

## **FORT MARION AND BEYOND** **Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865-1900**

in collaboration with Donald Ellis Gallery

January 25 – March 2, 2024

David Nolan Gallery is pleased to present *Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865 - 1900*, a major survey of Plains pictographic art in collaboration with Donald Ellis Gallery, on view from January 25 - March 2 to coincide with Master Drawings New York.

This exhibition features the most important group of Plains Ledger Drawings created by Arapaho, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Kiowa, and Lakota warrior artists since the 1996 exhibition organized by the Drawing Center, New York, and The American Federation of Arts, *Plains Indian Drawings, 1865-1935: Pages from a Visual History*, which in 1997 traveled to the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; and Frick Art Museum, Pittsburgh, PA.

*Fort Marion and Beyond* will showcase over 100 works on paper that collectively demonstrate the preeminent importance of Plains pictographic art to the documentation, preservation and dissemination of the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the Native Americans of the Great Plains, and their essential but underrecognized contributions to the art history of the United States.

Over 75% of the drawings in this exhibition have never been shown in North America before.

At the core of the exhibition are works by two artists: Nokkoist (Bear's Heart), of the Cheyenne Nation, and Ohetoint, of the Kiowa Tribe, who were among 72 Indigenous warriors imprisoned without trial at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, FL for their alleged connection to the Red River War, a U.S. military campaign aimed at the forced displacement and migration of Southern Plains tribes onto reservations. During their incarceration (May 1875 - April 1878), fort commander Captain Richard Henry Pratt attempted to assimilate the nomadic warriors into white Protestant culture: altering their physical appearance (cutting their hair, dressing them in uniforms); educating them in subjects such as English and arithmetic (Harriet Beecher Stowe was a teacher); and providing them with sketchbooks and art supplies for drawing. As Pratt encouraged the prisoners to sell their drawings and retain all the income from the sales, many sold their work to an interested middle class. Other drawings were gifted to high-ranking politicians in an attempt to promote Pratt's assimilation policies.

In the face of the deliberate erasure of Native American cultures, the drawings offered an avenue for resistance and a means of documenting a threatened way of life and bringing it to the attention of the colonizers. The artworks created at Fort Marion are rooted in a long-standing Plains pictographic tradition of recording both personal and communal histories, as well as expressing the power and prestige of particular warriors. The Indigenous peoples painted on rock surface, hide, and later on muslin and paper, a medium that was introduced to them when Euro-Americans began moving into the Great Plains region in the 1830s. The Native Americans acquired ledger books, along with tools like pens and colored pencils, through trade or by taking them from dead soldiers on the battlefield, and then, in a palimpsestic gesture, covered previous owners' inventory records with their own colorful figurations.

(Simultaneous with their incursion into the land, the Euro-Americans initiated the systemic and nearly successful extinction of the buffalo as a means of starving the Indigenous peoples into submission and moving them off their land. Buffalo had provided the nomadic warriors with not only their livelihood, but also the hides that had previously served as canvases for their pictographic paintings.)

The exhibition also includes exceptional examples of ledger drawings created from the pre-reservation to the reservation periods. Though stylistic differences naturally exist among the artists, the drawings all share a kind of visual vernacular, a directness and immediacy born out of a reverence for storytelling. The Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains can claim a long tradition of oral storytelling and the tropes of the art—rhythm, repetition, narration—are made manifest in the artists' patterning of garments, the processions of tribes, and the banners unfurled; in the dazzling pictorial accounts of dances and ceremonies, of warriors on horseback, and of the rituals of camp life that were disappearing as tribes were increasingly forced onto reservations. Remembrance resides in a visual clarity: an economy of line, a simplicity of form, and an enthusiasm for color that together create an emphatic call to be seen.

# DAVID NOLAN GALLERY

## PLAINS INDIAN LEDGER DRAWINGS

Ledger Drawings, so called because of the lined accounting paper on which they were first created, are rooted in longstanding pictographic traditions on the Great Plains, a vast area extending east of the Rocky Mountains and west of the Mississippi River. Predominantly created by male warrior artists, figural painting on rock, hide robes, tipis, and later on paper and muslin presented a way to record personal and collective histories. The earliest historical records are petroglyphs and pictographic paintings on rock walls. Later, the martial accomplishment of individual warriors were depicted on hide robes and tipis, using mineral and vegetal pigments applied with bone and stick drawing implements. Shield covers bore the imagery associated with individual visions and experiences, while collective histories were recorded on winter counts, a form of pictorial calendar. With the establishment of trading posts and the systematic extermination of the buffalo herds after 1850 the practice of painting on buffalo hide gradually diminished. Instead, artists transferred pictographic conventions to paper, muslin, and canvas, using newly available commercial product including graphite, coloured pencils, ink wash, crayon, watercolour paints and brushes. Ledger Drawings generally illustrate the deeds of a particular warrior, including warring exploits, hunting feats, and acts of great personal heroism such as counting coup on an enemy. Viewed communally, they are an expression of the warrior's accumulation of spiritual power and the rights, privileges, and obligations associated with them. Ledger Art is highly conventionalised: typically oriented from right to left, the drawings tend to foreground a single warrior and his horse. Facial features are rendered schematically, while the detailed rendition of dress and accoutrements serve to identify the protagonist as well as their rank within particular societies. With the forced relocation of Plains nations onto government reservations, new subject-matter including ceremonial life, domestic hunting, and courtship replaced the earlier focus on military feats. In visualising the transition from a semi-nomadic life to government reservations, Ledger Art directly reflects the changing cultural, social, and political landscapes brought upon by American imperialist expansions on the Great Plains, and is an invaluable chronicle of adaptation by Plains peoples.

## FORT MARION DRAWINGS

A special period within the body of Ledger Art is constituted by those drawings created at Fort Marion, in St. Augustine, Florida, between 1875-78. Following the Red River War of 1874-75, seventy-two warriors were incarcerated, without trial, under the supervision of fort commander Captain Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924). Opposing racial segregation, Pratt promoted a new doctrine of cultural assimilation through education, introducing classes in English, religious education, and various forms of manual labor to assimilate the warriors to a Euro-American way of life. He also provided a group of approximately twenty-six prisoners with art supplies, allowing them a small income generated by the sale of painted fans, pottery jars, and drawing books to tourists in nearby St. Augustine and to visitors to the fort. To advocate for his ideas, Pratt presented the prisoners' drawings as favors to politicians and like-minded promoters, principally among them the Episcopalian Bishop Henry Whipple (1822-1901). The historical significance of Fort Marion drawings is thus immense: they stand at the very beginning of the widespread cultural assimilation efforts that shaped US policies for almost one and a half centuries. In contrast to mainstream narratives, drawings from Fort Marion speak to these experiences from an Indigenous point of view. Amongst Plains nations it was customary to designate individuals to record significant personal and communal events in pictographic form. Most of the warrior artists working at Fort Marion were brought up in that tradition, yet they also introduced a new form of image-making. Rather than focusing on the accumulation of power and prestige, they produced complex narrative scenes directly reflecting on their lived experiences inside the fort and beyond. Repeated subject-matter includes the arduous journey from Oklahoma Territory to Fort Marion by horse cart, sailboat, and train; the military drills and classes at Fort Marion; and important social and ceremonial occasions prior to their incarceration, including buffalo and antelope hunts, ceremonial processions, and the Sun Dance. Fort Marion artists also introduced landscape elements, often employing panoramic vision to reflect on the changing environments they found themselves exposed to. In contrasting the visual splendor of Plains nations with the military homogeneity inside the fort, Fort Marion artists subtly undermined the very policies Pratt sought to advocate for. Graphic masterpieces, these images contain a visual vocabulary that encompasses Indigenous ways of being and knowing the world at the height of military and political pressure for their erasure. As such they must be considered an exceptionally important aspect of American art history.