

An Arkansas Master

The Work of John Howard



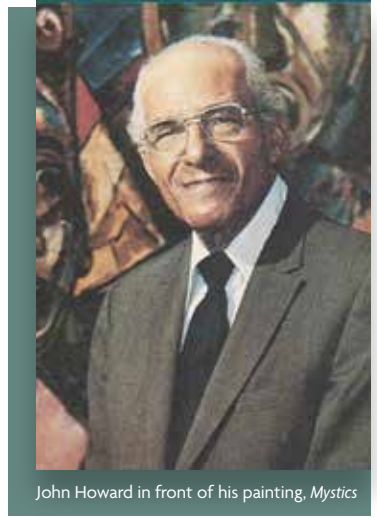
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ASC

John Howard

Early Life

John Miller Howard (1908 - 1980) was born on September 22, 1908 in the heart of the Delta, near Alcorn, Mississippi. At the age of three, Howard, his older brother, and his mother moved to Brookhaven, MS, where his mother made a meager living by cooking and cleaning for white families. Howard spent his childhood copying cartoons, drawing and painting, and dreaming of one day becoming an artist. While his mother recognized his talent and encouraged this interest, Howard's evident affinity for art was not nurtured in the segregated schools he attended. It would be decades before Howard was afforded the opportunity to truly develop himself as an artist.



Education

After high school, John Howard stayed local and attended Alcorn College. According to Howard, "Alcorn had no art, but I kept on painting. I did the walls in my dormitory, cartoons for the newspaper and drawings for biology students." His dedication to his craft eventually paid off. In 1935, Howard accepted a teaching job at T. J. Harris High School in Meridian, Mississippi. There, Howard impressed the State Education Director with his skill and competency, and the Director provided Howard with a scholarship for summer study at Atlanta University.

In Atlanta, Howard studied under the well-known muralist and painter Hale Woodruff, who turned out to be the perfect mentor for the fledgling artist. As a fellow African-American man, Woodruff's success in navigating the industry and the ease with which he explored his practice encouraged Howard to do the same. Woodruff recognized Howard's talent and invited him back to Atlanta in 1937, after his initial summer study, with a scholarship and a job teaching at Atlanta University's laboratory school. Through this program, Howard found community among other talented young artists mentored by Woodruff. Though he developed a practice uniquely his own, Woodruff's influence on Howard is most evident in the latter's *Old House Series* and his expressive abstractions.

Career and Legacy

In 1939, President John Brown Watson of the Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College (AM&N), now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, recruited John Howard to serve as the college's first art instructor. What began as a small department with only four students, relegated to the second floor of the library building, flourished under Howard's exhaustive efforts. As an instructor, Howard dedicated himself to providing his students with the education they deserved, despite continued segregation. Many of his students came from rural backgrounds and lacked exposure to art, much like himself, and Howard considered his job as a teacher was "to pull from students their deep rooted and hidden talents...It took a constant struggle to awake some; others met the challenge with ease."



John Howard (second from left) with his painting class. The writing reads, "To my mother with my compliments John"

Over the decades, the college tasked Howard with more administrative duties which took away from his time teaching. He continued to build an impressive art department by recruiting highly talented artists and art educators, such as Henri Linton and Tarrence Corbin. Together, Howard and his colleagues mentored future artists, educators, and activists for African-American arts, notably Dr. Jeff Donaldson, Earnest Davison, Kevin Cole, and Mitchell Caton.

In 1950, AM&N officially offered art as a major. However, it was not until much later that the art department officially gained its own building, thanks to Howard's persistent efforts advocating for the need for space and the importance of the department as a whole.

Howard convinced the Arkansas Higher Education Commission to fully fund the \$1.4 million Fine Arts Center, which was at that time the most expensive structure in AM&N history. In 1969, the Isaac Hathaway Fine Arts Building opened to house the Music, Theater, and Art Departments. Howard himself insisted upon the naming the building after Isaac Hathaway, a legendary former arts faculty member from the college. Today, this center for the arts is named the Isaac S. Hathaway-John M. Howard Fine Arts Center in honor of both men.

Throughout his tenure as an educator at UAPB, Howard's career as an exhibiting painter continued. In 1946, Arkansas artist Louis Freund encouraged Howard, his friend and colleague, to compete in the Arkansas Artists Exhibition organized by Freund. Howard did, submitting a painting titled *The Old Lady with a Letter and a Picasso*, which depicted a seated portrait of an elderly African-American woman from Pine Bluff with a Picasso painting in the background. When John Howard won first place in this juried exhibition, white patrons complained about the prize being awarded to an African-American, and a second first-place prize was awarded to a white artist to appease detractors. Despite this appalling reaction, the resulting attention helped to spread Howard's name as an artist. In 1950, Howard also won the John Hope Award in the National Negro Artists Exhibition for his work *Arkansas Landscape*. Throughout his life, he continued exhibiting in state and national art shows.

Among numerous honors and appointments throughout his career, Howard served on the Arkansas Advisory Council on Secondary Education and on the Arkansas Arts, Culture and Humanities Council. He was recognized by his peers for his outstanding work and listed in the 1970–71 edition of *Outstanding Educators of America* and was chosen as one of sixteen Distinguished Artists in Arkansas in 1974. In 1978, Howard was listed in *Who's Who in American Art*. In 1971, at the age of 63, Howard suffered a stroke and was unable to return to AM&N until 1974, where he continued to work until his death on October 10, 1980, at the age of 72.



Autumn Landscape Abstraction, Oil on canvas,
29" x 23"

Exhibited Works

The works in this exhibition marked with an asterisk (*) are loaned from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Art Department's collection

Cover: *Still Life with Fruit*, Oil on masonite, 47" x 40.5", ASC 80.026.000

Old House Series #6, Oil on canvas, 29" x 23", ASC 83.012.000

**Untitled Abstraction 1*, Oil on canvas, 19.5" x 24"

**Untitled Abstraction 2*, Oil on canvas, 35" x 27"

**Untitled Abstraction 3*, Oil on wood panel, 45" x 45"

**Untitled Abstraction 4*, Oil on wood panel, 30" x 30"

**Untitled Abstraction 5*, Oil on canvas, 26" x 18"

**In and Out*, Oil on canvas, 55" x 43.5"

**Old House Series 2*, Oil on canvas, 55.5" x 43.5"

**Old House Series 3*, Oil on canvas, 30" x 25.3"

**Old House Series 4*, Oil on canvas, 16" x 14"

**Arkansas Landscape*, Oil on canvas, 25" x 17"

**Autumn Landscape Abstraction*, Oil on wood panel, 24" x 50"

**Untitled Landscape Watercolor 1*, Watercolor on paper, 26" x 18"

**Untitled Landscape Watercolor 2*, Watercolor on paper, 26" x 18"

**Untitled Floral Watercolor*, Watercolor on paper, 26" x 18"



Old House Series #6, Oil on canvas, 29" x 23", ASC 83.012.000

John Howard's legacy is alive and well in the state of Arkansas, especially in Pine Bluff. Those Howard mentored have gone on to have enormous impacts in the arts community throughout the state, spreading Howard's passion for the arts and his vision of the arts as an inclusive community. Howard's dedication to his students, to his university, and to the arts was unmatched and unwavering. Today's students benefit from Howard's tireless advocacy for his department and university and his insistence upon the importance of arts education. His legacy lives on in those who follow in his footsteps, railing against racial and economic barriers to provide access to the arts and make a life filled with meaning.

Jessica Lenehan
Curator



The Arts & Science Center has three aspects of collecting and exhibition: art of the Delta, art by Arkansas artists, and art by African American artists.

ASC is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, a distinction held by fewer than 4% of museums in the United States.



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