



Background Information for Teachers

For countless years before the arrival of the first Europeans in North America, Plains Indians chronicled their histories in magnificent pictorial styles. Powerful images carved into stone (petroglyphs) or painted onto rock surfaces (pictographs) documented historical events and personal visions. Narrative scenes painted on animal hides, robes, and tipis chronicled men's personal exploits and feats of bravery—memorializing and making public their heroic deeds.

Among the early non-Indian visitors to the place we now know as Montana were artists like George Catlin and Karl Bodmer who documented the lives of the region's first inhabitants. In doing so, they also provided new materials and introduced Western artistic styles and techniques to the peoples they met. Native artists ultimately incorporated these new mediums into their traditional styles of pictographic histories—thus creating wonderful and beautiful pieces of art that kept traditional art forms alive in a rapidly changing world.

The majority of what we most commonly perceive of as classic “ledger art” was produced during the second half of the nineteenth century, a time of great upheaval for Plains peoples. The tradition of portraying narrative scenes of heroic deeds continued to evolve as Indian artists transitioned from traditional Plains life to reservation living and embraced the use of paper, pens, pencils, inks, and watercolors.

To create their drawings, these artists used whatever kind of paper was available to them: lined paper, foolscap, newsprint, books, or even old letters. However, the most readily obtainable paper throughout the 1800s was ledger paper—lined paper from account books. Eventually, the term “ledger art” was applied to the broader style of painting, whether or not the artist actually used ledger paper.

Today, contemporary Native American artists such as Terrance Guardipee and Juane Quick-to-See Smith continue the long and vibrant tradition of both chronicling Native culture and embracing changes in artistic styles and media. This curriculum invites you and your students to explore examples of pictographic art—from multiple time periods—from the permanent collections of the Montana Historical Society. In many of these works, the artist's intent is quite clear. In others, the original meaning remains enigmatic. In all cases, however, the artwork is stunning, powerful, and fascinating.