux Artist." *Institute of Indian Studies* 1, no. 1. Vermillion, SD. (November 1, 1959): 1-4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *National Museum of the American Indian*. Smithsonian Institution, 2015. Web. 30 Mar. 2015. <americanindian.si.edu>.



constraints that were being placed on him, defending his right to express his individuality through his work. This strong letter led to the show organizers changing their rules. Because Oscar Howe spoke out, people in the art community began to accept abstraction and individualism in Native American art. Howe made it possible for other artists from all tribes to express themselves more freely in their artwork.⁷

Oscar Howe inspired people during his long career, and his artistic legacy continues to inspire people today. His artwork honors and illuminates his Oceti Sakowin culture. The impact of his work reaches far beyond South Dakota, where he was named Artist Laureate in 1960. Oscar Howe's artistic legacy includes his exquisite artwork, his perseverance, and his ability to teach others how to express their thinking and their individuality.

Thinking About the Project

Please write your thoughts about the questions below. We are looking for your **original thinking**: what actually comes into your mind as you carefully read the questions. Your answers may be clear bullet points or clear, complete sentences.

1. Which two details from the text about Oscar Howe's life and work do you find most inspiring? Please give specific examples from the text to support your conclusions. Please write about why these details inspire you.

» _____

» _____

2. Please name at least five of the schools at which Oscar Howe was a student or a teacher.

3. Please write at least two reasons you find in the text showing that the policy of assimilation was an obstacle in Oscar Howe's life. Please use specific examples from the text to support your conclusions.

⁷ Day, John. "Oscar Howe: A Master Revisited." *South Dakota Magazine*, July/August 1996.



Notes for Teachers

The lessons connected with *The Oscar Howe Project* at the Performing Arts Center of Rapid City are designed to be used with students in several grade levels. You may need to provide scaffolding in order to help your students access the text. To help with this, we have included this vocabulary bank. This bank can be easily used with the existing word study procedures you use with students.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• artistic legacy• inspired• preserves• brilliant• <i>Oceti Sakowin</i>• international recognition• intellectual• premier• notable• paternal• orator• maternal• distinguished• Dakota War of 1862• assimilate• dominant culture• immigrant• endured• abandon• perseverance• oppression• conquered• incurable• trachoma | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• determination• particular• faithfully• ashamed• exhibited• domestic• foreign• Great Depression• scarce• Works Progress Administration• beautifying• murals• generations• commissioned• illustrate• scholars• annually• professorship• colleagues• mentored• trajectory• constraints• abstraction• exquisite |
|---|--|

CCSS Language Arts Anchor Standards Addressed:

R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

R10: Read and comprehend complex informational and literary texts independently and proficiently.

W9: Draw evidence from informational and literary texts to support analysis, reflection, & research.

SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly & persuasively.

L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown & multiple-meaning words & phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, & consulting reference materials as appropriate.



L6: Acquire & use accurately a range of general academic & domain-specific words & phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, & listening at the college & career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

South Dakota Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings & Standards Addressed:

EU 1.2: Analyze interrelationships of Oceti Sakowin people, places, and the environment as they relate to reservations in SD.

EU 2.1: Analyze the impact of Euro-American ideas, values, rights, philosophy, and beliefs on Oceti Sakowin people as tribal, state, and U.S. citizens.

EU 5.1: Analyze Oceti Sakowin culture through oral tradition, written accounts, and unbiased information.

EU 6: Federal policies and treaties enacted over time have affected Oceti Sakowin people adversely. Tribes as sovereign nations have the authority to enter into government-to-government relationships, which vary among tribes.

EU 7.1: Analyze actions taken by individuals and communities in an effort to bring about positive social change.

Note: Oscar Howe's scholarly work and his stature in the American fine art community underpin his writing and lend to it the highest credibility. His extensive personal cultural experience render his writings primary source texts and unbiased information. The source by Heidi Howe is also a primary source text; she was an eyewitness to Howe's career as well as his biographer and agent.

More Notes on the Standards and Student Work

The South Dakota Department of Education adopted the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards in 2011. The document is available on the South Dakota Department of Education website under "Oceti Sakowin Project." All South Dakota teachers should be employing these standards across all content areas. These standards represent essential learning for all South Dakotans.

We have included here the reference numbers and a basic description of each Oceti Sakowin Essential Understanding and Standard that this lesson addresses. For full articulations of all of these cultural standards, please consult the official state document: <http://indianeducation.sd.gov/documents/OcetiSakowinEUS.pdf>

The text of this article and the accompanying critical thinking questions are considered informational texts. They are real-world texts about a current local project. The questions are designed to elicit high-level thinking and need no answer key. If students are showing their original thinking, engaging with the topic and the ways in which they perceive the project, then they are doing good work.

This lesson has been field tested with South Dakota students in grades 6-12 with success. Younger thinkers will need more time and support with the lesson. Below are suggested performance level descriptors that show three levels



of performance. Over time, students show growth in inferential thinking and in using textual evidence to support their thinking.

Performance Level Descriptors (two learning targets from CCSS R1):

R1: I can make logical inferences from a text.

3	2	1
Students can combine their own background knowledge with specific text clues in order to make inferences. They can show their thinking in writing.	Students can combine background knowledge with text clues to make inferences, but the inference may be faulty *or* they cannot show how they arrived at their inference in writing.	Students cannot yet combine background knowledge with text clues to make an inference about a text. They may be lacking background knowledge *or* they may not be able to understand the text they are reading.

R1: I can use evidence to support my conclusions about a text.

3	2	1
Students can identify 2 specific text clues that support the conclusions they make about a text. They can show in writing how the text clues led them to their conclusion.	Students can identify 1 text clue that supports the conclusions they make about a text, but they cannot show how the text clues led them to their conclusions. They may have formed a conclusion that reveals a misreading of the text.	Students cannot yet identify any text clues that support the conclusions they make about a text. They cannot explain clearly how they arrived at their conclusions. Their conclusions may reveal a misreading of the text.

Teachers will have success when they encourage their students to show and explain their thinking. Great student discussions can follow! The next page contains a graphic organizer that can help thinkers prepare for their discussions. This process of preparing for & engaging in peer discussions addresses the CCSS Speaking and Listening Standard SL.1!



Discussion: In what ways do people overcome obstacles in their lives?

Brainstorm for 5 minutes alone using this prompt ↓. Next, discuss this ↓ with your partner and record each idea!

Brainstorm many obstacles people face in life:

Brainstorm many ways to overcome those obstacles:

Name:

Date of discussion: