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Picturing History Intro Panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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PICTURING HISTORY

Ledger Drawings of the Plains Indians

In the second half of the nineteenth century, artists from the Plains Indian peoples (Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho and others dwelling in the Western United States and Canada) produced an extraordinarily rich and distinctive body of drawings chronicling battles, rituals, and the winsome if sometimes jarring events of everyday life. Later subject matter shifted to focus on the forced captivity of Native Americans and the suppression of indigenous traditions and practices. Known as Ledger Drawings because they were done on the pages of commercially produced account books, these striking images, many bearing pictographic signatures, are executed in ink, graphite, and colored pencil and watercolor. Some favor flat, stylized forms and a stark economy of means, while others show a lyrical predilection for rhythmic movement, minute descriptive and narrative detail, and dense, mosaic-like surface patterns. What all share is their makers' acute powers of observation and ambition to record and describe recognizable people, places, things and events—to eloquently picture and record history as it transpired.

At the time they were made, Ledger Drawings were appreciated by (and in some cases produced for) non-Native audiences. Today, however, they are largely unknown outside a small circle of specialists and cognoscenti, and with rare exception they have been studied primarily as anthropological and ethnographic documents rather than as artistic creations. Yet the graphic media and materials, as well as the function and absorbing subject matter, align these works with the centuries-long European tradition of drawing “stories,” be they inspired by the Bible, history, mythology, political and military deeds, or the simple routines of domestic life. Following European models, the depiction of these kinds of subjects became part of artistic practice on the other side of the Atlantic. The American continent provides a more immediate context for the evocative and descriptive images produced by Plains Indian artists, which merge indigenous and non-native pictorial traditions and techniques. Featuring some fifty Ledger Drawings, *Picturing History* presents these works as graphic masterpieces warranting a place in the long and rich history of drawing.

The exhibition and related programs are made possible by generous support from Donald Ellis Gallery, New York.

TownVibe is the media sponsor for the exhibition.