

Art **Reviews**

A Shameful US History Told Through Ledger Drawings

In the 19th century ledger drawings became a concentrated point of resistance for Indigenous people, an expression of individual and communal pride.



John Yao 20 hours ago



Ohettoint (1852–1934), "Kiowas" (c. 1876), Bear's Heart and Ohettoint Drawing Book, Kiowa, Central Plains, Inscribed "Kiowas" and "Saul," ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches (all images courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery)

On April 28, 1875, 72 Native American prisoners of war from five different Great Plains tribes (Arapaho, Caddo, Cheyenne, Commanche, and Kiowa) were shackled and transported by train from Fort Sill, in Oklahoma territory, to Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida. The “trouble causers,” as the press labeled them, were greeted with vehement derision by the White settler crowds that came out to taunt and humiliate them every time the train stopped. Nearly a month later, on May 21, their harrowing journey came to an end when they arrived at Fort Marion.

There, Captain Richard Henry Pratt forced the men to assimilate into White Protestant society by cutting their hair, demanding they dress in army uniforms, instructing them to speak English, and providing them with ledger books in which to draw. Pratt's model was the United States Army's insistence on conformity. This was one way that the US eradicated Indigenous cultures; the other was genocide.

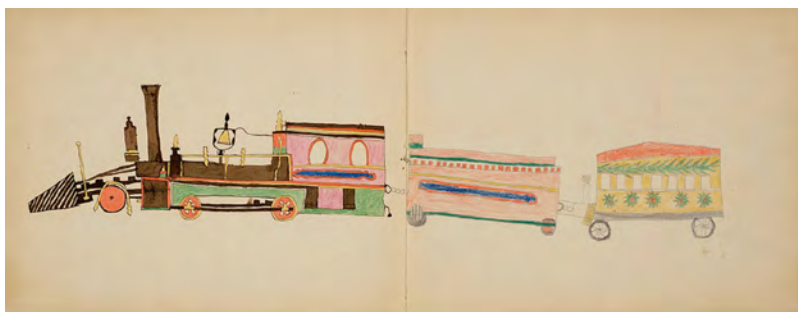
During their three years of incarceration, from May 1875 to April 1878, Pratt gave the men art supplies and permitted them to sell their drawings — made while White settlers were obliterating Indigenous people — and keep the money. The ledger drawings became a concentrated point of resistance, an expression of individual and communal pride, a form of preservation and the continuation of each Indigenous culture's pictographic tradition, an alternative history of their imprisonment, and more than that.



Nokkoist (Bear's Heart) (1851–1882), "Fort Marion Parade Ground" (c. 1876), Bear's Heart Drawing Book, Cheyenne, Central Plains ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches

Most of the 100-plus ledger drawings in the heartbreaking exhibition *Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865–1900* at David Nolan Gallery, in collaboration with Donald Ellis Gallery, have never been shown in the United States. This alone makes it the most important gathering of ledger drawings on view in New York since the 1996 touring show *Plains Indian Drawings, 1865–1935: Pages from a Visual History*, organized by the Drawing Center, and 2016's *Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains*, at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. The Drawing Center show changed Ellis's life. He visited it more than 50 times, and has since become one of the world's leading authorities on ledger drawings.

A significant portion of this exhibition calls attention to two artists: Nokkoist (Bear's Heart) (Cheyenne, 1851–1882) and Ohettoint (Kiowa, 1852–1934). In November 1876, in recognition of his abilities, Nokkoist received a drawing book of 24 pages, rather than a discarded ledger book. He wrote his name on the book's signature page. He was 25 and his art was as powerful as anything being made in the US at that time. Also on view are works from a book with drawings by both Nokkoist and Ohettoint, and from Ohettoint's drawing book.



Nokkoist (Bear's Heart) (1851–1882), "Locomotive" (recto/verso) (c. 1876), Bear's Heart Drawing Book, Cheyenne, Central Plains ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8 5/8 x 22 3/4 inches

With one exception, Nokkoist drew only on one side of the paper in his book. For me, his signature and that decision mark a shift in his intentions, from using art to record events to claiming ownership over his creative property — both of which are acts of resistance. The subjects of his 12 drawings include scenes of a way of life that no longer existed ("Successful Buffalo Hunt" and "Cheyenne Warrior Procession"), historic events ("Meeting Between Cheyennes and Osage"), memories of his journey from Fort Sill to Fort Marion ("Paddlewheeler"), and religious ceremonies ("Observing the Sun Dance").

Together, they present a record of a man moving from the past to the present, as in “Fort Marion Parade Ground,” where the incarcerated men, dressed in army regulation uniforms, are seen marching inside the fort. At once frontal and aerial, the view underscores a feeling of entrapment. The artist’s Great Plains world has been replaced by a prison overseen by White colonists.

In “Locomotive (rector/verso),” which spreads across two pages, Nokkoist renders an elongated brown and green locomotive with a pink cab pulling a pink coal car and a canary yellow passenger car. What look like decorative green boughs and wreathes adorn the side. In the feel of it, this drawing is a departure from a ledger drawing portraying a train approaching Fort Marion, with its barred windows (not in exhibition), attributed to the artist. In this absent drawing, we see the train frontally and the fort’s imposing facade aerially, in the upper left-hand corner. It suggests that Nokkoist’s world has been turned upside down, and he is cut off completely from the world he once knew. In contrast to the ledger drawing, “Locomotive (rector/verso)” is shown without context, as if inhabiting a boundless space.



Attributed to Eugene Standing Elk (c. 1857–1926), Ledger Drawing (c. 1882), Northern Cheyenne, Central Plains, watercolor, ink and graphite on paper, 5 3/4 x 3 1/8 inches

In addition to the drawings of Nokkoist and Ohettoit, all of which belong in an art museum, the exhibition includes many other exquisite works. A grid of 16 ledger drawings of a horse (c. 1880), attributed to an artist named Cedar Tree, occupies one room. In each of the drawings, the artist, who was evidently left-handed, renders the animals's contour in a single unbroken line.

In an alcove is "Pictorial Muslin" (c. 1900), an ink and watercolor work by an anonymous Lakota artist, which was likely made to sell to tourists. The artist's delicate touch and fierce attention to color and to the details of feathers, horses, and riders is riveting.

Made during the waning years of the Hudson River School, and on a modest scale with humble materials, the drawings of Nokkoist, Ohettoint, and others communicate a dark side of US history. It is a story that Albert Bierstadt and other White painters chose to overlook. If ledger drawings are going to be confined to ethnological and history museums, then it is time we put works by Bierstadt and his contemporaries in the same museum as an example of White privilege.



Ohettoit (1852–1934), "Warrior Procession" (recto/verso) (c. 1876), Ohettoint Drawing Book, Kiowa, Central Plains ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches