

## **Painting Lies**

*As creator of the art program at what would become the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Claude Howell is considered the city's father of the arts and possibly the most important figure in native art of our state.*

by Bryan Oesterreich

Claude Howell (1915-1997) died in the same bedroom in which he had been born 82 years earlier — in number 53 at The Carolina Apartments in Wilmington. The apartment was the anchor for the rich life of a talented artist, academic, and teacher. Howell said he painted “to study light, space, and color — not to make any social or moral statements.” He has been called the father of the arts in Wilmington’s ascension from a city without a gallery to a thriving community of artists that continues to flourish after his passing. Many consider him to be the most important figure in native North Carolina art.

### **Unambiguous aesthetic**

Howell’s opinion on the aesthetics of art was always direct and unambiguous. For example, he never saw Norman Rockwell’s representational style of painting as art. “I never copied a scene in my life. Reproduction is just copy painting,” Howell is reported to have said. He preferred to create fictional scenes from collections of concrete images that he observed and sketched along the Carolina coast. To him, art was “the painting of a lie to make it real.”

In 1929, Howell began to study art under Elisabeth Chant, who was an influential figure to the aspiring young artist. He remembered Chant telling him to sketch whatever he saw wherever he went, advice he followed when later traveling abroad. Howell’s work while in Chant’s classes incorporated cover designs for House Beautiful magazine and advertisement layouts. His portfolio from that period holds assorted sketches and some practical designs for clothing, textiles, and stage sets. These early “assigned” works provided fundamental painting and sketching experience for Howell, but he was not to be drawn into the world of commercial art. His interest in clothing design, though, would resurface in his later works — in renderings of the people of the Carolina coast. A weak economy, however, forced Howell to focus more on his own survival than his art — he had to work a regular job to provide the means to continue painting.

The economy was so weak at the time Howell graduated from Wilmington’s New Hanover High School in the 1930s that only one of his classmates could go directly on to college. So, instead, he did some postgraduate work in typing and shorthand. These were skills he quickly put to use when he hired on at the Atlantic Coastline Railroad office in Wilmington. This would turn out to be his only full-time job other than his painting and art classes. Howell’s ability to work within the confines of a clerical position surprised many of his friends, but it can be compared to his remarkable ability to stay focused while painting for hours at a time — an ability he never lost. For over the course of the next 17 years, Howell produced more than 2,100 artworks.

## **Awakening the appetite**

Until this point, Howell's world was confined to Wilmington, a then-small city of around 30,000 people. In 1936, he used some vacation time to investigate metropolitan areas in search of new art. He traveled to Washington, D.C., and viewed the art of the masters at the Phillips Collection, the Corcoran Gallery, and the National Gallery of Art. This marked the first time he had seen original oil paintings, and they heightened his appetite for color and light used in ways he hadn't even imagined.

When he returned to Wilmington with an increased passion to paint, Howell realized painting would be his life. He would, however, have to keep his clerical job to support himself. To be able to paint while working a full-time job, Howell lived with his mother in The Carolina Apartments until her death in 1972. In exchange for room and board, Howell gave his mother his paychecks from the Railroad Company and only asked enough for cigarettes, scotch, and clothes.

The long hours of painting and working full-time began to produce results. In 1937, Howell showed his work at the North Carolina Artist's Club at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Other exhibits soon followed — at the 1938 New York's World's Fair Southern States preview exhibition and the Contemporary American Art exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond.

Howell lamented the fact he was forced to exhibit his work elsewhere because there was nowhere to show his art in Wilmington. He loved his hometown and decided to do whatever he could to bring art to his community. So, when Hester Donnelly and Virginia McQueen opened an artist's gallery on Post Office Alley, Howell supported the small but available space. The gallery operated for a number of years and showcased mostly local artists but also brought in historical art when it was available. Fortuitously, when Post Office Alley's popularity began to ebb, another venue to showcase art was opened.

Henry McCoy, owner of the St. John's Lodge in Wilmington, was persuaded by Howell to offer the building and a 99-year lease to any organization willing to open a gallery. Donnelly and a group of art patrons formed the St. John's Organization to qualify for the gift. McCoy later gave the building outright to the city of Wilmington in memory of his brother. The St. John's Museum of Art was thereby created.

Howell's ongoing devotion to painting and his earlier visit to Washington, D.C., influenced him to spend his brief summer vacations away from Wilmington, and he began traveling throughout the Northeast as a result of his artistic curiosity having been aroused. He tried various summer artist colonies until settling on one in Woodstock, New York. There, Howell met and befriended art teacher Charles Rosen. Subsequently, art students in the Wilmington area had a new resource, as Howell began giving art lessons at night — sharing insights he had learned from Rosen. The popularity of those evening classes grew steadily.

## **Cuban colors**

During the next two years (1939-1940), Howell enjoyed increased recognition through exhibitions, and he also found time to explore other artist communities. In the summer of 1939, he traveled to Cuba, where he was attracted to the city streets and spent most of his time drawing scenes from sidewalk cafés in both Cuba and Trinidad. Always attracted to colorful settings and the effects of light on color, Howell was dazzled by the flashes of color and rhythmic movements of the Cuban people. Later that same year, Howell received his first award — first prize at the Wilmington Artist's First Annual, Wilmington Museum of Art. Shortly after, he won second prize at the North Carolina artist's exhibition at the Women's Club in Raleigh.

Howell's recognition continued to grow during 1940. Early in the year, he competed for and received the Carnegie Corporation Purchase Award, sponsored by the Section of Fine Arts, U.S. Government, Washington, D.C. Later that year, Howell was surprised when he received the Purchase Award to represent North Carolina in a national exhibition promoted by the IBM Corporation at the company building in New York City. The exhibition then traveled to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. — the same gallery Howell had visited just four years earlier.

Increased recognition, however, did not cause Howell to rest on his laurels. He continued to study and paint, and his artistic direction began to shift. In 1941, he started painting subjects close at hand — fishermen, fishing nets, and boats. Coastal Wilmington drew Howell back to the people and natural surroundings with which he grew up.

## **Gwathmey's mentoring**

The year of 1945 brought travel and adventure into Howell's life; he learned that painter Robert Gwathmey and his wife Rosalie were vacationing in Wrightsville Beach, just a few miles from his apartment. Howell knew of Gwathmey's work and promptly contacted the couple. The two artists connected immediately, and Gwathmey would go on to become a friend and mentor for young Howell.

The relationship between the two men grew closer, and Howell accepted an invitation to accompany the Gwathmeyes to New York City, where he would spend the next five years painting and meeting the inner circle of artists in and around the metropolitan area. With his typing and shorthand skills, he landed a secretarial position in the newly created Artist's Equity organization. While the position was voluntary, it allowed him to mingle with the many people active in New York's diverse cultural scene. Gwathmey took him to all the major exhibitions and parties, and Howell said the most productive conversations took place “after most everybody filled up on bourbon or scotch.” While in New York, he sketched and painted mostly abstracts but was never satisfied with the results.

The Gwathmeyes “dared” Howell to accompany them to Paris. He accepted the dare — and a two-week vacation turned into a full year of painting in France. During that year,

Howell traveled extensively with the Gwathmeys, taking trips to Austria, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Holland. In the process, this exposure to European art significantly aroused his interest in new forms.

Howell said what drove him to travel to New York and Paris was a search for solidarity and structure in his life (and many think in his painting). His forays into the world of abstraction and impressionism show a young, expressive artist unsure of his direction. He would eventually find these elements in his life and work, and he would find them very close to home.

### **An ideal marriage**

In 1953, Howell created the art department at Wilmington College — now known as the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Dr. William Randall approached Howell to ask him if he would be willing to create an art department for the then two-year college. Howell told him, “I’ve never even been in a college classroom.” Randall suggested he just show the students what he knew about painting. Howell agreed. For the next year, he taught art classes two nights a week while continuing to work full-time at the Railroad Company. Over the course of the next three years, he increased the art classes offered — ultimately offering five a week. The success of the classes led to teaching fulltime. It was an ideal marriage: He could paint while he taught and be paid to paint. Howell would head the art department at the university for more than 20 years.

Howell’s new position at the university had an important influence on his painting style that produced a major shift in his perspective. Up to that point in his career, he had always painted at night, under artificial light. Painting at the university meant space and, most of all, plenty of natural light. His work became not only brighter but also reflected the subtle effects of lighting on subjects and colors. He talked about the way the sunlight on Wrightsville Beach “not only met objects directly, but also reflected up from the sand and piers and backlit the surrounding objects or people.”

### **Triangular motif**

The most identifiable element in Howell’s work, however, is the use of the triangle. The symbol can be seen in most of his work throughout his more than 50-year career. Whether one looks at figures or objects, one can easily spot the triangular motif. Ben Williams, art historian, offers that Howell’s use of the triangle “gives his work solidarity — he didn’t want his work to fall apart, so to speak, and the triangle prevents that from happening.”

Early in the 1960s, Howell started experimenting with color. He says he “put opposite colors of the same intensity side by side to project a double image [that] would vibrate much like the pop art then [in vogue].” The effect is unique. In 1984, citing health reasons, Howell stopped painting. He said, “I couldn’t do it like I wanted to anymore.”

Chancellor James R. Leutze dedicated the Claude Howell Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in October 1998. Leutze said, “by establishing this gallery in the name of Claude Howell, the university is acknowledging this man as a principal contributor to UNCW and the community. He represented his passion for the arts by his selfless devotion to the establishment of our art program.” At the ceremony, St. John’s Museum of Art donated a bust of Howell for the gallery.

Howell died in February 1997, and his funeral was held two days before what would have been his 82nd birthday. During the service, Ren Brown, director of St. John’s Museum of Art, remembered Howell’s final words before he died in the same bed where he was born. He raised a hand and pointed in the direction of one of his paintings on the wall and said, “I did that.”

Howell’s ashes were buried at St. John’s in a garden area while hundreds of people raised their glasses to celebrate the man who so greatly influenced the world of art in Wilmington.

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