

Plains Indian Ledger Art: Pure Images for a Digital Age

By JAMIE ELLIN FORBES

The Plains Indian Ledger Books are being digitally formatted printed and preserved at Hi Rez Digital Solutions (hirezdigital.com) project of the Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association, in partnership with Hewlett-Packard's Digital Village program, and with UC San Diego and other partners (Plainsledgerart.org). This is an attempt to preserve the 200 known ledger books giving access to this unique and historically important documentation of Native American Plains Indian life and culture. The artistic material, and the opportunity for the academic research community to study in depth detailed pictorial life experiences displayed in the pages of the ledgers, would otherwise be prohibited by any extensive handling of the antique pages promoting and allowing a concise comparison by many academicians in multiple fields. The artistic renderings will bring to life individual artists first had accounts of their histories.

Scholars are comparing and reviewing the individual artistic style to identify some of the books, which have been dissembled for sale at prices meeting market demand. Ledgers can be unified in one place, where until now they resided in various locations. The multifaceted depiction by more than one artist or drawing reveals complete artistic annotation of clothing, hair, community life style, and historical battle. These images concur and validate the traditional oral records and written material of George Bird Grinnell, George Brent and other historical accounts noted in the ethnographic notes that accompany many of the drawings displayed.

In interviewing Drew Hendricks, marketing director of High Rez Digital Solutions, he cites many of the issues in compiling and reproducing the full color reproductions of the Plains Indian Art Books. In our conversation Drew explained, "Challenges in getting the exact feel and making faithful reproductions of the exact ledger books included capturing the edges of the pages and the look and feel of the original bindings due to the fact the imagery overlapped into the stitching on many of the original works. Another challenge of the modern digital reproduction is to represent original provenance. To show the art and the original provenance while maintaining the imagery and the lines, the living history and living works of art and still convey the feeling of antiquity and age of the ledgers. Tattered edges of the pages, the stains of the art work spreading across the spine. It shows a real person lead a real life.

"Color management was the greatest challenge. The paper had aged naturally. Maintaining the exact look and feel of the original paper and not compromise the feel of antiquity was difficult. We used 100% archival rag paper so the reproductions stand the test of time. Pencils and crayons were the original materials. The best thing going for the books was the fact that the images were exposed to limited light, maintaining the basic integrity to the images. To date the Ewers ledger, Leather Wood, Scares the Enemy and Arrows Elk ledger have been reproduced."

The Ledger artists capture their art with a simplicity of line. Line has been extolled by art historians and critics, in works by Modigliani, Kandinsky, and Léger as well as the Russian avant garde. The historically noted Western European artists strove to use the line as a means by which they stated their imagery. Line



*Scares the Enemy Ledger, Chasing pawnee Warrior, page 8 of 14, Brulé Lakota (Rosebud Reservation), 1882-83, Courtesy of Edwin and Dorene Leatherwood
Plains Indian Ledger Art Digital Publishing Project: plainsledgerart.org*

becomes the focal point for the artistic viewing, rather than the development of perspective and dimensional composition with the line inferred. The Plains Indian Ledgers' artist's indigenous approach results in the natural and simple grace imbued into the unfolding picture of experience expressed through the use of line and color, which are used to naturally complement each other. The material is not composed but recorded. The experience for an individual to see and enter the art is left to interpretation through the ground line that lends definition through the frame created and sets the viewer free to explore the mental extrapolation of the intended art space to be experienced, in a full spectrum.

These seemingly simple works of art created by Plains Indian artists, who had no prior art background or training in the format and usage of their materials, makes their direct, clean articulation of line and approach a brilliant usage of the artistic medium and statement. Many of the artists were given materials through contact with traders or while in forts. Stellar and unmatched in modern art experience, the complete story of their intended impression is delivered through the seemingly simple lines drawn to convey the rhythm and setting of their historical experiences. The art of story telling meets the art of picture story line in the every day moments and battle scenes drawn by the various tribal artists represented, bringing the accurate portrayal of Plains life of the Cheyenne Kiowa Arapaho and Lakota tribes as intended, in the images, through the eyes of the artists in first hand drawn accounts, which validate written historical documents as stated by Professor Ross Frank.

Stylistically, in observing the individual ledger imagery, there is a running thematic from each artist represented. The cohesion of dialogue is like a movie storyboard, blocking out the action of the depicted scenes. Arrows fly, bullets sail and men ride through the thick of battle. Soldiers who stand at attention, buttons shine and guns are drawn to their sides, military rows are observed. The buffalo is hunted on ponies that move with the wind. All of these passages of times are revealed as the changing history of Plains Indian culture and story in the Ledger books. Historians read the study of the accounts as they unravel and decode the signs painted on ponies and the dress worn by notable warriors. These images, along with the historical accounts already dialogued, allow a direct accurate Plains indigenous view of their history. Images are so real and cutting in their depiction the translation of the moment is not left in doubt. The line of acuity drawn by the various artists details a time line of individual activity.

I met these exquisite works when I stumbled across them for other research. The opportunity for me to experience this mind set and perspective of the artists enhanced my understanding



Scares the Enemy Ledger, Stealing a Horse, page 5 of 14, Brulé Lakota (Rosebud Reservation), 1882-83. Courtesy of Edwin and Dorene Leatherwood



Walter Bone Shirt Ledger; Medicine Man Brulé Lakota, circa 1890 Plate 10 page 10 of 33. Courtesy of the Bradley Foundation



Scares the Enemy Ledger, Stealing 3 Horses, page 9 of 14, Brulé Lakota (Rosebud Reservation), 1882-83. Courtesy of Edwin and Dorene Leatherwood

of the sophistication and mental frame of reference used by the Cheyenne and the other Plains Indian artists. The authentic indigenous depiction allowed me to enter the space of the art in a way no story or account could have afforded. An instantaneous meeting of the minds between viewer and artists, in the art is revolutionary for me. The art works are not rock art or anthropological material to be absorbed, they are contemporary images painted when van Gogh, Monet, and Lautrec mastered their strokes. In many ways the Ledger art challenges the artistic merit of the Western European artist contemporary counterparts. I learned how to become part of the moment in time by the listening to what was depicted in the imagery.

The seamless flow and ease in the ledger drawings is duplicated in oriental master works where the painter knows the entirety of the images before the painting is started. This is the exemplified discipline of the uninterrupted line as studied and executed by Picasso. The seamless line challenges the traditional Western art approach that encouraged compositions and style to be dominated by technique and composed symmetry. Here, technique inherent to the artists and the unity of the images flows from the hand as the impressionists sought to achieve in the freedom of their artistic moment. The art is a pure visual joy. Color is used to document the life style and becomes a staccato movement annotating life's color, rather than a trained traditional, compositional statement.

The Plains Indian ledger images are not primitive — they are pure. The western world of art strove through several art movements to achieve the grace and complete execution of line as stated in the individual drawings. Some individual ledgers are easier to view than others when considering artistic merit. All are equal in their story telling capacity. The smell of the trees, the horses pounding the dust, the scent of a prison fort and its misery and death as seen in battle, are all etched into time by the art works as they were experiences recorded, which become transcendent in their beauty for me as the viewer.

The expression of the Plains indigenous spatial relationship to a time oriented sequence displayed in the Ledger books allows the American Plains Indian, during his time to carve the identity of his experience unmasked by the pressures of colonial interpretation. This artistic reference point is still reflected in Native American art, I have seen displayed, in many fine art galleries and museums around the country today. The unique and seminal moment depicted in the Ledger Art Books that frame the life experience of American Plains Indian tribal movement in 19th century have not been surpassed today. The artistic interpretive "photographs" of the Ledger art makes time stand still.

DIGITIZING THE LEDGERS

By ROSS FRANK

Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Ethnic Studies, UCSD

"The PILA project digitizes the ledger books as they are offered by their owners or conservator, and I also approach them in a prioritized order to extend the range and depth of the digital image database served on the web. The ledger drawings created in accountant's ledger books and sketchbooks or drawing books have been vulnerable to dismantling by owners in order to sell them page by page. The PILA project has allowed us to gather the images in their original form and preserve them. The project came to me after the I arranged for 2 ledger books to be digitized. The question then was, 'what can I do with this record', and it prompted the idea of building a project that preserved the originals — by reducing the wear and tear on them; preserved the ledger books in their entirety — from possible breakup; and brought far-flung books of drawings together for easy access over the internet.

"This year the pace of people offering books and drawings to PILA for digitization or inclusion has quickened measurably. The project seems to have reached a kind of critical mass, both in terms of the number and range of ledger books presented on the web site (<http://plainsledgerart.org>), and in terms of public knowledge of PILA's existence. Eleven books are accessible now of the site, and there are four more ledger books in process. Many others are in various stages of discussion or negotiation for inclusion. The web site already represents the largest virtual research station for ledger drawings material in which users have the ability to save and annotate searches, comments, and exercise control over the material in other ways. PILA encourages the public to register for free, and other owners or custodians of ledger art to participate as well. Some of the ledger materials come out of families who have held these materials for generations. When people contact me I help them digitize the material. Occasionally I help place ledger books into museums or in the hands of collectors that will preserve the ledger books intact. The site is also a repository of knowledge, both by accumulating scholarly research on the ledger art inside, and by encouraging anyone to comment on the materials.