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Sketches preserved as natives' narratives

Ledger books contain art by Plains Indians

By Chet Barfield

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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A San Diego professor's decade-long quest to preserve a rare form of 19th-century American Indian art is getting a big boost from a happenstance partnership with an Escondido gallery owner.

Now people can do more than see and learn about Plains Indian ledger art on the project's Web site. They also can buy a limited number of museum-quality reproductions and help fund the effort to digitally record the remaining works before they are lost, damaged or destroyed.

"There are books of this art that are scattered across the county," said Plains Indian Ledger Art project director Ross Frank, who teaches ethnic studies at the University of California San Diego. "The material has a lot of historical information."

Indians of the northern and southern plains, captured and held by the U.S. Cavalry in the 1860s to 1890s, sketched stories of their experiences on lined pages of ledger books used by accountants in the forts. Fewer than 200 of these fragile, crumbling books, ranging from 10 to 120 pages, are believed to exist intact. They're in the hands of museums and individuals across the United States and abroad.

Since 1995, Frank has been traveling the country to digitally scan the books he can find and post images and stories about them on a Web site he created, www.plainsledgerart.org. The site has seven collections on display and 11 are being prepared for display.

"They tell a narrative," Frank said. "If you went to an enemy camp, stole six horses and got safely back, if you follow the hoofprints on the ground, it tells the entire story."

The works share distinctive traits, Frank said.

"Anytime there's action, the action's always going from right to left," he said. "The good guy is generally on the right, and the bad guy is on the left."

For generations, Indians used the same style to draw on animal hides to



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune

An image from a ledger book drawn by a Northern Cheyenne warrior is contained in the Ewers ledger, which is being reproduced by UCSD professor Ross Frank and Escondido gallery owner Robert Wright.



depict a big event in their lives like a successful hunt. But captive Indians used ledgers for their artwork out of necessity.

Frank's project, largely self-funded, is intended to advance public awareness and scholarly research and to encourage holders to allow works to be recorded before they are gone. Over the years, many books have had pages ripped out and sold individually for thousands of dollars apiece.

Collector interest in the art has been growing in recent years, Frank said, "partly because it tells stories that are otherwise inaccessible, but partly because it's so visually catching."

Frank gained a key ally when, by chance, he wandered into Robert Wright's gallery in Escondido about two years ago. Wright, who has a passion for native art, was intrigued by Frank's project and offered to give it another dimension.

With help from a local high-resolution digital-imaging firm, Wright has been painstakingly reproducing and framing museum-quality replicas of 32 images from a ledger book drawn by a Northern Cheyenne warrior incarcerated between 1870 and 1880 at a fort in Montana. The so-called Ewers ledger, named after the cavalry officer whose descendants ended up with the book, contains a series of drawings on faded yellow pages 7½ inches by 12 inches.

"Every image tells a story," Wright said. "They pilfered each other's tribes. They fought the cavalry. They fought disease. They fought trappers."

Wright is certifying each print as a limited edition. Only 550 of each one are being reproduced. Mounted on archival paper and registered with the National Title Registry, they sell for \$395 apiece, with most of the proceeds funding acquisition and reproduction of more works.

Since October, Wright has completed nine prints of the set and has put them on display in his Grand Avenue gallery. He expects to have the rest of the Ewers collection completed by the end of January and is eager to do more.

"It really is one of the most exciting things that I've come across," he said. "The moment I saw and held this book, I said, 'Oh my God,' "

Frank is grateful for Wright's help in preserving and promoting what both hope will not become a lost art.

"I've been working on this thing for 10 years," Frank said. "Now it's at a point where it's gathering some kind of critical mass."




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Gallery owner Robert Wright framed one of the reproductions of Plains Indian ledger art. "Every image tells a story. They pilfered each other's tribes. They fought the cavalry. They fought disease. They fought trappers," Wright said.

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