
In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Native American civilizations of the Great Plains experienced wrenching transition. Contact with soldiers, settlers, and ethnographers introduced the medium of paper, which eventually replaced the buffalo hides on which warriors traditionally recorded their exploits. These drawings came to be known generically as “ledger art” for the books in which they were often contained.

In this survey, Wheaton College professor emeritus Richard Pearce showcases the discipline of ledger art, as it was revived in the twentieth century, and re-interpreted from a female perspective. Focusing on artists Sharron Ahtone Harjo (Kiowa), Linda Haukaas (Sicangu Lakota), Dolores Purdy Corcoran (Caddo), and Colleen Cutschall (Oglala Lakota), the book provides several examples of each woman’s work, accompanied by commentary in their own words.

All of the artists, whether working on paper, through quillwork, or in sculpture, maintain the conventions of ledger style by depicting their subjects two-dimensionally, using pellucid layering rather than foreshortened perspective to indicate distance. Tribal affiliation, gender, and symbolism are established through the use of vibrant color and the exquisite details of their subjects’ regalia, (i.e., hair ornaments, cloth patterning, beading, coup sticks, parasols and staffs). Each woman pays homage to the stylistic criteria of her forbears, while simultaneously imbuing her images with the concerns and outlooks of twenty-first century Native women.

Rich in satire and social commentary, the works often consist of multiple layers of irony. Haukaas and Purdy Corcoran, for example, created their images directly on vintage documents – account books from banks, court transcripts, and the rulings of governing bodies – all of which record the historical displacement of Native Americans.

While the direct contributions of the artists themselves are informative and accessible, the scholarly apparatus employed by Pearce in the introduction is frustrating. The narrative feels disjointed and incohesive, offering meandering and tangentially relevant quotations, when a concise, historically-linear explanation of traditional ledger art would have sufficed. In addition, the names of other authors (presumably experts) are abruptly introduced into the text, without any concomitant clues as to who they are. Attempting to find clarity in the “Notes” section at the back of the book is similarly unsatisfying, forcing one to continue all the way to the final “Works Cited” portion to ultimately discover full citations and attempt to divine the identities and relevance of those mentioned.

Women and Ledger Art would make a useful addition to pre-existing collections on Native American art, but lacking a more coherent introduction to the subject of traditional ledger art, it would be recommended only as a companion or supplemental piece.

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