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Oscar Howe's *Wounded Knee Massacre*: A Complex Critique of Settler Colonialism

By

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Abstract

Oscar Howe's painting *Wounded Knee Massacre* has been understudied and sparsely exhibited since its completion in 1960. The few scholarly analyses of the work that exist rely heavily on a written interpretation of the painting that Howe produced in 1974. Scholarship has been satisfied with a surface level discourse that concludes that the painting, as Howe himself states, is "a [record of a] true event." Lack of rigorous examination and interpretation of this work fails to situate it within the social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s in which Howe was working. This article rectifies this lack through a reevaluation of *Wounded Knee Massacre* and Howe's writing about it to provide a more rigorous interpretation that accounts for the broader socio-political context of twentieth-century Native American-settler relations. Specifically, it articulates how *Wounded Knee Massacre* functions as a nuanced critique of settler colonial violence and the harm caused by its logic of elimination.

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Oscar Howe's *Wounded Knee Massacre*: A Complex Critique of Settler Colonial Violence

Introduction

In 1960, Native American artist Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Sioux), was named the South Dakota Artist Laureate, awarded an honorary PhD in humanities from South Dakota State University, appointed as a fellow of the International Institute of Arts and Letters. In the same year he was also featured in his own episode of *This is Your Life* and honored with a solo exhibition at the Indian Art Gallery in the US Department of the Interior in Washington, DC. This was one of the most eventful years in Oscar Howe's life. Howe had grown up on a small Native American reservation and spent most of his life in South Dakota. In 1953, Howe received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Oklahoma and then was hired as the assistant director of the W. H. Over Museum of Natural and Cultural History and the new Institute of Indian Studies at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion in 1957.¹ Prior to 1960, Howe established a name for himself at Native American art competitions, winning his first Grand Purchase Prize at the Indian Art Annual, at the Philbrook Art Center, in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1947. Howe continued to win art contests and to sell his art from his home base in Vermillion, South Dakota for the rest of the 1940s and through the 1950s. By 1960 Howe had made a name for himself in South Dakota and beyond as a great Native American artist. Also in 1960, Howe painted what can now be called his most controversial painting, *Wounded Knee Massacre* (Figure 1).

Wounded Knee Massacre is considered Howe's most controversial painting because it is the only one of Howe's paintings that depicts a known historic event of United States

¹ For a comprehensive biographical timeline of Oscar Howe's life see: Kathleen E. Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes, ed., *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe* (Washington DC: National Museum of the Native American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 154-161.

government violence against Native American men, women, and children. This bold depiction of white violence toward Native American men, women, and children brazenly details the massacre that took place near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota on December 29, 1890. The violence and death that is given visual form in Howe's painting makes it easy to imagine why this painting is considered controversial.

Howe is known for painting subject matter that is—on the surface—decidedly less controversial than *Wounded Knee Massacre*; for example his 1962 painting titled, *Eagle Dancer* (Figure 2) is characteristic of his usual subject matter. This abstract and dynamic painting depicts a single male dancer floating in fractured red space. Although the abstract style found in this example cannot be found in Howe's earliest art works, the subject matter of a single dancer or a group of dancers can be found throughout Howe's oeuvre. Howe focused his painting career on depicting scenes of ceremonies, dances, and other representations and continuations of Native American heritage, and more specifically Sioux heritage. He is now remembered as a decidedly apolitical artist, whose oeuvre contains only a few exceptions, of which *Wounded Knee* is the most often cited.

A graphic reproduction of *Wounded Knee Massacre* hangs in the current Oscar Howe retrospective, *Dakota Modern*, a traveling exhibition organized by the National Museum of the Native American Indian. The exhibition's catalog includes sparse analysis of the work, sprinkled throughout topical essays on various segments of Howe's artistic career.² These brief mentions of *Wounded Knee* characterize it simply—as Howe himself repeatedly claimed—as a historic

² A 2021 to 2023 exhibition called *Dakota Modern*, a retrospective of Oscar Howe's work, organized by the National Museum of the Native American Indian produced a comprehensive catalog of scholarly works regarding Howe's life and work. Three specific articles in the catalog mention *Wounded Knee*, and they all mention its place as a historical record and its function as an image of survivance, but only minimal analysis and discussion is present: Kathleen E. Ash-Milby, *Dakota Modern*, 61, 118-119, 149-152. A brief description of the painting and a few of Howe's own words regarding the image can be found here: Susan Forsyth, *Representing the Massacre of American Indians at Wounded Knee, 1890-2000* (Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press, 2003), 1-5.

representation of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee Creek that centers a Sioux perspective, preserves the memories of survivors, and articulates Dakota survivance. Although minute attention is given to the painting in the retrospective and its published catalog, there has been an overall lack of research regarding this specific work, which is surprising due to its relative popularity in the year it was completed. It is hard to pinpoint the exact reason for the underdeveloped discourse regarding *Wounded Knee Massacre*, but it is clear one major piece of the puzzle is the fact that the literature on Howe's entire body of work is sparse. The main motivation for the current traveling retrospective, *Dakota Modern*, is to remedy this paucity.

Most scholarship on Oscar Howe has centered on his groundbreaking altercation with the organizers at the 1958 Philbrook Indian Annual. Howe protested the exclusion of one of his paintings on the grounds that it was not painted in the acceptable "traditional" Indian style.³ Howe's protest forced the reevaluation of the boundaries museums and institutions placed on Native American artists and their artistic production in the twentieth century. Scholars have also focused on Howe's engagement with modern artistic styles and have worked to establish his place in the art historical canon as a great modern painter.⁴ Their efforts have included reconstructing the definitions and conceptions of the terms "traditional" and "modern." Early twentieth-century Native American artists were often only considered "authentic" if they worked in "traditional" styles. As Howe worked in what has been considered both "traditional" and

³ Ash-Milby and Anthes, *Dakota Modern*. For a comprehensive argument on twentieth-century Native American Modernist art see: Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). For treatment on Howe's altercation with the Philbrook in conversation with other issues in twentieth-century Native American art see: Jackson W. Rushing, "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (1992): 6-14. Leroy N. Meyer. "In Search of Native American Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35, no. 4 (2001): 25-46.

⁴ The goal of the current retrospective, *Dakota Modern* is ultimately to establish Howe's importance in the history of American modernism, see: Ash-Milby and Anthes, *Dakota Modern*. For earlier scholarship that discusses Howe's modernist aesthetics see: Jessica L. Horton, Mindy N. Besaw, Candice Hopkins, and Manuela Well-Off-Man, "Inclusivity at Midcentury: George Morrison, Oscar Howe, and Lloyd Kiva New," in *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, 30-43, (University of Arkansas Press, 2018) 30-43.

“modern” artistic styles, scholars have rigorously dispelled the notion that these terms were mutually exclusive.⁵ Thus, Oscar Howe has been firmly situated in the narrative of modernism and is a well-established master of Očhéthi Šakówin (Sioux) artistic traditions.

Although *Wounded Knee Massacre* was published in newspapers the year it was painted and appeared on an episode of *This is Your Life* featuring Howe on national television and thus it was widely known, it has only been on exhibition four times. Shortly after the painting was finished, it was purchased and gifted to President Eisenhower by the production company of *This is Your Life*.⁶ After its gifting, it was placed in the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas. Here it was put on display for the first time in 1973 and shortly thereafter it had to be removed from the exhibition because there were “too many complaints by the public.”⁷ Although the exhibition record does not state what the public’s complaints were, it is not hard to imagine “mainstream” viewers in Kansas being upset by such a violent painting.

Perhaps due to this lack of public exhibition, there is currently only one published study of the work, “Oscar Howe’s *Wounded Knee Massacre* and the Politics & Popular Culture of an American Masterpiece,” written by Edward Welch in 2013.⁸ This article analyzes *Wounded Knee Massacre* and contextualizes it within art historical discourse as a “firing-squad” painting, comparing it to the likes of Goya, Picasso, and Manet. Although these comparisons shed light on the possibility that Howe may be relying on art historical references to make an emotionally charged anti-violence and anti-war image, Welch’s treatment of the painting largely decontextualizes it from Howe’s own body of work. Welch also neglects to acknowledge that

⁵ Ash-Milby and Anthes both argue for the cultural reality that is both traditional and modern Indigenous aesthetics, see: Ash-Milby and Anthes, *Dakota Modern*. Anthes, *Native Moderns*.

⁶ Axel Grunberg, “Letter to James C. Hagerty.” March 28, 1960, Eisenhower Presidential Library, Ailene, Kansas.

⁷ Exhibit Record,” Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.

⁸ This study is the only rigorous treatment of *Wounded Knee Massacre* on its own: Edward Welch, “Oscar Howe’s *Wounded Knee Massacre* and the Politics & Popular Culture of an American Masterpiece,” *Weber—The Contemporary West* 29, no. 2 (September 7, 2013): 135-142.

although Howe is aware of art historical traditions of emulation and the use of art historical “types,” he often and repeatedly denied participating in such traditions.⁹ Welch’s study provides much needed discussion of Howe’s provocative painting in the context of the broader art historical canon, but it leaves a lot of room for further investigation and makes a recontextualization within Howe’s oeuvre necessary for a fuller understanding of the painting itself.

In his 2004 book, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Settler Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*, Jeffrey Ostler uses Howe’s painting of *Wounded Knee* as evidence of members of the Sioux Nation challenging accepted accounts of Wounded Knee in the twentieth century. Howe is a Yanktonai Sioux.¹⁰ Ostler’s description is only a short piece of the author’s larger discussion about how U.S. society has dealt with the aftermath and reputation of the events that took place at Wounded Knee. My thesis dives deeper into Howe’s *Wounded Knee* functioning as a Sioux account of the massacre and how it affects our understanding of Howe as an artist. Many scholars have claimed that Howe avoided political subject matter in his work with *Wounded Knee* being the exception, making *Wounded Knee* an anomaly in his oeuvre.¹¹ This includes the present retrospective where the wall label directly preceding the graphic reproduction of *Wounded Knee Massacre* informs viewers:

Howe did not use his art to directly challenge his viewers or drive them to question their contemporary deprivations of the reservation system or the racism endured by Native peoples in the Midwest. Because he rarely depicted past or current events, he largely avoided engaging in politics. Only a few powerful exceptions in Howe’s oeuvre depict historical violence and critique.¹²

⁹ Robert Pennington, *Oscar Howe, Artist of the Sioux* (Sioux Falls, S.D: Dakota Territory Centennial Commission, 1961), 39.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 361-369.

¹¹ None of these mentions provide a detailed argument of how it attained its anomaly status: Ash-Milby and Anthes, *Dakota Modern*, 60-61, 79, 118-19, 151.

¹² Wall Text, *Dakota Modern*, Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. October 29, 2022- May 14, 2023.

This signage makes it explicitly clear few of Howe's other works are politically engaged and sets viewers up to consider the painting an anomaly. This causes a conscious devaluation of *Wounded Knee*'s importance to the understanding of Howe's oeuvre and encourages its divorce from considerations of the power and impact of Howe's entire career.

Despite the exhibition's identification of *Wounded Knee* as an anomaly, in the conclusion of its catalog, American Historian Phil Deloria gestures toward something different. Deloria suggests that *Wounded Knee* should be used as a lens through which all Howe's work should be viewed. He says, "reading the body of Howe's work through [*Wounded Knee Massacre*], one sees just how consistently his paintings sought to reclaim buried histories, not simply as acts of salvage ethnography, but as cultural heritage that functioned as political claim."¹³ This implies that *Wounded Knee* is integral to understanding Howe's entire body of work. Deloria suggests that using *Wounded Knee* as a lens reveals that Howe's oeuvre does more than contribute to modern artistic practices and preserve Sioux traditions as other scholars have established, but also stakes political claim over historical and contemporary narratives of Native American experience in the United States. Deloria is ultimately suggesting that *Wounded Knee* is not an anomaly, and instead is integral to understandings of everything Howe created. This is a crucial point as the anomaly status of *Wounded Knee* has led to its exclusion from considerations of what Howe's career was and is to us today, thus causing misrepresentations of his body of work as apolitical. *Wounded Knee*'s inclusion in Howe's oeuvre, not as an anomaly, but as a key insight into Howe's involvement with broader socio-political matters in the '50s and '60s

¹³ Philip J. Deloria, "Afterword," in *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe*, ed. Kathleen E. Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes (Washington DC: National Museum of the Native American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 149-153. Deloria, "Afterword," 151.

provides a more accurate understanding of Howe's art functioning more broadly as a critique of and resistance to settler colonial violence and its logic of elimination.

The 1960s were a time of civil unrest in the U.S. Protesting and riots were taking place all over the country. The U.S.'s long history of white supremacy and race-based discrimination was being contested by the Civil Rights movement and the rise of Black Power. It is an understatement to say that U.S. society at large was dissatisfied with government practice and policy and were demanding change.¹⁴

Leading up to the 1960s, in the 1950s— what is now known as the Termination Era— U.S. government policy regarding Native American's pursued the termination of sovereignty and the relocation of Native American individuals and families from Reservations to growing urban centers.¹⁵ These policies renewed the physical and cultural erasure of Native American peoples which ultimately aimed to reinforce the mythical foundations of the U.S. and the notion of the “vanishing Native.” This era of policy making led to the rise of the Red Power Movement and the American Indian Movement in the 1960s, alongside the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.

The Red Power Movement began in the 1960s and was led primarily by Native American youth. This group of Native American young people advocated for self-determination and the reversal of Termination Era policies. Growing out of the Red Power Movement, the American Indian Movement, now known as AIM, was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota and specifically focused on advocating against systemic issues of poverty, police brutality, and racial

¹⁴ For more on the general history of the post-World War II United State see: Howard Zinn, *Postwar America: 1945-1971* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973).

¹⁵ For a more general and comprehensive treatment of United States post-WWII era policies regarding Native Americans see: Donald Lee Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).

discrimination toward Native Americans. These movements confronted government agencies head on and performed public acts of civil disobedience in order to inspire socio-political change for Native Americans. The protests and activism of these groups led to the Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 and the Siege of Wounded Knee in 1974. Both of these events garnered national media coverage and are regarded as two of the most influential demonstrations the groups organized.¹⁶

Although Oscar Howe's painting *Wounded Knee Massacre* comes in-between the Termination Era and the rise of the Red Power Movement and its public protests, it is clear Howe is inserting himself in the broader socio-political conversation of discontent with U.S. treatment of its Native American citizens in his artistic practice. It specifically highlights Howe's use of historical imagery to critique the past and present settler colonial violence enacted against Native Americans. As policies of termination and relocation became prominent in the late 1950s, U.S. policy makers were actively pursuing the dispossession and physical and cultural erasure of Native American peoples. Specifically, Howe's paintings as a whole challenge settler colonial attempts to sever Native American links to place, memory, ceremony, and other cultural practices, through his continuous practice and revival of his cultural heritage and repeated assertion of sovereignty over his artistic practice.

This article provides a close reading of *Wounded Knee Massacre* paired with his 1974 homonymous essay in order to reveal the way Howe viewed the Wounded Knee Massacre. The painting and the essay contextualized in the period in which they were made highlights Howe's awareness and participation in the broader socio-political climate of the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁶ For comprehensive coverage of Native American history and activism from 1960 to 1980 see: Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York, New York: New Press, 1996).

Together this framework reveals how *Wounded Knee Massacre* destabilizes our understanding of Howe's entire career through a repositioning of the painting as integral to Howe's oeuvre instead of as an anomaly in it.

Wounded Knee Massacre and Wounded Knee Massacre

It is important to first establish what settler colonialism is. Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, and as Patrick Wolfe says, "elimination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off."¹⁷ Thus elimination, whether it be physical or cultural, is a constant driving force in settler colonial societies. This becomes clear when the fraught history between Native Americans and the U.S. government is examined. Wounded Knee Massacre was a literal embodiment of the settler colonial logic of elimination, where the U.S. seventh Cavalry succeeded in physically eliminating around 300 Sioux men, women, and children at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890.¹⁸ Howe's painting of *Wounded Knee Massacre* not only visually articulates the settler colonial logic of elimination that was enacted that day, it also provides an implicit and explicit critique of its recurring violent iterations throughout United States history.

Howe's explicit critique of the settler colonial violence and its driving force of elimination is unmistakable in *Wounded Knee Massacre*. In the center of the painting, a group of Seventh Cavalry militia dressed in blue uniforms stand along the edge of a ravine. Below them, Native American heads and arms flail as bodies sink into the ground, blood flowing from gunshot wounds. The blood streams from the victims out of the frame communicating the

¹⁷ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of genocide research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

¹⁸ Wounded Knee Massacre took place on December 29th, 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. For a comprehensive record of what led up to the event and the event itself through the lens of primary source documents see: William S. E. Coleman, *Voices of Wounded Knee* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

ultimate lifelessness of those strewn along the bottom of the ravine, while also suggesting that blood is still flowing. On the left a small white flag falls to the ground amid the chaos, signaling there must have been an attempt at surrender and the now useless hope for a peaceful resolution to the massacre that ensued. Below the flag, a single baby falls into the streaming blood in a woman's outstretched hand—the fringed sleeves of her dress, her long black hair, and the position of her body all emphasize the force with which she and the baby she holds hurl toward the blood-soaked ground. They are the only woman and child in the ravine. The rest of ravine occupants are all men, a mass of blue blankets, tan pants, and unclothed torsos that twist, arch, and slump in response to the fiery red bullets escaping from the cavalry's guns. A few of the men are missing hands, all bleeding; their hair and limbs reveal the chaotic and horrific result of being continuously fired upon.

In contrast to the large group of militia men firing on the Sioux in the ravine, the background is filled with violent, intimate scenes of killing. On the left a single blue clad militia man fires a cannon toward a circle of dress-clad women and children who raise their hands in futility. They are surrounded by the bodies that lie lifeless and bleeding. Further to the left and receding into the background, two mounted militia chase women who run away from their family and their homes. On the right side of the central group of cavalry men, also shows mounted militia chasing dress-clad women who run out of view and toward the edges of the canvas. Before them, a single cavalry man stares down the barrel of his gun unflinchingly firing at a kneeling woman with a small child on her back. Further forward is another isolated scene of a man standing over a child. The man poised with his bayoneted rifle to the left and bends forward to stab the child who raises a tiny hand in protest. The viewer approaches the painting

from the perspective of those in the ravine, emphasizing the inability to escape or stop the inhumane violence unfolding before them.

This violent painting is filled with scenes of literal settler colonial elimination through the Seventh Cavalry's brutality. Soon after Howe finished painting *Wounded Knee*, he was the honored guest on the hit Television program *This is Your Life* hosted by Ralph Edwards. During Howe's forty-five minutes of fame, he was asked what the painting *Wounded Knee* meant during a camera closeup of the painting. As the premise of the show was that it was a complete surprise, Howe had not prepared any statements regarding the painting for national television. Thus, he struggled to verbalize what his violent painting of *Wounded Knee* was about. After getting out a few words, Edwards cut him off to continue the show. It was during this show that it was announced that *Wounded Knee* had been purchased by the production company, who would later gift the painting to President Eisenhower.¹⁹

Although Howe does not state it explicitly, it would seem that this short and somewhat awkward interaction on *This is Your Life* was the motivation behind his writing of an essay interpreting the painting.²⁰ Regardless of his motivation, the parts of the painting that Howe draws attention to in his essay are very specific and appear to engage more broadly in contemporary socio-political conversations concerning the history of *Wounded Knee* as an event

¹⁹ *This is Your Life*, Oscar Howe, Ralph Edwards Production. NBC. April 13, 1960. DVD.

²⁰ It is not clear when this essay or caption was originally authored by Howe. The first instance of the text in published form can be found in: Oscar Howe. "Wounded Knee Massacre," in Oscar Howe Artist, ed. by John Milton, 1974. (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 2004). The first instance of its publication is in a documentary television series produced by South Dakota Public Broadcasting in 1973. The text is read by Howe as his painting, *Wounded Knee Massacre* is shown on screen: *Oscar Howe Sioux Painter*, South Dakota Arts Council. SDPB. 1973. DVD. box 42, Oscar Howe Papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota. It was also reproduced as a wall label for *Wounded Knee: Lest We Forget*, an exhibition at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Wyoming. This label is now in the Eisenhower Presidential Library artifact file for Oscar Howe's *Wounded Knee Massacre* and was provided to me by the museum registrar, Troy Elkins.

and its historiography. In the very beginning of the essay Howe explicitly states his intention for the painting saying, “The idea here was to record an historical event, namely the massacring of Chief Big Foot and his starving Sioux Indians by the Seventh Cavalry troops in 1890.”²¹ At its base this is a brief summary of what Howe had visually articulated. He continues his essay by detailing how he understood the massacre to have taken place:

The Indians were disarmed of their weapons even to the taking of the women’s sewing needles. The men and boys were separated from the women and children. During the disarming of one of the Indians one shot went off accidentally. The white soldiers immediately opened fire on the frightened desperate Indians with their bayoneted rifles. They drove men, women and children back into a natural ravine and trained their Gatling machine guns on them, mowing down the hapless men, women and children indiscriminately.²²

His detailed recounting of the event matches perfectly with his painting. The Seventh Cavalry has been depicted in detail with their insignia painstakingly reconstructed; it is clear Howe did not want the militia to be misidentified. Lying beside the weapons—down to the sewing needles of the women—of the Sioux being attacked are, as Howe puts it, “the white soldiers stand[ing], stilted, impassionately-posed gunlike figures much like the deadly bullet streaks and flashes from their guns.”²³ Howe took great care in showing that the Sioux had been completely disarmed, depicting none of them with weapons of any kind, and recounted this disarming in his essay. The sole aggressors in Howe’s painting are the Seventh Cavalry troops, whom he describes and paints as unfeeling, shooting to kill the Sioux men they had driven back and trapped in the ravine central to his composition. Howe also carefully depicted the separation of the women and

²¹ This catalog includes several pairs of statements and paintings by Howe. The statements are edited by John Milton. In Edward Welch’s article on *Wounded Knee*, he refers to this statement as an essay, following his lead I will do the same here: Howe. “Wounded Knee Massacre.”

²² Howe. “Wounded Knee Massacre.”

²³ *Ibid.*

children from the men as only one woman and child can be found in the ravine with the men, and the rest recede into the background, isolated and continuing to be separated by death and chaos.

In the second paragraph of his essay, Howe stresses that his painting is meant to be a visual record of the Wounded Knee Massacre, stating, “I have kept the painting semi-objective rather than abstract. It was not meant to be a shocker but merely a recorded true event. I heard about this story from the Indians. There was more to the massacre, but I left out some of the gory details.”²⁴ Although his painting style had become more abstract in the years prior to when he painted *Wounded Knee*, Howe intentionally used what he called a “semi-objective” style to depict the massacre. This clear and detailed style conveys a strong and developed opinion on the painting’s content. Using a “semi-objective” or more naturalistic style ensured that every detail of the painting is readable.

It is clear *Wounded Knee* is not as abstract as other paintings Howe created during this period. Two examples of the abstract direction his art took during this time are both titled *Ghost Dance* (Figure 3 and 4). Both works were completed the same year as *Wounded Knee* but are stylistically abstract. In the first painting there are three identifiable figures who dance in a swirling atmosphere of blue, white, orange, brown, and gray (Figure 3). The second painting is an abstracted mass of figures dancing in a line composed of rounded shapes of red, maroon, and purple (Figure 4). Although both paintings seem to be oriented vertically the space the dancing figures inhabit is obscured and unidentifiable. Both paintings are characteristic of Howe’s tendency to abstract his figures and backgrounds into various geometric shapes and flat colors that began in the late 1950s. Thus, Howe’s decision not to make his painting of Wounded Knee abstracted was significant and noticeable. Perhaps his statement that this painting is “semi-

²⁴ Ibid.

objective” meant that he intentionally avoided using only his new abstract style. Regardless of what he meant with this statement, this stylistic choice, paired with the statement that he “heard about this story from the Indians,”²⁵ signals that the painting functions as a statement of what Howe believed was the truth about the historic event and who the holders of that truth were, in a very clear and potent way that his abstraction may not have been able to.

In the last paragraph of Howe’s essay, he describes his color choices for the painting, and identifies a paradox he created based on his understanding of the color’s symbolic meanings. He says:

The supposedly peaceful blue is the color of the clothing worn by the soldiers, and the supposedly war-like red is the color of the Indians. And so, the reversal of meanings detracts from the beauty of traditional colors. The yellow, symbolic of religion, here is the color of the ground like a carpet on which the unnatural is happening. The gray is the natural color of the underground and ashes of fire; here it means interment and symbolizes Indian fate in an analogy to ashes. The blue sky, muted to offset its symbolic Indian meaning, forms the background. The red spots on the ground of the death ditch are blood from the Indians.²⁶

It is unclear where Howe’s understanding of the symbolic meaning of the colors he used was drawn from, but his decision to articulate what they meant to him in his essay provides an interesting layer of personal meaning to his painting. The colors Howe chose to use in this painting created a tension between his understanding of their symbolic meanings and what he chose to use them to depict. This tension will be revisited later.

In sum, Howe’s essay lays bare Howe’s own interpretation of *Wounded Knee Massacre*, as well as what he believed to be true about the actual Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. The essay identifies his intention to record the stories he heard from Sioux survivors and community members in a semi-realistic way, in order to give visual form to collective memory. Howe’s

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

interpretation is invaluable as insight into his own intentions and motivations for painting *Wounded Knee Massacre*, but it is imperative to contextualize the painting and his writing in the broader socio-political context of the period of the 1960s in order to understand how it created conflict through its complex critique of settler colonial violence.

Contesting Settler Narratives

The earliest accounts of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 can be found in newspaper articles like that of “The Sioux Outbreak,” from the January 24, 1891, edition of *Harper’s Weekly*.²⁷ Accompanying the article were prints by artist and journalist, Frederick Remington, the only print that depicted the violence of the event is, “The Opening of the Fight at Wounded Knee” (Figure 5). Remington captioned the print, “from a description by the Seventh Cavalry.”²⁸

In the foreground of Remington’s composition, the Seventh Cavalry lunge and kneel aiming their guns into a misty haze. Two cavalry men have been hit; one lies lifeless on the ground while the other arches back as gravity pulls him to join the other. In the haze, barely visible, are Sioux men, adorned with feather headdresses and weapons of their own that aim back at the cavalry from close range. It is clear the Seventh Cavalry described this altercation to Remington as a battle where both parties, the Sioux, and the Cavalry, were well armed. Remington emphasizes Cavalry losses, by depicting two dead cavalry men, and several others wounded laying on the ground in agony. In sharp contrast to Howe’s depiction, there is an absence of Sioux dead or injured in the print, in fact the Sioux are barely visible. This reveals

²⁷ Frederick Remington. “The Sioux Outbreak in South Dakota,” *Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization* (New York), January 24, 1891.

<https://harp.alexanderstreet.com/view/issue/image/1891/0124/65/m>.

²⁸ Frederick Remington. “The Sioux Outbreak in South Dakota,” 65.

Remington's focus on how the battle negatively affected its—in his opinion, most important—white participants.

Whether Howe had seen Remington's print or not, it was not uncommon for Wounded Knee to have been depicted as a battle, rather than a massacre, especially by white artists who relied on Seventh Cavalry testimonies. Thus, Howe's decision to paint Wounded Knee differently brings to light several important points. Howe emphasizes the vulnerability of the Sioux, their pain and individual suffering, and the strength, force, and uniformity of the Seventh Cavalry. There is a notable lack of Cavalry death or injury in Howe's painting, whereas it is central to other depictions, including Remington's print. Perhaps the main source of difference in these works arise from the opposing sources of Howe and Remington's depictions. Howe claims in his essay that he heard the story from the "Indians" and Remington states in the caption of his published drawing that it was created from a "description by the Seventh Cavalry."²⁹ Clearly the opposing parties to the event conceived of the tragedy in disparate ways.³⁰

These disparate views of what happened at Wounded Knee inspired imagery that, if it weren't for the titles of Howe and Remington's works, it would be hard to know they were depicting the same event. The discrepancies in the retellings of the events of Wounded Knee evident in Howe and Remington's artworks echo the broader historical record of the event in very important ways. Directly after the massacre and well into the twentieth century, several rigorous investigations were undertaken in order to understand and record the events of the Wounded Knee Massacre. Despite these investigations, there are few undisputed facts about the

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

³⁰ From 1890 on there has been a tension between Sioux and white remembrances of Wounded Knee. White authored sources largely followed the government's lead and referred to the incident as a battle. Sioux peoples on the other hand varied in what they called it, but most commonly they referred to it as a massacre. This tension is illustrated by the comparison of Howe's painting with Remington's print. For more information on Sioux testimonies of the massacre see: Coleman, *Voices of Wounded Knee*.

event.³¹ Several of the investigations interviewed members of the Seventh Cavalry as well as Sioux survivors, but it is still unclear what exactly happened on December 29, 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota.

The comparison of these two artworks makes that abundantly clear and brings to light one very important disagreement among the disparate views of the event, that the Sioux remembered it as a massacre and the government recorded it as a battle. In fact, official government records of Wounded Knee refer to it as the Battle of Wounded Knee.³² This fact is clearly articulated in Remington's depiction; both sides are armed and actively firing on one another engaged in battle. In stark contrast, Howe's title and composition asserts that Wounded Knee was a massacre; the Sioux were disarmed. This is a very strong statement and a very contentious one to make so deliberately in the 1960s because it contests the accepted rhetoric about Wounded Knee.

Through his titling of *Wounded Knee Massacre*, and his explicit articulation of the event as a massacre in visual terms, Howe directly contradicts previous and contemporary depictions of Wounded Knee. His painting casts an unflattering and critical light on the Seventh Cavalry, and ultimately criticizes the settler colonial logic of elimination that motivated the action taken in 1890. By articulating the event as a massacre, and then reinforcing that it was a true depiction of the event informed by the Indians in his essay, Howe contests all other depictions and the official government record, critiquing their representation of the event as a battle. His painting engages with the broader discourse about Wounded Knee that developed before and during the 1960s and '70s. He establishes a complex critique of the settler colonial logic of elimination that had been

³¹ Susan Forsyth, *Representing the Massacre*, 10.

³² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

employed in writings that recounted the event, and specific accounts that silenced Native American voices and denied the event was a massacre.

Scholarly and popular texts retelling the events of Wounded Knee were never in short supply in the twentieth century, but in the 1960s and '70s they became especially prominent.³³ Interestingly, in the '60s and '70s there were also a great deal of fictional representations of the event that shed a heroic light on the Seventh Cavalry as the victors in a violent battle.³⁴ Most publications were sympathetic to the Seventh Cavalry and followed the government's official record of the event in calling it a battle. In 1970, Dee Brown published *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, which is often regarded as the first Native American history of the American West that cast the U.S. government in a negative and abusive role toward Native Americans.³⁵ Although Brown's book did not praise the Seventh Cavalry's actions in her account of Wounded Knee, she still referred to the event as a battle.³⁶ Her account makes it clear that her sympathies lay with the Sioux murdered at Wounded Knee, but she refrains from calling it a massacre.

There is no one instance that can be identified as a public shift in understanding of Wounded Knee from a battle to a massacre. Instead, it seems that Howe's 1960s depiction was one in a long string of Sioux representations of the massacre that advocated for a shift in public opinion, which could perhaps be seen as culminating in 1990, with the centennial anniversary of Wounded Knee. An important exhibition curated for that year, *Wounded Knee: Lest We Forget*, organized by the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, states clearly in its catalog that the project's main focus was to motivate "all references to *The Battle of Wounded Knee* be changed to *The*

³³ Ibid., 10-11.

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

³⁵ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).

³⁶ In her retelling of the aftermath, she says that, "a detail of soldiers went over the Wounded Knee battlefield": Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 445.

Massacre at Wounded Knee.”³⁷ This influential exhibition displayed pictures and artifacts from Wounded Knee and attempted to change public perceptions of the event from a battle to a massacre. In October of the same year, after almost a century of petitioning the Supreme Court for an apology and compensation for losses, descendants of Sioux survivors of Wounded Knee were issued an apology in which the government recognized the event as a massacre.³⁸ This was likely the first record of the event as a massacre on government documents. Howe’s decision to depict Wounded Knee blatantly as a massacre was perhaps ahead of its time, as white public opinion of the event had not yet significantly shifted to accepting Sioux accounts of the event. Thus, Howe’s criticism of the Seventh Cavalry and explicit portrayal of the event as a massacre was jarring and upsetting to many of its “mainstream” viewers.

The unrest caused by Howe’s painting will be returned to later, but the main takeaway here is that *Wounded Knee Massacre* inserted itself into a popular culture that accepted Wounded Knee as a battle, and it directly contested that narrative. *Wounded Knee Massacre* presented audiences with a potent critique of settler colonial histories ten years before the watershed of Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and thirty years before a government apology to survivors and acknowledgement of the event as a massacre. Howe took a risk when he painted *Wounded Knee Massacre*, a risk that would seem wildly out of place in his oeuvre if we accept it as an anomaly. But as an integral piece of Howe’s body of work, it sparks questions about the possibility that his subject matter reached beyond cultural heritage and into the realm of political

³⁷ Alvin M. Josephy, Trudy Thomas, and Jeanne M. Oyawin Eder, *Wounded Knee: Lest We Forget*. (Cody, Wyoming: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 1990).

³⁸ Congress.gov, "Text - S.Con.Res.153 - 101st Congress (1989-1990): A concurrent resolution to acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the tragedy at Wounded Knee Creek, State of South Dakota, December 29, 1890, wherein soldiers of the United States Army 7th Cavalry killed and wounded approximately 350-375 Indian men, women and children of Chief Big Foot's band of the Minneconjou Sioux, and to recognize the Year of Reconciliation declared by the State of South Dakota between the citizens of the State and the member bands of the Great Sioux Nation," October 25, 1990. Accessed May 12th, 2023.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-concurrent-resolution/153/text>.

activism and not only a critique of but a resistance to settler colonial violence and its logic of elimination.

Semi-Objective Style

Returning to Howe's interpretation of *Wounded Knee Massacre*, he states that he kept the painting stylistically semi-objective and not abstract. This statement is important when Howe's larger body of work is viewed in relation to *Wounded Knee Massacre* as discussed above, because his work in this period was usually more abstracted. In contrast to both of Howe's paintings of the Ghost Dance discussed above, *Wounded Knee* is clearly of a specific place and event. Thus, Howe's style is more "objective" in *Wounded Knee* than in other works of this period.

This may be because of Howe's use of popular photographs of the aftermath of Wounded Knee in his research and planning for *Wounded Knee*. George Trager's photographs of the January 1, 1891, clean-up of Wounded Knee Creek are particularly well-known examples. A 2013 article by Lynn Mitchell illustrates the history of Trager's photographs of Wounded Knee. She specifically highlights the fact that national interest in the battle of Wounded Knee inspired Trager to immediately begin marketing his photographs to the public and went so far as to establish a company that exclusively sold his Wounded Knee pictures.³⁹ Thus, Trager's photographs spread widely throughout the Midwest and beyond. In a letter from 1959 written by Howe and addressed to Dorothy Dunn, Howe makes it clear he was researching the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee the year before *Wounded Knee Massacre* was completed. Thus, the

³⁹ This article details the career of Trager, a photographer in Chadron, Nebraska. It specifically focuses on his photographs of Pine Ridge reservation and the aftermath of Wounded Knee: Lynn Marie Mitchell, "George E. Trager: Frontier Photographer at Wounded Knee," *History of photography* 13, no. 4 (1989): 303–309.

widespread sale of Trager's Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee photographs in the Midwest makes it highly likely that Howe was aware of the photographs.⁴⁰

One of Trager's most famous photographs from Wounded Knee is that of the mass grave (Figure 6). This specific photograph shows unmistakable similarities to Howe's painting. The top half of the photograph contains a line of trench-coated troops, all wearing hats, most holding guns. In the bottom half on the right, beginning at the feet of the troops, are bodies; further to the left is a deep trench filled with more distorted and frozen bodies of the massacre's victims. The composition of the photograph echoes Howe's painting composition, a trench of distorted bodies below and a double line of troops above. There is no direct proof that Howe saw Trager's photograph, but the similarities between the two make it hard to believe otherwise.

Howe deviates from the photograph in many important ways. Most noticeably, the stillness of the photograph reminds the viewer of medium's capacity to only capture a single moment, and due to its title, it is clear this moment is after the massacre has ended. Howe's painting, on the other hand, aside from the static line of Seventh Cavalry militia, is full of movement. The bodies in the ravine twist and bend, charged with chaotic energy in stark contrast to the lifeless, frozen bodies in Trager's photograph. Howe has flipped the frozen bodies from those in the ravine to those who stand above it. He has also made use of distorted perspective that allows for the inclusion of both the contents of the ravine in the foreground and the distant background scenes of those who fled the massacre's initial site. This clearly displays a deliberate distortion of objective perspective. The ravine runs along the entire bottom half of the canvas, and the grouping of cavalry men above separate the background scenes into separate vignettes.

⁴⁰ Oscar Howe, "Letter to Dorothy Dunn Kramer." April 10, 1959, box 50, folder 4, Oscar Howe Papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

Trager's photograph does not give viewers access to the battleground, as the wall of troops continues off both the left and right sides of the frame, leaving no view of what lies beyond. As a record of the event and place, the photograph reveals Howe's distortion of perspective. Behind Howe's troops the ground rises, and the scale of horses and figures decreases to create the appearance of their distance from the ravine. Howe combined several moments of the massacre into a concurrent event, including as much of the massacre as possible, and although he claims he "left out some gory details,"⁴¹ he certainly included as many of them.

Howe's decision to combine nonconcurrent events into one canvas tells a more expansive story of Wounded Knee than Trager's photographs of the aftermath ever could. The painting also animates the landscape of Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, in a way that denies viewers the possibility of closure found in aftermath photos like Trager's. The lack of context in Trager's photos provide room for the massacre to be remembered in a myriad of ways, a "tragedy," a "battle," an "accident." But Howe's painting actively and repeatedly affirms that the event was a massacre. All the painting's vignettes reveal the mercilessness of the Seventh Cavalry and show the lengths to which the Cavalry went to eliminate all of Wounded Knee Creek's occupants. Howe's artistic choices were clearly made to lay bare the horrors of the Wounded Knee Massacre and call into question the settler colonial logic of elimination that motivated it.

If Howe used photographic records of Wounded Knee for inspiration for his painting it might explain his use of a "semi-objective" style. Of course, the "semi" implies that Howe took liberty to insert details not captured by Trager's aftermath photographs, but it also suggests that the complicated historical record of Wounded Knee Massacre has made it impossible for any record of it to be completely objective. Thus, Howe's possible reliance on Trager's photographs

⁴¹ Howe. "Wounded Knee Massacre."

combined with the stories of the “Indians” can be seen as a gesture toward a more “objective” kind of truth about the event than that which had previously been denied to Sioux peoples by settler colonial narratives of the Battle of Wounded Knee. Howe’s choice to use a “semi-objective” style instead of abstraction in his painting of *Wounded Knee* made it clear that he viewed Wounded Knee as a massacre and that he wanted it to be easily identified in that way by its viewers.

Paradoxical Stylistic Choices

Along with his statements on his stylistic choices, in Howe’s interpretive essay he identifies specific meanings for his color choices that reveal more about *Wounded Knee Massacre* than meets the eye. When Howe painted *Wounded Knee Massacre* his art was undergoing a massive change, but his artistic innovations were not welcomed by Native American art institutions that had previously praised his “traditional” artwork. Thus, Howe experienced an attempt at elimination himself at the hands of the Native American art world and turned it into an opportunity to expose the paradoxical eliminatory logic of settler colonial violence.

As stated above, Howe wrote in his interpretation of *Wounded Knee* that his color choice caused, “a paradox of Sioux symbolic colors.”⁴² His detailed identification of each color’s traditional meaning and its conflicting use in painting of *Wounded Knee* created a tension that resulted in paradox. This could be read as shedding light on how the motivations that led to the Wounded Knee Massacre were ultimately a misunderstanding on the part of the U.S. government. Much of the concern about the Ghost Dance—the event that ultimately led to the

⁴² It is important to reiterate that the meanings Howe assigned to each color is based on his personal understanding of Sioux symbolism, and it is unclear where he gained this understanding from: Oscar Howe. “Wounded Knee Massacre.”

Wounded Knee Massacre—was the misconception that it was a war dance.⁴³ Howe depicts the Sioux as red and the Cavalry as blue, and his essay claims that he considered these colors as symbols of war and peace respectively. Thus, they visually represented the misunderstanding that was taking place. The reality of the encounter was that the Ghost Dance was a completely non-hostile, religious ceremony. Although Howe has used colors that he states reaffirm the misunderstanding, he complicates the reading of the symbolic colors by depicting the Seventh Cavalry as aggressive and violent, while the Sioux are unarmed, and helpless, the antithesis of war-like. The colors Howe chose to use highlight the misunderstanding that led to Wounded Knee, but everything else about the painting reveals the reality of the cavalry's warlike eliminatory attitude and the helplessness of the nonhostile Sioux.

The most striking compositional element of Howe's painting is the harsh line that divides the composition into a distinct top and bottom. Above the ravine the Seventh Cavalry stand in a compact group; they embody order and strength. Below, Sioux men writhe, their arms flailing as they violently fall toward the blood-soaked ground; they are chaos, helplessness. Howe describes the visual difference between the top and bottom of the painting in his essay as "erratic like the contrasting movements within the two groupal masses: the curvilinear movements of the Indian bodies below the ground level contrast to the static vertical movements of the white soldiers in a group above the ground level. The parallel groups embody contrasting feelings."⁴⁴ As he points out, the organization and depiction of the group of the Seventh Cavalry soldiers contrasts visually with the dynamic depiction of the Sioux men in what Howe referred to as a "death ditch."⁴⁵ The soldiers are calm and composed, and the Sioux are frantic and helpless. The power

⁴³ Jeffrey Ostler, "Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance," *Pacific historical review* LXV, no. 2 (1996): 217–248.

⁴⁴ Oscar Howe. "Wounded Knee Massacre."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

imbalance between the soldiers and Sioux is clear, with the soldier's power being used to eliminate the Sioux.

The contrast in movement between the soldiers and the Sioux is reinforced by clear stylistic differences between the top and bottom halves of the composition. Above the ravine Howe's stylistic choices resemble his earlier paintings from the 1930s continuing into the late 1950s, which are now identified as being in the "Studio" style.⁴⁶ The "Studio" style was developed at the Santa Fe Indian School's "Studio" that Oscar Howe attended between 1934 and 1938.⁴⁷ This style is characterized by decorative, two-dimensional genre scenes. A potent example of one of Howe's paintings in this style is his 1951 *Dakota Teaching* (Figure 7).

Comparing *Dakota Teaching* with the top half of *Wounded Knee* reveals several similarities. In the foreground of *Dakota Teaching* are a line of teaching implements, depicted delicately and in minute detail. The weapons that have been stripped from the Sioux men and women in *Wounded Knee* are lined up beside the Seventh Cavalry in the same careful detail. The clarity of both the teaching elements and weapons reveal their importance to the story presented by the composition. Flat fields of color and an almost total absence of shadows are present in both paintings and are characteristic of the "studio" style. Both paintings share a triangular organization: in the center a large solid body splits the compositions, and on the left and right, the ground rises to create a sense of depth. Although there are hints of movement in both paintings, their overall impression is stillness. Also present in both paintings are highly stylized

⁴⁶ The "Studio" style was developed at the Santa Fe Indian School which was established in 1932 and continued until 1962 when it was replaced by the Institute of American Indian Art. As one of the first formal art programs exclusively for Native American artists it had a huge influence on early twentieth-century Native American art. For a comprehensive overview of the school and its artists see: Michelle McGeough, *Through Their Eyes: Indian Painting in Santa Fe, 1918-1945*, (Santa Fe, NM: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 2009).

⁴⁷ It is unclear what exact years Howe attended the school. The particulars of Howe's complex and often misrepresented biography have been well covered: Kathleen Ash-Milby, "Origin Story," in *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe*, ed. Kathleen E. Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes (Washington DC: National Museum of the Native American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 67-87.

horses. In *Dakota Teaching* the horses are depicted as though they have been painted onto the tipi to the left and right of its central entrance and they are ridden by men in feather headdresses. In *Wounded Knee*, similarly stylized horses appear again both on the left and the right of the central Cavalry, but now they are ridden by members of the Seventh Cavalry who chase Sioux women toward the edges of the composition. The shared organization, two-dimensionality, stylization, and careful attention to small details in both paintings make it clear that Howe depicted the top half of *Wounded Knee Massacre* in a style reminiscent of his early “studio” style compositions.

On the contrary, the bottom half of *Wounded Knee* is more abstract and dynamic. The bodies in the ravine are made up of geometric shapes like those of Howe’s paintings after 1954 when he finished his MFA at the University of Oklahoma. One example, his 1962 painting, *Eagle Dancer*, painted only two years after Howe finished *Wounded Knee Massacre*, shares several similarities with the bottom half of *Wounded Knee*. The dancer’s body and musculature echo the forms of those in the “death ditch,” arms raised head down and legs sprawling, muscles geometric and defined. Lastly the dynamic red abstraction of space and rhythmic movement are almost identical in both compositions.

This combination of styles in *Wounded Knee* comes at a very important time in Howe’s career. A year before he began painting *Wounded Knee*, his 1958 submission of *Umine Wacipi* (War and Peace Dance) to the Philbrook Indian Annual competition, was removed from consideration for prizes on the grounds that it was not in the expected “traditional” style (Figure 8).⁴⁸ The official Jury’s decision regarding Howe’s painting stated, “Your painting is by far one

⁴⁸ For more coverage of Howe’s participation in Philbrook Indian Annuals and his 1958 controversy regarding *Umine Wacipi* see: Christina E. Burke, “Accolades and Acrimony: Philbrook’s Indian Annual” in *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe*, ed. Kathleen E. Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes (Washington DC: National Museum of the Native American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 125-135.

of the finest... but could you possibly consider doing the traditional style for our show?”⁴⁹ The abstract and dynamic dance scene Howe depicted in *Umine Wacipi* deviated from his previous submissions to the Annual, which comfortably fit within the “traditional” stylistic boundaries.

The traditional style the jury was looking for was essentially the “studio” style. They expected submissions to the contest to look like Howe’s painting, *Dakota Teaching*. This expectation stemmed from the fact that this “traditional” style was one of the first Native American painting styles to be produced for consumption as a fine art object. The “traditional” style became recognized as the only “pure” Native American art by institutions like the Philbrook Art Center and thus it was encouraged and required for the artist's paintings to be considered authentic or true to their Native American traditions. Howe’s deviation from this style led to his exclusion from the contest and the accusation that his painting was not based on Native American “traditional” artistic styles. Outraged, Howe wrote a letter in response to the competition organizers stating:

Who ever said, that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style, has a poor knowledge of Indian Art indeed. There is much more to Indian Art than pretty stylized pictures... We are to be herded like a bunch of sheep, with no right for individualism, dictated as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him. Now, even in Art, ‘You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different.’ Well, I am not going to stand for it.⁵⁰

Howe’s letter reveals the anger and frustration he felt toward the fact that white institutions and their employees were the ones deciding what “traditional” or authentic Native American art is. His reaction to his exclusion eloquently points out the paradox created by the twentieth-century art world for Native American artists.

⁴⁹ Jeanne Snodgrass, “Jury’s Decision,” ca. 1958, box 15, folder 8, University Papers 1915-2016, Oscar Howe Papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

⁵⁰ Oscar Howe, “Letter to Jeanne Snodgrass, April 18, 1958.” in *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe*, ed. Kathleen E. Ash-Milby and Bill Anthes (Washington DC: National Museum of the Native American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 126.

In the twentieth century, institutions like the Santa Fe Indian School studio and the Philbrook Indian Annual Competition were established to encourage and support Native American artists, but they ultimately established and enforced strict parameters for what Native American art was and could be. As long as artists did not fail to meet established expectations, Native American artists likely were unaware they were being stylistically confined. Of course, once Oscar Howe pushed the established boundaries, he was made acutely aware of the limiting expectations for inclusion in the established structures that had previously accepted and rewarded his artistic production. Howe's new awareness of the lack of room for experimentation and self-expression in Native American art resulted in his now famous assertion that "Who ever said that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style has a poor knowledge of Indian Art indeed."⁵¹

In *Wounded Knee Massacre*, both Howe's previously rejected abstract style and his long praised "traditional," "Studio" style are present. Interestingly they are not combined, the top half, mostly dominated by white members of the Seventh Cavalry is depicted like his earlier painting *Dakota Teaching*, in what was considered the "traditional" style. Whereas the bottom half of *Wounded Knee*, the "death ditch" is abstracted and dynamic like the style of his later, *Eagle Dancer*, a style that two years earlier would have been considered non-traditional and unacceptable like *Umine Wacipi*. The "traditional" top half of Howe's painting looms large over, and shoots down at the abstracted and innovative bottom half. Through this positioning Howe visually articulated his confrontation with the Philbrook Indian Annual. His innovative and abstract style is visually subdued and attacked by his "traditional" style. *Wounded Knee* can then be read as a metaphor for Howe's interaction with the Philbrook, where the judges who excluded his painting take the place of the Seventh Cavalry and Howe's new abstracted style is the

⁵¹ Oscar Howe, "Letter to Jeanne Snodgrass, April 18, 1958."

murdered Sioux. The exclusion of Howe's abstract painting from the 1958 competition and the organizers attempt to eliminate it from further competitions in their plea for Howe to "possibly consider doing the traditional style for our show?" is made visually manifest in this violent scene. Howe gives visual form to this attempt through his depiction of the literal physical elimination of his abstract style through the death of those in the more abstract bottom half of his composition. Therefore, the stylistic split in *Wounded Knee Massacre* is a visual embodiment of the violence experienced by both the Sioux in 1890 and Howe in 1958.

The Philbrook Indian Annual's requirement that submitted artworks be "traditional" in style created a forced assimilation that enacted settler colonial violence on its participants by restricting their artistic production and attempting to eliminate their self-expression and agency in the fine arts world. *Wounded Knee Massacre* visually articulates this settler colonial violence and its logic of elimination in stylistic terms, ultimately revealing the complex paradox of the twentieth-century art world encouraging Native American artistic pursuits but ultimately restricting those pursuits to white perceptions of what constituted Native American art.

This paradox extends beyond the art world to broader twentieth-century governmental policies regarding Native Americans. From 1929 to 1950 many discriminatory restrictions that had been placed upon Native Americans were abolished, the size of Native American landholdings increased and instead of decreasing for the first time in U.S. history, the income of most Native American families doubled or tripled, while the Native American death rate was cut in half.⁵² This period also saw a relaxation or removal of policies that caused forced assimilation. In 1934 restrictions that had been placed on the practice of Native American religions were

⁵² For more information regarding the drastic change in policies between 1930's and 1950s that regarded Native American freedoms see: Felix S. Cohen, "The Erosion of Indian Rights, 1950-1953: A Case Study in Bureaucracy," *The Yale Law Journal* 62, no. 3 (1953): 348. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*.

repealed as well as restrictions on the speaking of Native languages in schools. Thus, before 1934 governmental policy aimed to eliminate Native American language, religion, and other cultural practices through restrictive and discriminatory practices, but after 1934 Native Americans were allowed freedom for cultural continuation through the practice of language and religion.

In the 1950s, policies that favored cultural pluralism were replaced by what is now known as the Termination Era.⁵³ During this period governmental policy aimed to completely dismantle the reservation system and relocate Native Americans to cities across the U.S. The Termination Era largely aimed to strip tribes of their sovereignty and completely assimilate all Native Americans into mainstream U.S. society.⁵⁴ The cultural pluralism experienced in the first half of the twentieth century did not replace the settler colonial logic of elimination that drives U.S. treatment of Native Americans.

Howe's painting of *Wounded Knee Massacre* toward the end of the Termination Era reaffirms its function as a critique of ongoing settler colonial violence and its logic of elimination. Also driven by the settler colonial logic of elimination, the violence of forced assimilation and the termination of tribal sovereignty can easily be read as parallel to the violence experienced by the Sioux in 1890 and their treatment at Wounded Knee. Although massacres like the one at Wounded Knee Creek were not happening in the late 1900s, the physical elimination of Native Americans was still being facilitated by the U.S. on a daily basis

⁵³ Paul C. Rosier, "'They Are Ancestral Homelands': Race, Place, and Politics in Cold War Native America, 1945–1961," *The Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Ind.) 92, no. 4 (2006): 1300–1326.

⁵⁴ Larry W. Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1986): 85–99.

through the sterilization of Native American women with and without their consent. In the 1970s U.S. doctors sterilized 25-42 percent of Native American women of childbearing age.⁵⁵

This horrendous practice paired with frequent rehousing of Native American children in white foster homes carried forward the settler colonial violence of separation and elimination seen at Wounded Knee late into the twentieth century. Ultimately, relocation programs, termination of tribal sovereignty, and a slew of other government policies enacted in the post-World-War-Two era aimed to accomplish the same goals as Wounded Knee Massacre—the elimination of the Native, both physically and culturally. Thus, Howe’s visual articulation of *Wounded Knee*—a historical moment of settler colonial violence with a goal of elimination—during a period where government policy was still deliberately intended to cause wide-scale elimination, served as a potent reminder to viewers of the violent harm of eliminatory politics. Overall *Wounded Knee* served as a reminder and potent critique of both past and present settler colonial policy and action driven by the logic of elimination.

Conclusion

In February of 1960, *Wounded Knee Massacre* was published in two newspapers—the *Mitchell Daily Republic* of Mitchell, South Dakota (Figure 9) and the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* of Minneapolis, Minnesota (Figure 10).⁵⁶ Both of these newspapers printed a large reproduction of the painting along with a written account of the 1890 event. The *Daily Republic*

⁵⁵ For comprehensive treatment of this subject see: Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁵⁶ “Oscar Howe’s Painting of Wounded Knee Renews Controversy,” *The Mitchell Daily Republic*, Mitchell, South Dakota, Saturday, February 6, 1960, box 32, folder 2, University Papers 1915-2016, Oscar Howe Papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota. “South Dakota Indian Painter’s Version of The Wounded Knee Massacre,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Picture, February 7, 1960, box 16, folder 1, University Papers 1915-2016, Oscar Howe Papers, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota. The following article identifies the same two paper and their publishing of Wounded Knee Massacre, but there is no discussion of their titling, distribution, or influence beyond inspiring Will Robinson’s response, which will also be covered below: Edward Welch, “Oscar Howe’s *Wounded Knee Massacre*,” 138.

titled their accompanying article, “The Blackest Page in Annals Of American Warfare Written At ‘Battle’ of Wounded Knee” and assigned Howe’s painting a title of its own, “Oscar Howe Painting of Wounded Knee Renews Controversy,” strategically leaving massacre out of both titles. The *Sunday Tribune*’s article was titled, “South Dakota Painter’s Version of The Wounded Knee Massacre.” The title included the word massacre, because it is the title of Howe’s painting, but throughout the rest of the article the author refers to the 1890 event as, “the Wounded Knee ‘battle.’” This hesitancy to use the word massacre when talking about Wounded Knee in the 1960s reveals the risk Howe took in representing the event explicitly as a massacre and his boldness in titling is as such.

These publications prompted an outraged response from the official South Dakota State Historian, Will Robinson, which was published in the *Mitchell Daily Republic* under the title, “Distortion” (Figure 11).⁵⁷ In his response Robinson called Howe’s painting a “distortion of historical fact,” and claimed that “Oscar Howe, as an Indian, cannot deplore what happened at Wounded Knee more than I as a white man do, but after all he should use his talents to depict and not distort the truth.” In Edward Welch’s 2013 article mentioned earlier, Welch suggests that, “the zealous language of [Robinson’s] editorial seems to suggest that the two men had been at odds with one another prior to the completion of the Wounded Knee painting.”⁵⁸ Welch goes on to explain that Howe and Robison had a well-established, “acquaintance dating back to at least 1946.”⁵⁹ Regardless of the extent of the relationship between Robison and Howe, Robinson’s frustration over Howe’s painting identifies *Wounded Knee* as a contestation and

⁵⁷ Will Robinson, “Distortion,” *Mitchell Daily Republic*, February 29, 1960. Accessed March 9th, 2023. <https://newspaperarchive.com/mitchell-daily-republic-feb-29-1960-p-4/>.

⁵⁸ Edward Welch, “Oscar Howe’s *Wounded Knee Massacre*,” 138.

⁵⁹ Although Welch does not substantiate this claim with any evidence, his advisor John Day knew Howe personally and was likely the source of such information: Edward Welch, “Oscar Howe’s *Wounded Knee Massacre*,” 139.

critique of the official government records that exposed U.S. histories of settler colonial violence.

While it is clear Howe may not have depicted an exact replica of the event that took place on December 29, 1890, his painting clearly establishes his view that the event was a massacre and that Native American survivor stories had not been adequately factored into widely accepted historical records of the event. His painting establishes a complex critique of the Seventh Cavalry and their violent acts of massacre as well as the repeated attempt of forced assimilation through governmental policy and art institutions for Native Americans in the late twentieth century, therefore critiquing ongoing settler colonial violence driven by the logic of elimination in total.

Howe never directly responded to the accusations made by Robinson in the newspaper, but his essay on the interpretation of his painting *Wounded Knee Massacre* written in 1974, could be read as a response to Robinson's accusations. Boldly, Howe states that his painting of *Wounded Knee* was not a distortion of historical truth as Robinson claimed, and Howe takes it a step further by claiming it was a "record of a true event."⁶⁰ Such a contentious move by Howe would be wildly out of character for an artist who is largely apolitical. But if all of Howe's art is viewed as actively contesting narratives of elimination through asserting living modes of cultural continuation through knowledge of silenced histories like *Wounded Knee*, it becomes clear that all of Howe's works are deeply political in nature.

The complexity of this critique implies that Howe's paintings cannot be read simply for their content and style. They must be situated in their socio-political moment and examined in relation to Howe's writings and lectures for Howe's full contribution to Modern American Art to

⁶⁰ Howe, "Wounded Knee Massacre."

be appreciated. His works not only celebrate and preserve Sioux cultural traditions; they are the continuance of cultural practice, activations of collective memory and embodiments of spiritual beliefs that refuse to be eliminated.

Figures



Figure 1. Oscar Howe, *Wounded Knee Massacre*, 1959-1960. Casein on paper. Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration, Abilene, Kansas.



Figure 2. Oscar Howe, *Dakota Eagle Dancer*, 1962. Casein on illustration board. Sioux Indian Museum, Rapid City.

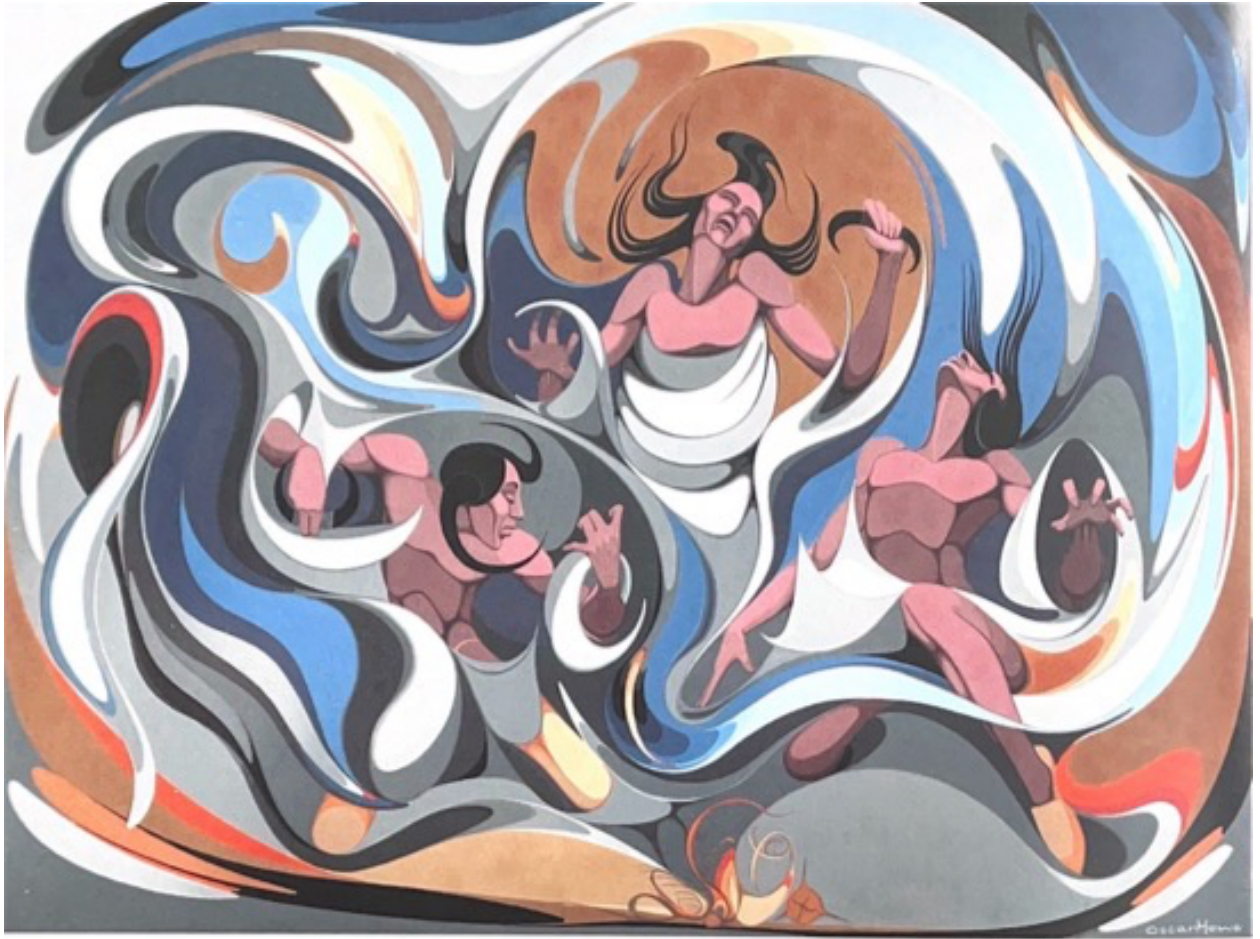


Figure 3. Oscar Howe, *Ghost Dance*, 1960. Casein on paper, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{9}{16}$ in.



Figure 4. Oscar Howe, *Ghost Dance*, 1960. Casein on paper, 18 x 24 in. Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, HM.IAC85.



THE OPENING OF THE FIGHT AT WOUNDED KNEE.—DRAWN BY FREDERICK REMINGTON FROM A DESCRIPTION BY THE SEVENTH CAVALRY, ENGAGED.—(SEE ARTICLE ON FRONT PAGE.)

JANUARY 24, 1891.

HARPER'S WEEKLY.

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Figure 5. Frederick Remington, *The Opening of The Fight at Wounded Knee*, 1891. Engraving. Harper's Weekly Newspaper, January 24th, 1891.



Figure 6. George Trager, Photograph of the Mass Burial at Wounded Knee, January 1, 1891.



Figure 7. Oscar Howe, *Dakota Teaching*, 1951. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 21 in. Philbrook Museum of Art.



Figure 8. Oscar Howe, *Umine Wacipi (War and Peace Dance)*, 1958. Watercolor on paper.
Location unknown.

South Dakota Indian Painter's Version of

The Wounded Knee Massacre



Artists Oscar Howe's graphic, stylized painting of the Wounded Knee massacre has soldiers mowing down Indians like cattle in a pit.

JUST AS WHITE painters and writers frequently recall Gen. George A. Custer's "last stand" at the Little Big Horn river in 1876, the Sioux Indians of South Dakota remember the Wounded Knee "battle" of Dec. 29, 1890. Probably the most vivid portrayal so far of that wanton massacre of Indians by whites is this painting, the latest work of the highly-regarded Sioux Indian artist, Oscar Howe, 44. The painting now is on display at the W. H. Over museum at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, where Howe is artist in residence and a member of the art faculty. In the spring Howe's painting will be part of a traveling show from the Museum of New Mexico at Santa Fe.

This is definitely an Indian version of the massacre, but it is based on considerable research by Howe and his German-born wife, whom he met while he was in the army of occupation in Germany after World War II. Most paintings of Indian-white battles are done by white artists.

The so-called battle of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge reservation in southwestern South Dakota was the dying gasp of Indian resistance on

the western plains. It was the culmination of the messiah craze sparked by a Nevada Paiute Indian named Wovoka. The craze, which spread like a prairie fire, was marked by widespread ghost dances by Indians who believed that the whites soon would be destroyed and all Indians would be reunited on earth.

When the Sioux took to ghost dancing, too, the alarmed government sent troops to South Dakota to maintain order. Big Foot's band fled to Wounded Knee creek and was captured by the seventh cavalry (Custer's outfit) at ordered disarmed. The next day the Indians were troops training Gatling and Hotchkiss guns on helpless women and children as well as Indian men. More than 200 Indians were slaughtered (the exact figure never will be known). White losses were 29 dead and 33 wounded. Although resistance kept up for awhile, Wounded Knee was the very last fight of the Sioux. Since then they have been passive inhabitants of a white man's world.

12 Minneapolis Sunday Tribune • Picture • February 7, 1960

Figure 9. "South Dakota Indian Painter's Version of The Wounded Knee Massacre," Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, Picture, February 7, 1960. Oscar Howe Collection, University of South Dakota, authors photograph.

DISTORTION

To the Editor

When a copy of your paper on February 5, 1960 was handed to me with Oscar Howe's version of the lamentable Wounded Knee Tragedy; I sat down and wrote a rather long story of why I thought it to be an historical distortion. I'm afraid that I went into so much detail that you would not be tempted to use it all. If there is anything I dislike more than historical distortion, it is editorial amendments by way of deletion, that not infrequently wrecks the constructive thought. I do think your readers should understand that the Howe picture is an artist's conception. Without going into minor detail or commenting on other factors, the viewers conception of the Wounded Knee tragedy, with nothing more than Howe's picture to go on, would inevitably be that the Army had, at command of its officers, participated in an organized brutality. What happened at its best would make any intelligent and informed white man wince. But it had no "worst" as depicted by Howe. There is not one iota of evidence to sustain belief that there was any ordered or organized brutality.

As an historian, the area where the sad affair transpired, I do not feel that I can let the "Howe picture" go unchallenged. I am enclosing a couple of pictures of markers that we have erected that factually, augmented by small markers on the field, present a reasonably exact story. Oscar Howe, as an Indian, cannot deplore what happened at Wounded Knee more than I as a white man do, but after all, he should use his talents to depict and not distort the truth.

WILL G. ROBINSON
Secretary, Dept. of History
Pierre, S. D.

Figure 11. Screenshot of article "Distortion," Mitchell Daily Republic, February 29, 1960.

Accessed March 9th, 2023.

<https://newspaperarchive.com/mitchell-daily-republic-feb-29-1960-p-4/>.

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