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MAY 2006
Volume 3, Number 2

FEATURES

Drawing on Tribal History by Inga Kiderra

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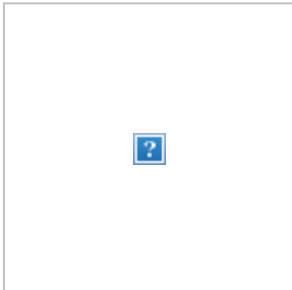
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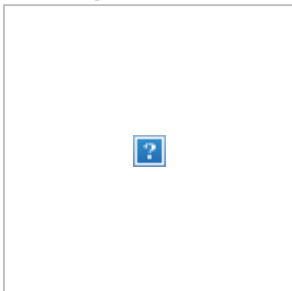
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Ross Frank was a teenager when he first saw the 19th-century ledger drawings of Plains Indians. These were three scenes of derring-do acquired by his art-dealer father. Two were drawn by a Lakota Sioux man named Swift Dog, who had fought at the Battle of the Little Big Horn as one of Sitting Bull's band. The third was by Red Hawk and was said to have been taken off a dead warrior at the massacre of Wounded Knee.

Then, as now, Frank was struck by the stories and by the beauty and immediacy of the drawings—responding with a gut-level “that’s cool.” Later, he would grow to appreciate the drawings’ historical significance. But what he found equally compelling was that they were in fact pages ripped out of a book, the disarticulated parts of a greater whole.



BLACK HAWK: A statement by the daughter of William Edward Caton, Indian trader at the Cheyenne Agency in Dakota, was bound into the book and recounts the events of 1880-8: “Black Hawk, Chief Medicine Man of the Sioux was in great straits that winter, having several squaws and numerous children dependent upon him. He had absolutely nothing, no food, and would not beg. Father knew his condition; he also knew that Black Hawk had had a wonderful dream. So he asked him to make pictures of the dream, offering to furnish paper and pencils, and to give him 50 cents in trade at the store for each sheet he brought in.” The book sold at Sotheby’s in 1994 for \$387,500.

For more than a decade now, Frank, 48, has been working to preserve Plains Indian ledger books intact. An associate

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"Ledger art is very good at communicating humanity."

professor of ethnic studies at UCSD and a specialist in Native American history and culture, Frank has been building a virtual, public collection of the endangered books through the Plains Indian Ledger Art (PILA) Project.

Ledger drawing flowered in the northern and southern Great Plains from about 1860 to 1900. A transitional art form, it corresponds to and was partly shaped by the destruction of the buffalo herds and the forced relocation of tribes to reservations.

Lakota, Cheyenne, Kiowa and other Plains Indians known for their pictographic artistry turned to new materials in the middle of the 19th century. They switched from bone and stick brushes to pencils, crayons and occasionally watercolors, and from the now-scarce buffalo hide to muslin and paper. They sometimes used sketchpads, but most often standard-issue ledgers, lined accounting books that could be readily obtained from traders and Indian agents or taken as booty during raids.

Ledger drawing initially continued in the established pictorial convention of painting on buffalo skins. The exclusive province of men, these were public records of male achievement and focused on feats of daring and valiance, battles and sacred visions. The drawings were a way for a man to attain status, Frank explains, simultaneously “building and validating the power and stature of both the individual and the tribe.” The stories—both the original experiences and their depictions—were treasured and owned, Frank says, in much the same way that a piece of property is owned and can be passed on to a relative.

The style and themes of the drawings changed as the old ways of life disappeared—and with them, Frank says, the traditional avenues of male accomplishment. Scenes began more often to depict hunting, ceremonies, courtship and the minutiae of daily doings.



Candace Greene, an ethnologist with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, has been studying Plains Indian ledgers for more than 25 years. She notes that the range of themes extended beyond warfare in part because the ledgers were a more private medium. What’s on buffalo hide—on a robe, say, and quite literally on your back—your mom-in-law might see, Greene points out.

But you could show your book to whomever you chose.

“A lot of behavior that previously had been taking place only in verbal ways took pictorial expression,” Greene says. “Success with the ladies” crops up as a theme. And jokes, both sly and slapstick, make a frequent appearance.

Whether driven solely by the tragic settlement of tribes in reservations or in combination with the relative privacy afforded by books, the expanded repertoire of ledger art makes for a remarkable testament.

The drawings hold a tremendous amount of information, Frank says. They are rich with detail (sometimes down to the make and model of U.S. Cavalry guns), which researchers can use to corroborate or, more critically, disrupt and enlarge the standard Anglo narrative.

Even though some of the drawings were made while the men were held in prisons or re-education schools and some were produced with the explicit intent of trading for money or other necessities, they were by and large created from within the culture and for native use. The ledger books recorded history from an Indian point of view during a time when most Plains peoples were still not literate.

“We’re often told indigenous people don’t have their own history—but [in the ledgers] that’s obviously not true,” Frank says. “Ledger art tells you very clearly: It’s always been more complicated.”

The ledgers also powerfully contradict stereotypes. The humor evident in some of the drawings—falling off a horse, for example, or being shot in a non-heroic place—challenges the image of the Stoic Indian. As Candace Greene puts it, “Ledger art is very good at communicating humanity.”

Tom Haukaas, a contemporary Lakota Sioux artist who has been part of the recent revival in ledger-style drawing, agrees. There’s been a longstanding public hunger for the testosterone-driven tale “and a market for anything that looked of war,” Haukaas says, and while some of the ledger drawings fit that description, others plainly do not.

One of the important features of Frank’s ledger work, says Haukaas, “is that it shows more of a totality—it shows us as human because it shows more aspects of our lives.”

The PILA Project had its beginnings in the summer of 1994, when art dealers at a Sotheby’s auction bought the Pamplin Cheyenne/Arapaho Ledger. Their intention was to resell it piecemeal, but before that could happen, Frank arranged for Denver’s Visual Information, Inc. to professionally scan the 94-page book cover to cover, free of charge. Then in October of the same year, another ledger came on the market—a bound volume of dream drawings, laid down in the harsh winter of 1880-81 by Black Hawk, chief medicine man of the Sioux. Again it appeared the book would be dismantled and so Frank arranged for it to be digitally preserved.

Both books, however, remained intact. But by scanning and then placing them online Frank has assured that they will always be accessible as complete ledgers, no matter what

happens to them.

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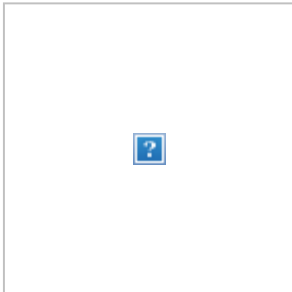
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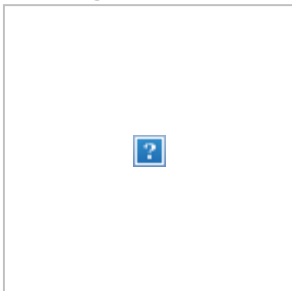
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The ledgers are paradoxically both too valuable and not valued enough. Made of cheap and fragile pulp, some books molder in the homes of unsuspecting inheritors. Some end up in the trash. (The Ewers Ledger, now part of the PILA database, was fished out of the rubbish bin by the son-in-law of an aging colonel.) When books do surface, they may be auctioned off whole for tens of thousands of dollars and end up in private hands. They could also be dispersed in the art market, where a single page can go for anything from \$1,000 to \$20,000.

“The project equalizes the playing field,” Haukaas emphasizes. “It allows people from all over, Indian and non-Indian, access to materials they wouldn’t otherwise have access to.”

The project also functions as a long-overdue lesson. “Native art,” Haukaas says, “is pretty foreign in its own country—Americans know more about Amish quilts than native art.”

A scholar and psychiatrist as well as artist, Haukaas also notes the ledgers “have great currency in Indian life”—serving not only as a “wellspring” of artistic inspiration, but also as “a source of cultural renewal.”

Frank estimates there are some 200 ledger books still extant. But because they are scattered throughout the U.S. in institutional and private collections, there are numerous logistical and organizational challenges to their study. The

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"A modern-day analogy to a ledger might be a blog; it has a single primary author but is often crucially supplemented by community inputs."

PILA Project aims to overcome these challenges and provides a simple interactive research platform for scholars of all stripes—from dedicated academics to drop-in tourists.

The project currently comprises 419 plates in eight ledger books, with many more books in various stages of preparation for display. The latest addition is the Zotom Ledger, which was produced by a Kiowa at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Fla., during the infamous, extralegal detention of 72 Plains Indians there from 1874 to 1878. These drawings are among those to first capture Indian impressions of Anglo culture.



Recently, the project has partnered with Robert Wright Gallery of Escondido, Calif., to sell museum-quality reproductions of the PILA ledger drawings. The reproductions are printed by the Indian-owned company, Hi Rez Digital Solutions, an outgrowth of another Frank project, the Tribal Digital Village. The limited-edition prints are also being sold on the PILA website and proceeds go back into the project.

Frank is also collaborating with Lynda Claassen, director of UCSD’s Mandeville Special Collections, on an application for National Endowment for the Humanities funding. He hopes to ensure the preservation of at least 40 more books.

The ledgers are not books in the familiar sense. They are mnemonic and symbolic devices, Frank says, for orally resuscitating the complex elements of an event. Entire stories are often encapsulated on a single page but it is still important to try and keep pages together.

“A page taken out of context doesn’t begin to tell you as much as the whole,” says Greene, of the Smithsonian, because the ledgers were shared among friends and the interaction of multiple artists is often represented in a single book. With as many seven different contributors, the Fort Reno ledger, Frank says, is a good example of this. Some of the drawings are clearly a kind of snickering commentary on others.

A modern-day analogy to a ledger might be a blog; it has a single primary author but is often crucially supplemented by community inputs. Preserving the ledger books is not only about saving an important historical voice, but potentially a whole conversation. ■

Inga Kiderra is with the UCSD University Communications Office



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