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Final Accounting: Traditional Ledger Art Speaks to Past and Future

By [Dina Gilio-Whitaker](#) December 8, 2011

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Courtesy Braun Research Library Collection, Autry National Center; 4100.G.2. 4

"Arapahoe Chief" (left) and "Cheyenne Chief," by Howling Wolf

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In the world of American Indian [art](#), one of the common debates among collectors and artists alike revolves around what counts as “authentic” Indian art. “The ahistorical view is closely connected to the romantic sense that Native arts are unchanging and that the only ‘real’ Native American art was created before European contact. If made after that time, it could be authentic only if it showed no evidence of contamination by non-Native influences.”

So writes author Joyce Szabo in a new [book](#) called *Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage: Plains Drawings by Howling Wolf and Zotom at the Autry National Center*. The book is the latest release by Szabo, a professor of art history at the University of New Mexico whose scholarship focuses on early Plains Indian ledger art. Published by the School for American Research in Santa Fe, the book is a study of two historical artifacts from the 1870s, both books of ledger drawings made by captives of the Fort Marion prison camp in St. Augustine, Florida. The artists, known as Howling Wolf, Southern Cheyenne, and Zotom, Kiowa, were taken captive by the U.S. military after their defeat in the Red River War and held for three years in a prison camp run by Col. Richard Henry Pratt that turned out to be the model of the Indian boarding school system. The lives and art of the Fort Marion prisoners would later become the inspiration for a new generation of contemporary Native ledger artists, who like their predecessors, strive to blend what remains of a vanished past into a meaningful and vibrant present.



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"Zotom Coming to Capt. Pratt With Flag of Truce," by Zotom

Howling Wolf and Zotom (as well as many other of the Fort Marion prisoners) produced a vast body of work during their incarceration. The two books of drawings that Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage surveys are special in part because they are among the earliest known ledger drawings created by commission rather than for tribal record keeping, as was the original purpose of ledger drawing. The books were commissioned by a non-Native patron, a young woman named Eva Scott Fényes, who was at Fort Marion at the time of Howling Wolf and Zotom's captivity. The drawing books remained in Fényes's estate until they were donated by her granddaughter to the Southwest Museum of the American Indian in Los Angeles in 1986, which Fényes helped establish in 1907. In 2003 the Southwest Museum merged with the Autry Museum of Western Heritage and the Women of the West Museum, forming the Autry National Center of the American West.

The goal of Szabo's analysis of Howling Wolf and Zotom's drawings is to accord them the same academic respect given to the study of European art, particularly by comparing other drawings by the two men from other collections, a common practice in the study of European medieval manuscripts. "By giving 19th century Plains drawings the same treatment afforded to many other art forms, we can better grasp the creativity of the artists and the reasons behind the specific information they included. The drawings themselves, I hope, can begin to take the place they so richly deserve within the larger history of art," Szabo writes in the introduction to her book.



"Bride and Groom," by Zotom

Ledger drawing (so named for the accounting-ledger books that were often used) originated in northern and southern Plains cultures such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Blackfoot, Mandan, Comanche and others. It typically depicted significant events like important battles or hunting expeditions as a way of recording a tribe's history. The images could also impart more personal messages contained in the dreams or visions of an individual. With the conclusion of the Indian Wars and the incarceration of 72 prisoners at Fort Marion (who were encouraged to draw), ledger drawing emerged as an iconic American Indian art form.

With the establishment of the reservation system during the late 1800s, ledger drawing was still practiced in small, rural communities. A group of Oklahoma Kiowa artists who came to be known as

the Kiowa 5—noted for their pastel drawings of traditional Kiowa life but drawn in more detailed stylized fashion reminiscent of earlier ledger art—received international acclaim after being displayed at the International Art Congress in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1928, and coincided with the growing commercialization of Indian art in the American Southwest. The new Kiowa 5 style emerged as a distinct but separate art form, becoming wildly popular among Indian art collectors in the succeeding decades. The earlier forms of traditional ledger art became submerged by comparison. Its relative resurgence came in the 1970s with the flourishing of the Indian art industry, as a new generation of scholars started writing about Plains pictographic imagery

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overlapped with the activity (and activism) of young Indian artists who, energized by the momentum of the Indian rights movement, found inspiration in the work of their Plains ancestors. A handful of artists—George Flett, Spokane, Tom Haukaas, Lakota, and Michael Horse, Yaqui/Mescalero Apache/Zuni, among them—are often credited with reviving ledger art in its modern manifestations. The art of the Fort Marion artists has become something of a canon for today's ledger artists and serves as a foundation for much of the ledger art now produced.

There has been an influx of new artists working in the ledger art form over the past 10 years. During the first week of November, the Autry National Center's annual American Indian Arts Marketplace celebrated the release of *Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage* by featuring a presentation by Szabo and ledger artist Michael Horse on the significance of the Fort Marion drawings.

Horse talked about the first time he saw ledger drawings in the mid-1970s—"it was such an emotional experience for me. I realized that the drawings were not about hunting or battle, they were about freedom. It's kinda like the blues." Szabo confirms this notion in her book, writing that "[Pratt] urged them to create images representing their new lives and experiences in Florida.... In fact, the men created many more images of their previous lives on the Plains than they did of their prison existence."

Just as the ledger art of old was not only a historical record but a testament to life's changing circumstances, the work of today's artists embodies the spirit of survival through adaptation to the dominant culture. A case in point is the entry of women into the world of ledger art, something that was virtually unknown in tribal cultures until recently. The Autry's Indian marketplace this year featured at least two female ledger artists, one of whom, Sheridan MacKnight, Chippewa/Lakota, has been producing ledger art for at least 10 years. A classically trained artist at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and the University of California, Los Angeles, MacKnight turned to ledger art as a way to pay tribute to her Native ancestors. She explains that she "felt the need to express, record, and reinvent the beauty and devotion of these people, my relations. At first, I was a little afraid of the reaction of the men because I was going against the grain of the art. My work shows women's work and tasks of life, and because it's more emotional I wasn't sure if it would be accepted." MacKnight, who has been deeply influenced by her friendship with Michael Horse, says she found little resistance from her male counterparts.

Like most forms of Native art, ledger art reflects the traditions of the past while it depicts the living realities of contemporary Native life. "It's an evolving art form," Horse says.

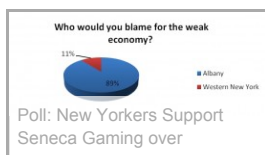
When asked by Szabo at the Autry event what the future holds for ledger art, Horse said, "Everyone's different. We use images of cars and rocket ships—we use what's in our surroundings and psyches."

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Friday, December 9, 2011

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