Drawing on Cultural Memory: Self and Other in Native American Ledger Art

Spirit Beings and Sun Dancers: Black Hawk's Vision of the Lakota World. Janet Catherine Berlo. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 2000. 189 pp.

Arrow's Elk Society Ledger. Mike Cowdrey. Santa Fe: Morning Star Gallery, 1999. 254 pp.

I Will Tell of My War Story. Scott M. Thompson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. 120 pp.

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Lakota Books

The three books under review here have a common thread, albeit unintentional, which not only underscores the artists' knowledge of themselves and their tribes, but the cultures of others that have encompassed them during early historic times. This artistic style, which ranges from allegory to realism, is generally called pictographic, or ledger art, the first term referring to a variable style of art, the second to the lined, ledger pages on which many of these images originally appeared.

Pictographs are representations of human and animal figures drawn or painted on hides, muslin, and paper, or woven into quill- and beadwork. Although usually associated with the Plains style, pictographic art appears widely across the United States. In volume, however, it is attributed to Lakota and Dakota artists who seem to be the most prolific.

Anthropologists have studied pictographic art for a variety of reasons beginning with Garrick Mallery's analysis of petroglyphic and pictographic art (Mallery 1886, 1893). Mallery looked at the significant function of pictographs emphasizing the mnemonic character used in the well-known winter counts, a prime example of hide art transferred onto paper. The significance of pictographic art to Plains history is found in James H. Howard (Howard 1960, 1968). However, even a cursory examination of early winter counts shows that pictographic art is not a singular category but a sequential series of art forms that are greatly transformed by new technologies. The relationship between art as art, and art as history, remains a resounding theme throughout all subsequent interpretations, frequently seen as a means of authenticating oral and written history (Peterson 1971, 1988; Szabo 1994).

The earliest of pictographic art was mnemonic and the glyphs used to illustrate important events in Native American history required interpretation, usually by the artistic keepers of the winter count. Thus pictographs served as an aide to cultural memory. As time passed, bone painting implements were replaced by pencils and crayons, and hides gave way to paper. Beginning in the 20th century, artists used ermine brushes to apply oil and acrylics to canvas.

Utilizing paper and pencil, pictographs were frequently drawn on pages found in standard bookkeepers' ledgers, apparently distributed to native artists during the latter 19th century. A number of ledgers contained drawings bought by local traders and agents. These drawings tend to be less mnemonic than winter counts and more imaginative. Artistic themes are highly predictable and may be classified into larger categories such as important battles, autobiographies of prominent warriors and chiefs, and studies depicting successful and unrequited love trysts, all of which appear to transcend tribal boundaries. Interesting to cultural anthropology is the category of ceremonialism in which artists render sacred objects and entire ceremonial scenarios in amazing detail. Natural history is a less common subject but appears mainly in the representations of animals and birds from the artist's region. Many artists "sign" their works with an eponymous glyph, also used in tribal rosters and treaties to identify signatories.

Although comparative studies are yet to be done, the potential has been greatly enhanced with the publication of a guide to ledger art in U.S. museums, libraries, and archives (Lovett and DeWitt 1998). The authors list 169 institutions located in 39 states and the District of Columbia; their bibliography lists 314 items. Most of the ledger art has not been published nor dismembered. The largest collections are in the Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives (1000–2000), the National Museum of the American Indian (634), and the Beineche Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale (312) (Lovett and DeWitt 1998:xi).

Although originally considered valuable for their historic content, in the past 20 years art and antique collectors have driven up prices for original ledger art to unreachable heights. Ledgers and other pictographic forms are regularly auctioned off at Sotheby's, Christies, and at private galleries, and a robust demand far outweighs availability. Two years ago I attended a gallery opening in which single pages had been extricated from a ledger, framed, and sold for as much as tens of thousands of dollars each. The effect on contemporary native artists is understandable. More artists have returned to drawing and painting pictographs, now in oil, acrylic, and water color. Some prefer to draw on ledger paper still available in most business supply stores, or paint replicas of ledger pages as a background to their contemporary works. Others paint on muslin, which gives modern pictographs an archaic look.

Concerned with the problem of "dismemberment," Eugene V. Thaw, a well-known collector of Native American

(and European) art was able to salvage the ledger that is now published as *Spirit Beings and Sun Dancers: Black Hawk's Vision of the Lakota World*. Janet Berlo, an art historian, well known in the field (Berlo 1993, 1996a, 1996b; and Berlo and Phillips 1997) has brought her years of expertise in Native American art to bear on what perhaps is the finest example of collaboration between Native Americans, art historians, and anthropologists. Working with Thaw and Arthur Amiotte, the latter a Lakota artist and scholar of repute, Berlo traveled the reservation roads for the purpose of capturing the spirit of Lakota culture through a most remarkable artist, Black Hawk.

Black Hawk was an Itazipco (also known as Sans Arcs and No Bows, both literal translations from the Lakota) from the less-well known Cheyenne River Reservation in central South Dakota. Through Black Hawk, Berlo broadly introduces the Lakota drawing tradition of the 1880s when "men making drawings were engaged in an act of cultural remembrance and validation at a time when their culture was under siege" (p. 17). Berlo further raises the question as to whether Black Hawk (or other artists) conceived of the ledger drawings as books, discussing each drawing thematically rather than sequentially. The original sequence appears in an appendix. The ledger is a leather-bound book containing 76 drawings collected in 1881 by William Edward Caton, a trader at Cheyenne Agency.

Berlo regards Black Hawk as a "master of coloration and patterning" and points to his meticulous eye for detail in rendering beadwork, jewelry design, fringe, feather, and fabric, his art being "the most complete visual record extant of Lakota ceremonial imagery" (p. 17). With the collaboration of Amiotte, whose own grandfather, Standing Bear, was a recognized pictographist, Berlo discusses the contributions of well known Lakota artists of the past including Swift Dog, Sitting Bull, Red Hawk, Kills Two, several anonymous artists, and the prominent Amos Bad Heart Bull, whose drawings stand as an encyclopedia of Lakota life memorialized in a single collection (Blish 1967).

Berlo has organized the drawings thematically into five major sections. "Visions of Spirit Beings" presents Black Hawk's interpretation of religious themes starting with two hooded horseback riders commonly called *wakinyan oyate* in Lakota, referring to the fabulous Thunder Beings who, in this rendition, remarkably resemble the so-called Piasa bird motif from the Great Lakes Algonquians replete with horned riders and horses, forked tails encircling the riders, and talons as replacements for human hands and hoofs.

Perhaps unique to Black Hawk's visionary style is the appearance of what Berlo believes to be diagrams of altars each containing pipes, buffalos, hoops, and crossed arrows. A Sun dance series features dancers mainly drawn from a dorsal perspective wearing headdresses that today would appear novel. Some drawings appear from the dorsal view, while another is typically drawn in profile, dancers facing left (from the viewers' perspective). This typical use of profile may occur because of the statistical prevalence of right-handed artists. It is easier for a right-hander to draw a profile facing left than right as any right-handed person knows and probably does not reflect a cultural predilection.

A relatively large section on the "Arts of Transformation" offers a number of drawings of dancers masked as buffalo, deer, antelope, and wolves with symbolic analysis culled from early Lakota and anthropological interpretations. Dancers carry hoops through which they sight imminent conquests, usually females. Noteworthy are two drawings of paired females that are probably references to the fabulous character, Double Woman, who frequently manifests herself as a seductive Black-Tail Deer.

The final drawings depict the female puberty ceremony Awicalowanpi. The unusual manner in which both the spiritual leader and pubescent females wear their hair: one side loose, the other tied with red strouding *(Aske gluwi aske kaablaya)* is a method usually restricted to males.

"Lakota Social Organization and Daily Life" begins with group portraits of well-dressed male leaders standing shoulder to shoulder as if posing for the artist. A series of three drawings capture the attitude of the courtship process more dramatically than others I have seen: A disinterested woman ignores the advances of her suitor while two other males stand impatiently in line waiting their turn; a successful suitor embraces his lover from behind while grasping the reins of his horse; lastly, another boldly woos his sweetheart while her chaperone looks on and three other women, backs turned to the artist, stand by perhaps once eligible but now rejected. The final drawings in this section depict a round dance in which Black Hawk provides an ethnographically superb description of men's and women's period clothing.

With some irony, the largest section of drawings focuses on "Crow Indian Ceremonialism.' Drawings of other tribes and non-Indians are conspicuous in ledger art, however most of them justifiably depict battles or horse raids between tribes or American cavalry. But, for the Lakota, the Crow were formidable enemies along with the Pawnee, Shoshone, and Ute in the later 19th century. Here Black Hawk has produced a series of Crow ceremonial dancers with an exacting eye for color, design, face and body painting, hand-held objects, and the ever present signature of the Crow—his hairstyle. Uniquely, Black Hawk has become an artist with ethnological insight, fully relying on cross-cultural considerations based on observation and perhaps even participation. It is a well-known fact that Lakotas continued to be great travelers even after confinement to the reservations. I know of some who have married into Crow society and who continue to exchange visits.

The penultimate section is more typical of Plains ledger art, scenes of forays against the enemy. Even though thematically similar to others, Black Hawk's style is vibrant with line and color. Whether chasing enemies, or buffalo, the figures are full and colorful. There are no examples of "x-ray" drawings in which artists draw multiple images

without linear boundaries, and we find a presence of true three dimensional figures atypical of earlier pictographic art.

The final series contains Black Hawk's portrayals of animals in a most realistic way. The animals—elk, bighorn sheep, deer, pronghorn antelope, black bear, porcupine, fox, wild cats, and a host of birds and bats—are realistically drawn and easy to identify.

Berlo's bibliography and notes are indicative of the amount of anthropological research she has conducted. The volume is evocative and stimulating and an inspirational contribution to Native American art.

Again, Sotheby's has inspired another work on ledger drawings called *Arrow's Elk Society Ledger: A Southern Cheyenne Record of the 1870s*. According to its author, Michael Cowdrey, an independent scholar, this cultural memory was collected in 1882 at Darlington, Indian Territory, Agency of the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. It remained in possession of the descendants of Sallie C. Maffet, the original collector and sold at auction at Sotheby's in 1997 The artist's name comes from what Cowdrey calls a "name glpyh" of an arrow appearing on only three of the 168 numbered plates.

It is important to note that the volume is dedicated to the memory of F. Dennis Lessard, an Indian trader and scholar who wrote many articles on ledger drawings, particularly in *American Indian Art Magazine* (Lessard 1992). Lessard also was a great collector of old photos that grace the pages of the book thus adding a profound sense of history to the art. In addition to two maps of Cheyenne territory in 1875 and 1879, the period bracketing the Battle of the Little Bighorn, there are 62 figures.

Although labeled a ledger, Cowdrey's research is perhaps better labeled a history of the Southern Cheyenne as told through ledger drawings and rare photographs. This in no way detracts from the artistic value of the work, and both text and illustrations contribute to a broader picture of native art. It is a monumental history of the Southern Cheyenne, one in which pictographic analysis plays a smaller part than historic, ethnographic, and photographic perspectives. There are also more references to the artist or artists who contributed to the drawings. In addition to Southern Cheyenne, there are multiple references to Pawnee, Utes, Mexicans, Lakota, and the American cavalry. There are perhaps too many long quotes from Cheyenne authorities, and I would have preferred to hear what Cowdrey had to say about various important subjects. However, the volume is distinguished not so much by what others have said about the Cheyennes, but Cowdrey's exceptional analysis of material culture contained in the plates. No headdress, moccasins, clothing, or horse markings—from coloration to the cut of their ears—goes unnoticed not only as a matter of individual analysis, but of recurring examples in many drawings.

Cowdrey tells us that the artist's name comes from a name glyph portraying a single undistinguished arrow which appears on only three of 168 numbered plates. Much of the identity of the artists, as well as individuals, is perhaps too speculative. Much is based on an examination of clothing and horses, itself an interesting idea. In one example Cowdrey goes so far as to say that "it is not certain that this drawing represents a self-portrait of Arrow, but most likely it does" (p. 15). In fact, the drawings could have been made by multiple artists. My feeling is that the concern over producers of the ledger is less important than the minute analysis Cowdrey presents from plate to plate recognizing details that many of us would certainly ignore. On a pragmatic note, Cowdrey's analysis becomes a handy manual of how to look at a pictographic drawing.

Although less is known about Nez Perce ledger drawings, most scholars of Native American cultures are familiar with the words "I will fight no more forever," attributed to Chief Joseph at the end of the Nez Perce war of 1877. Scott M. Thompson, author of *I Will Tell of My War Story*, is an art teacher at Chase Middle School in Spokane, Washington, and with this publication joins the ranks of the finest art historians and anthropologists writing on ledger art.

What makes this book different from others is that it represents a single episode in Nez Perce culture-history. Like other ledgers, this one was collected by a government agent to the Nez Perce, Charles D. Warner. Because of an inscription on the leather cover, the drawings are referred to as *The Cash Book* drawings. Including covers, end pieces, and drawings, the ledger contains 46 plates. The drawings are presented in order of their appearance in the ledger, and Thompson also includes a number of pages of inscriptions, most referring to proper names, a reminder that many if not most ledgers were used to record financial transactions, grocery lists, and minutes of tribal and societal meetings, topics that are presently less collectible. Thompson points out that "certain of the headings were written in preparation for some accounting business" (p. 27).

After a brief introduction to the collector, the Nez Perce tribe, and the Nez Perce War, Thompson moves directly into analyzing form, organization and artistic style. He discusses pagination, text headings, captions, media, and technical skill. His role as an art teacher comes to play when he discusses the compositional analysis of the drawings dividing them into six categories based on linearity (to emphasize movement or quantity); central subject (where a central figure is flanked by other figures to achieve visual balance); vertically split pages (where figures face each other as in war scenes); undefined arrangement of space (where artists have underutilized the picture plane); and strong vertical symmetry (where figures appear as mirror images).

Thompson believes that *The Cash Book* goes beyond usual Plains themes because it includes portraits, women,

camp scenes, and abstract themes based on the artist's religion. While I agree that portraits are perhaps unique, other subjects are routinely drawn in most ledgers. He also states, perhaps owing to the fact that much of *The Cash Book* contains drawings partly inspired by Euro-American painting techniques that they should not even be classified as "pictographic art." However, in even the most rudimentary comparison of ledgers, one will find a wide variety of styles, some of which include three dimensional art, shading, frontal and rear views of humans and animals, and realistic representations of ceremonial equipment. From the point of view of others, the ledger contains a drawing of a Lakota Sun dance and the author makes references to a Lakota-Nez Perce alliance that took place in Canada where both tribes were able to observe the customs of the other.

But, stylistic differences aside, *I Will Tell of My War Story* remains a welcomed addition to the artistic and academic analysis of ledger art.

Tribal memories continue to reveal themselves through the refractive lenses of contemporary painters but, like all old memories, symbolic representations of them are short. The impetus to draw pictures about the old times is today generated not only by intrinsic cultural demands but the enticement of the market place. Modern-day ledger drawings are popular because they vibrantly capture the perception of the past dimmed by the shadows of the present. And, like all art, the drawings become images to be interpreted by the individual beholder, just like a myth handed down over generations. Thaw's need to salvage a potentially dismembered ledger book is also a vivid reminder of how Native American cultures have been dismembered physically and spiritually by a colonial omnipresence

The value of the books reviewed above share the conditions of cultural thought by demonstrating that the art of memory lives precariously between reminiscence and reality.

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