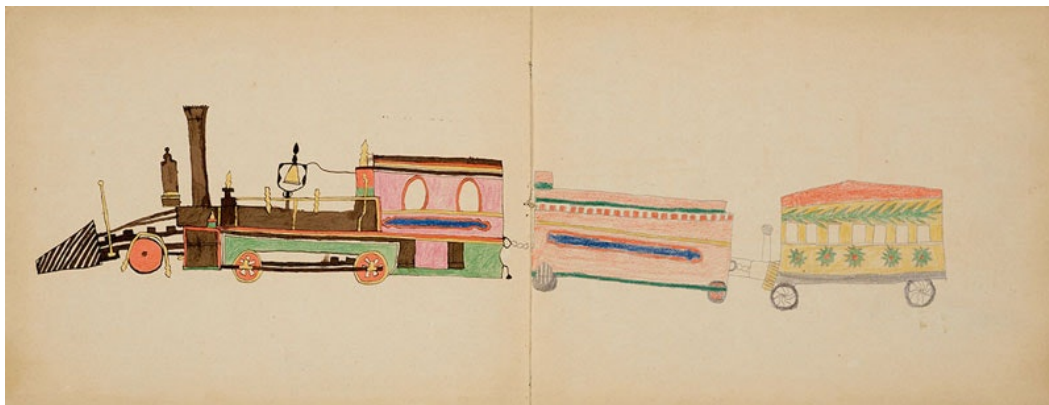

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Author: Susan Harris



ArtSeen

Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865-1900

By **Susan Harris**



Locomotive, Nokkoist (Bear's Heart, 1851-1882), Bear's Heart Drawing Book, Cheyenne, Central Plains, ca. 1876, (diptych), ink, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 8 5/8 " H × 22 3/4" W. Courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery.

Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865-1900 is an exhilarating presentation of nineteenth century drawings that illuminate an essential and complex piece of American art and history. The exhibition features over one hundred Plains Ledger drawings created by Arapaho, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Kiowa, and Lakota warrior artists that testify to the power of the image both in its making and in its capacity to speak to the depths of the human spirit.

Ledger art refers to drawings made in white colonizers' ledger books primarily by Southern Plains Indian warrior artists about personal and tribal triumphs in accordance with pictographic traditions going back to petroglyphs and paintings on buffalo hide. But whether in accounting books, notebooks, or on single sheets of paper, ledger drawings were made by Native American warrior artists with materials they secured in trades or took from their enemies' dead bodies on the battlefield. Thus, as the US government

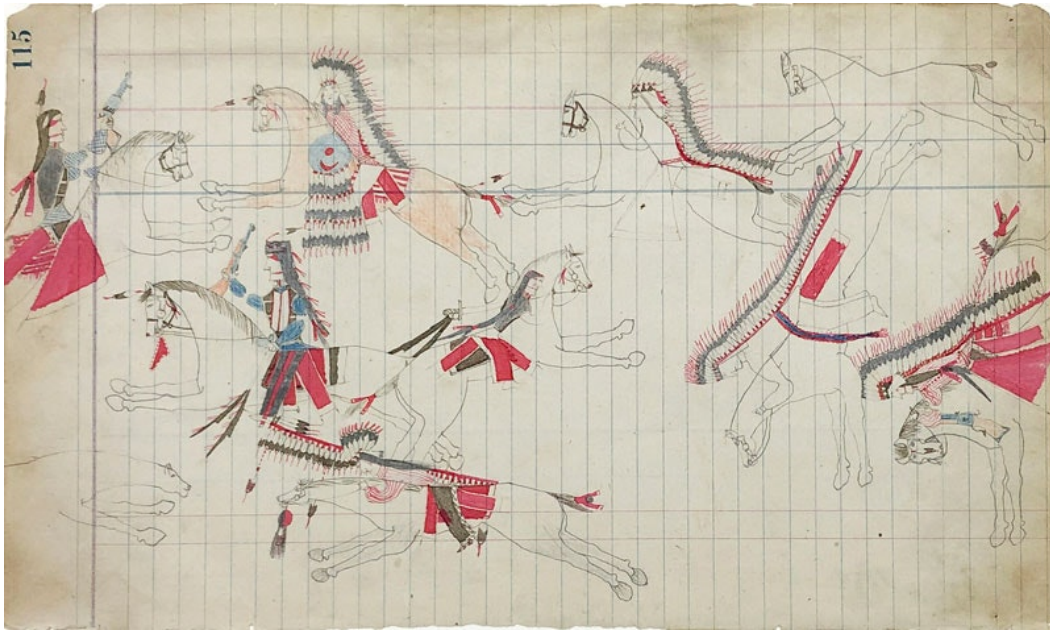
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David Nolan Gallery in
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was executing its self-declared mandate of Manifest Destiny by taking over Native lands, killing and displacing their citizens, and eliminating the buffalo on whose survival the tribal communities depended, warrior artists responded to the epic upheaval with articulations of valor drawn over the lines, numbers, and words on the pages of their aggressors' books. It is tragically ironic how the compression of their recorded chronicles from buffalo hides to sheets of paper corresponded to their forced confinement. But faced with their own extinction, Ledger artists prevailed and, fusing acts of drawing and telling, they embedded their cultural narratives and worldview in their art and shared it amongst themselves and with non-Native people for perpetuity.

It is noteworthy that the first historical survey of late nineteenth century/early twentieth century Plains Indian drawings took place at the Drawing Center, a contemporary arts institution in New York City. The exhibition introduced the genre of Plains Indian ledger drawings to a generation of artists, curators, academics, and general viewers who were astounded and inspired by this little-known legacy of American art and history. Today, in the wake of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and the Black Lives Matter movement which helped raise awareness about the structural environmental and racial violence towards Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, *Fort Marion and Beyond* offers a new opportunity to witness a prodigious group of artistically significant ledger drawings that serve as a tangible bridge of communication and insight between the past and the present.

A rich and turbulent history unfurls from an exclusively Indigenous perspective in this thoughtful installation throughout the two galleries and connecting hallway. The show is comprised of drawings from three periods: pre-reservation era (1865-1875), Fort Marion (mid 1875-mid 1878), and reservation era (1878-1890). Appealing to a modern sensibility, the drawings share a generally spare vocabulary dominated by lines of graphite, colored pencil, and ink, along with figurative forms touched in or filled in with lines or washes of sometimes startlingly vivid color, and the supremacy of space as an expressive envelope within which events and people play themselves out. But the familiarity stops there. The pre-reservation drawings are simple, pared down compositions that represent life as it existed on the Plains for millennia. Two small drawings in the hallway, circa 1870, by an unknown Cheyenne artist are breathtakingly poignant in their austerity. In one, a horse and rider materialize in profile out of the space of the page with a delicate, crisp line of black ink and pale washes of pink and grey. A thin, wobbly line connects the figure to a floating glyph above, a common ledger drawing feature that identifies a person, and five short horizontal lines with vertical tails suggest the firing of arrows or bullets. Another group of early drawings installed in the left gallery are attributed to an anonymous Cheyenne warrior from the Tie Creek Ledger Book. In them, repeated patterns of curved shapes and dots convey the dynamic movement of horses and warriors, respectively, while concentrated fields of horizontal lines describe an onslaught of enemy ammunition being launched at the protagonist. Intrinsic to these and later ledger drawings is a multivalent, multidimensional sense of space and time based on Native American lived experience (as contrasted with the order, linearity, and single point perspective prized in Euro-American art). Figures occupying different places on the ledger sheet, as in the drawing attributed to Arrow in the Cedar Tree Ledger Book, for example, are likely illustrating a succession of actions and movements over a period of time and, perhaps, from different vantage points too.



Ledger Drawing, attributed to Arrow, Cedar Tree Ledger Book, Southern Cheyenne, Central Plains, ca. 1880, ink, crayon and graphite on lined paper, 7 ¼" H x 12 ½" W. Courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery.

When Plains warrior life as portrayed on buffalo hides gave way to life on government reservations, subject matter in ledger drawings expanded to include scenes of courtship, hunting, and ceremonial events. *Fort Marion and Beyond* offers jewel after jewel by known and unknown artists from the reservation period with meanings and associations that may never be fully accessible to contemporary viewers, even as they elicit perceptions about Indigenous life and art after contact with white culture. A two-sided drawing from 1880 portrays a warrior in full regalia on a yellow horse counting coup on a uniformed man with a rifle on his back; on the verso is a procession of red and yellow horses galloping from right to left and, it seems, beyond the page, while the colonial wagon they are harnessed to remains static. Attributed to Southern Arapaho, Mad Bull, from the Mad Bull Ledger Book, the drawing exhibits a greater refinement of line and color in the depiction of clothing and in the representation of figures in space than in pre-reservation drawings. A series of courtship drawings attributed to Northern Cheyenne, Eugene Standing Elk, circa 1882, is dazzling in its polished details and use of saturated color as it documents a suitor's ritual of wooing a squaw and in one of them, the paramour and his horse stare uncharacteristically boldly out at

the viewer as the woman remains in profile. A grid of sixteen images, each of a single horse drawn in graphite at the bottom of a lined sheet of paper in ever so slightly different positions is, at once, unassuming and sophisticated. Attributed to southern Arapaho, Cedar Tree, circa 1880, from the Cedar Tree Ledger book, the installation is like a flip book of a horse in motion and recalls Eadweard Muybridge's photographic study, *Horse in Motion* (1878), done just a few years before.



Ledger Drawing, attributed to Mad Bull, Mad Bull Ledger Book, Southern Arapaho, Central Plains, ca. 1880, graphite and coloured pencil on lined paper, 6" H x 14 3/4" W. Courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery.

Another gallery is devoted entirely to Fort Marion drawings made by two artists, Nokkoist (Bear's Heart) of the Cheyenne Nation, and Ohettoint, of the Kiowa tribe. They were two of seventy-two indigenous warriors notoriously incarcerated without a trial and sent across the country to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida in mid-1875 for three years for their alleged roles in the Red River War, the US military operation aimed at displacing the Plains tribes from their lands. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, who oversaw their capture, their transport, and arrival at prison, believed in the promise of educating the prisoners so they could assimilate into Euro-American culture. Towards this end, he provided at least twenty-six prisoners with art supplies so that they could make and sell their drawings to locals and visitors. He also made gifts of drawing books to politicians and friends to advance his cause. Much has been published and talked about this period and drawings. Much work needs to be done. But it is irrefutable how much of a departure the Fort Marion drawings are from earlier Plains art.

Individually and collectively, the Fort Marion ledger drawings represent a re-envisioning of the artist-prisoner's visual world. For the first time, the artist-prisoners made drawings based on personal experience and direct observation as opposed to following established pictorial conventions. Bear's Heart's *Locomotive* and *Paddlewheeler*, both circa 1876, portray modes of transportation the prisoners took for the first time on their journey across the country. Surprisingly charming and candy colored, the drawings, nonetheless, reveal a sharp eye for detail in transcribing the mechanical parts and workings of motorized vehicles that must have been simultaneously frightening and fascinating. *Observing the Guards from the Fort, Fort Marion Parade Ground*, and *Sun Dance* are other examples of drawings Bear Heart made from his observations of events and of his new surroundings in St. Augustine. This radical shift in artistic intention and subject matter, a manifestation of the vast changes in the artist-prisoners' lives, positions the Fort Marion drawings at the beginning of contemporary Indigenous art.



Observing the Guards from the Fort, Nokkoist (Bear's Heart, 1851-1882), Bear's Heart Drawing Book, Cheyenne, Central Plains, ca. 1876, ink, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 8 5/8 " H x 11 3/8 " W. Courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery.

For the first time, too, Fort Marion artists began to incorporate features of landscape. Plains artists had never drawn landscape or even a horizon line, so Fort Marion artists had to invent new modes of visualizing the land and compositional space. Bear's Heart's *Cheyenne Camp Scene*, circa 1876, describes a brightly colored, bucolic scene in colored pencil. Horses of many hues graze alongside three tribal members who sit and talk behind grass covered mounds while a row of five tipis sits in a plane below. The spatial configuration is unlikely a literal transcription of what Bear's Heart saw, but rather a visual solution for including everything in the space of the page. Ohettoint's *Warrior Process on Horseback* is a dreamy pastoral landscape where warriors on horseback are partially visible behind a hill rendered in long strokes of colored pencil. On the verso, a transparent lighthouse is set against bands of water and land denoted by long lines of blue, yellow, and green pencil and to the right, the very tops of a buffalo herd can be spied as a dark line between the land and the vast sky.

Drawings are inherently direct and intimate. They channel an artists' thoughts, impulses, and feelings. While ledger art is not sacred art, the images in *Fort Marion and Beyond* speak to enduring sacred traditions. Whether or not we comprehend the meanings of the images, we can acknowledge and recognize their mystery and spiritual potency. Each lays claim to a space that is a product and reflection of its respective culture but in the intersection of the two cultures there comes into being a zone in between writing and drawing and telling—a third space where, even if we slip in and out of knowing, we may find ourselves in a shared place of understanding.

Contributor

Susan Harris

Susan Harris is a writer and curator. She is on the Executive Boards of *Printed Matter*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and the International Association of Art Critics, United States section (AICA-USA).