

COLLECTIBLES

What's It Worth?

Native American ledger art tells stories of Plains Indian life.

>I am an art teacher living in Colorado. I have a deep love of Native American art and know just a bit about the “ledger art” that was done when tribes were moved to reservations as one of the few forms of art-making available. Artists used government ledger book paper from the reservation. I bought this from a vendor at an outdoor flea market in Illinois for \$150 and know nothing more about the drawing, the vendor or where it came from. The stamping on the image and tag makes me think that it may have been in a museum or government collection of some sort.

—SALLY THOMAS, Colorado



The type of paper and direction of action give clues to the age and value of this ledger art.

IMMEDIATELY, WE WERE CURIOUS about this artwork, which you described to be a Plains American Indian ledger drawing from the 19th century—a rare and desirable collectible. When we saw these images of the drawing, however, we quickly realized that it was a contemporary rendering.

In order to explain how we were able to come to the conclusion, we have included a thematically similar drawing from the 19th century. The ledger drawing is one of 64 illustrated pages from the *Macnider Ledger*—a circa 1880 ledger book drawn by several Sioux warriors, most notably Sam Jaw (b. 1849-51), or His Fight (Okicize Tawa). The book is named after John Macnider, a 19th-century Dakota trader whose name was penned onto the inside cover of the book. This Macnider page is currently in a private collection and has an approximate replacement value of \$5,500.

Ledger art emerged almost by accident on the North American Plains. Ledger books were initially imported into the North American Plains by Anglo businessmen, for whom paper was scarce. The purpose of these imported 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, however, their pages unexpectedly became utilized for an entirely different purpose. The Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Kiowa warriors acquired them and, with western drawing implements, they began to illustrate important scenes from their lives. Largely illiterate and faced with an uncertain future, these Plains warrior artists drew scenes from memory on paper with the hopes of preserving their individual histories and social status.

The ledger books they illustrated became biographical portfolios, flush with colorful drawings of galloping horses, heroic deeds and battle exploits. Each illustration demonstrated the




This drawing comes from the *Macnider Ledger*, a circa 1880 book.

military prowess of the artist, his comrades, or both. Paper became particularly popular with the approach of the Reservation Period (1880 to 1920); it slowly replaced rock faces and hides as a preferred medium for drawing.

There are some obvious similarities and differences when comparing the contemporary drawing with the Macnider ledger. Both drawings feature mounted warriors atop their pinto war horses with tied tails; both riders wear feathered bonnets and wield lances. A major difference in the two drawings is the direction of the rider and horse. In traditional Plains ledger art, the action typically proceeds from right to left. Centuries of pictographic art had cemented this as a standard convention on the Plains. Therefore, it is rare that the protagonists in ledger drawings are illustrated proceeding rightward. This is not the case with the contemporary drawing. Another stark difference can be observed in the ledger paper itself. The contemporary drawing is on a very complicated modern columnar grid with multiple colors—paper that is atypical of antique ledger paper from the 19th century.

ESTIMATED VALUE:
\$200

With the Macnider ledger, portraying the essence of an action took precedence over the correct rendering of a form. Here, the Macnider artist is drawing an encounter between a Sioux warrior and a Crow archenemy. The slain Crow antagonist on the left is shown with his distinctive cowlick hairstyle. To emphasize the Crow's inferiority relative to his Sioux protagonist, he is rendered in fewer colors. Blood gushes from three sizeable wounds, as well as his mouth, likely the result of strikes from the protagonist's lance. Conveying the bravery and skill of the Sioux protagonist was paramount to the artist.

The contemporary drawing lacks many of these elements. The artist seemed more concerned with the details of the rider and his horse, rather than giving a purpose to the scene. And while there is certainly a market for contemporary ledgers like this one—most likely drawn in the past few decades—it is a market that is still gaining collectability because it is divorced from the historical context that inspired 19th century ledger drawings. 

ABOUT OUR EXPERT:

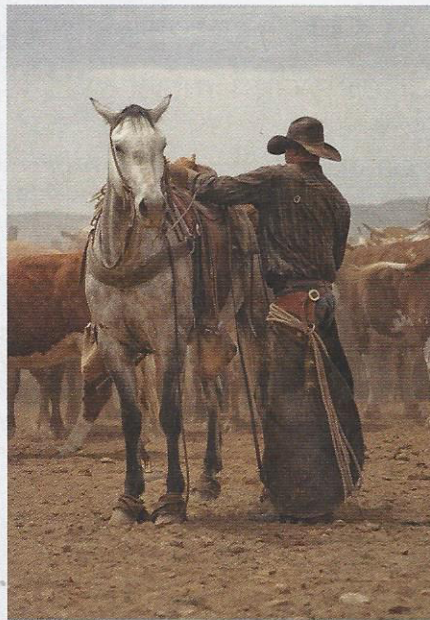
TOM CLEARY has been employed at H. Malcolm Grimmer Antique American Indian Art of Santa Fe, New Mexico, for five years. As the director, he has been involved in the buying, selling and appraising of high-end antique Native American Indian art. He has also written articles and produced catalogs on Native American Indian art, including *The Sheridan Pages: At the Heart of the Southern Cheyenne Warrior* (2014), *The Macnider Ledger Book: Coloring the Plains* (2013) and *BraveArt: The Emergence of Tribal Style on the Plains* (2006). A graduate of Colorado College with high distinction in Art History, Cleary also has worked for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, New York, and the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C.

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To find out how to submit your own item to our experts, look on page 6.

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