

The Armory Show | Donald Ellis Gallery: Plains Indian Ledger Drawings 1865–1900

An elegant, eloquent elegy to America's tragic past, as told by the people who lived through it, reminds us that the truth will always emerge.



by Miss Rosen

Mar 3rd, 2016

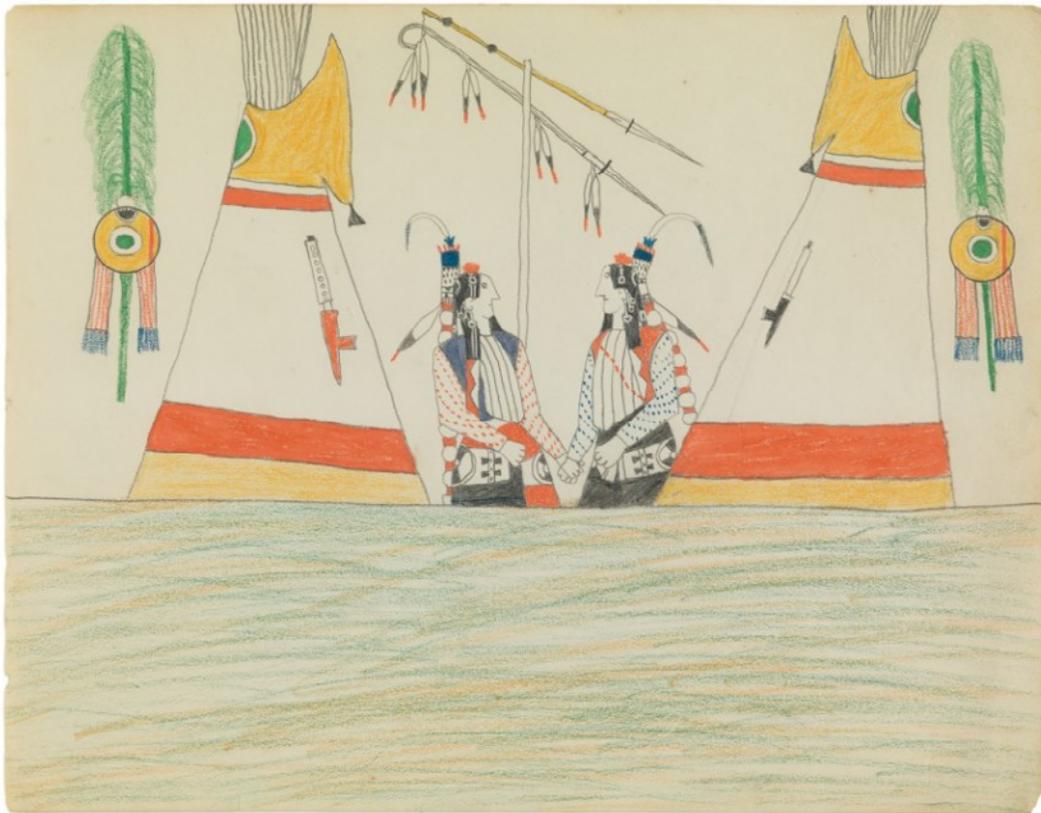


Macnider Ledger Book (page 208) . Sioux. ca. 1880, graphite and coloured pencil on lined paper, width:14 ½", height: 5 ¾". The Macnider Ledger Book is an important discovery in the field of Plains ledger art following its discovery at a local courthouse auction over 130 years after it was produced.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the American West was transformed into a mythical landscape, a wide open frontier of flora and fauna populated by a native race that was all that stood between newly-arriving American dreams of Manifest Destiny. Many had the idea that they were pioneers, making a “discovery,” and in doing so a new era came to pass. Herds of buffalo were systematically exterminated and native peoples were forced on to reservations. In brief, America effectively began to erase itself.

Historically speaking, the term “Plains Indians” refers to tribal groups originating in the vast grasslands lying between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River, including the Lakota, Cheyenne, Crow, Blackfoot, and Comanche, among others. Rich with traditions of oral and pictorial histories, the Plains Indians told their story as the environment demanded. The earliest records show petroglyphs and pictographic painting on rock walls; later they embellished buffalo hide tipi covers, shields, and personal garments with scenes bearing witness to major events. After the buffalo disappeared, they began to work on muslin, canvas, and commercial prepared hides, as well as on pages from lined accounting ledgers made widely available to Plains Indians peoples in the reservation period, roughly after 1860.

A selection of these artworks is currently on view at **Donald Ellis Gallery**, New York (Booth #238). This is the gallery’s first time at The Armory Show, and is indicative of an rising interest of the Plains Indian ledger drawings (1865-1900). Ellis, who established his gallery in 1976, is considered the foremost dealer of historical Native American art. He remembers his first encounter with ledger drawings was in 1996 at an exhibition at the Drawing Center. He recalls, “It set New York on its ear. People flipped out. That planted the seed. I consider this one of the most important aspects of American art history.”



Attributed to Bears Heart (Nokkoist) b. 1851 d. 1882. Southern Cheyenne. Executed at Fort Marion ca. 1875-78. watercolour, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, width: 11 1/4", height: 8 5/8".

For the past two decades, Ellis has acquired an incredible collection of works that tell the story of the Plains Indians during one of the most horrific eras in their history. The works begin around 1850, before the reservation period begins. Here we witness the last moments of freedom and celebrate the glories of a people who lived one with the land. These are elegant, eloquent elegies of a way of life that has been all but disappeared but for these artworks.

Just a few years later, everything has changed and the Plains Indians were being taken to the reservations. This is where the ledger drawings begin and the story they tell is one that is in equal parts harrowing and horrific as it is a story of the powerful heroism of America's first people. Each drawing is a story told in a single image, spellbinding in its ability to distill the essence of the moment in line, color, and shape. The essential nature of the form, combined with the stark moments it commemorates, makes each ledger drawing a force of nature. Individually they are icons; taken together, the booth becomes a shrine, poignantly standing independently of everything else at the show. So compelling is each image, it is easy to forget there's an entire fair of people all around.



Sheridan Ledger (page 5). Southern Cheyenne, ca. 1885, graphite and coloured pencil on lined paper, width: 11 ¾, height: 5 ¼". Collected at Camp Supply, Oklahoma, in the 1880's, by John L. Sheridan (1837-1898), a lawyer and certified land registrar, and brother of General Philip Sheridan (1831-1888), who led military campaigns against Southern Plains Indian and other tribes.

Ellis is dedicated to the cause of elevating Native American art to the pantheon, ensuring it receives the same level of attention, respect, and honor befitting the legacy it represents. In addition to its significance as an artifact of American history, Native American art has influenced modern art since the beginning of the twentieth century, captivating and influencing Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, and Pop artists including Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and Barnett Newman.

When gazing upon the drawings there is something instantly recognizable, almost uncanny. There's a sense that these images have been waiting to make their appearance on the world stage. Ellis first showed the ledger drawings at Frieze Masters in 2014, and the response was greater than anything he had seen in his forty years of trade. It is as if the ledger drawings are able to connect us with the ineffable miracle that exists deep within tragedy, that here is a force of goodness, truth, and justice that will emerge and be victorious.

All artwork courtesy of Donald Ellis Gallery.

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of Clue. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.