

Truman Lowe, [Feather Tree](#), 1990



Southern pine, peeled willow sticks, stones, raw hide, 144 x 104 x 96 in.

Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial Fund purchase, 2020.44.1a-w

*The patterns of nature, and how natural materials have been adapted to provide for succeeding generations of human beings, are an endless source of fascination for me.*

– Truman Lowe <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elvehjem Museum of Art, *University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Art Faculty Exhibition*, exh. cat., (Madison, WI: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1990), n.p.

## **Artist's Biography**

Truman Lowe, or Wakajahukga in Ho-Chunk, (American, Ho-Chunk, 1944–2019) is considered one of the foremost Native American artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Lowe was the youngest of six children and was raised in the Winnebago Indian Mission east of Black River Falls in west-central Wisconsin. He grew up alongside the Black River in the geographical and cultural homeland of the Ho-Chunk Nation, also known as Winnebago. Ho-Chunk is one of twelve First Nations in the state of Wisconsin and one of eleven tribes whose lands were forcibly ceded to the United States through treaties in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The origin stories of the Ho-Chunk Nation place these indigenous people in the geographical area west of Lake Michigan, which became the Wisconsin Territory in 1836 and subsequently joined the Union as the thirtieth state in 1848.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison acknowledges the ancestral Ho-Chunk land that the campus occupies and thus contributes to the survival and celebration of Ho-Chunk culture in Wisconsin. Lowe's life story and his professional career as an artist and educator, most of which took place at the university, contribute to Ho-Chunk history in Wisconsin, on the UW–Madison campus, and beyond.

As a child, Lowe learned traditional Ho-Chunk crafts from his parents. His mother was a renowned ribbon-appliqué textile artist as well as a black-ash basket maker and colorist. His father selected young ash trees suitable for basket weaving. He would pound the saplings with the flat end of an axe to separate the growth layers and create the strips for weaving, as well as carve the wooden handles for the baskets. The artist recounted how his father taught him about his natural environment in the process of selecting the appropriate wood for a project:

“He'd say, you know where the Black River and the Morrison meet, you have to go to the third grove and you start looking for the wood and it has to be clear, without any branches, so that you can bend it as you're carving it. And the annual growth of the portion that you're cutting—before you cut it down you should check; the annual rings should be thicker than a nickel. Then you get the most perfect size diameter and the length should be four feet and that's where you cut it. You always use that growth. It is the clearest and the straightest.”<sup>3</sup>

It was his father's knowledge of and reverence for natural materials that instilled in Lowe his family's and his community's connection to the environment. The ethic of sustainable use of natural resources was impressed upon him early on and he made judicious use and reuse of all the natural materials that he collected throughout his career.

After attending a two-room mission school, Lowe pursued art studies and a bachelor's degree in art education at UW–La Crosse. In 1973, he earned an MFA in sculpture from UW–Madison. In graduate school at UW–Madison, he explored the European and American avant-garde art movements under the

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see: <https://theways.org/map.html>

<sup>3</sup> Loew, Patty, *Seventh Generation Earth Ethics: Native Voices of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2014): Chapter 9, “Organic Sculpture Artist: Truman Lowe,” pp. 130-31

umbrella of modernism, as well as the themes of land and identity. He became very interested in plastic as a medium, because it was “so big, so flexible, so easy to store, and so cheap,” and used polyethylene to create large, fringed hanging pieces and floor sculptures.<sup>4</sup> But he was also inspired by two twentieth century Native American artists: George Morrison (Grand Portage Ojibwe) and Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache), who explored their Native identities through abstract expressionism. Lowe’s use of plastic, however, was at odds with his inclination to use natural materials as a Native artist. In the mid-1970s, during the early days of the environmental movement, Lowe became concerned about the toxicity of plastics and abandoned synthetic materials in favor of natural materials, such as wood, feathers, and stones.

When the artist and his family moved to Emporia, Kansas, for his first teaching job, they moved into an old farmhouse with a barn where he found a stash of old wood, which he used to create his first sculptures of weathered wood, feathers, and found objects. After a brief teaching stint in Kansas, Lowe returned to Wisconsin and the native woodlands of his youth when he was offered the position of Assistant Dean for Multicultural Affairs at UW–Madison in 1974. The following year he became the director of the American Indian Studies Program (AISP) and was appointed assistant professor of art education. He taught sculpture at UW–Madison until his retirement in 2010. His mother’s death in 1976 inspired large works that recalled the objects and sacred spaces of his Ho-Chunk homeland, such as feather trees and sculptures reminiscent of cradle boards and wigwams, and drawings that evoked his mother’s appliqué patterns. From that time forward, his “personal, professional and artistic identities would converge and coalesce around his Indian heritage.”<sup>5</sup>

Known for large-scale works that combine the contemporary with the traditional—both in form, materials, and meaning—Lowe is considered the preeminent Native American sculptor of his generation. His drawing practice, which, melded abstraction with cultural references and often incorporated sculptural elements, was also extensive. He is, however, best known for his large organic sculptures that convey traditional Ho-Chunk values and stories. Lowe’s Ho-Chunk heritage played a central role in his practice. According to art historian Jo Ortel, Lowe’s art does three things simultaneously: “it makes Ho-Chunk history and material culture visible; it demonstrates the twenty-first century cultural contributions and the present-day vitality of the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk; and it poetically weaves together Native and non-Native artistic influences in a singular, compelling way.”<sup>6</sup> Lowe’s sculptural practice is grounded in the use of natural materials, principally wood, which is central to Woodland Indian culture. Lowe used native trees from Wisconsin forests in his sculptures, particularly willow, black ash, and birch. He collected all the wood necessary for his sculptures himself, either along the riverbank or in a neighbor’s field, using the methods his father taught him. He then peeled the bark off the branches, according to the techniques he learned from his father, and then sanded the bare sticks to create the smooth, whitened surface that is one of the hallmarks of his sculpture. Lowe credits his father’s example as the foundation of his practice: his “use, respect, and knowledge of wood became

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Jo Ortel, *Woodland Reflections: The Art of Truman Lowe* (Madison: Univ. of WI Press, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Jo Ortel, *Woodland Reflections: The Art of Truman Lowe* (Madison: Univ. of WI Press, 2003), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Jo Ortel correspondence with Maria Saffiotti Dale, 2019.



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my own quest and primary direction.”<sup>7</sup> His artwork reflects his environmental sensibilities in the use of renewable resources taking only the quantity needed without creating waste, and in the way it conveys the message of connection—that we are all connected to the land and to each other.

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<sup>7</sup> University Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin—La Crosse, “*Truman Lowe: Streams,*” exh. cat. (La Crosse, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1991), p. 22

### **Visual Description**

*Feather Tree* is a large wooden sculpture created by Truman Lowe. The eight-foot-tall sculpture measures 12 feet by roughly 8.5 feet wide at its base and is composed almost entirely of wood. At its center, a tall willow branch has been stripped **bare** of its bark and stands tall resembling a tree sapling. The trunk of the sapling is thin and mostly straight. The sapling's trunk forks halfway up the shaft and sprawls to a cluster of thin, delicate branches. Most of the branches point upright, but at least two branches bisect the vertical lines at a diagonal angle and form an "x". Above the "x" form, one circular branch sits and creates an obvious contrast to the upright movement of the others. At various points, two-dimensional wooden shapes dangle from branches, attached by rawhide lace cord that has been wrapped multiple times. Made from a darker wood than the sapling, these wood shapes mostly resemble feathers, though in one instance, an arrow-like spear is seen. The sapling grows from a large pine rectangular platform composed of four symmetrical square quadrants. The wood grain of the pine contrasts with the bare sapling and has a slightly amber tint as if it's been stained. At the juncture of each quadrant, a narrow wood board sits and houses a row of irregular, short willow sticks that **vary** in height. Placed atop the quadrant and directly center, a smaller rectangular piece of wood sits and seems to hold the sapling in place. Fourteen smooth river stones rest atop this board and encircle the tree. Twelve of the stones are light gray, one is dark gray, and another is a reddish-brown.

### **Location**

*Feather Tree* is installed in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### **Content and Context**

*As an artist, I have always felt a responsibility to interpret and to make visual the influences of our time and the environment.*

– Truman Lowe<sup>8</sup>

*Feather Tree*, 1990, is a large-scale installation piece that evokes the Wisconsin woodland landscape of Lowe's childhood. The artist's personal stories are reflected in this work, which is a memorial to his grandmother and the land she lived on, and about which she possessed deep knowledge. One summer, Lowe and his grandparents were working as laborers picking fruits and berries in the marshy wetlands east of their home at the Winnebago Indian Mission. Truman became very thirsty, so his grandmother

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<sup>8</sup> Cudahy Gallery of Wisconsin Art and Milwaukee Art Museum, *Cross Cultures: Ethnic Themes in Wisconsin Art*, exh. cat., (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1990), n.p.



led him to a mature birch tree and cut a “V” into the bark and into the grain of the wood from which, as if by magic, a clear, sweet liquid flowed out. His grandmother filled a tin cup with the birch water and gave it to her grandson to quench his thirst. “I can taste that water today,” the artist would proclaim throughout his life, remembering this life-giving moment. He continued: “Water is everywhere. Our own lives and basic survival depend upon its presence. Yet few seem to want to care for it. We seem to take it for granted, as if it will be here forever, pure and clean.”<sup>9</sup> This story also embodies a metaphor of transformation from one material into another—wood into water—a metaphor that is a guiding principle in Lowe’s work.

The central element of *Feather Tree* is a soaring willow branch that rises like a sapling from the center of a square wooden platform. Entangled in its branches are wooden forms that evoke Native American implements: a circle and a long quill, or possibly, an arrow-like spear, as well as feathers made of wood hanging from some of the branches. A group of smooth river stones encircles the base of the tree. The platform is composed of four quadrants, at the junctures of which are placed four boards with inserted rows of peeled willow sticks, which represent reeds growing along the banks of a river, lake, or marsh. The quadrants of the platform are intended to be aligned with the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. The tree symbolizes the cycle of life, and the careful placement of stones and twigs evokes the ritualized marking of a specific place in nature that bears personal significance for the artist. Here, Lowe memorializes the spirit of his grandmother, in a landscape of his own creation that can be moved from place to place and, in each new location, establishes a new place of memory.

*Feather Tree* was exhibited in the 1990 Art Department Faculty Quadrennial Exhibition, which was held at the museum, so its recent acquisition for the permanent collection and display at the Chazen contributes to the extension of memory into the future. As a monument to the memory of the artist’s grandmother, it celebrates his ancestors and serves as a vehicle for the transmission of familial and tribal history.

As an organic landscape sculpture, *Feather Tree* reminds the viewer of the centrality of the land in Ho-Chunk culture and that the preservation of land, water, and natural resources is necessary for the survival of indigenous identity itself. The art of Truman Lowe emanates from and embodies a way of life and an approach to artistic production that centers sustainability by being in harmony with the natural world and protecting it from damage and destruction. *Feather Tree* as a symbol both of the past and the future urges us to cultivate this sustainability mindset.

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<sup>9</sup> University Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, *Truman Lowe: Streams*, exh. cat. (La Crosse, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1991), 8

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does this work relate to sustainability? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Feathers are a common motif in Lowe's work. What do you think feathers represent to Lowe?
3. For creating a work of art, Lowe says "use renewable resources, take only what you need and create a work of art that reminds us that we are connected to each other and to the land." Does *Feather Tree* remind us that we're connected to the land? If so, how?
4. Lowe felt deeply connected to his homeland of Wisconsin and the many memories he made here. Have you ever had a profound experience with your birthplace or nature? If you had to recreate this memory using visual cues only, what would it look like? What symbols might you use?
5. Some cultures look to nature as a limited resource and therefore treat it with a spirit of respect. They take no more than they can use, and use all they can from what they took. They put time and energy into the land so that it continues to yield and produce for generations to come. How in your life can you practice to this ideal?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Not all these artworks are currently on view; click the titles of each to determine if they are currently on view in the museum, and in which gallery.*

George Morrison (American, Grand Portage Ojibwe, 1919–2000), [Wood Collage: Landscape](#), 1980. Found and prepared wood on plywood base, 14 x 106 in. Bequest of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2017.14.53

One of the fathers of Native American modernism, George Morrison was a teacher, role model, and mentor to the younger generation of indigenous artists, including Truman Lowe. His work embodies the importance of the land in Native American identity and the central role it plays in the sustainability of the culture. Made of found wood, this wood collage reflects a responsible use of natural resources.

John Steuart Curry (American, 1897–1946), [Erosion and Contour Cropping](#), 1938-40. Oil on canvas mounted on board, 30 x 44 1/2 in. Gift of Mrs. John Steuart Curry, 49.4.6

In this painting, regionalist artist and UW–Madison's first artist in residence, John Steuart Curry, documents the increasingly industrialized agricultural practices occurring in the Midwest during the 1930s and 40s, which led to the exploitation of the land.



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Unknown artist (American, Ho-Chunk), [Basket](#), 1970–80. Woven black ash splint, 12 x 16 1/4 x 9 1/2 in.  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Van Zelst, 1984.153

This example of a basket made by another Ho-Chunk artist (yet unknown to museum staff) demonstrates this artform, which also utilized local materials.



### **Additional Resources**

Cassidy, Victor M., Truman Lowe, Winnebago Artist, *Artnet Magazine* (December 17, 1997), [http://www.artnet.com/magazine\\_pre2000/features/cassidy/cassidy97-12-17.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/cassidy/cassidy97-12-17.asp)

Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, “Artists of the 1999 Eiteljorg Fellowship”(1999), <https://vimeo.com/366812861> [section featuring Truman Lowe, 1:34-3:06]

Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, “Haga (Third Son): An Exhibition of Sculpture, Drawing, and Painting by Winnebago Artist Truman Lowe,” exh. cat. (Indianapolis, IN: Eiteljorg Museum, 1994) [Kohler Art Library, N6537 L69 A4 1994]

Elvehjem Museum of Art, “University of Wisconsin–Madison Department of Art Faculty Exhibition,” exhibition catalogue (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990), n.p., <https://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/Arts/Arts-idx?type=turn&entity=Arts.AExFacEx1991.p0057&id=Arts.AExFacEx1991&isize=M>

The Ho-Chunk Nation, “People of the Sacred Voice,” official website, <https://ho-chunknation.com/>

Klatt, Brian, “Truman Lowe MFA’73: 2008 Distinguished Alumni Award Honoree,” *Wisconsin Alumni Association* (April 21, 2008), [https://www.uwalumni.com/awards/daa\\_lowe/](https://www.uwalumni.com/awards/daa_lowe/)

Loew, Patty, “Seventh Generation Earth Ethics: Native Voices of Wisconsin,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Autumn 2014), pp. 50-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24402716>

Milwaukee Public Museum, “Material Culture and the Arts,” *Wisconsin Indian Resource Project*, <https://www.mpm.edu/plan-visit/educators/wirp/great-lakes-traditional-culture/material-culture>

Museum of Wisconsin Art, “WHVA: Truman Lowe” (posted October 6, 2015), 4 minutes, 15 seconds, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkcJYCqDTxo>

Ortel, Jo, “Truman Lowe: Ho-Chunk,” *Native Peoples Magazine* vol. 13, issue 2 (February/March 2000), pp. 67-69 [available [here](#) via EMBSCOhost Art Full Text, UW-Madison library]

Ortel, Jo, “Woodland Reflections: The Art of Truman Lowe” (Madison: Univ. of WI Press, 2003) [Kohler Art Library, NB212 L68 A4 2003; College Library, NB212 L68 A4 2003; Steenbock Library NB212.L68 A4 2003]

University Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, “Truman Lowe: Streams,” exh. cat. (La Crosse, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1991)