

UW-Madison: Truman Lowe, acclaimed Ho-Chunk artist and professor emeritus, dies at 75

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MADISON – UW-Madison alumnus and Professor Emeritus Truman Lowe (Wakajah), an internationally acclaimed artist whose works are deeply rooted in his Ho-Chunk heritage, died at his home on March 30. He was 75.

“Truman was a quiet force in the Art Department, leading by example over the course of a long and productive career,” says department chair Douglas Rosenberg. “Through his teaching, service and activism, he taught us what an artist could be in the world and how we can, through art, help make the world a more inclusive and thoughtful place.”

Lowe, who joined the School of Education’s Art Department in 1975 and was promoted to full professor in 1989, was recognized as a master sculptor whose work bridged the traditional and contemporary, abstract and representational worlds of Native American fine art.

His works were exhibited at major venues throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe, Africa, South America and New Zealand. In 1998 his Bird Effigy, in aluminum, was shown in a yearlong exhibition of 20th century works at the White House Sculpture Garden. And from 2000 to 2008 he was curator of contemporary art for the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).

“Truman Lowe has been an incredible influence on so many people as an artist, curator, and leader,” says John Hitchcock, the School of Education’s associate dean

for the arts. “Personally, Truman’s been a mentor to me as a strong American Indian artist who led with vision and generosity. Every time I talked with him, he would ask: ‘What have you been working on in your art?’ Then he would smile really big in delight as you told him. Truman encouraged us to stay strong as artists and to our vision as makers.”

Lowe was born on Jan. 19, 1944, and grew up in a Ho-Chunk community near Black River Falls. He was known for using natural materials to shape objects that represent the relationship between nature and culture.

Lowe earned his undergraduate degree from UW-La Crosse in 1969 and after graduating taught art at Valders High School, about 45 miles north of Milwaukee.

Lowe decided to pursue a graduate degree in art, and first applied at UW-Milwaukee so he could keep his teaching job. But he was rejected, and applied and was admitted to UW-Madison. During that time, he received a Ford Foundation Doctoral Fellowship, which paid for his graduate work and allowed him to attend UW-Madison.

While on campus, Lowe studied sculpture, glassblowing, ceramics and more while developing his own artistic voice. He received his master of fine arts degree in 1973 and moved to Emporia, Kansas, where he served as a visiting lecturer at Emporia State University.

He returned to UW-Madison in 1975 as assistant dean of students and then received a joint position as Native American studies coordinator and assistant professor of art. In 1989 he was promoted to full professor and he later served as chair of the Art Department from 1992 to 1995. He also served as chair of the Chancellor’s Scholarship Committee, where from 1984 to 2004 he recruited and supported underrepresented students interested in pursuing their education at UW-Madison.

In 2007 the Wisconsin Arts Board honored Lowe with its Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 2008 he received a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Wisconsin Alumni Association.

“I remember seeing Truman’s delicate and personal work in art publications long before I began teaching at UW, but only realized that it was his work years after I arrived here,” says Rosenberg. “He was humble about his success and about his service to his community and always supported younger faculty in the most

generous way. Even after his retirement, when I became chair of the Art Department, he would pop into the office to offer a few kind words of support. That meant the world to me and I will miss his mentorship.”

Lowe is survived by his wife of 52 years, Nancy (Knabe) Lowe; daughter, Tonia Lowe; and grandson Anders Page.

A memorial service celebrating Lowe’s life is scheduled for Sunday, May 5, at 1:30 p.m. at the Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison.

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