

Title

Historic and Contemporary Art of the *Oceti Sakowin* (Och-aht-ee Shak-oh-ween) Cultures.

Grade Level

Grades 9-12.

Theme

This lesson plan, the first of four focusing on four individual Native American artists, will explore how Dakota, Lakota and Nakota culture impacts art, both historical and contemporary.

Duration

2.5 hours.

Goal

Students will explore Dakota cultural continuity by studying Oscar Howe's work.

Objectives

Students will be able to identify continuity in cultural traditions based upon the quotation of Oscar Howe; "It has always been my version of Indian traditions to make it individualistic in my own way, but every part comes from Indian and not White culture. I have been labeled wrongfully a Cubist. The basic design is *Tahokmu* (spider web). "From an all-Indian background I developed my own style."

Oscar Howe: A Retrospective Exhibition, Frederick J. Dockstader, editor, 1982, Thomas Gilcrease Museum Association, note #1, pg 15 in response to article *Oscar Howe and the Sioux (Mazuha Hokshina - Trader Boy)*.

South Dakota Standards

See South Dakota Content Standards <http://doe.sd.gov/contentstandards/>.

Cultural Concept

This lesson plan will stress to students that the art of the *Oceti Sakowin* continues today based on living cultural concepts that have continued from and expanded from historical culture.

The cultural concept of Dakota design will be examined through the works of Yanktonnais artist Oscar Howe (1915-1983). Howe's later artistic style was based from a historic cultural design concept called *tahokmu* (spider's web). In examining and discussing examples of Howe's work such as the casein on paper work *Cunka Wakan* (http://www.oscarhowe.org/images/OscarHowe_CunkaWakan.jpg) and comparing the work with examples of historic Dakota objects such as this parfleche (http://content.mnhs.org/education/archive/fullsize/3d-objects-038_251a948bba.jpg) or cradle cover panel (<http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/1464>) many similarities can easily be identified, as can evidences of culture change influenced by today's world.

Cultural Background

The *Oceti Sakowin* (Och-aht-ee Shak-oh-ween) is the correct name for the people commonly known as the Sioux. *Oceti Sakowin* means Seven Council Fires with each Council Fire made up of individual bands. The Seven Council Fires are *Mdewakantonwan* (Dwellers by the Sacred Lake), *Wahpekute* (Shooters Among the Leaves), *Wahpetonwan* (Dwellers Among the Leaves), *Sisitonwan* (People of the Marsh), *Ihanktonwan* (People of the End of Horn), *Ihanktonwanna* (People of the Little End of

Horn) and *Tetonwan* (People on the Plains). These seven bands are divided into three linguistic groups: the Dakota (*Mdewakantonwan*, *Wahpekute*, *Wahpetonwan* and *Sisitonwan*), the Nakota (*Ihanktonwan* and *Ihanktonwanna*) and the Lakota (*Tetonwan*)

Tribal identities developed over centuries deriving from the geographic, biological, environmental and psychological elements of a group of individuals. Family relationships have traditionally defined the collective identities of Dakotas, Nakotas and Lakotas, however collective identity is comprised of multiple variables and no one descriptor can be used to label it.

The art of the *Oceti Sakowin* reflects their environment and is an integral part of their everyday lives. (There is no word for “art” in the languages of the *Oceti Sakowin*.) The creation of a work of art is influenced by the dreams or visions of the individual, which will determine the colors, design and images incorporated.

The traditional artistic styles that developed for utilitarian or ceremonial purposes typically included painting with vegetable dyes and quill work. Later (about 1820) with access to trade items, commercially produced dyes, glass beads, brass and tin decorative items were included. With the introduction of paper, pencils, watercolor and other media during the mid – late 1800s, the art of the *Oceti Sakowin* expanded into new artistic directions.

Artistic creation among the *Oceti Sakowin* began to differ from the traditional as art began to be created for “art’s sake” and emphasis began to be placed on individual creativity and style. However, one must take care in using the labels of “traditional” or “contemporary” when discussing Native American art, as such labels can limit our appreciation and understanding of what each represents.

The cultures of the *Oceti Sakowin* did not cease to exist after 1890. That period of time saw a new beginning in which some of the finest and unprecedented forms appeared to demonstrate that the artistic spirit of the *Oceti Sakowin* was very much alive.

Oscar Howe, a Yanktonais Dakota, was born on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation in 1915. After attending the Pierre Indian School he attended the Santa Fe Indian School, enrolling in the “Studio” of Indian art. There he was trained in the traditional “Indian Art Style” which was based on hide painting techniques. In 1940, Howe was given an art commission with the Works Progress Administration in the South Dakota Artist’s Project to paint a mural on the dome of the Carnegie Library in Mitchell, S.D. His success with that project awarded him a scholarship to study in Oklahoma under muralist Olaf Nordmark. Afterward, Howe painted a series of murals in the city auditorium of Mobridge, S.D. and also designed and executed the corn covered murals on the Corn Palace in Mitchell for 22 years. In 1957, Howe accepted the position of Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at the University of South Dakota where he remained until his death in 1983.

During the 1950s, Howe began a style of work that he would continue throughout the rest of his career. This style was a complete break from the “traditional” painting style of his training. Composed of geometric forms, the backgrounds of his works became dramatic environments for his figures. The figures arise from the shapes in the background, while

the background envelopes the figures, becoming part of the foreground. This unique development of depth was achieved through the placement of hues, tones and shades.

This new direction brought criticism by some that Howe's painting was being influenced by European cubism, an art style stressing abstraction at the expense of other pictorial elements. European cubism especially expresses abstraction by showing several aspects of the same object simultaneously and fragmenting the primary forms. However, Howe pointed out that the use of abstract forms, both geometric and circular were a natural and integral part of the Dakota culture. This Dakota style was called *tahokmu* (spider's web).

The Dakota oral tradition that depicts *tahokmu* is said to have originated from a vision and became the basis for all design among the Dakota. According to the oral legend, a young boy, eager to prove his manhood, followed a war party. Displeased that the untrained boy had chosen to join them, the warriors left camp early in the morning before the boy was awake. While he slept he dreamed of a two-dimensional design from which all created visual patterns would arise. When he woke he saw a spider web between the branches of a tree. This single design, based on the spider web, would eventually become the model for the "point-and-line" rules of Dakota art.

Oscar Howe's work represented a return to the abstract traditions of the *Oceti Sakowin* and used that linear style to add depth to the flat and static Santa Fe Indian Style.

Student Activities

Students will view the works of Oscar Howe and select one of four works identified for the project. The students will view the historical American Indian objects exhibited in the Middle Border History Gallery. Students will write a brief statement (two to four paragraphs, no more than one page) comparing the differences and similarities between the historic designs and the designs of Oscar Howe.

Resources

Students will need a color image of the Oscar Howe work they have selected for the project and writing materials.

Assessment

Students will complete that assignment, providing a brief statement of the contrasts and similarities between the Oscar Howe artwork and the designs of the historical objects of the American Indian collection.

References

<http://www.aktalakota.org/index.cfm?cat=54&artid=44>.

http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mikestevens/oceti_sakowin.htm.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cubism>.

<http://www.oscarhowe.org/about>.

<http://www.oscarhowe.org/video>.

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Leuthold, S. (1998). *Indigenous aesthetics*, pp. 17, Austin: University of Texas Press.

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Further resources: <http://www.oscarhowe.org/resources.php>.

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