Exploring the legacy of American Plains Indians ledger drawings, an art form weighted by tragedy

James Adams
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"It's very complicated." Ross Frank was on the phone the other day trying to explain, concisely, cogently, the "difficult history" of Plains Indian ledger drawings and how it couldn't be anything but complicated when the subject is a cultural phenomenon informed by unequal parts subjugation, resistance, acculturation, appropriation, admiration, creativity and, yes, beauty.

An associate professor of ethnic studies at the University of California San Diego and director of the La Jolla-based Plains Indian Ledger Art Project, Frank is in the forefront of an effort to study, preserve and make available the riches of the mostly 19th-century art form. The illustrations were usually done on lined pages and in prosaic paper ledger books used to record, say, a merchant's spending, or the disbursal of hardtack from a U.S. Army supply depot in Wyoming. Other ledgers might have contained the accounts of an Indian agent on a reservation in Nebraska, or, more sinisterly, the target practice scores of U.S. cavalrymen circa 1874 as they trained to subdue the Cheyenne, Kiowa and the other First Nations they believed were impeding the realization of America's so-called Manifest Destiny.

Sioux Medicine Men, attributed to Howling Wolf, Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1875, ink, pencil and watercolour on paper. (All photos by John Bigelow Taylor/Courtesy TrépanierBaer Gallery)

PILA was founded by Frank in 1995 to promote the preservation of, research on and public accessibility to these palimpsest-like metaphors of cultural collision, largely, in recent years, through high-resolution digitization of ledger books and pages. Yet as this has been occurring, ledger drawings not housed in public collections or in institutions such as PILA have become hot commodities in the art market. Be they intact ledger books or individual renderings, the most vivid and artful depictions of First Nations' history, life and rituals can now fetch tens of thousands of dollars each, and sometimes more.

Unsurprisingly, there is intensifying commercial pressure to break up books and sell their contents page by page, thereby short-circuiting any possibility of them being studied and understood as whole entities. While no one, not even First Nation peoples, argues that ledger art can't be sold – for one thing, they're not swathed in the religious significance accorded, say, sacred bundles – much more research needs to be done. Faced with the both the anarchy and logic of the market, Frank sees one of his primary jobs these days as "sensitizing people" to the issues.

Sheridan Pages (Sundance), Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1885, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

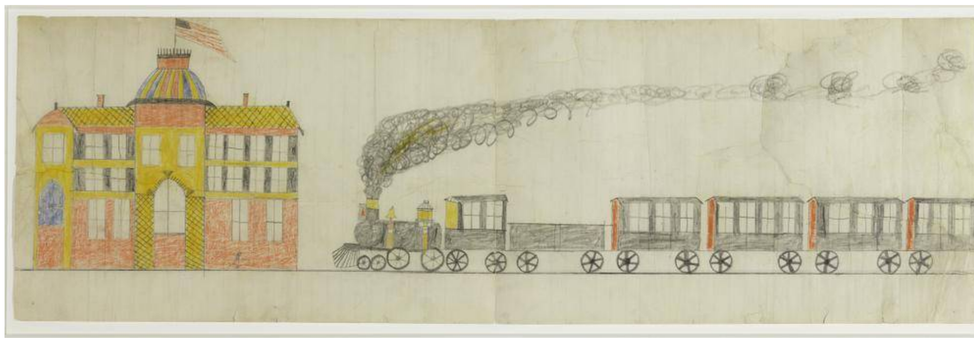
It was this sense of mission and, of course, expertise that recently brought Frank to Calgary's TrépanierBaer Gallery as guest speaker at the opening of "Keeping Time: Ledger Drawings and the Pictographic Traditions of Native North Americans ca. 1820-1900." For TrépanierBaer, which typically showcases contemporary artists such as Evan Penny and Chris Cran, it's an unprecedented exhibition and sale. The quality of work available is impressive – there are almost 70 ledger drawings by Sioux, Hidatsa, Arapaho and Cheyenne artists, with prices ranging from $8,500 to $95,000, plus 20 or so related objects. They include a pair of 1880 painted Cheyenne parfleche rawhide bags, and a painted Crow shield and cover from 1870, made of buffalo hide and deerskin which are selling for $175,000. It's the single largest assembly of ledger art ever offered for purchase.

Most of the works are from the collection of the respected Canadian tribal-art dealer Donald Ellis, who operates out of New York. Ellis is perhaps most famous for shepherding the return of the Dundas Collection to Canada from the U.K. in 2006. (The collection's 40 artifacts, from B.C.'s Tsimshian First Nation, were acquired under murky circumstances in 1863 by Anglican prelate R.J. Dundas.)

Sheridan Pages (page 39), Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1885, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

While Ellis has had a long-standing interest in ledger drawings, what really galvanized his engagement was seeing the now-epochal 1996 exhibition "Plains Indian Drawings 1865-1935: Pages from a Visual History" at Manhattan's Drawing Center. (It came to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1997.) Here was a fresh, little-known graphic art tradition. "Exotic," to be sure. One that seemed to offer "the other side" of the victory narrative found in the paintings of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, yet whose best works had the colour sense of a Dufy or Vlaminck, the graphic economy and rhythmic dynamism of a Matisse.

"It set the New York art world on its ear," Ellis recalled recently of the show, which drew big crowds and rave notices from the critics. "So I've been sort of quietly, actively working with a few major collectors, building their collections and at the same holding back drawings with the idea of doing a much larger presentation on a commercial level, rather than a museum level."



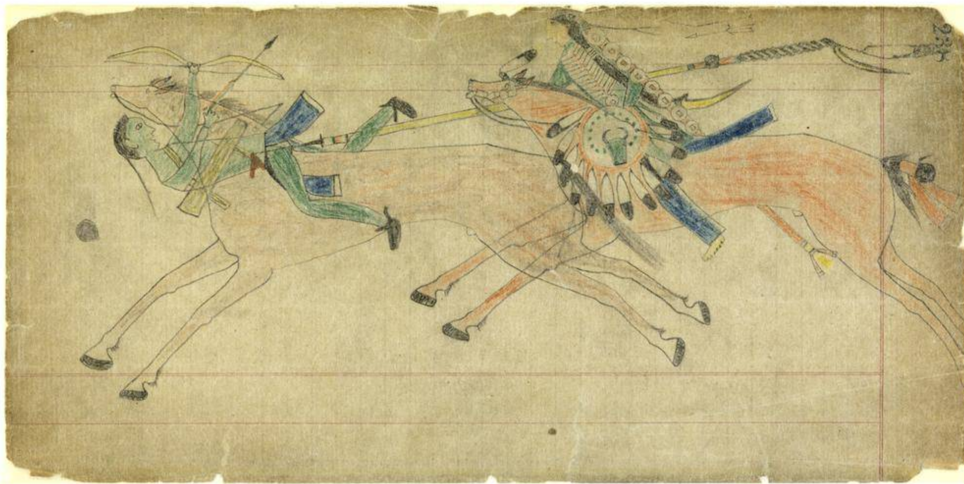
Fort Marion Ledger page, Cheyenne, ca. 1870, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

The drawings at TrépanierBaer, mostly 14 or 22 cm by 29 cm, are flavoured with the same bittersweetness tasted (and remarked upon) by visitors to the Drawing Center show. It's true their depictions of courtship rituals, dancing and hunting, horseback riding, camp life and combat are a continuation of a rich artist-historian tradition among Plains Indian tribes. But for all that these works represent what ledger art historian Janet Catherine Berlo calls a "great flowering of graphic arts on the Great Plains of North America," they are also telling documents of a culture under severe duress.

THE ORIGINS

Before the American Civil War (1861-1865), the imagistic rendering of significant events among Plains Indians largely involved the application of pigments made from minerals, plants and soils on the stretched hides of buffalo and other wild animals. Post-war, this tradition was ruptured as whites of various stripes – soldiers, settlers, adventurers, prospectors, whisky traders and government bureaucrats – gazed firmly westward and, for the next 35 years, proceeded to attack, sack and debilitate aboriginal societies, eviscerate buffalo herds, swarm sacred sites, violate treaties and drive formerly nomadic bands onto confined reservations. Faced with this aggression and displacement, Plains Indian artist-historians switched to a new, non-native, decidedly more convenient medium, the ledger book,

variously bought, received as a gift, stolen or scavenged from the whites they were encountering.



Vincent Price Ledger Book (page 238), ca. 1875-78, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

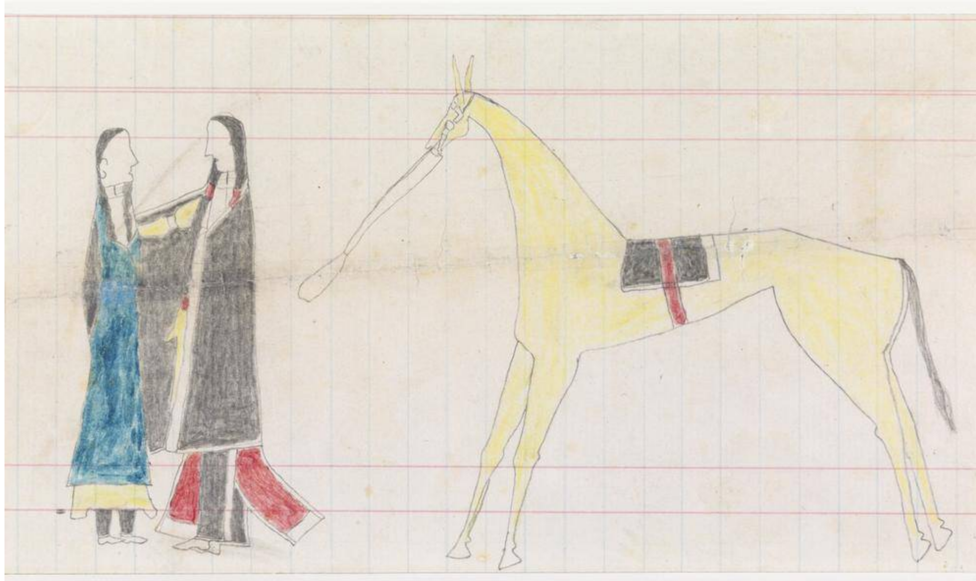
A salient example of the phenomenon would be the so-called High Bull roster book of drawings, now in the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Originally the property of a sergeant in the U.S. 7th Cavalry, the book listed the best marksmen in his company, among other records. In late June of 1876, the sergeant was one of hundreds who lost their lives at the famous Battle of the Little Bighorn in what is now southeastern Montana. The roster book was taken from the sergeant's body by the Northern Cheyenne warrior High Bull who, with other Cheyenne, drew over the records with graphite and crayons. Five months later, the book was back in white hands after High Bull himself was killed in another battle with cavalry. From there, Frank speculates, the book "may have been purchased a few times" before ending up in the possession of the wealthy author/suffragist/peace activist Grace Hoffman White, who donated it to the original Museum of the American Indian in New York in 1925.

Paradoxes abound in the "great flowering" that was ledger art. Though it may have been a symbol of an invasive, destructive culture, "paper, when it came, gave more opportunity to different people to draw, rather than just the tribal few," a First Nations' artist remarked. "So you saw things that weren't done before, like courtship rituals … the soap opera of the day." Aboriginal scouts, hired by the U.S. cavalry, also made drawings in ledger books, sometimes giving or selling their narratives of present and past history to their white employers, who, in turn, would bring them home as souvenirs of their participation in the Indian wars.

Detail of Chief Killer among the turkeys on the Canadian River, c. 1875-80, graphite, crayon, coloured pencil on paper

One of the most illustrious profusions of ledger art didn't even occur on the Plains, but in a military prison on the Atlantic coast of Florida. Following the conclusion of the Red River War of 1874-75, close to 75 Plains Indian warriors and chiefs, mostly Cheyenne and Kiowa, were sent by rail to Fort Marion, near St. Augustine, after being deemed "murderers" by military court. Of these, 20 or so were given unlined paper, crayons, pencils, ink and paint, and for the next three years they churned out a voluminous number of drawings, many of them bought by tourists to the region. TrépanierBaer is selling at least eight drawings with a Fort Marion connection, including six especially striking works attributed to the Cheyenne warrior Howling Wolf (1849-1927), one of the most proficient and sought-after ledger artists.

"He clearly loved what he did. There's such attention to every aspect of art-making, from the paper it's drawn on to the colours used, how things are rendered, the subject matter. Extraordinary, really," says Yves Trépanier, co-proprietor of the Calgary gallery.



Courtship scene, Sheridan Pages (page 38), Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1885, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

Attribution of ledger art, it should be noted, is fraught and slippery. Frank observes some Fort Marion artists did write their names on some of their work because they were being taught to write and read English. Moreover, most of the Fort Marion drawings in the Calgary sale have inscriptions in English written by the fort's commander, Capt. Richard Pratt.

However, Candace Greene, an ethnologist at the Smithsonian Institution, noted in a recent e-mail: "We know that many inscriptions [found on ledger art generally] are incorrect." What does "count for a 'signature' in ledger art," says Frank, "is a system of 'name glyphs' that hover above the heads of figures" in the drawings. But not all ledger drawings have them (most, in fact, do not); and sometimes a glyph represents both the figure in the drawing and the artist, but other times not.

Cheyenne at Home, attributed to Howling Wolf, Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1875, ink, pencil and watercolour on paper

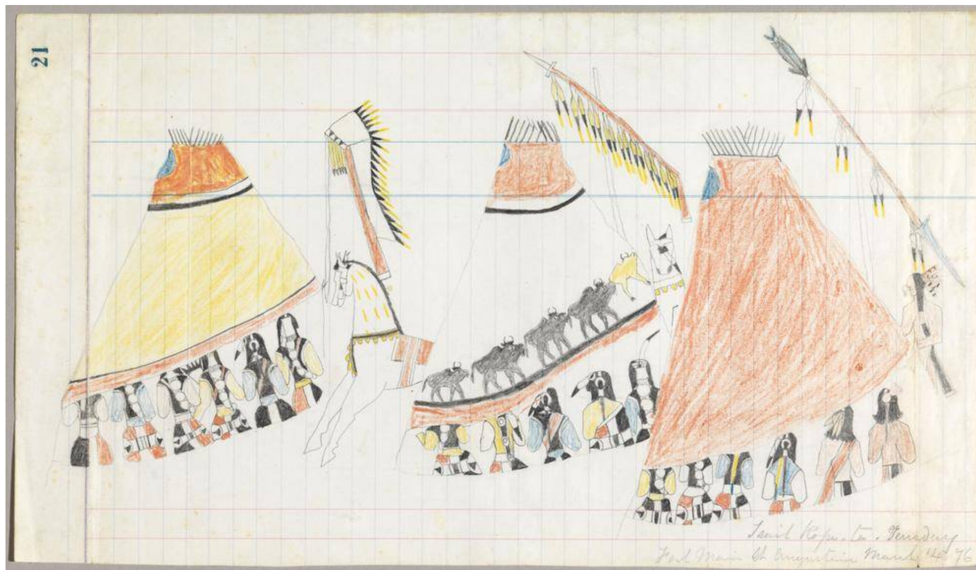
Connoisseurship of a kind is a factor, too: For example, University of New Mexico historian Joyce Szabo, author of Howling Wolf and the History of Ledger Art (1994), thinks a case can be made that the Fort Marion drawings in Calgary are from the hand of another distinguished Cheyenne warrior, Chief Killer, whereas Trépanier and Ellis, among others, hold for Howling Wolf.

It’s been argued that works such as the Fort Marion drawings are “products” of a people in exile and therefore are “tainted” and less “authentic” than the by-natives/for-natives works done prior to incarceration or confinement on reservations. Despite this reality, Joyce Szabo writes in Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage (2011),“nothing suggests that any of the men was forced to draw … The men known to have made these images had to want to do so.”

Cheyenne Medicine Lodge, attributed to Howling Wolf, Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1875, ink, pencil and watercolour on paper

Admittedly, Fort Marion's overarching agenda was one of acculturation: Capt. Pratt liked to say his job was to "kill the Indian, save the man," and to that end Howling Wolf and his fellow inmates had their hair shorn and traditional garb removed. Yet at the same time, according to Szabo, "an atmosphere existed that encouraged the creation of drawings and inspired experimentation."

Adds Frank: "In every case that we know of of what might be called 'patronage' of ledger art, it was unlike, for example, trading posts in the Navajo territories when trading-post folks would say, 'Do this design' … This didn't happen in ledger art. Even when prisoners were in jail or commissioned to fill out a sketch-book album, they were allowed to do whatever came to them. The interest of the people commissioning them was to get the authentic Indian production."

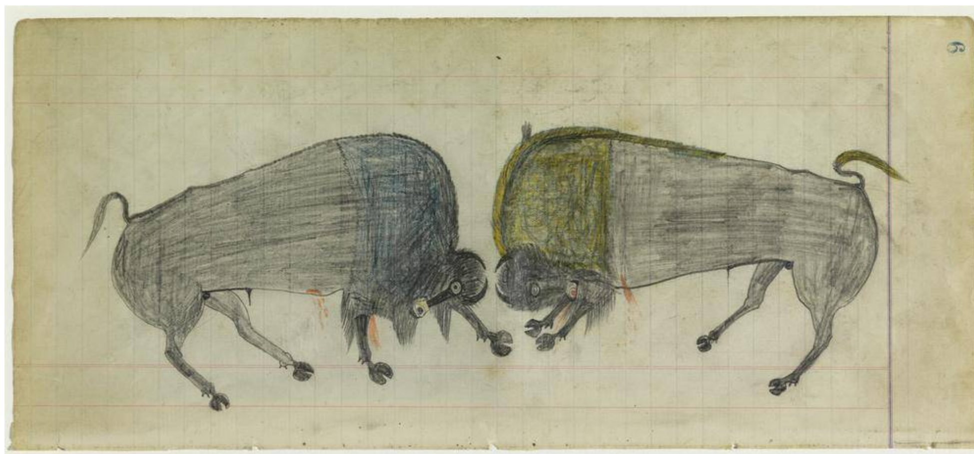


Tsaitkopeta (Bear Mountain), Cheyenne/Pawnee/Kiowa, ca. 1876, Fort Marion drawing, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

And the results, more often than not, were pictures that display what New York Times critic Holland Cotter, in his 1996 review of the Drawing Center show, described as "a shrewd, bitter, dogged impulse to perpetuate the realities of Indian life, both as longed-for past and often grim but resilient present."

COMMERCE VS. PRESERVATION

Today, the big issue about ledger drawings has less to do with how much coercion was involved in their creation or what compensation their creators received, and more with maintaining, as Ellis says, "the integrity of the full ledger book."



Henderson Ledger Book (page 6), Arapaho, ca. 1880, coloured pencil and watercolour on lined paper

Almost from their initial transfer to private hands from aboriginal, these books have, in many instances, been broken up and their individual pages

scattered. One example involves the late movie star Vincent Price, who in the 1950s acquired a ledger book with more than 100 Cheyenne and Arapaho drawings purportedly done in the late 1870s. Price apparently kept the book intact for decades – but then, sometime in the 1980s as the commercial value of single drawings rose, he allowed the book to be unbound and individual pages sold. Five illustrations (including one double-sided drawing) from Vincent Price Ledger Book, as it's called, are in the TrépanierBaer exhibition/sale. Fortunately, four have been scanned for PILA's digital archives, part of a PILA initiative calling on all the owners of original Price pages to submit an image or images to permit the book's reconstruction online.

Ellis, meanwhile, has been working on a project to "rebuild" some of the actual ledger books dismantled during the 1980s and 1990s. And, to prevent any further dismemberment, the dealer and a "very serious major Canadian client," unnamed, is letting it be known they're prepared "to pay a premium for full books." It's an ethos shared by a U.S. private foundation, also unnamed, which recently acquired a complete book of 140 drawings called the Sheridan Ledger, for donation to PILA.

U.S. Cavalry skirmish line, Vincent Price Ledger Book (page 111/recto), ca. 1875-78, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

(Sheridan is John L. Sheridan, brother of Gen. Philip Sheridan, who oversaw the "pacification" of the Plains Indians, declaring, according to some accounts, that "the only good Indians I saw were dead" – a remark subsequently "translated" into white popular culture as "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." John, a lawyer and land agent, acquired ledger art during visits to forts in Oklahoma in the late 1870s. Another batch of his drawings, 40 in total, torn from an unknown ledger book, are called the Sheridan Pages; 26 are for sale at TrépanierBaer. PILA has obtained permission to digitally archive the Sheridan Pages.)

Given the fraught history of ledger drawings, you might think the genre would be anathema to contemporary aboriginals. But in fact artists, men and women such as Michael Horse, Terrance Guardipee and Sheridan MacKnight, continue the tradition by drawing and painting not just in old ledger books

but on sheet music, maps, cheques, government documents, boarding-school records and hymnals.

Fight scene, Vincent Price Ledger Book (page 111/verso), ca. 1875-78, coloured pencil and graphite on lined paper

Horse, a Yaqui/Mescalero Apache/Zuni who also acts in film and TV and collects ledger art, showed up at the opening of Keeping Time last month and was “very impressed” by what he saw. “Very seldom you actually see that many really good pieces of ledger art,” he said. Speaking the other day from his home near San Francisco, Horse likened ledger art to the blues, another art form born of suffering and repression yet attesting to survival, preservation, resistance. “Imagine you’re a free person, you have no boundaries, only where the wind takes you and the buffalo. And all of a sudden, in just a few years, somebody draws a little square and says to you, ‘You can’t go out of there’ … When people see ledger art sometime, even people who aren’t collectors of native art, they know something’s going on here. Yeah, it’s a lot like the blues.”

Keeping Time: Ledger Drawings and the Pictographic Traditions of Native North American ca. 1820-1900 continues at TrépanierBaer Gallery in Calgary through Aug. 16.