



Howe, Delmas (b. 1935)

by Richard G. Mann

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A prominent American artist, Delmas Howe seeks to visualize gay history by linking the past with the present in intensely homoerotic, deceptively naturalistic paintings. In paintings of the American West, such as *Atlas* (1982), he endows cowboys with the heroism and dignity of ancient classical gods, while managing to capture the aura of "whiskey, tobacco, leather, and sweat" that he obviously finds exciting.

Referencing themes from ancient classical mythology and from the Roman Catholic tradition, Howe explores complex psychological issues and urgent social problems, including the impact of AIDS on the gay community.

Background and Early Life

Born in El Paso, Texas, on October 22, 1935, Howe grew up in Hot Springs (renamed Truth or Consequences in 1950), New Mexico. His father was an alcoholic, but it was only later in his life that he realized that his parents had provided a dysfunctional family environment. Believing that formal education was a waste of time, Howe's father encouraged him to become a cowboy and occupied his time with jobs involving "fixing the fence, [and] stuff with animals." Although Howe hated these tasks, he was excited sexually by his father's cowboy friends, and he still cherishes childhood memories of sitting on their laps.

From an early age, Howe liked to draw, and his mother encouraged him to consider the arts, especially music, for a career. In high school, he began playing the bassoon, and, after graduating in 1953, he received a music scholarship to Wichita State University. Earning his bachelor's degree in 1957, he joined the Air Force and spent the next four years playing bassoon in the U.S. Air Force Academy Band at Colorado Springs.

In 1961, Howe went to New York City in order to study with a member of the New York Philharmonic, and he obtained a scholarship for graduate studies in music at Yale University. The following year, without completing his degree at Yale, he accepted a teaching position in Texas. Realizing after three days in the classroom that he did not want to teach, he quit that job and moved back to New York City.

Howe's return to New York in 1962 marked an important point of transition in his life.

Howe chose New York as his destination partly because he felt that it would provide an environment in which he could begin to act upon his sexual and romantic attraction to other men. His exploration of his own sexuality corresponded with the emergence of the gay community in New York from underground clubs and with the flourishing of what Howe has described as an "incredible, sexual party."

Artistic Education and Development



Three paintings by
Delmas Howe.
Top: *Atlas*.
Center: *The Gentle Executioner*.
Above: *Study for Veronica's Kiss*.
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Without abandoning his interest in music, Howe resolved to develop a career in the visual arts, in which he had been interested since childhood. Between 1962 and 1974, he studied painting, drawing, and printmaking at various institutions, but primarily at the Art Students League. While encouraging students to produce work that would express their own individual concerns and identities, the League strongly favored naturalistic styles, even during the period from the 1950s through the 1970s, when abstraction was predominant. In accord with the philosophy of the League, Howe has never tried to keep up with the latest trends being emphasized in art galleries.

Among the twentieth-century artists who influenced him, Howe was especially affected by two painters who also had studied at the Art Students League: Paul Cadmus (1904-1999) and Jared French (1905-1987). Both these artists utilized a Magic Realist style to develop homoerotic themes and to explore complex social and psychological issues. In particular, Cadmus's depictions of urban workers and sailors as simultaneously monumental, earthy, and sensual directly foreshadow Howe's paintings of cowboys.

Throughout his career, Howe has also been profoundly inspired by Renaissance and Baroque works, which were also studied intently by Cadmus and French. Vividly expressing his immediate, sensual response to historical art, Howe has described Renaissance altarpieces as "turgid male flesh rolling off the wall." Further, he maintains that Renaissance art "connects with all of history" through such features as monumental treatment of human figures, carefully balanced compositions, and frieze-like treatment of the picture plane, all ultimately inspired by Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art.

Howe has identified Rogier Van Der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (1535, Prado Museum, Madrid) as a favorite piece, and one that has had an enduring impact on his work. In Howe's *The Stripping* and other paintings of the *Stations of the Cross* series, now in progress, the artist has depicted a contemporary gay sacrificial victim who evokes van der Weyden's Christ: at once naturalistic, elegant, sensual, and intensely tragic. In a more general sense, one can note numerous stylistic correlations between Van Der Weyden's altarpiece and such typical examples of Howe's work as *Theseus and Perithous at the Chutes* (1982). These correlations include naturalistic details; precise outlining of forms; bright, vivid colors; convincing modeling of anatomy; definition of the composition through poses, gestures, and expressions; and a strong emphasis upon the picture plane.

Utilizing formal elements characteristic of Renaissance art to visualize contemporary American subjects, Howe creates work that seems at once universal and immediately relevant. By 1970, in such paintings as *Ronnie as Melancholy*, Howe had defined his distinctive approach to the theme of the modern cowboy. In both its composition and its solemn mood, this depiction of the enthroned figure of Ronnie evokes Renaissance portraits of rulers and ecclesiastics, such as Raphael's *Pope Julius II* (1510, National Gallery, London) and El Greco's *Portrait of a Cardinal* (1610, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). However, Howe has replaced brocaded walls with saddle, stirrup, and blanket, which complement Ronnie's cowboy hat and clothes. Despite the changes in setting and costume, Ronnie gazes at the viewer with the same confidence and intensity as the Renaissance leaders do. Distinctive to Howe's portrait is the mood of smoldering sensuality, conveyed not just by Ronnie's gaze but also by the sense of the movement of his muscles underneath his clothes.

Return to the West

By 1975, Howe had become disillusioned with the dynamics of the New York art world. Although he received favorable critical reviews for works exhibited at galleries in New York and elsewhere from 1970 onwards, he was not able to support himself through his art. In interviews, Howe has attributed the difficulties he has experienced in selling works to several factors, including the intense homoeroticism of his imagery; his use of a monumental, figurative style, out of sync with art "fashions"; and the large scale of many of his pieces. Unwilling to change his style or to play the gallery "game" by devoting his energies to selling (rather than creating) his art, Howe realized that he could only afford to remain in New York if he took a full-time job in

another field and painted on a part-time basis.

Therefore, Howe decided to move back to the West, where he believed that he would be better able to devote his energies to his art. In 1975, he accepted a position designing fabric in Amarillo, Texas, and, in 1979, he opened his own studio in Amarillo for the creation of large-scale art for public spaces.

During the 1980s, Howe earned the reputation as one of the leading mural artists in the United States. His highly original wall paintings responded to the distinct needs of the organizations that commissioned them. At the Amarillo Speech and Hearing Center, he created a soothing environment for the children being treated there by covering the walls of the long hallways with large, illusionistic images of different species of shells, connected to one another by streamers and waves. For the Texas and Southwestern Cattleraisers Association, Fort Worth, he painted a twenty-five foot long mural, depicting cowboys and cattle in an idyllic Western landscape. In Seppi's, an elegant restaurant in a New York hotel, his mural of the Alsatian countryside evokes the city vistas in the paintings of Piero della Francesca and other Renaissance artists.

Since 1984, Howe has been living in his home town, Truth or Consequences. Obviously fond of this town, Howe has characterized its population of about 8,000 as an unusual mixture of cowboys, retirees, and ex-hippies. In part because of Howe's presence there, the town in the past few years has attracted other artists, writers, and intellectuals, and it is beginning to gain recognition as an artists' colony.

Nevertheless, local fundamentalists have become increasingly vocal--publicly disparaging his art and even disrupting shows of his paintings in local galleries. Despite these conflicts, Howe feels deeply rooted in Truth or Consequences, and he continues to create images celebrating the cowboys whose company have given him so much comfort and delight throughout his life.

Major Series of Paintings

As Renaissance artists did, Howe has conceived many of his pictures as parts of extended series. However, in contrast to Renaissance practice, Howe's works are not intended to be composed into linear narrative sequences. Rather, the components of his series interact with one another in complex and provocative ways.

Thus far, his largest series is *The Rodeo Pantheon*, which incorporates pieces produced as early as 1970. By 1993, he had completed over fifty large-scale paintings for the *Pantheon*, and he occasionally has added other pictures to this group. As the name implies, the series involves the presence of the ancient gods at the modern rodeo, but it also encompasses a broader range of subjects and issues. Howe subtly establishes the American West as the dwelling place of gods in *The Sierra Pantheon* (1988), which depicts an isolated trailer--the archetypal working-class residence of the American West-- before a dramatically lit vista of the Sierra Mountains, the new Olympus.

Howe has explained that he follows Renaissance practice by conceiving nude figures as embodiments of the spiritual and aesthetic ideals of the ancient pantheon and clothed ones as representations of cruel and barbaric aspects of the human spirit. The moral distinction between nude and clothed figures can be noted, for example, in *Sebastian and Diocletian: The Persecution of an Aesthete* (1989).

During the Renaissance, representations of the nude figure of the martyred St. Sebastian--tied to a column and pierced with arrows--were often infused with homoerotic feeling, as Howe's picture also is. Replacing the usual classical column with the post of an animal enclosure, Howe has shown the nude Sebastian before he has been pierced with arrows, in a pose derived from a famous ancient Greek sculpture of *Marsyas*. Although Sebastian is not a self portrait, this reference to Marsyas associates the saint with Howe, because, in ancient mythology, Marsyas was a painter who was flayed after challenging Apollo's supreme control of the arts.

The central figure in Howe's picture, Emperor Diocletian, is depicted as a muscular ranch boss, dressed in tight jeans, singlet, boots, and Stetson hat. Evoking Renaissance images of *Ecce Homo* (the presentation of Christ to the people before the Passion), Diocletian points out toward the viewers, as if accusing them of responsibility in Sebastian's fate. The sexual dimensions of the interaction of the two principal figures are conveyed by the large bulge in the crotch of Diocletian's pants and by the gesture of his right hand, which conceals Sebastian's genitals from the gaze of spectators.

Among the other figures, one's attention is particularly attracted to the confidently posed cowboy in elaborate chaps, who, along with his horse, dominates the right half of the composition. Although the meaning of the subsidiary figures remains unclear, the intense erotic energy that they exude is as apparent as the muscles bulging through their clothes.

In many other pictures in the *Rodeo Pantheon*, the distinctions between the nude gods and the clothed mortals are not as immediately apparent as in *Sebastian and Diocletian*. For example, in *Theseus and Perithous at the Chutes*, the mythical figures have the shaggy hair and weathered skin of cowboys, and one of them even drinks a Budweiser. Indeed, both the gods and the men seem infused with the aura of "whiskey, tobacco, leather, and sweat." The gestures and glances, leading from one figure to another, suggest that these intensely sensual beings--gods and mortals, alike--are cruising one another.

Yet, upon closer examination of *Theseus and Perithous at the Chutes*, one realizes that, not only nudity, but also cheerful expressions, bright eyes, and glistening flesh distinguish the gods from the mortals, who are characterized with somber expressions, eyes generally concealed by sunglasses and hat brims, and bodies covered by heavily shaded garments. In addition, viewers familiar with European art history will recognize that the figures of Theseus (also known as Poseidon, god of the sea) and his companion, the Lapith Perithous, are based on famous classical Greek statues of these subjects.

Attempts to interpret Howe's painting in terms of classical stories, however, raise a number of intriguing questions, but no clear answers. Are the chutes to be identified with the underworld to which Perithous went on Theseus's behalf? Does the cowboy with foreshortened buttocks, extending provocatively into the viewer's space, refer to the story of Persephone, who inspired lust in Theseus?

While most paintings in the *Rodeo Pantheon* explicitly concern homosexual themes, some depict male-female relations and examine supposedly "conventional" gender roles. The composition of Howe's *Picnic on the Grass* (1979) is based upon Edouard Manet's famous *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass, 1863), but Howe has reversed the gender hierarchy of the French picture, which shows two clothed men, accompanied by two nude women. In Howe's picture, the nude men are presented as objects of sexual desire, while the clothed women are strong and dominant. At first glance, Howe's *Picnic* seems to depict two "normative" heterosexual couples. Yet, this impression is undercut by the lustful way that the standing man gazes at the reclining male figure. The homoerotic dimensions of seemingly "straight" men are explored in other paintings of the series, such as *Trailer Buddies* (1990).

Since 1996, Howe has been working on *Stations: A Gay Passion*, a series of large paintings that represent (in his words) "moments when we are forced for reasons of grief or triumph or any number of life events to stop and reflect." The title of this series alludes to the Stations of the Cross, fourteen incidents in the Passion of Christ, designated as subjects of special devotion in the Roman Catholic Church since the seventeenth century. Usually, the events commemorated in the Stations of the Cross are depicted as a coherent series of paintings or sculptural tableaux, arranged at intervals along the walls of a church, although they sometimes are grouped together in exterior settings. In accord with this Catholic tradition, Howe believes that the entire *Stations: A Gay Passion* should be displayed as an ensemble, ideally in a gay church, and he has indicated that he will not sell individual components, even when the series has been completed.

The twelve paintings thus far completed for *Stations* provide moving commentary on the impact of AIDS on

the gay community. Howe has explained that he conceived the series in response to the death of his partner from AIDS in 1993. At that time, he was very angry at religious organizations because of the attitudes of the Christian right towards gay men and lesbians and the AIDS crisis. Deeply moved by the images of tortured male flesh covering the walls of Catholic churches which he visited during an extended trip to Europe in the mid-1990s, he resolved to create a project that would correlate the current sufferings of the gay community with older religious traditions.

Stopping in New York on the way home, he found the perfect setting for his project in the abandoned piers of the West Village of New York--the theater of the "sexual party" that had liberated him during the 1960s and 1970s, but which had also provided an environment in which AIDS would spread. Throughout the series, the ruined architecture seems to dominate the human figures. It, thus, helps to evoke a sense of inevitable doom. Also contributing to the sorrowful character of the pictures are the overall dark tonalities and, especially, the somber expressions and gestures of the figures.

Yet, despite the dark mood, the intense sensuality of the handsome, muscular figures recalls the cowboys in *Rodeo Pantheon*. Naked, except for boots and leather fetish accessories (harnesses, hoods, caps, and jock straps), the men in *Stations* superficially resemble characters by Tom of Finland, but their solemn movements differentiate them from Tom's exuberant figures. Thus, Howe's scenes reveal the combination of sexual passion and death, which lies at the heart of the tragedy of AIDS.

Howe closely based many of his compositions upon famous Renaissance altarpieces. For example, in the *Flagellation*, the poses of the principal figures and their placement within the monumental architectural space recall depictions of the *Flagellation of Christ* by Sebastiano del Piombo and Caravaggio, among other earlier artists. Howe's selection of the *Flagellation* as one of his subjects indicates that he does not feel obligated to repeat the traditional Catholic Stations. Because it occurred before his condemnation to death, the Flagellation of Christ does not form part of the Catholic Stations of the Cross. However, the subject is obviously relevant both to the theme of Christ's suffering and to the S/M context of the paintings that Howe has thus far produced for the series.

All of the components of Howe's *Stations* show sensitivity to the significance of Christ's Passion, as well as awareness of the distinctive qualities of recent American gay life. Instead of the traditional opening subject of Christ condemned to death, Howe has depicted in *The Beginning* six isolated figures, scattered throughout the huge space of the piers. In *Veronica's Kiss*, a drag queen kisses the sacrificial victim, who is being led through the piers. Utilizing a composition recalling the monumental and deeply moving *Pietà* (1604, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Naples) by Annibale Carracci, one of his favorite artists, Howe shows in the *Gentle Executioner* a burly, hooded figure tenderly embracing the bruised corpse on his lap.

As in his earlier work, Howe has created in *Stations: A Gay Passion* images that are both universal and contemporary. Never concerned with passing fashions, he devises monumental compositions in the spirit of the Renaissance and Baroque artists that he admires so much. Through his innovative handling of subject matter, he reveals the pervasiveness of homoerotic desire in Western culture, while eloquently representing unique features of gay life in the United States. Showing great integrity in both his art and his life, Howe seeks to define gay history through works that connect past and future.

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