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The Pencil is the Key

The Pencil is the Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists, on view through January 5, 2020, contains several ledger drawings.

In 1996, the Drawing Center in New York co-organized the exhibition Plains Indian Ledger Drawings, which raised public interest in the art form. Its current exhibition, The Pencil is the Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists, on view through January 5, 2020, contains several ledger drawings.



Attributed to Howling Wolf (Ho-na-ist-to) (Southern Cheyenne, 1849-1927), ledger drawing, Central Plains, ca. 1875, graphite and colored pencil on lined paper, 5 5/8 x 7"

Aniko Erdosi, director of Donald Ellis Gallery in New York, comments, “The exhibition examines the art of past and contemporary artists throughout the world who have experienced incarceration or who developed as artists while incarcerated. Donald Ellis Gallery is the proud lender of a group of important ledger drawings produced by Native Americans while imprisoned at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, from 1875 to 1878.”



Attributed to Bear's Heart (Nokkoist) (Southern Cheyenne, 1851-1882), ledger drawing, Central Plains, ca. 1875-78, watercolor, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 85/8 x 11¼"

Native American pictographic art was once painted on buffalo hides. As the buffalo herds were slaughtered and the availability of buffalo hides for painting diminished, warrior artists turned to drawing in ledger books originally used for record keeping by Anglo businessmen and the

government. Often, the pages still contained the bookkeeping entries. The artists acquired lead pencils, colored pencils and pens and continued to document their personal narratives in a changing world.

Howling Wolf (Ho-na-nist-to) (1849-1927) was a Southern Cheyenne warrior and one of the most important Plains artists. His father was Eagle Head, a warrior and council chief, who supported peaceful coexistence with the Anglos. In 1864, when Howling Wolf was about 15, his encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho was attacked by the Colorado militia at Sand Creek leaving more than 175 dead in what is now known as the Sand Creek Massacre. In 1875, he, his father and about 70 chiefs and warriors from several tribes were arrested by the federal government and incarcerated at Fort Marion.



Attributed to Howling Wolf (Ho-na-ist-to) (Southern Cheyenne, 1849-1927), Osage and Cheyenne Chiefs, Having Been Long at War Making Friends, ledger drawing, Central Plains, ca. 1875-78, ink, colored pencil and plaster on paper, 12½ x 15¾"

Often the prisoners were able to sell their drawings. Bear's Heart (Nokkoist) (1851-1882) sold one his drawings to a U.S. senator who had traveled to Fort Marion. The drawing is in the exhibition.

The Pencil is a Key contains about 140 drawings by imprisoned artists from around the globe. Featuring works produced over a roughly 200-year period, it includes work by Gustave Courbet who was imprisoned for his role in the Paris Commune uprising in 1871 as well as work by Ruth Asawa, caught up in the U.S. government's mass internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.



Attributed to Bear's Heart (Nokkoist) (Southern Cheyenne, 1851-1882), ledger drawing, Central Plains, ca. 1875-78, watercolor, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 85/8 x 11 1/4"



Attributed to Etahdleuh Doanmoe (Kiowa, 1856-1887), The Indians Coming from Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, to Hampton, VA April 1878, ledger drawing, Central Plains, ca. 1875-78, pencil, ink and watercolor on paper, 13 x 17"

The Drawing Center's executive director, Laura Hoptman, notes, "In this moment throughout our country and around the world, when all kinds of freedoms are being called into question, it seems to me that we could not have picked a more urgent topic than the ability of drawing to articulate our humanity and express our determination to be free, even in the most dire conditions." —