

A Modernist Moment
Native Art and Surrealism at the University of Oklahoma

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In the late 1940s, University of Oklahoma students Chief Terry Saul (Choctaw/Chickasaw, 1921-1976), Walter Richard “Dick” West, Sr., (Southern Cheyenne, 1912-1996) and Oscar Howe (Yaktonai Nakota, 1915-1983) began to depart from established, accepted styles of Native painting in order to explore the possibilities of Native expression. Believing so-called “Traditional Indian Painting” to be an impasse, they experimented with various forms of European modernism: Cubism, Expressionism, and most notably Surrealism.¹ They were influenced and encouraged not only by their instructors, who dabbled with various Surrealist tendencies, but also by notable examples in the University of Oklahoma Art Museum (now the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art) from William Baziotas, Byron Browne, Charles Howard, and Adolph Gottlieb. For the Native artists, Surrealism in its various forms offered a strategy for producing work identifiably Native yet visibly modernist by contemporary definitions. Surrealist fascination with myth and magic provided an accessible framework for Saul, West, and Howe to explore the visionary within their respective tribal cultures while creating work marketable as both modern and Surrealist. They were less concerned with a critique of Surrealism’s dubious appropriation of tribal motifs than with a tactical negotiation of the complicated divisions between personal, tribal, and artistic identity. As art historian Bill Anthes has affirmed, artists such as Howe and West “forged a hybrid modernity that challenged clear boundaries between Indian and white art and culture. They made innovative, highly individual, and often abstract artworks that were related stylistically to the European-American avant-garde yet also expressed their experiences as Native Americans in the twentieth century.”² Saul, West, and Howe began that

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experimentation with modernity while studying at OU, an important moment in their artistic formation that has been given scant attention in the critical literature.

The years between 1948, when Saul began his MFA, and 1953, when Howe concluded his study at OU, constitute an important watershed in the history of Native American art, while remaining relatively unexplored in critical literature. Contemporary with similar developments in the work of Joe Herrera and Pablita Velarde in New Mexico, the paintings of the Oklahoma group constitute the first serious engagement by Native artists with modernist aesthetics and thought. Their artistic choices, what they appropriated and what they rejected, offer insights into the fashioning of their respective artistic identities and how they promoted work that straddled divisions between Native American art and Euro-American modernism.

Saul, West, and Howe entered university studies in the years following World War II, taking advantage of the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act or G.I. Bill that provided funds for the educational or vocational training of servicemen. Each had prior training, yet the work they would produce after military service differed markedly. Their work dating before the war would have been described as "Traditional Indian Painting" and was characterized by emphatic contours, spare modeling, attention to details of dress and accouterments, and little to no background. This aesthetic approach was largely informed by the pedagogy of the two primary artistic programs for Native artists: Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma and the Santa Fe Indian School Studio. Saul began his studies at Bacone with Woody Crumbo, then served in the 45th Infantry Division in Europe where he achieved the rank of first sergeant. After he graduated from OU in 1949, he studied at the Art Students League with M. Peter Piening, who had been a student of László Moholy-Nagy and Paul Klee at the Dessau Bauhaus.³ Similarly, West received early training at Bacone with Acee Blue Eagle, then received his Bachelor of Fine Arts at OU in 1941. He served in the Navy between 1942-46, attaining the rank of lieutenant senior grade.⁴ West began teaching following the war, first at the Phoenix Indian School and then as the chair of the art program at Bacone before continuing his studies at OU in 1949. Howe, by contrast, studied at the Studio between 1935-38, then served in the 442nd Anti-Aircraft Battalion, in which he attained the rank of corporal.⁵ He continued his education after the war at Wesleyan University in Mitchell, South Dakota where he received his BFA in 1952.

All three sought graduate degrees at OU, which boasted a number of distinguished Native alumni by the late 1940s, including the early Kiowa artists, Blue Eagle, and Crumbo. Professor Oscar B. Jacobson had supported and promoted the careers of a number of Native artists over the past two decades, but the situation changed in 1945, when an aging Jacobson was asked to step down as chair.⁶ A

younger generation of professors, versed in the latest developments of European modernism, assumed artistic control of the department. Unlike Jacobson, most had little involvement or interest in “Traditional Indian Painting” and had little concern for the preservation of notions of “Indianness.” Only Leonard Good,



Fig. 1. John O'Neil, *Untitled*, 1949, oil on canvas. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman

who worked in conservative styles linked to the American Scene, had any direct involvement with the history of Native American art at OU. By contrast, William Harold Smith, the new head of the department, experimented with a synthesis of Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism, as a means of investigating the alienation and existential crises of the postwar period.

Similarly, John O'Neil, one of the painting professors, worked in a style that would have been characterized as abstract Surrealism, and he was included in Frederick Sweet and Katherine Kuh's 1947 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, "58th Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture: Abstract and Surrealist American Art."⁷ An untitled painting (1949; Fig. 1) demonstrates the expressive brushstroke, vivid coloration, and abstracted forms of O'Neil's work of the period. Human figures engage in what appears to be an armed struggle in a space populated by sparse, fantastical foliage and ambiguously architectonic structures. Artist and critic Jerry Bywaters found a subtle medievalism in O'Neil's work and emphasized the mutability of his forms as a spur to the viewer's imagination: "The conception of each painting is as bold as an early mosaic, as glowing as a stained glass window, and as organic as a motor, a vegetable, or a geode ... Each painting is built on a three-dimensional framework as rigid as steel with spaces and planes of vibrant color forming a thoroughly satisfying 'structure' to be inhabited by man's imagination."⁸ O'Neil had arrived at a synthesis of Surrealism, Expressionism, and Cubism by the late 1940s, and his imaginative compositions had a strong influence at OU.

In addition to O'Neil, the arrival of the Mexican muralist Emilio Amero in 1946 encouraged Surrealist tendencies at OU. Amero had worked closely with Jean Charlot in 1922-23 and helped to initiate the lithography revival in Mexico. The following year, he assisted José Clemente Orozco and Carlos Mérida with their murals for the National Preparatory School and Secretariat of Public Education, respectively. He spent much of the late 1920s in New York City, where he experimented with photography and film. His work impressed Federico García Lorca, and the two planned a film project that was never realized. Amero's work, especially his flirtation with photograms, also caught the attention of dealer Julien Levy, who gave the artist an exhibition in January 1935. The photograms illustrated Amero's awareness not only of the work of Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky but also Surrealism, particularly the rayographs of Man Ray. Amero's surrealist tendencies only intensified in the 1940s and, by the next decade, he had become entirely sympathetic to Surrealism. Paintings such as *The Game* (Fig. 2), with its cryptic and vaguely Pre-Columbian women positioned against a ruin of unknown provenance, present an inexplicable drama and suggests a kind of intrigue expressed by the odd dance of the figures.⁹



Fig. 2. Emilio Amero, *The Game*, 1955, egg tempera on panel. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of J. Wendell Andrews, 2005

Good, Smith, O’Neil, and Amero were the core painting and drawing faculty in the 1940s when Saul, West, and Howe arrived to complete their graduate degrees. Saul and West completed their MFA degrees in 1949 and 1950, respectively, under Good and Smith. Howe, whose committee included O’Neil, Smith, and Amero, finished in 1953. Good likely encouraged both Saul and West to experiment with naturalistic styles, and both of their theses include paintings of this type. Saul’s thesis, “An Exhibition of Six Original Oil Paintings,” bears the strong imprint of Good’s preference for figuration.¹⁰ West, too, flirted with a style he described as “comparatively realistic” in some of his thesis paintings.¹¹ However, both Saul and West abandoned naturalism in subsequent work in favor of more identifiably modernist experiments with color and form.

The brand of Surrealism practiced by Smith, O’Neil, and Amero would have a decisive influence on Saul, West, and Howe by encouraging each to explore abstract tendencies. Like many American artists, the OU faculty generally ignored Andre Breton’s orthodox definition of Surrealism and experimented freely, so long as the results were suitably inscrutable. Curator and critic Michael Duncan has concluded

that for most American artists Surrealism was “an oddly open, almost egalitarian aesthetic genre.”¹² Sidney Janis, in his classic 1944 study *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, mused on the varied inspirations available to the contemporary Surrealist. Frottage, decalcomania, and especially automatism were techniques embraced by American artists but, for Janis, it was the liberation from strict representation that constituted the allure of Surrealism:

Dwelling upon the marvelous, the irrational and the delirious, the surrealist investigates the dream, the myth, the metaphor and the fable ... New realities are symbolized which transcend commonplace representation: the secret life of the object; the dynamics of an expanding universe; the unseen mechanisms of nature; pictorial law; the all-but-inscrutable phenomena of the mind and the emotions; light and form, essence and sensibility, and all the marginal experiences that tell of wonders still to be explored.¹³

These new realities allowed artists tremendous latitude in their choice of subject matter and provided Native artists with a means of exploring tribal mythology but with a distinctly modern cast.

Myth and metaphor, in particular, would become increasingly important vehicles for numerous American painters in the 1940s and central concerns of the still nascent New York School, especially for Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. A heady ferment of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Otto Rank, and Joseph Campbell produced in artists of this period the belief that myth provided insights into the archetypes of the individual psyche and some understanding of the values universal to humanity. Myth connected the individual to society and provided a framework for understanding the ego, culturally as well as genetically according to Campbell. He summarized the belief effectively in his influential 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

The tribal ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, serve to translate the individual's life-crises and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms. They disclose him to himself, not as this personality or that, but as the warrior, the bride, the widow, the priest, the chieftain; at the same time rehearsing for the rest of the community the old lesson of the archetypal stages. All participate in the ceremonial according to rank and function. The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations

of individuals pass, like anonymous cells from a living body; but the sustaining, timeless form remains.¹⁴

As Campbell suggests, the translation of ceremony and ritual into archetypal, mythic forms that transcend time is metaphorically comparable to the natural processes of life, death, regeneration, and renewal.

The Abstract Expressionists conflated myth, natural cycles, and the psyche to explore the essence of the human condition. Art historian Stephen Polcari has argued that the Abstract Expressionists sought “the return to origins, the universal striving or inner continuum of all life,” in order to invest modern experience with a spiritual or supernatural dimension they perceived lacking.¹⁵ “Primitive” man, or “First Man” as Newman dubbed him, perceived nature as fundamentally supernatural phenomena and rendered that mystery as totemic or ancestral figures. Many of the Abstract Expressionist sought understanding in anthropology and the study of tribal cultures to this end and, as art historian W. Jackson Rushing has demonstrated, they were particularly inspired by Native American art and culture.¹⁶

In the years following the war, it was not unusual for students entering graduate study around the country to be exposed to these aesthetic and philosophical ideas.¹⁷ The postwar climate at OU’s School of Art paralleled that of other progressive art programs, at least to some degree. O’Neil later recalled that the period from 1947 through the 1950s was one of “robust health” in which the “energy that fueled the New York School reached even the mid-America places.”¹⁸ For Saul, West, and Howe, this mid-century fascination with myth, especially when conceived in terms of tribal ceremony, provided each of them with some degree of encouragement to investigate the mythology and rituals of their respective cultures with the understanding that this not only created a link to a tribal past but potentially fostered a broader connection to humanity and the continuity of life.

Although the OU faculty must be credited with encouraging Saul, West, and Howe to depart from “Traditional Indian Painting,” the university museum’s acquisition of 36 paintings from the U.S. State Department in 1948 also played a considerable role. The paintings were a portion of the exhibition “Advancing American Art” that had been organized by the State Department in 1946 as a form of cultural diplomacy. Fears of Communist influence abroad prompted the State Department to use contemporary art as an illustration of the intellectual and expressive freedom afforded by American democracy, and to this end, the exhibition included conservative trends as well as some of the most innovative work being done in the country. Paintings by Louis Bouche were displayed along with those of Ben Shahn, Jack Levine, and Adolph Gottlieb. After it premiered at the Metropolitan

Museum of Art in October 1946, “Advancing American Art” toured Paris, Czechoslovakia, Cuba and Haiti. Ironically, it became political theater in 1947, when conservative members of Congress learned that not only had the State Department purchased the paintings with public money but that some of the artists included had Communist sympathies. The exhibition was recalled by Secretary of State George Marshall that spring, and the entire collection was eventually reclassified as war assets and publically auctioned in 1948.¹⁹

When OU’s portion of “Advancing American Art” arrived in September 1948, it was exhibited immediately, and portions of the collection were displayed over the next several years. Several pieces in the collection must have made a favorable impression on Saul, West, and Howe and encouraged their future experimentation with modernist forms. When considered together with the example



Fig. 3. Chief Terry Saul, *Savage*, c. 1948, oil on canvas. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman

of Amero, O'Neil, and Smith, it is clear that the Native artists were steeped in questions of tradition versus innovation, representation versus abstraction, and communal expectations versus individual expression.

Saul was the first to contend with these issues in paintings produced apart from his MFA thesis. Although he maintained a tie to naturalistic representation more so than either West or Howe, his paintings demonstrate an increasing interest in the inexplicable and otherworldly, and he experimented with biomorphic forms, expressive coloration, and non-traditional paint application. His *Salvage* (c. 1948; Fig. 3) employs the biomorphic distortion practiced by Jean Arp, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy, and also clearly visible in the work of American Charles Howard, who had been included in "Advancing American Art."²⁰ *Salvage* depicts an airless and relatively flat plain, similar to those painted by Amero, and populated by unusual objects of varying degrees of familiarity. It is only after extended examination that Saul's subject, an airfield salvage yard, becomes clear. Painted from the perspective of someone behind the glass of a cockpit, the painting includes oil drums, ladders, sundry spare parts, and the tail fins of two aircraft. The painting may depict the airfield on the northern edge of Norman, where the U.S. Navy had a training program during World War II. Its significance for Saul, however, likely went beyond its specific location. To a veteran like Saul, an image of the instruments of combat, now fallen into disuse, must have resonated with his memories of the recent war and seemed disquieting and strange.

The unusual environment of *Salvage* would become a familiar trope for Saul and over the next decade he employed Surrealist techniques as a means of investigating his Choctaw heritage. He began to explore rituals and practices among Choctaw before European contact, in paintings such as *Warrior* (Fig. 4). The painting includes decorative flora that is fancifully distorted and distributed across a sparse plain unrelated to either the ancestral home in Mississippi or the diaspora in southeastern Oklahoma. In addition, Saul elongates and simplifies the anatomy of the figure as if to invest him with an otherworldly character indicative of his origin in myth and legend as opposed to perceptual experience.²¹ Saul never departed from recognizable representation yet his depiction of atmospheric elements and decorative ornament verges on the automatist at times, and he utilized modernist and Surrealist techniques such as spraying paint and decalomania to dislocate his figures from waking experience. He effectively straddled the amorphous boundaries between Choctaw oral tradition and legend and personal artistic expression. As he noted, "All my paintings have Indian themes – in contemporary style ... This is a combination of line, design and color. It is not exactly like traditional 'calendar' Indian art but not too radical, either."²²



Fig. 4 Chief Terry Saul, *Warrior*, n.d., acrylic on canvas. The James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman

Saul also acknowledged that his interpretation of Choctaw culture was distinctly personal and shaped, at times, by his concern for design: "Painting to me is purely a personal thing and I try very hard to make my own interpretations as original and personal as they can possibly be. I try to work into my compositions a sincere, honest and lasting quality. I sacrifice, at times, realistic renderings and rely on color, pattern and design to emphasize a certain theme of part of my interpretations and compositions. Trying to put down in line and color the customs of the Choctaw tribe is certainly a primitive and exciting work."²³ His objective was not ethnographic recovery but a subjective investigation of his cultural heritage filtered through his aesthetic desires. His use of the term "primitive" is exceptionally telling, since it not only indicated that Saul regarded such customs as distinct from his modern experience but also linked his interests to both modern art and those of the New York School. Although Saul was concerned to some degree with ethnographic specificity, the term "primitive" referred to an early stage in human development, closer to the recess of the unconscious, and hence universal in meaning. It is unclear whether Saul perceived any ideological conflict or pejorative meaning in his use of the term, but he clearly hoped that his abstract renderings of the obscure rituals and myths of the Choctaw would seem sufficiently modern.

Saul never seems to have exhibited in a venue outside of those established for Native American art but his adoption of "contemporary style" indicated his desire to disrupt the expected aesthetics associated with Indian painting, especially with works such as *Salvage*. Similarly, Dick West had become disenchanted with "Traditional Indian Painting" during his MFA, as explained in his thesis: "the traditional type of Indian painting has been done over and over to the point of being hackneyed. Since there is little possibility of growth in this style of painting, the Indian artist must inevitably turn in the direction of more contemporary two- or three-dimensional studies."²⁴ He achieved the crossover that eluded Saul, when his painting, *The Wedding of Art and Science* (1949; Fig. 5), won first prize at the Association of Oklahoma Artists Tenth Annual. The forms derive from a mixture of Cubism, Constructivism, and the enigmatic imagery of Metaphysical Painting and early Surrealism. His title, with its matrimonial allusion, suggests a familiarity with the mystical marriage of bride and groom, a subject of interest among the Surrealists, although West's aim was likely the search for fundamental truths through the subjectivity of the arts and the objectivity of the sciences.

The Wedding of Art and Science would not be included in West's thesis, but it signaled the direction he intended to explore. He proposed an investigation of Indian motifs using the styles of European modernism from "comparatively realistic to extreme abstraction."²⁵ The thesis included paintings such as *The Masked Dancers*



Fig. 5. Walter Richard “Dick” West, Sr., *The Wedding of Art and Science*, 1949, oil on canvas. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; museum purchase, 1950. Courtesy of the estate.

(c. 1950), an homage to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907; the Museum of Modern Art, New York) but with Booger masks, and *Thanksgiving Prayer* (c. 1950), a patchwork of Native iconography related to food and the beneficence of the divine.²⁶ Much of his work prior to his MFA focused exclusively on representational images of Cheyenne culture, but the university offered the opportunity to study nineteenth-century material culture as well as other pictorial traditions.²⁷ He came to believe that the abstract tradition had been “a part of the Indians[’] artistic thinking longer than [sic] most European contemporary [sic] influences,” and sought a hybridization of motives and styles that would be at once recognizably Native and recognizably modern.²⁸ West found formal direction in both nineteenth-century hide painting and the modernist traditions he encountered at OU, and he frequently turned to Cheyenne myth for thematic inspiration. Cheyenne legends provided a rich supply of subject matter for West during this period, but he also believed that the resulting painting might touch the human psyche, irrespective of race. He later stated that “I do not believe we can possibly comprehend the eventual aesthetic value of the paintings and sculpture which flows from the minds of contemporary citizens

of the world, who are often able to reach back into the wealth of tribal traditions and occasionally penetrate even further – into the deep rich wells of the atavistic memory.”²⁹ West’s language indicates awareness of the rhetoric of both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism as well as a belief that myth, irrespective of its cultural origin, offered access to the collective unconscious.

West’s mythological exploration included paintings such as *Water Serpent* (c. 1951; Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma), a depiction of a creature of Cheyenne legend, and *Buffalo Migration* (c. 1950; Fig. 6), a Surrealist interpretation of an animal that had both material and mythical significance to most Plains cultures. In the latter painting, he attempted to synthesize “the buffalo shapes as conventionalized by many American Indian tribes,” while also evoking “a special realm of surrealism where symbols take the place of realistic representation in the dream world.”³⁰ When West later reflected on his investigation of myth and modernist abstraction in paintings such as *Buffalo Migration* and *Water Serpent*, he hoped that other Native artists would follow his direction and the resulting work would “evolve into the [contemporary] period unidentified, fused, and will enrich

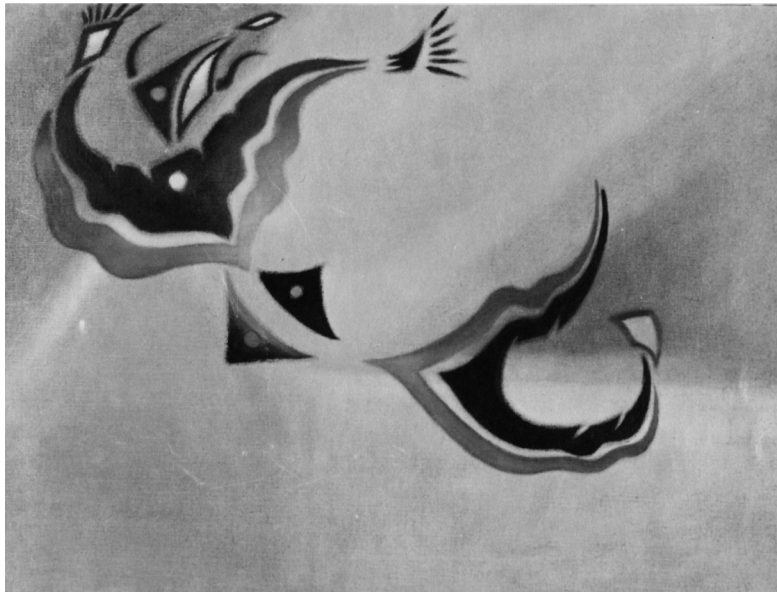


Fig. 6. Walter Richard “Dick” West, Sr., *Buffalo Migration*, c. 1950, oil on canvas. Current location unknown. Courtesy of the estate.

and add further contributions to art by the American Indian.”³¹ Modernist theories derived from Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism provided West and later Native artists with a strategy for retaining their cultural identity while providing a means to enter a broader market free of the segregation that had defined most Native art up to that time.

Like West, Oscar Howe pursued a similar objective. His MFA thesis charted his progress from “Traditional Indian Painting,” which he had practiced at the Studio, to the mature style for which he achieved acclaim. He found aesthetic inspiration in tribal forms such as quillwork and hide painting as well as the Cubist and Surrealist forms and techniques available readily in the work of his instructors and the paintings from “Advancing American Art.” Like West, Howe believed “Traditional Indian Painting” “suffered from lack of individuality in expression.” He defined his thesis project as painting “with direct imagination in close association with the sub-conscious,” resulting in “a statement of conception rather than perception.” Hesitant to ally himself too closely with the irrationality of the unconscious mind, he allowed for the “psychological use of catharsis as a means to realize individuality.”³² Catharsis was a loaded term in 1953 and was commonly used in relation to Abstract Expressionism, especially after Sam Hunter described Jackson Pollock’s paintings as “cathartic” in 1949.³³ Emotional release in Howe’s work took shape through the Siouan aesthetic process of *oma*, in which forms are created through the placement of points and the subsequent connection of those points by line. The technique compares to Wassily Kandinsky’s emphasis on point and line as the basis of creation and to automatic drawing, since Howe seemingly entered a trance-like state while laying out the points.³⁴ In thesis paintings such as *Three Women* (Fig. 7), he marshaled a complex of points and lines resulting in an overtly planar approach to form. Although the style derived chiefly from the linear composition of Siouan quillwork and hide painting, the results often seem closer to work of Stuart Davis or George L. K. Morris, two artists Howe could have studied in the OU collection.³⁵ The linear framework of Howe’s style also compares to the architecture of Matta’s surrealist abstractions and Stanley Hayter’s automatist etchings from the 1940s. Whether Howe was directly or tangentially influenced by any of these artists is an intriguing question but relatively unimportant. Howe’s abstractions, with their complex network of lines, points, and planar geometry, have an iconic presence equivalent in many respects to work by Matta, Hayter, Davis, and Morris. *Three Women* straddles the boundaries between Howe’s aesthetic heritage and European modernism, a stylistic hybrid difficult, if not impossible, to parse.

Future paintings delved into the mysteries of Yanktonai Nakota traditions using tropes that would have been familiar to those versed in mid-century

modernism. In *Dance of the Heyoka* (1954; Fig. 8), Howe created a dense, colorful layering of geometric and biomorphic forms intertwined in a ritual celebrating the Siouan trickster, and it is only after close scrutiny that the viewer is able to discern distorted heads, torsos and limbs in the mangle of imagery. He extended the forms to the edge of the picture plane in a fashion similar to his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, and the result bears more than a passing similarity to Willem de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950; the Art Institute of Chicago), in which the human forms are buried within a complex of gestures and planes. Howe never cited de Kooning, or any other Euro American modernist, as a direct inspiration, but the paintings suggest that the former was highly literate in modernism.

In other paintings such as *Woman Buffalo Dreamer* (n.d.; Fig. 9), Howe demonstrated an awareness of the elongated forms, desolate plains, and timeless environments of Dali, Yves Tanguy, and Alberto Giacometti. The subject evokes the visionary and oneiric subject matter of the Surrealists, but within a Native context. A buffalo dreamer was usually a male of exceptional visionary ability who helped the tribe locate bison, ensuring the survival of the people. A woman with such abilities



Fig. 7. Oscar Howe, *Three Women*, c. 1953, tempera on paper. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; MFA Thesis selection, School of Art, 1953. Courtesy of the Oscar Howe Estate.



Fig. 8. Oscar Howe, *Dance of the Heyoka*, c. 1954, watercolor on paper. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; museum purchase, 1954. Courtesy of the Oscar Howe Estate.



Fig. 9. Oscar Howe, *Woman Buffalo Dreamer*, n.d., tempera on paper. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of Gertrude Phillips, 1978. Courtesy of the Oscar Howe Estate.

was extraordinarily rare, according to oral tradition, and Howe attempted to suggest the nature of her gift through the strange scene around her.³⁶ It is unclear whether Howe was aware that the Surrealists considered the feminine closer to the irrational, mystical and extrasensory aspects of the psyche, but the painting clearly associates femininity with the visionary capacity of dreams and their importance to daily life.³⁷

Howe's appropriation of Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist forms provided a framework for his subjective interpretation of tribal myths and rituals that remained identifiably Native and modernist by the dominant artistic trends of the day. He merged those forms with his own technique derived from Siouan aesthetics to create a hybrid modernity, similar in approach though different in appearance from the experiments of West and Saul. For all three artists, Surrealism legitimized the individual exploration of myth and promised not only a validation of tribal identity but potential access to the collective unconscious or what West termed "atavistic memory." Their paintings, though sometimes obscure in meaning, sought some form of universal understanding through primal or "primitive" imagery and themes. As Master's students at the University of Oklahoma, Saul, West, and Howe were encouraged to experiment with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism through their instructors and the influence of modernist paintings from "Advancing American Art." The paintings of Saul, West, and Howe reveal a strategic engagement with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, in both form and content, and created a clear break with "Traditional Indian Painting," with the possibility of exhibition and market opportunities formerly unavailable to Native artists. Their efforts presaged those of the next generation of Native artists who found opportunity and success in the styles employed by American artists at large.



1 The classification "Traditional Indian Painting" is often used to describe the style of painting endorsed at the Santa Fe Indian School Studio and Bacone College in the 1930s. Although it became synonymous with "authentic" Native aesthetics, it has been criticized as being neither traditional nor wholly Native, since it was a style shaped by pedagogical and commercial demands of Caucasian educators and patrons. For an indictment of this term, see J.J. Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971).

2 Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press,

2006), xii.

3 Resume of Chief Terry Saul, 1970s, Curatorial Files, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Saul also studied with an instructor at the Art Students League that he identified as Bauer, but was probably Walter Buehr, a well-known illustrator.

4 Author unknown, "With the Armed Forces," *Sooner Magazine* 15:8 (April 1943): 8. West's assignment was initially listed as painter third class on an unidentified vessel. His lieutenant rank on an unidentified carrier was reported later in Grace Penney, "Son of the Cheyennes," *Sooner Magazine* 22:4 (December 1949): 17.

5 Robert Pennington, *Oscar Howe: Artist of the Sioux* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Dakota Territory Centennial Commission, 1961), 18.

6 William Harold Smith assumed the directorship of the School of Art in Fall 1946. "1946-47 Salary Budget Request," President George L. Cross Papers, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman.

7 Letter from William Harold Smith to President George L. Cross, 22 November 1947, Cross Papers.

8 Jerry Bywaters, "John O'Neil," *Art in America* 43:1 (February 1955): 56-57.

9 Horacio Fernández, "Emilio Amero," in Horacio Fernández and Salvador Albinana, *Mexicana: Fotografía Moderna en México, 1923-1940* (Valencia, Spain: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1998), n.p.

10 Chief Terry Saul, "An Exhibition of Six Original Oil Paintings," MFA Thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 1949, pp. 3-6.

11 West, "Six American Indian Motifs Adapted to Contemporary Pictorial Principles," MFA Thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 1950, 3-5.

12 Michael Duncan, "American Surrealism Outside of New York: Membership Open" in Isabelle Dervaux, et. al., *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum, 2005), 46.

13 Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 8-9.

14 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 383. The University of Oklahoma library first acquired a copy of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in June 1949. Otto Rank's *Art and Artist* was acquired in November 1944, and his *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* was acquired sometime after 1952.

15 Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 34.

16 W. Jackson Rushing III, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

17 This educational experience was particularly apparent at the California School of Fine Arts in an environment cultivated by artists such as Edward Corbett, Hassel Smith, Clay Spohn, and Clyfford Still. See Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

18 Sam Olkinetsky, "John O'Neil: An Appreciation," *Cross Currents* 11:1 (January/February 1998): 6.

19 For a history of "Advancing American Art" see Margaret Lynne Ausfeld and Virginia Mecklenburg, *Advancing American Art: Politics and Aesthetics in the US State Department Exhibition, 1946-48* (Montgomery, Alabama: Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, 1984); Taylor Littleton and Maltby Sykes, *Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics, and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); and Dennis Harper, Mark Andrew White, and Paul Manoguerra, *Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 2012). For a discussion of its favorable reception at OU, see author unknown, "OU Purchases 'Condemned' Art," *Sooner Magazine* 20:12 (August 1948): 15.

20 Although undated, Saul's *Salvage* was included in the University of Oklahoma's representation in the 1948 exhibition, *Art Schools, U.S.A., Selections from Twenty-Five Art Schools of the U.S.*, at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Charles Howard's *Medusa* (1945) is included in OU's portion of the Advancing American Art collection. For further information on the painting, see Harper, White, and Manoguerra, 156-57.

21 Letter from Chief Terry Saul to Philbrook Art Center, 4 April 1948, Curatorial Files, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Saul had produced an earlier painting of the Choctaw Scalp Dance and noted that it was "given before the coming of the Missionaries and was never known, except by legend, this side of the Mississippi or in the Indian Territories of Texas and Oklahoma."

22 Mac Sebree, "U.S. Indians Turning to Modern Art," *Daily Oklahoman*, 4 February 1962, 8A.

23 Letter from Chief Terry Saul to Philbrook Art Center, 4 April 1948, Curatorial Files, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

24 West, "Six American Indian Motifs Adapted to Contemporary Pictorial Principles," 1.

25 West, 2.

26 West, 15 and 12.

27 West explained in 1995 that "Once I got to the university I had a better chance to study the old -- what I was brought up with." Andrea Rogers-Henry interview with West, 29 July 1995, transcribed by Linda Scudder, 9 September 1995, Curatorial Files, Philbrook Museum of Art.

28 Letter from West to Joan Nordling, 12 May 1955, Curatorial Files, Philbrook Museum of Art.

29 West, "Traditional Motifs and Contemporary Principles," *South Dakota Review* 7:2 (Summer 1969): 102.

30 West, "Six American Indian Motifs Adapted to Contemporary Pictorial Principles," 18. For an expanded discussion of West's *Water Serpent*, see Anthes, *Native Moderns*, 154.

31 West, "Here Comes the Judge," *Oklahoma Art Gallery Magazine* (Spring 1980): 6.

32 Oscar Howe, "An Exhibition of Original Painting in Tempera," MFA Thesis, 1953, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 1.

33 Sam Hunter, "Among the New Shows," *New York Times*, 30 January 1949, sec. 2, 9.

34 Howe described this trance in Oscar Howe and Vincent Price, "Oscar Howe: Sioux Artist," Produced by Sanford Gray and South Dakota Indian Arts Council, 1973. Howe, "Theories and Beliefs," *South Dakota Review* 7: 2 (Summer 1969): 70. Howe specifically defines *owa* as "writing with a point-to-point movement, always esthetic or kinesthetic. The form or form arrangements are guided by one groupal point to another groupal point, etc. For economy of time and space and clarity of meanings, simple but effective esthetic movements are used in objectifying ideas." For a full discussion of Howe's technique, see Anthes, *Native Moderns*, pp. 162-167, and White, "Oscar Howe and the Transformation of Native American Art," *American Indian Art Magazine* 23:1 (Winter 1997): 36-43.

35 The works by Stuart Davis at OU include an oil produced for the Federal Art Project, *Waterfront* (1935), and a gouache that was included in "Advancing American Art," *Shapes of Landscape Space* (1939). George L.K. Morris is represented in the collection by two works from "Advancing American Art": *Shipbuilding Construction* (1944-45) and *New England Church* (1935-46). See Harper, White, and Manoguerra, 104-05 and 204-07.

36 For a brief description of the buffalo dreamer in the context of Sioux legend, see "The Vision Quest in Wakan," in James R. Walker, Raymond J. DeMaillie, and Elaine Jahner, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 150-53.

37 For a history of Surrealism and its fascination with the feminine, see Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).