

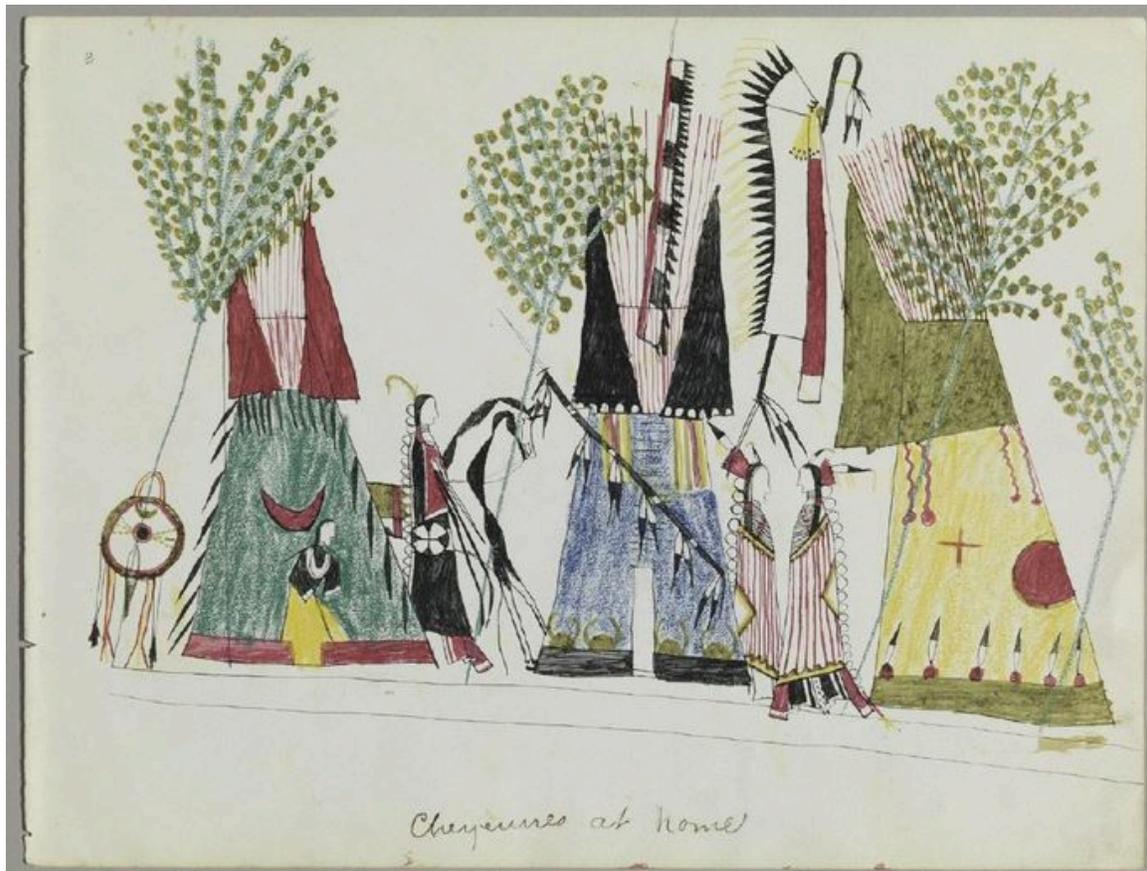
“Keeping Time: Ledger Drawings and the Pictographic Traditions of Native North Americans ca. 1820-1900”:  
TrépanierBaer, Calgary  
June 21 to August 16, 2014

Monique Westra  
Galleries West

<http://www.gallerieswest.ca/art-reviews/exhibition-reviews/%22keeping-time%3A-ledger-drawings-and-the-pictographic-traditio/>

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Astoundingly, this fascinating exhibition of historical First Nations art is not presented by a museum but by a commercial gallery best known for avant-garde contemporary art. It came about through the initiative and vision of Yves Trépanier, whose longstanding love of First Nations art led to friendship and collaboration with New York connoisseur Don Ellis, a highly regarded collector and dealer of native art. The extraordinary ledger drawings on view at TrépanierBaer were acquired by Ellis over 20 years.



*Cheyenne at Home*

Attributed to Howling Wolf (Southern Cheyenne, Central Plains), circa 1875, ink, pencil and watercolour on paper, 8.5" x 11.3"

Drawn on lined paper from accountants' ledger books, the drawings are an exclusively North American phenomenon created by the native peoples of the Plains. They come out of a long graphic tradition of storytelling, going back centuries to pictographs carved into stone, winter count calendars documenting events through symbolic icons, and stylized paintings on buffalo hides. But when the buffalo was hunted to extinction in the mid-19th century, Plains artists turned to paper as their primary medium.

Ledger books were filled with drawings by one or more artists, often at the behest of a military officer. There's a terrible irony in these commissions, which encouraged the recording of aspects of traditional life even as this way of life was being brutally suppressed. Compounding this irony is the fact that ledger books invariably bear the names of the non-natives who commissioned or collected them. Few intact books remain as most were unbound and sold as separate drawings. Exquisitely rendered in fine graphite and coloured pencil, the drawings share many pictorial conventions but remain distinctive. The particular style of individual artists is evident, such as the remarkable clarity, intense colour and complex overlapping compositions in the dynamic action scenes of Howling Wolf, the most famous of the Southern Cheyenne artists (and the most expensive today).

One grouping at TrépanierBaer features drawings of military exploits on horseback, the most frequent subject. These battle stories are not generic but specific, deemed to be true as sanctioned by the tribe. The owner of the story is the protagonist or hero, but he is not necessarily the one who commits it to paper. Artists – always male – were entrusted with the important responsibility of relaying the bold achievements of a particular warrior, attesting to his bravery, virility and prowess. These depictions, which served as mnemonic devices to aid oral storytelling, are of inestimable value today as historical documents that present a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of how the West was won. When the Plains tribes were forcibly confined to reservations and forbidden to practise their traditional ways, they preserved salient aspects of their culture through art. In addition to stories about warfare, the ledger drawings illustrate specific tales of love. Within the context of a fiercely proud and macho warrior culture, these scenes are surprisingly romantic and charming. An entire gallery is devoted to the courtship drawings of several artists, representing the largest single collection ever assembled under one roof. This would make a most coveted acquisition for any museum.