

The Macnider Ledger Book: Coloring the Plains

By Thomas Cleary

The *Macnider Ledger Book* is a unique historical and artistic document. Drawn in the 1880s by several Sioux warriors, this book recalls Sioux life just before the onset of the Reservation Period. Largely illiterate and faced with an uncertain future, these men drew scenes from memory with the hopes of preserving their individual histories. The *Macnider Ledger Book* is their personal narrative of Plains life. That this document exists today is nothing short of a miracle. Decades of war, poverty and politics have caused many other ledger books to be lost or destroyed. The *Macnider Ledger Book*, with its many individual ledger drawings, is a fortunate exception.



A Blue and Black Horse (Page #210)

A Sioux warrior chases down a Crow adversary

Sioux, c. 1880

Paper, pencil and watercolor

14 1/2" wide, 5 3/4" high

Ledger books were initially imported into the North American Plains by Anglo businessmen. Paper was scarce in the Plains. The purpose of these hardcover books – filled with sequentially numbered, lined pages – was to keep track of financial transactions. As the books dispersed into the Plains in the mid-19th century, the pages unexpectedly became utilized for an entirely different purpose. The Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Kiowa tribesmen acquired them and, with their western drawing implements, they began to illustrate important scenes from their lives. These books became biographical portfolios, flush with colorful drawings of galloping horses, courting episodes, camp scenes, heroic deeds and battle exploits. How the *Macnider Ledger Book* first came into the hands of its Sioux authors is unknown. How the book came to be discovered at a courthouse auction, over a hundred and thirty years later, is further puzzling. At some point, the book was signed by a man named, “John Macnider.” It is to this mysterious owner that we dedicate the book.

Ledger art emerged out of a long-standing pictorial tradition. As such, it was deeply influenced by centuries of conceptual drawing. Many Plains artists sought inspiration from the artistic conventions deployed on ceremonial buffalo robes, tipis and rock faces centuries before. In the Macnider ledgers, many features are reminiscent of this rich past. Wispy lines conveyed movement; radiating lines conveyed gun shots or wounds. Portraying the essence of an action took precedence over the correct rendering of a form: the speed of a horse, the bravery of a warrior or the beauty of a woman. Sioux warriors, for example, preferred to recount their successful exploits against their archenemies, the Crow. In the Macnider ledgers, the Crow are shown with red faces and their distinctive cow-lick hairstyles. To emphasize their inferiority, they are often depicted with less color. The effect is psychological. Visually, they seem insignificant on a page – particularly when compared to the colorful and elaborately dressed Sioux.

These traditions would quickly evolve. Great art, it is said, manifests in response to dramatic cultural shifts. Such is true of the ledger drawings produced by Sioux artists in the 1880s, for the previous decades had provided just that shift. The cessation of Mexico's northern territories, the California Gold Rush and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad – only several decades earlier – forever changed the social landscape of the Northern Plains. By 1881, Sitting Bull and his band had finally surrendered to the U.S. Government. For the Sioux, this was the end of an era: their nomadic way of life was over and the reservation life was just beginning. Change was eminent. So, confined on reservations in the Dakotas, the Sioux could not help but reminisce about their pasts and bear witness to an irrevocably changing world.

More than ever, ledger art became an artistic focus. In the early years of the Reservation Period, Sioux men could no longer gain wealth and honors by hunting buffalo, counting coup or stealing horses. With their traditional merit system dismantled, they were forced to maintain their good social standing by celebrating the honors they had earned in Pre-Reservation times. Younger men, meanwhile, relied on the fathers' or uncles' honors to see them through. By creating comprehensive historical records of their lives, these dispossessed veterans ensured that their histories were not lost. At the same time, they also documented the changing world around them. The Macnider ledgers not only record Sioux life prior to the reservations, they also document Sioux culture as it adapted to change. In time, these ledger books became increasingly sought after by officers and agents.

The 1880s was consequently a period of great experimentation in Sioux ledger art. And it was both with a sense of curiosity and apprehension that the Sioux artistically embraced it. Reservation life, and the decades leading up to it, exposed artists to new subject matters and new ways to draw. With the white man's mysterious trains, there came strange curiosities: umbrellas, metal cooking utensils, drawing implements, colorful fabrics and patterned trade blankets –

many of which quickly came into vogue. These items feature throughout the Macnider ledger pages. Exposure to western art also facilitated in the emergence of new artistic concepts. In the Macnider pages, one is captivated by the naïve use of perspective, foreshortening and three-quarter view. Naturalism, as seen on these pages, begins to compete with age-old notions of conceptualism.

Like much of the art exhibited at the Metro Show, the *Macnider Ledger Book* was created by self-taught artists who were using everyday materials to speak poignantly about their lives. Caught in the midst of a changing world, they created an art form that is uniquely American. The ledgers they produced are naïve, yet informed portrayals of a fleeting nomadic existence. They simultaneously express nostalgia for the past and curiosity about an uncertain future. In these pages, one observes the unfolding of American History, as seen through the eyes of its Native peoples. It is with great pride that *H. Malcolm Grimmer Antique American Indian Art* presents select pages of the *Macnider Ledger Book* at the 2013 New York Metro Show.



Two Parasols (Page #188)

A courting scene depicting Sioux women, with their most fashionable accessories, alongside their male suitors

Sioux, c. 1880

Paper, pencil and watercolor

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