



## Balancing Accounts Crow and Gros Ventre Indian Ledger Art

from the Charles H. Barstow Collection, Special Collections,  
Montana State University–Billings Library

BAIR MUSEUM



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by Gordon McConnell

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the American Indian tribes of the Northern Plains were gradually confined to reservations and subjected to the authority of the United States government. After years of constant conflict and warfare, Indians were faced with the loss of an entire way of life. Their autonomy, territory and sources of spiritual and physical sustenance were all imperiled. Confronted with coercive acculturation and assimilation, many Indian men turned to art as a means of preserving and passing on stories of their personal deeds and experiences, records of tribal history and traditions, and responses to new circumstances.

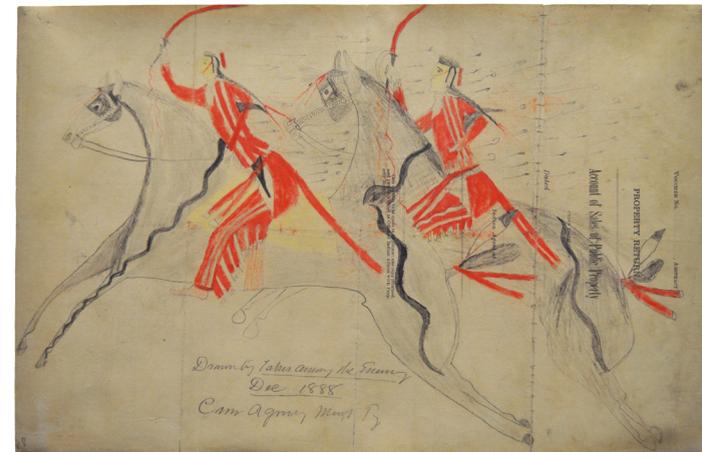
The pictorial art of this last generation of nomadic warriors is widely known as “ledger drawing.” Using manufactured materials — pencils, ink and commercial pigments on the pages of recycled ledger books, school notebooks and office forms — these men created compelling folk art of great artistic, cultural and historic significance.

Their work, which has a strong quality of modernity to it, accommodates dramatic historical changes and direct links between the warrior artists who made ledger drawings and the first generation of academically trained American Indian artists. Today, countless American Indian artists — Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Kevin Red Star, Arthur Amiotte, Francis Yellow and Colleen Cutschall among them — revere

ledger art as a vital link to their rich heritage.

Pictorial art was the traditional province of Plains Indian men — portrayals of warfare and hunting, along with visionary and totemic imagery, adorned lodge covers, tipi liners, shields and other objects. Distinguished chiefs and warriors wore buffalo robes they

had painted with scenes confirming their prowess in battle and the hunt, set forth in this way for all in their society to read. Much ledger art, from both the reservation period and before, conforms functionally to the role of traditional hide



**Takes Away the Enemy, Crow, War Record Drawing, 1888**, pencil, colored ink and commercial pigment on paper, 10¼ x 16 inches

painting. Personal history is delineated as an assertion of social status, as a celebration of youthful adventure, martial gallantry, and personal coups of various kinds — from capturing horses to courting young women.

In the reservation period, Bureau of Indian Affairs agents, clerks, teachers and army officers noticed that Indian warriors liked to draw and paint. They encouraged the activity by giving the Indians drawing materials. One of these individuals was Major Charles H. Barstow, chief clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Crow Agency from 1879 to 1897. Barstow took great interest in the Crow people and during those years acquired a large collection of Indian artifacts.

Barstow apparently commissioned or otherwise encouraged a number of Crow and Gros Ventre Indian men to draw pictures of their exploits and episodes from their lives. The sixty-six drawings of the Charles H. Barstow Collection of Native American Ledger Art, housed in Special Collections of the Montana State University–Billings Library, are all that survive of Barstow's once extensive collection, but they represent an artistic legacy of enormous historic and cultural significance. The drawings were rediscovered in 1930 stored in a trunk in Roundup, Montana, and came to Eastern Montana College (now, MSU–B) through the efforts of Ruthann Wilbur Hines. The collection remained in relative obscurity until the early 1980s when C. Adrian Heidenreich, who is now Professor Emeritus of Native American Studies/Anthropology at MSU–B, began to present and publish his research on it.

In subject matter, style and technique, the pictures in the Barstow Collection are similar to those of the other Plains Indian artists — especially the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa and Lakota. Over a third of the pictures explore the

traditional subjects of warrior art. There are twenty-six scenes of inter-tribal warfare and two of buffalo hunts. Eighteen of the pictures feature traditional activities — courtship, dancing, councils and encampments — subjects that were new in the early reservation period. Other drawings reflect the changing scene, Indian-White relations and the wonders of the world outside the reservation.

Nearly half of the collection is the work of Medicine Crow, one of the most notable warriors of the Crow tribe and one of their last chiefs. His drawings have great immediacy and a notational quality that stresses the symbiotic relationship of the pictures to oral narration. The vigorous, economical lines and markings preserve the action of story-telling. One can imagine the veteran warrior describing his deeds as his hand sketches across the page.

Medicine Crow's drawings document numerous engagements with the hostile tribes that surrounded Crow territory and his exploits as a scout for the U.S. Army, as well as pictures of places and things he saw on his trip to Washington, D.C., as a member of the Crow Peace Delegation. White interlocutor, Charles Barstow, wrote captions, presumably based on Medicine Crow's narration, directly on these pictures and others in the collection. Barstow's notes, whether they are accurate or not, reinforce the perception that these drawings were intended as an expression of intercultural communication.

Two pictures in the collection are attributed to the last surviving traditional chief of the Crows, Plenty Coups, although Plenty Coups himself stated that, while the pictures were accurate portrayals of his exploits, he did not draw them. Among the other named individual artists are Pretty Eagle (another prominent chief), Above (captain of the Crow Indian police), Spotted Buffalo, Deaf Bull and Takes Away the Enemy. By far the most sophisticated drawings in terms of technique, composition and the use of color are by a Gros Ventre man named New Bear who visited the Crow Reservation between 1883 and 1884. His pictures present a great range of subject matter, from warfare and hunting to social dancing and a council meeting.

Surviving from a period of tremendous change, the ledger drawings of the Barstow Collection are characterized by a great immediacy, intimacy and even urgency of expression. They are tinged with romance and nostalgia, but are also suffused with fierce pride and a spirit of resilience. Fluent artistry is richly evident throughout the compact pictorial

histories of these warrior artists. Deft line quality, elegant stylization — particularly of beloved horses — a keen appreciation for telling detail, formal balance and judicious use of color mark these drawings as work of great and enduring artistic worth.



Barney, Crow, *Drawing of Crow War Dancers*, 1897, pencil, colored pencil and crayon on paper, 7 7/8 x 9 3/8 inches



Medicine Crow, Crow, *War Record Drawing*, ca. 1880, pencil, colored pencil colored ink on paper, 6 5/8 x 16 1/4 inches

**NOTE: Gros Ventre (probably Hidatsa)**

Two tribes were historically referred to as Gros Ventre: the Gros Ventre of the Prairie and the Gros Ventre of the River. They speak separate languages and live in different areas on the Plains. Today these two tribes are called the Gros Ventre and the Hidatsa, respectively. The Gros Ventre are related to the Arapaho, and the Hidatsa are related to the Crow.

**REFERENCES:**

Berlo, Janet Catherine, Ed., *Plains Indian Drawings 1865–1935: Pages from a Visual History*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.  
 Heidenreich, C. Adrian, *Background and Interpretation of Crow and Gros Ventre Ledger Art Done at Crow Agency, Montana, Between 1879 and 1897; Ledger Art of the Crow and Gros Ventre Indians: 1879–1897*. Billings, MT: Yellowstone Art Center, 1985.

**EXHIBITION:** May 8–August 11, 2013



above: Gros Ventre, *Drawing of Gros Ventre Women at a Dance*, 1883, commercial pigments and ink on paper, 7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

below: Gros Ventre, *Drawing of Gros Ventre Women at a Dance*, 1883, commercial pigments and ink on paper, 7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

cover, above: Above, Crow, *Drawing of Crow Hot Dancers*, 1882, pencil and commercial pigment on paper, 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 12 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

cover, below: New Bear, Gros Ventre, *War Record Drawing*, 1884, commercial pigments and ink on paper, 8 x 24 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

The **BAIR MUSEUM** is honored to present this exhibition of Plains Indian ledger drawings selected from the Charles H. Barstow Collection of Crow and Gros Ventre drawings held in the Library's Special Collections Department of Montana State University-Billings. The objects in this exhibit were completed between 1880 and the late 1890s on the Crow Reservation near Billings, Montana. The drawings belong to and speak about a very specific period of Native American life on

the Plains just as the Native Plains people were confined to reservations. It was a time of social turbulence and severe economic stress. It was also a time to preserve, record and celebrate personal and tribal identities, to memorialize what one could of the past while struggling to survive newly imposed lifeways. The work known today as "ledger art" contextualizes the iconography of the old and the new in bold, poignant imagery that incorporates both direct and subtle messages and meanings.



above: Plenty Coos, Crow, *War Record Drawing*, 1884, pencil, colored pencil, ink and commercial pigment on paper, 8 x 25 inches

I would like to thank Sharon Dynak and the Trustees of the Ucross Foundation for allowing us to reprint Gordon McConnell's insightful 2002 essay, *Balancing Accounts: Crow and Gros Ventre Indian Ledger Art*. This exhibit has been made possible with the help of Montana State University's Director of Library Services Brent Roberts. I would like to especially thank Reference Librarian and Archivist Eileen Wright for assisting with all the details and time it takes to assemble an exhibition of this caliber. The exhibition has been made possible with the generous financial support of The Charles M. Bair Family Trust and the Trust's current Board of Advisors, John Jones, William Davies, Bill Lucas, Arville Lammers and Joy Culver. All exhibits are a collaborative effort and I thank you.

Elizabeth Guheen, Director and Chief Curator

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