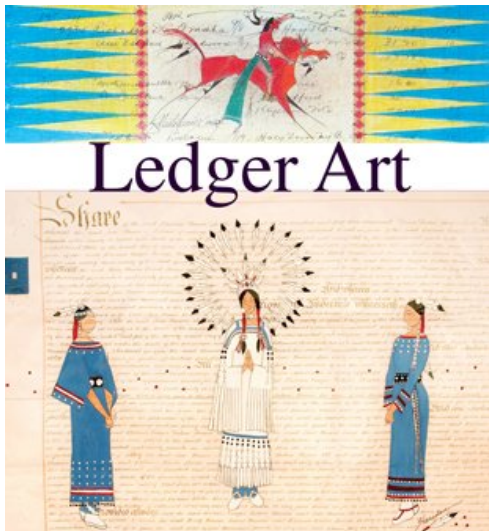




Ledger Art: Looking Between the Lines

GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



Top: "Black Eye (Yankton Sioux Warrior)," by Donald Montileaux, 2011, Prisma color pencil & India ink on antique ledger paper dated 1903. Bottom: "Pretty - Shield," by Sheridan MacKnight.

One side of the story of the conflict between Plains Indians and the U.S. government during the transition period--the mid-1800s through the early 1900s--has been voluminously told, passed down to generations of American schoolchildren in history books. The other side of the story, though not well-known, has its record too, rich in detail, heroism, poignancy, specific battles and events, important figures, even touches of humor. But it was recorded for the Plains people themselves--and in pictures, not words.

Plains ledger art was a continuation, in a new form, of the age old practice of using imagery to record and announce important knowledge and events, including successes in hunting and war. This imagery--pictographs on rock walls and mineral-pigment painting on buffalo hides--also

served as a memory aid in oral storytelling. Symbolic narratives painted on tipis, buffalo robes, shields, and other clothing and objects were easily understood by friend and foe alike.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, as the buffalo were being slaughtered and new drawing materials were simultaneously accessible to Plains warrior-artists for the first time, the pictorial tradition found a new form. Used storekeepers' ledger and accounting books and other types of paper were obtained from traders, settlers, military officers, missionaries and U.S. government agents. With pencils, crayons, fountain pens and occasionally watercolors, the traditional stylized imagery of hide painting was continued, but in finer detail.

Early ledger art took as its primary subject battles and hunting, but as the buffalo disappeared and the Plains tribes were increasingly confined, the drawings began to focus more on personal experiences, such as courtship and daily life. Once solely the domain of warrior-artists, the imagery also began including more of the feminine point of view.

Intact books of early ledger drawings have been compared with modern-day blogs; one artist may have created the first drawings, but the books were often passed around and others added their own depictions of the same event. In this sense, much of the fullness of historical record contained in early ledger drawings was lost as art dealers removed pages from bindings to be separately sold.

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Contemporary ledger artists employ the art form for many of the same reasons their ancestors did: to honor pre-reservation cultures and the battles and struggles of the transition period; to visually comment on--and often poke fun at--the world around them; and to reinforce the lines of continuity between earlier and current day life in the Native world.

Beginning with artists such as Michael Horse (Yaqui/Mescalero Apache/Zuni Pueblo) and others in the 1980s, the form has seen a strong revival in recent years. Museum exhibits have drawn attention to original ledger drawings, while contemporary ledger art received its own category at Santa Fe Indian Market for the first time in 2009.

Artists today draw and paint not only on antique ledger pages, but also old maps, sheet music, railroad tickets, bank notes and other documents, creating thought-provoking juxtapositions between the content of the original documents and the art on top--layered stories and histories of very different cultures. Here is a look at five contemporary ledger artists who have developed the medium in their own distinctive ways.

Dolores Purdy Corcoran

When Dolores Purdy Corcoran (Caddo/Winnebago) began researching the 1875-78 imprisonment of Caddo and other tribal members at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida (see Summer 1993 issue), she discovered some surprising things. With Florida newspapers printing articles about "big, bad Indians" during the three-year imprisonment, curious tourists began coming around. So guards scrounged whatever paper they could find and encouraged the prisoners to draw pictures for tourists to buy.

"It's amazing what they could do with three colors, and amazing how sophisticated the drawings were," Purdy Corcoran says of the resulting ledger art. And while she learned that her direct ancestors were not among the prisoners at Fort Marion, she discovered in some of the drawings a distinct sense of humor, which happens to be a Purdy family trait. Along with depictions of dances and buffalo hunts, she found images that clearly poke fun at the tourists and guards.

Purdy Corcoran carries on the legacy of subtle and not-so-subtle Native humor in her own ledger art. She enjoys inserting such anomalous references as a 1959 Cadillac--or "Caddo-lac," as she puts it--oversized headdresses, and blankets adorned with colorful polka dots. In "The Road to Indian Market is Filled with Potholes," aging, rusty pickup trucks with patched tires navigate a rough road, with pottery, sculptures and paintings in danger of bouncing out. As with all her award-winning work, the image features saturated colors on high-quality paper from the late 1800s, in this case a store ledger page.

Now living near Santa Fe, the 58-year-old artist grew up hearing stories of hardship and isolation from her Oklahoma relatives. Whether forced onto reservations, into prison, or sent off to boarding schools, the Caddo and other tribes during the transition period often used humor as "relief from day-to-day painful experiences. It was a rough time," she says.

Whenever possible, Purdy Corcoran correlates the old documents' original text with her chosen imagery, sometimes adding script in the Caddo language. Ledger art featuring warriors and tipis, for instance, adds another dimension to a 19th-century deed. "The original writing is like a snapshot in history in the non-Native world," she observes. "So it becomes two stories in one." Such work earned her the honor of being chosen as featured artist for the 2010 Eiteljorg Indian Market & Festival.

Purdy Corcoran will show at the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Market. Her work is also available at the Smithsonian Museum shops in New York and Washington, D.C.; Tribes 131, Norman, OK; Morning Star Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; Red Cloud Indian Arts Gallery, St. Petersburg, FL; and www.dolorespurdycorcoran.com. She can be contacted at dpc@cox.net or 785/224-1655.

Donald "Yellowbird" Montileaux

Like his Oglala Lakota ancestors, Donald "Yellowbird" Montileaux started off painting on buffalo hides he laboriously processed himself--an art form he learned from his mentor, Herman Red Elk--and later shifted to ledger books. Unlike in the 19th century, however, it wasn't the buffalo's disappearance that inspired a transition in Montileaux's art. "Being an artist and having an ego, I hated to keep getting third place or honorable mention in hide painting, after Red Elk," the 63-year-old artist says, smiling.

Montileaux, who studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, has indeed earned top awards with his ledger art, including first place and Best of Division at the 2006 Santa Fe Indian Market. His richly hued paintings on high-quality antique ledger paper are widely collected and have been commissioned to illustrate numerous books. With a deep respect and knowledge of his people's history and symbolism, he continues the age-old tradition of telling stories and recording important events.

He not only preserves history, he made history as the first living artist whose artwork was launched into space. In 1995 Montileaux was involved in a mentoring program for tribal youth when he was asked by the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology to create an artwork to raise funds for the program. "Looking Beyond One's Self" is a stylized depiction of three robed Lakota gazing up into the starry sky. With a number of School of Mines alumni working as NASA engineers, the painting ended up aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavor. "I looked up into the sky when it was going up that day," the artist recalls. "It was cool."

Montileaux's art often begins with ledger books dating from 1872 to 1920, whose paper contains a high percentage of silk fiber rather than wood pulp. Applying as many as 10 blended layers with Prismacolor pencil, he produces intensely saturated color burnished into the silken fibers. The result is a sense of dimension and depth in his imagery of warriors, horses, tipis and buffalo. He also paints on such documents as mid-19th-century maps, old banknotes, or authentic documents of illegal gold mines in the Black Hills.

Born in Pine Ridge and living in Rapid City, South Dakota, Montileaux is half Lakota and half French--his two great-grandmothers were Lakota and two great-grandfathers were French from Quebec. As such, he appreciates the juxtapositions inherent in ledger art. "It reflects both my cultures," he observes. "It's a good marriage for my art."

Montileaux's work is on view at www.donaldmontileaux.com. He can be contacted at montileaux@knology.net.

Terrance Guardipee

Just as 19th-century drawings by Terrance Guardipee's Blackfeet ancestors reflected their experience of the world, Guardipee also begins with a strong connection to his people's age-old ways and then incorporates a 21st-century sensibility, artistic training and innovation to create his own distinctive version of contemporary ledger art. Notably, the 43-year-old internationally acclaimed artist was among the first to significantly expand the concept of drawing over existing text on a single page from a ledger book. Starting with antique maps of his home state of Montana, where he grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation, Guardipee creates a layered collage with other types of antique documents, including war ration coupons, sheet music, train tickets and bank checks. Once the collage is arranged and affixed to the map, he uses Prismacolor to add swift-riding warriors, tipis, authentic Blackfeet designs and other vibrantly colored imagery on top.

With a lifelong interest in drawing, Guardipee studied two dimensional art at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. In the late 1990s, while living in the Seattle area (where he still resides), he met an artist who encouraged him to apply his skills to a contemporary version of ledger art. It was an ideal fit, especially once Guardipee decided he could best honor his ancestors' legacy by making the art form his own. "I thought about what the old-time people would have access to," he relates. "On the maps I showed where the tribe is originally from. It connected me, my homeland, the

drawings and my tribe."

Guardipee's ledger work has earned numerous honors over the years, including first-place awards and Best of Division at Santa Fe Indian Market. His work is in the permanent collections of such institutions as the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles, and the CM Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana.

While Guardipee's ledger art reflects the transformation that has taken place in his homeland over time, it also reinforces what has not changed. "Even though there are all these changes on the maps, like highways and the evolution of my homeland, my art tells people that we're still here," he asserts. "We still have our culture and belief systems intact."

Guardipee will show at the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Market. He is represented by Catherine Black Horse at blackhorsestudio1@yahoo.com.

Todd Lone Dog Bordeaux

One of the key ingredients for an important new direction in ledger art fell into place some years ago when a fellow Native artist offered Todd Lone Dog Bordeaux the gift of an old ledger book. "Here you go," the friend said to Bordeaux. "It's time!"

Except it wasn't, not quite yet. For three years, Bordeaux hovered over the ledger book, pen in hand, unable to bring himself to draw on its pages for fear of ruining them. Then one day as he sat with the book open, his longtime girlfriend, bead artist Karen Beaver (Yupik/Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara), was handing him one of his hyper-realistic beaded butterflies when it dropped onto the page. "My eyes lit up," the 43-year-old Sicangu Lakota artist remembers. "I said, 'Oh! I can bead, I can perfect the beadwork and then put it onto the ledger!'" As a master beadworker--taught by Beaver and by his father, artist Ted Bordeaux--he knew he had discovered his own distinctive approach to ledger art.

Since then, Bordeaux, who lives in an ancestral river valley on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, has earned such top awards as Best of Show and Best of Class at the Northern Plains Indian Art Market. He has served as a judge at the Eiteljorg Museum Indian Market, and his widely collected work was included in the nationally traveling exhibit Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2.

A highly prolific artist, Bordeaux may have as many as 30 projects in process at any one time. Along with beaded imagery on ledger pages and other antique documents, he creates beaded winter count story sticks, parfleche bags and a range of beaded jewelry, including his trademark "Indian Time" watches in which the inner workings are replaced with a beaded watch face--without numbers or hands.

As a direct descendant of Chief Lone Dog, Bordeaux draws on his deep connection to historic events and figures in his art. In "Spotted Tail and Swift Bear Protect the People," the legendary peace chief and war chief ride their horses in front of seven lodges, representing his nation's seven council fires. Fellow Lakota ledger artist Donald Montileaux once described ledger art to Bordeaux as "a Polaroid of real events." "That really inspired me," Bordeaux relates. "I realized it's a great way to tell stories. I wanted to go beyond aesthetics to use it as a teaching tool. It's so much more than just art."

Bordeaux will show at the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Market. He is also represented by Ancient Nations Gallery, www.ancientnations.com; Home & Away Gallery, Kennebunkport, ME; Sunny Bless Gallery, Kobe, Japan; Akta Lakota Museum Gift Shop, Chamberlain, SD; Garage, Tokyo, Japan; and Black Bear Crossing, St. Paul, MN. He can be contacted at 605/259-3078 or lakotashadows1@hotmail.com.

Sheridan MacKnight

Like buffalo-hide paintings in pre-contact days, men did the majority of 19th-and early-20th-century ledger drawings. Not surprisingly, they often depict battles, buffalo hunts and other traditional activities of Plains Indian men. Meanwhile, the women and children were carrying on a less visually documented daily life. Sheridan MacKnight (Chippewa/Lakota) fills in those gaps with graceful imagery of mothers and babies, young women in love, and painted umbrellas that speak of sacred rain.

Among the antique documents on which MacKnight paints are pages from a Lakota language hymnal--likely from the chapel of a government-run boarding school--and 1920s-era sheet music of popular Native love songs. "It's definitely a woman's perspective," the 52-year-old Los Angeles-based artist observes.

Women and children have been enormously important throughout MacKnight's life, beginning with the influence of her aunt, Tawacin WasteWin, a powerhouse of Native pride who helped establish 17 tribal colleges, received a MacArthur Fellowship, and was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. MacKnight grew up in southern California but spent summers with her aunt on the Standing Rock Lakota Reservation in South Dakota. WasteWin's inspiration not only propelled her into art, it led to a passion for education. The artist, a former art teacher in public schools, now volunteers with Southern California's Hands On Art program for kids.

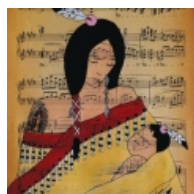
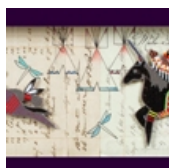
MacKnight was drawn to ledger art in large part for its visual layering and the juxtaposition of stories inherent in that. "I love anything painted on anything else," she explains. Using gouache or watercolor in the flat style of tipi paintings and the Dorothy Dunn School, she frequently correlates imagery with the content of the original documents. A painting on a hymnal page, for example, features a Lakota woman as Mary with hands clasped in prayer, an eagle-feather halo, and cherubic Lakota angels hovering above her head.

MacKnight, who also creates rawhide earrings featuring miniature ledger-style drawings, has earned a number of first and second place awards at the Santa Fe Indian Market. All her imagery, whether of women in prayer, at work or holding babies, reflects simple yet universal narratives that document the "sacredness of women's lives," she notes. In one piece, the artist sees the painted figure as herself, praying for a friend who was dying of cancer. Now as in an earlier era, she notes, ledger art becomes "the way we remember our life."

MacKnight will show at the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Market. Her art is also on view at Morning Star Gallery, Santa Fe; the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe; and www.sheridanmacknight.com. She can be reached at 310/488-1796.

Based in southern Colorado, Gussie Fauntleroy writes frequently on Native artists, as well as other types of art, architecture and design for national, regional and local publications. She is the author of three books on visual artists, among them Roxanne Swentzell: ExtraOrdinary People.

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