

What is Ledger Art?

I was thinking of the tradition of ledger art, but I was also thinking of the other, original meaning of ledger; a place for keeping track of sums. . . It is sort of a bittersweet notion - the whole idea of ledgers, and accounting for what has been taken from Indians and what we were given in exchange.
- Arthur Amiotte, Oglala Sioux artist (contemporary)



Ledger Art Beginnings

- Native cultures had no written language, so abstract pictures and drawings were their “visible language”.
- Rather than create realistic scenes, these warrior-artists produced abstract images that publicly validated notable accomplishments and events through visual narrative.

Pictographs and Petroglyphs and carved replicas of spirits and animals are among the earliest known expressions of human artistic expression.



Traditional petroglyph etched in stone

- Paintings and etchings on rocks, trees, pottery, etc. evolved to other media as it became available and fueled the imagination of contemporary artists.



Painting above by contemporary artist, Monica Stobie

- When the Southern Plains Indian Wars ended in 1875, U.S. troops captured seventy-two of the most influential Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Caddo, and Comanche chiefs and warriors and imprisoned them at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, until 1878.
- Unexpectedly, their internment supported ledger drawing as a popular genre of Native arts. Prisoners were supplied with pencils, crayons, pens, watercolors, ledger books, and sketchbooks and were encouraged to draw their memories and recent experiences.
- As we know historically, some of our most poignant art was created during deep turmoil in the lives and times of the artists. In pain and suffering we plumb the depths of bared souls. These were not trained sketch artists. The photos were raw. My granddaughters can draw better technically than some of these men. But when viewed with empathy for their situations and a little imagination, the stories often come through, allowing a glimpse into their souls and perhaps to experience a little what they feel.
- Recent research seems to suggest that rather than being a Plains-wide practice of image-making, “ledger art” may have first originated among a small group of Cheyenne and Lakota war leaders who formed hybrid bands of resistance fighters determined to oppose U.S. encroachment.

- Populations of Buffalo and other game animals of the Great Plains were decimated by Anglo-Americans.
- Painting of war stories and hunts on hides gave way to works on paper, muslin, canvas, tipi liners or commercially prepared cowhides.



Traditional buffalo hide painting

- Ledger painting a transition from pre-reservation art to newer expressions of Native American perspectives on historic events and culture change.
- Plains Indian men adapted their representational style of painting/etching to paper, such as accountant's ledger books.
- Traditional charcoal, paints, bone and stick brushes gave way to new tools such as colored pencils, crayon and water color paints acquired peaceful trade or as booty after violent military engagement or from a raid.
- Military exploits, acts of heroism traditionally depicted on hides, transitioned to ceremonial scenes, dreams, scenes from daily life, religious ceremony, and recollections/remembrances.
- Art reflected new social and cultural realities of reservation life and forced assimilation.
- This art genre' spread among many different tribes and the works of distinctive individuals was recognized.



Ledger Art above by 19th Century artist Walter Boneshirt - Brule' Sioux

Contemporary Art in Ledger Art Style

Today, many contemporary native artists look back to the ledger drawings of their forefathers to create art that critiques America's contested histories while also reconciling themselves with the cultural genocide of a past that has left severe scars in the lives and memories of many Plains peoples.

- Non-Native artists have adopted the abstract beauty and simplicity of this style of art which has now evolved into a nationally recognized sub-category of Western Art.
- Some current ledger art is still closely based upon use of antique ledger media, but has recently taken on new and meaningful expression utilizing other media.
- New creations based upon ledger art style have emerged due to its distinctive and timeless visual design appeal. Some contemporary ledger artists have gained national/international renown and their works are housed in permanent museum collections (i.e., George Flett, Terrance Gardipee, etc.) Both of these artists have works in the permanent collections of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC.



Contemporary ledger art by Blackfeet artist Terrance Gardipee



Contemporary ledger art by late Spokane tribal artist, George Flett

- New ledger art style also captures the spirit of the original style of storytelling.
- Three-dimensional works (bronze castings, ceramic, wood and stone) now add an exciting new dimension to the style, enhancing the traditional two-dimensional ledger art genre’.



“Windwalker” by contemporary artist, Kevin Kirking



“Spirit Horse” sculpture in ledger art tradition by contemporary artist, Kevin Kirking

In closing, human identity can never be fully captured by any art form, but can provide only glimpses into our own common consciousness. However, ledger art continues to honor the incredible perseverance of Native American arts and culture under created under extreme conditions of cultural suppression but also displays the creative force behind visual narrative as a means of renewal and healing.

Note: My two sculptural interpretations of traditional two-dimensional ledger art shown above were inspired by discussions and consultation with two well-known Native American artists, the late Spokane Indian artist George Flett and Blackfeet artist, Terrance Gardipee. I owe them a debt of gratitude for their friendship and encouragement. Images and information used as reference for these pieces were from the extensive ledger drawings holdings at the University of Montana. “Spirit Horse” exhibits traditional Blackfeet regalia and symbols, while “Windwalker” is in the tradition of mid-nineteenth century Brule’ Sioux ledger artist, Walter Boneshirt. These two sculptures are from a series of ledger art sculptures being created.

Kevin Kirking