

Evolution of Ledger Art (taken from Wikipedia)

Ledger art is a term for Plains Indian narrative drawing or painting on paper or cloth. Ledger art flourished primarily from the 1860s to the 1920s. A revival of ledger art began in the 1960s and 1970s. The term comes from the accounting ledger books that were a common source of paper for Plains Indians during the late 19th century.

Historical precedents: Ledger art evolved from Plains hide painting. Among Plains tribes, women traditionally paint abstract, geometrical designs, whereas men paint representational designs. The men's designs were often heraldic devices or visions painted on shields, tipis, shirts, leggings, or robes. Before the Plains tribes were forced to live on reservations in the 1870s, men generally painted personal feats in battle or hunting. Plains ledger art depicted communally acknowledged events of valor and tribal importance in order to gain status for the individuals who participated in them, and their band and kin. Plains pictorial art emphasizes narrative action and eliminates unnecessary detail or backgrounds. Figures tended to be drawn in hard outlines and filled with solid fields of color.

These were all traditionally painted on animal hides – particularly buffalo hides. When buffalo became scarce after eradication programs encouraged by the US federal government, Plains artists began painting and drawing on paper, canvas, and muslin.

New materials: In increasing supply of ledger books and other paper came from traders, government agents, missionaries, and military officers. With these came pencils, ink fountain pens, crayons, and watercolor paints. These new tools allowed for greater detail and experimentation than the earlier tools, such as bone or wood styli dipped in mineral pigments, had. The compact ledger books and pencils were highly portable, making them ideal for nomadic lifestyles.

Subject matter: Battle exploits dominated ledger art. Other traditional themes such as hunting, courtship, and religious practices were common subjects. Ledger artists also documented their rapidly changing environment by portraying encroaching European Americans and new technologies such as trains and cameras. Many ledger artists worked with ethnologists, by documenting shield and tipi designs, ethnobotanical information, winter counts, dance customs and regalia, and other cultural information. Dreams and visions inspired ledger art just as they had inspired earlier hide paintings.

The artists creating ledger art today often reference pre-reservation lifeways, historical transitions, and social commentary. They use this style to illustrate cultural continuity between historical and contemporary Native life.

Today: Numerous modern Plains artists create ledger paintings, including many women artists despite its history as a male domain. Many seek out 19th-century documents on which to paint, creating ironic juxtapositions between the printed text and the paintings. Dwayne Wilcox (Oglala Lakota) uses the style of 19th-century Lakota painters to express humorous views of