

Every pictograph tells a story

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By MARGA LINCOLN Independent Record helenair.com | Posted: Thursday, January 5, 2012 12:08 am | (0) Comments

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Dylan Brown Independent Record - Jennifer Bottomly-O'looney talks about the history of the donated lithographs, created by George Catlin, which are part of a new exhibit at the Historical Society.

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If you go

Where: Montana Historical Society, 225 N. Roberts St., across from the Capitol

Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday and to 8 p.m. on Thursdays

Contact: 444-2694 montanahistoricalsociety.org

Note: Exhibit runs through October

A war chief in flowing feathered headdress charges into battle; a warrior on an orange-dappled horse spears an enemy; another fighter stands his ground shooting arrows into a mass of charging braves. This is just one vivid scene from a battle between Cheyenne and Comanches that's part of a vibrant new exhibit at the Montana Historical Society, "The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indian Perspectives."

"We have this wonderful collection of pictograph art from different tribes to highlight with three-dimensional artifacts to make it a beautiful and engaging exhibit," said Jennifer Bottomly-O'looney, senior MHS curator.

Much of the powerful artwork is referred to as "Ledger Art," referring to the lined paper that was commonly used by native artists from the 1860s to 1900s. The term began to be used for all Plains Indian artworks on paper.

The tradition carries on with contemporary artists like Terrance Guardipee, whose 2009 drawing on 1900 Western Union ledger paper is part of the exhibit.

Altogether, over 80 pieces of art, artifacts and photos are displayed, illuminating the work of native artists as they chronicled both their personal and tribal histories.

The battle scene between the Cheyenne and Comanches, described above, was a unique 1885 collaborative piece by two native artists from different tribes White Bear, a 17-year-old Cheyenne, and Elk Head, a 35-year-old Gros Ventre, who met when they were incarcerated at the territorial prison in Deer Lodge.

Also displayed are individual works by these artists, showing their individual artistic styles and their histories.

A large pencil drawing by Elk Head, done in 1883-1885, depicts scenes from his life — his mother being shot at as she carried him as a baby; Elk Head scalping and killing an enemy; and such everyday scenes as a woman paddling a bull boat, the tribe's painted lodges and the shooting of a buffalo.

Also displayed is the "Walter Bone Shirt Ledger Book," on loan from the Mansfield Library, which was actually drawn in a ledger book. Since it's now too fragile to handle, an electronic display above the book, flashes through photo images from each page.

Nearby is a fascinating Sioux "Winter Count" painted on a deer hide, documenting important tribal events that began in 1823 and ended around 1911. Starting in the upper left corner of the hide, the images

continue around the outer edge until the story ends in the middle of the hide.

“Winter counts are a way to chronicle history,” explained Bottomly-O’looney. “The elders would pick one symbol for a year. They (historians) were able to translate this and we can identify almost everything on here.”

A cluster of stars, refers to the year 1833, when a spectacular meteor shower lit the sky, Nov. 12. A bear outside a teepee symbolized the 1834 winter camp on the Heart River that was frequented by a bear. The 1838 devastating smallpox epidemic is also pictured, as well as a dark sphere symbolizing a harsh winter when there had been a total solar eclipse.

The job of the keeper of the winter count was often passed from father to son, said Bottomly-O’looney, and the events picked were to help storytellers remember their histories.

“We wanted to show this tradition of depicting history through pictographic means,” said Bottomly-O’looney of the exhibit’s focus. “It’s a tradition that is ancient but also contemporary and it’s important to tribal people today...It keeps their culture and history alive. It’s not static and dead; it’s still a vibrant way of communicating.”

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