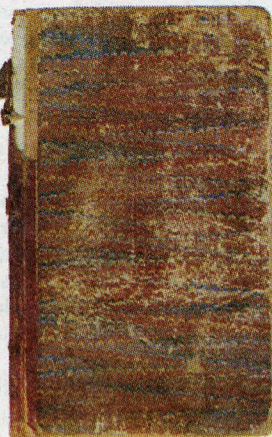


NOTES FROM ACADEME

PLAINS INDIAN MEN used to wear stories on their backs. Buffalo skins painted with the wearer's exploits in battle or the brave acts of his tribesmen were used to show status and displayed on ceremonial occasions. But beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, as the destruction of buffalo herds made hides scarce and Plains people were forced on to reservations, they began to use new materials to tell their stories. They drew with pencils and crayons on paper, often on the lined pages of ledgers obtained at trading posts or in raids.

The medium changed the message. Just as the tribes' own movements were now conscribed, artists were forced to



EWERS LEDGER, NORTHERN CHEYENNE
LATE 1870S-EARLY 1880S
COURTESY OF PRIVATE OWNER



SCARES THE ENEMY LEDGER, BRULE LAKOTA (ROSEBUD RESERVATION), 1882-83. COURTESY OF EDWIN AND DORENE LEATHERWOOD

Accounts of Indian Life



BLACK HAWK LEDGER, SAN ARC LAKOTA, 1880-81. COURTESY OF THE THAW COLLECTION, FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.

Above, two warriors steal four horses, indicated by horses' heads and footprints, and flee in a hail of bullets. Center and below, two of a series of sketches said to have been drawn by Black Hawk, chief medicine man of the Sioux, depicting a dream. In one, a group of men and women watch a sun dance. In the other, a war horse and his rider are transformed into dream figures by "spirit energy," represented by the red and blue lines.

find ways to render large movements onto a smaller surface, and developed a shorthand—four horseheads, for example, to show four stolen horses. And while hide art and early ledger art depicted battles, later drawings in ledgers, which could be shown more privately than buffalo skins, usually depicted domestic scenes: ceremonies, courtship, and rituals.

More than 200 such ledgers exist, according to Ross Frank, an associate professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at San Diego. But they have been scattered among various collections or even taken apart by dealers eager to cash in on the market for American Indian art. Mr. Frank is working to preserve the books and keep them intact. His Plains Indian Ledger Art Project creates digital reproductions of entire ledger books that scholars and the public can browse on a Web site.

"Things matter in terms of their context," says Mr. Frank. "The way drawings are arranged in a book may have larger ramifications that are simply lost when the book is split up."

"Some of the ledgers were drawn by one artist, some by several, but in all cases, the act of drawing was a communal one because the scenes depicted were communally recognized deeds," he says.

Much of the research done so far on the ledger drawings has been an effort to identify ethnological elements, such as the dress, decoration, and weapons depicted. Scholars are just beginning to form larger questions, Mr. Frank says, about the significance for the tribe of a dream sequence, for example, or the larger meaning within tribal cosmology of symbols marked on a figure's body.

"These ledgers give rise to better questions, and someday to better answers," says Mr. Frank. "We've only scratched the surface."



COURTESY OF THE THAW COLLECTION, FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.

■ TO SEE MORE LEDGER ART, visit the project's Web site (<http://plainsledgerart.org>).