COLLECTING LEDGER ART

EARLY LEDGER ART PORTRAYS RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE ON THE FRONTIER, WHILE ITS CONTEMPORARY PIECES TELL MORE MODERN STORIES WITH SIMILAR THEMES.

By Kimberly Field

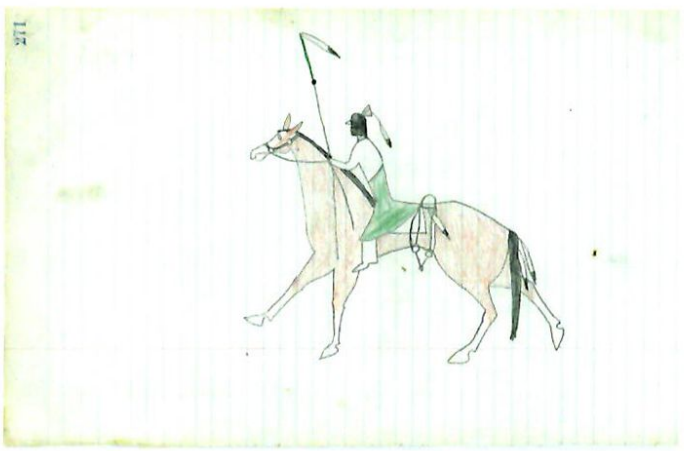
IMAGINE A COMPLETE FOLIO OF LEDGER ART—PLAINS INDIAN DRAWINGS ON OLD financial ledgers—as a form of 19th-century social media. You page through the drawings, or individual "postings," of daring acts, romantic exploits, pictures of friends and family, and personal accounts of pivotal events. Other artists join in, "sharing" their own perspectives.

But while social media is ubiquitous, antique Indian art is rare, and authentic ledgers are highly coveted. They speak—with an immediacy and intimacy—to a poignant time in American history, a time when the great herds of buffalo were disappearing, and the proud tribes that once ruled the Plains were being relegated to reservations. "Early ledger art is a first-person narrative of history in the West," says Henry Monahan, director of Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe. "It says, 'I was there and this is what happened.'"

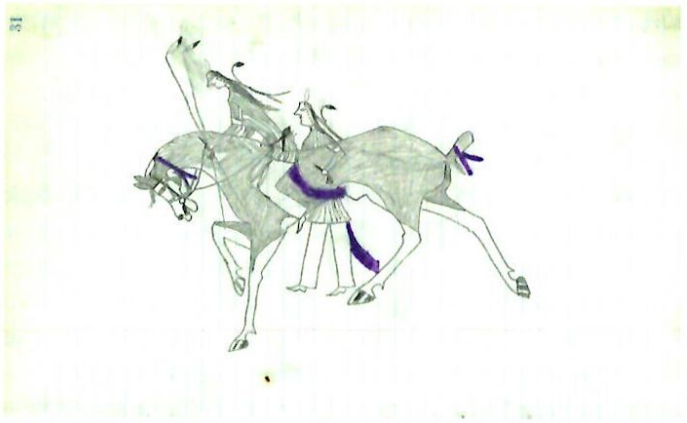
The earliest examples were done primarily by artists for their own use. But their drawings soon became a source of income. "Commercialization of ledger art starts with the Fort Marion artists. It's a process of the non-Indian world appropriating Indian art as trophies and souvenirs," says Ross Frank, associate professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, San Diego, and director of the Plains Indian Ledger Art project.

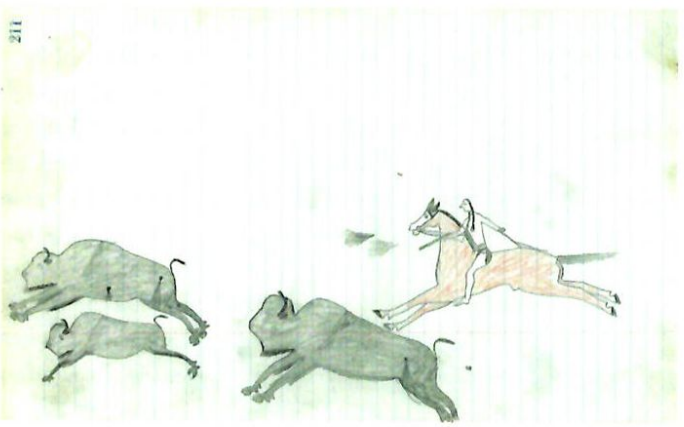
Interest in ledger art crosses several genres, appealing to collectors of Native arts, Americana, and Western history. "It's picking up momentum, accessing bigger artistic collecting spheres, and elevating into a more substantial platform," says Tom Cleary, director of H. Malcolm Grimmer Antique American Indian Art in Santa Fe. "Collectors are drawn to it because they can connect with it on a visceral level."

Established collectors tend toward the earlier materials, which can command six figures. They may be interested in specific tribes, military campaigns, or notable figures such as Red Cloud or Sitting Bull. "Collectors of works on paper appreciate the economy of line," Monahan says. "There's no frame of reference, no landscape of mountains and trees. Yet it tells an emotional story." *(continued on page 97)*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Courting: Man in Black Blanket, Woman in Blue Blanket, and Cheperone in Blue Dress* by Hagetta (Wild Hog) from The Wild Hog Ledger. *A Mounted Masked Warrior* by unknown artist, probably Jaw from The Amidon Ledger. *Hunting Buffalo* by unknown artist, probably Jaw from The Amidon Ledger. *Hunting: Man on Blue Horse Lances Elk Bull; Hunting: Man on Red Horse Lances Elk Bull* by Hagetta (Wild Hog) from The Wild Hog Ledger. *Two Comrades* by unknown artist, probably Jaw from The Amidon Ledger.





A CASE OF COLLECTING

A ledger drawing done by Lakota warrior Crow Dog while imprisoned in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, is a case study in the many aspects of early ledger art that experts and collectors must consider.

It might be an expression of boredom, a Lakota prisoner's drawing in a notebook while sitting in jail in Deadwood awaiting the trial that finally arrived in March 1882. But it is also authentic ledger art, and an example of why museums and Western art collectors covet pieces by warrior artists who lived the last days of the American frontier and drew their accomplishments on paper.

"That's the most collectible of anything... very expensive," says Western art dealer James Aplan of James O. Aplan Antiques & Art in Piedmont, South Dakota. A good example, Aplan says, is that picture the warrior Crow Dog drew in that Deadwood jail. There is Crow Dog, riding right to left across the picture to drive his lance into a fleeing warrior who carries a carbine. Crow Dog is easily recognized because of the glyph or sign that identifies him—a crow on top of a dog, trailing somewhat behind and above the rider as though tethered by a string.

Crow Dog, a Brulé Lakota, was facing trial for killing another Brulé, Spotted Tail, at the time he drew the picture. He was eventually convicted, sentenced to be hanged, and then released on appeal in a landmark case about jurisdiction and tribal sovereignty. In the past, some mistakenly viewed his Deadwood drawing as depicting the fight with Spotted Tail. Darrel Nelson, exhibits director for Deadwood History, says that's not the case. It's just an incident that came out on paper when a girl named Estella, the daughter of Demetrius Billington, the jailer, loaned the prisoner a notebook.

"My understanding is that the jailer's daughter, this Billington, let Crow Dog draw in her little album," Nelson says. "I also understand, unlike what was previously thought, the drawing does not refer to him killing Spotted Tail. It's another incident. But it's clearly Crow Dog. There's him and here's his little image floating behind him. It's some other situation, but it's absolutely his work."

The Crow Dog piece is in the Deadwood Days of '76 Museum now because Estella, the jailer's daughter, donated the notebook to help preserve a crucial part of Deadwood history. Other pieces by Plains warriors found their way into collections nearly nationwide—including some from as early as the 1860s, when whites first recovered ledger books depicting warrior exploits from southern Plains battlefields.

When John R. Lovett Jr. and Donald L. DeWitt compiled their 1998 *Guide to Native American Ledger Drawings and Pictographs in United States Museums, Libraries, and Archives* there were examples of pictographic or ledger art in archives in 22 states west of the Mississippi and in 19 eastern states. That's surprisingly wide distribution, given that scholars consider only the Plains Indians to have produced ledger art in that period.

The Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives has the largest number of ledger drawings with approximately 2,000 pieces. When Lovett and DeWitt did their guide, some of the other sites unusually rich in ledger art included the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, with 634 drawings; the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with 457; the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, with 218; and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, with 204.

Scholars disagree about when that first flowering of ledger art ended. Lovett and DeWitt, when compiling their guide, used 1940 as a cutoff date, reasoning that art created after that would likely have been produced by artists too young to have experienced pre-reservation life.

Along with the name glyph that is often found on ledger art from frontier days, there are a few other markers collectors can look for on pre-1940 ledger art. "A majority of ledger drawings share common characteristics, such as a lack of perspective, and action scenes that usually move from right to left," DeWitt and Lovett write. "Ledger drawings are also egocentric in that the warrior-artist is nearly always the focus of the drawing's action." However, there's a wide range in artists' style, content, and quality, the two explain.

Because contemporary artists often use authentic ledgers from the late 1800s, collectors shopping for 19th-century ledger art will have to do their homework. Still, ledger art from the early period is out there for the collector who knows what to look for. —*Lance Nixon*

Drawing done by Crow Dog in jail while awaiting legal proceedings.

(continued from page 92)

SCENES OF THE TIMES

"The pre-1890 work portrays an Indian world that still existed. After 1890, artists are reminiscing about earlier times," PILA's Ross Frank says. "You find first-person accounts in the 1860s and pictures drawn by actual warriors. Later battle scenes are likely done by Indian scouts or individuals employed by the U.S. government. The buffalo herds are gone from the northern Plains, but in southern Plains ledger art you still see local deer hunting along with antelope and turkey. You find more courting scenes and ceremonial depictions in the later work, partly because the people who owned the battle stories were passing away."

John P. Lukavic, associate curator of Native arts at the Denver Art Museum, agrees. "Conquests through love replaced conquests through warfare. While battle scenes were memories of the past, courting scenes were of the moment." Drawings from the reservation period recount past greatness, depicting ancestors, war exploits from the artists' youth, and ceremonies that were prohibited on the reservation. "It was almost a form of cultural resistance."

Because of increased collector interest—and the *Antiques Roadshow* effect—more ledgers are coming to light. In 1985, two important ledgers were found at a local courthouse sale in Amidon, North Dakota. Many of the drawings were attributed to Jaw, a Hunkpapa Lakota artist.

Scholars prefer that ledger books remain intact, but many books are leafed out, with drawings sold individually. "Books rarely were done by one artist," Cleary says. "There is growing interest in trying to understand how these books were conceived as entire volumes, and why certain drawings are in certain places. They didn't come together haphazardly." Cleary's gallery presented works from the Amidon ledger at a selling exhibition at the Heard Museum in February 2017, but the ledger books were digitized by the Plains project and will be available for public viewing online. Ledgers are to be offered for sale again August 15–18 at the Antique American Indian Art Show in Santa Fe.

Space constraints and light sensitivities prevent institutions from permanently displaying their collections. But many of the finest ledger art examples are now accessible online, including hundreds of high-resolution images from the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, and PILA.

NEW TAKES ON THE OLD TRADITION

Contemporary artists working on antique ledger papers hark back to historical art, but more often than not, they choose to depict modern Native life. They're continuing the conversation with an expanded lexicon, and sometimes with biting social and political commentary. Dwayne "Chuck" Wilcox (Oglala Lakota) uses satire and irony in humorous works that hold a mirror to how modern Indians are imagined in works with titles such as *Wow! Full Blooded White People!* In Terrance Guardipee's (Blackfeet) signature collages, vividly rendered warriors on horseback race across ledgers layered with antique checks and ration cards atop colorful, modern maps, and railroad advertisements.

Women artists are pushing cultural boundaries in this art form historically reserved for men. Dolores Purdy (Caddo) began making ledger art when she learned that a relative had been held at Fort Marion in 1875. Her unabashedly commercial work combines pop, psychedelia, and wry visual commentaries on pre-20th century paper. Linda Haukaas (Sicangu Lakota) uses historical Lakota motifs in her drawings. Like many contemporary ledger artists, she has expanded the medium to include beadwork and other materials.

The contemporary ledger market is just as robust as that of antique drawings; however, prices tend to be lower for contemporary works. Working artists show at Indian markets and powwows across the West.

A COLLECTOR'S DILEMMA

Dr. Thomas Jacobsen has a magnificent collection of 22 ledger drawings passed down from his great-aunt Mary C. Collins, who worked as a missionary from 1885 to 1910 on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. "They gave her the name Winona. She never married, and stayed for 25 years," Jacobsen says. "Sitting Bull even adopted her into the tribe." Collins offered the Sioux paper, pencils, and paints when they visited the mission, and she kept the pictures they drew. Her collection passed down through the family, coming to Dr. Jacobsen after his father's death in the 1960s.

It's a familiar story: No one in the family was really aware of the art. "My brother gave me a manila folder with the pictures because he knew I was interested in that kind of thing." They've hung on Jacobsen's walls for decades. "I look at them every day."

The images are spectacular, depicting warriors and horses on the battlefield. In one scene, a Sioux warrior chases a cavalry rider carrying a flag, which is shown flying upside down. "The artist himself survived and lived to draw it," Jacobsen muses. The pictures are both exciting and personal. "The artists took time drawing these. They wanted these stories told."

Jacobsen wants the collection kept intact and displayed—preferably on a family member's wall. However, none of his children or grandchildren can do so. "I don't want these to sit in a filing cabinet somewhere," he says. And that's a common problem for owners of family collections. Museums eschew accepting collections with stipulations on how the pieces will be used. Even the largest institutions lament the lack of acquisition budgets.

Ross Frank hopes to digitize the collection for PILA, so the pictures Winona's friends created for her may continue to enthrall viewers online for years to come.