

LEDGER ART

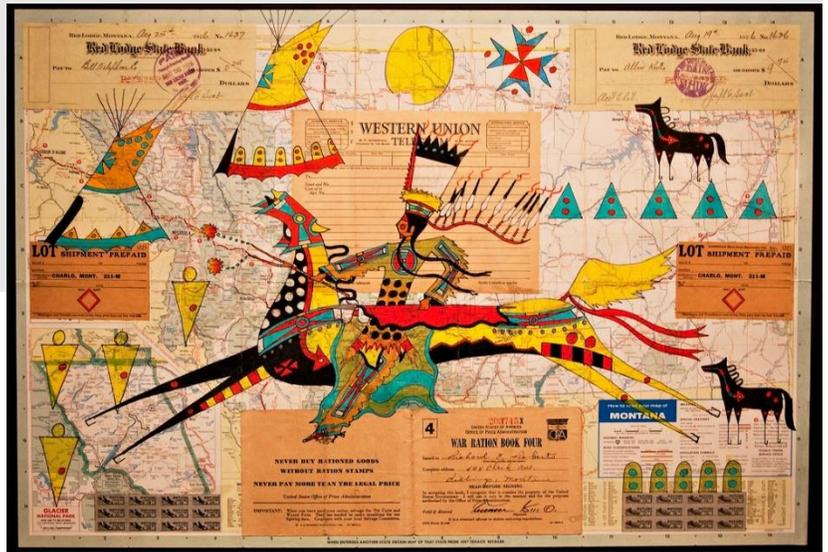
CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION
HANDCRAFTED RHETORICS: DIY AND THE PUBLIC POWER OF MADE THINGS WORKSHOP

HISTORY

Stemming from the long-held tradition of pictographic images on deer skin, ledger art is a form steeped in tradition and resistance among indigenous peoples. Institutional documents, ranging from filled ledger pages to land deeds, are appropriated (or reappropriated) by artists who use the media to overlay an image-based narrative. The mixture of media, meaning, and story is a hallmark of indigenous cultural production. Ledger art finds its particular beginnings in the nineteenth century and the art form continues into modern day, when contemporary artists use the form to critique, question, and provide an alternative view of current political, cultural, and societal issues. Though certainly a vast number of ledger artist originate from Plains tribes, ledger art has begun to cross the boundaries between indigenous nations. The modality of ledger art has opened up to new and interesting possibilities, with the creation of art that combines alternative materials—such as quilt-making, digital materials, or commodities. Whether past or present, ledger art is a genre of protest, embodiment, and dialogue. These images, such as the one to the right, disrupt the institutional and create spaces for social, cultural, and political critique.

Craft in Indigenous Cultures

Materiality has always been a part of indigenous cultural production. The practice of making is interwoven in the practice of creating and telling. This can be seen in examples ranging from beadwork to basket-making to ledger art (see: Dubinsky 2002; Johnson 1998; Powell 2010). The materials used hold culturally-embedded meanings, which become a part of the created object's purpose and narrative. In recent years, indigenous materiality has also be used as a means of critique, action and embodiment in activist movements—such as protesting the KXL pipeline.



“Mountain Chief, Blackfoot War Leader” by Terrance Guardipee (Blackfoot), 2008. (Photo by Joseph Mehling '69)

Repurposing for Cultural Production

Ledger works are—by one interpretation—counter-propaganda and counter-narrative, operating against the dominant discourse (Amerika 169).

The paper materials of ledger art are diverse and often specifically chosen to fit a certain rhetorical purpose. One example of this would be a drawing of a warrior's victory over a Calvary officer drawn onto a fort roster. The meaning is both in the use of the roster and in the image drawn over it.

Likewise, in activist ledger art, the indigenous perspective is exposed in the paper materials and mixed media used in conversation with the images.

Public Power

Ledger art is a genre of resistance, of cultural embodiment, and of protest. In recent years, activist and protest ledger art has become increasingly popular—especially as the genre remediates and renarrates assumptions. Parody ledger art often places popular culture on its head; and activist ledger art uses ledger pages to communicate stances on key issues within indigenous communities.

There are many current examples of ledger art that engages major activist movements in the United States and Canada, such as:

- Missing And Murdered Indigenous Women (#MMIW)
- The R*****s Name Change (#ChangeTheName)
- #NotYourMascot
- the KXL pipeline (#StopKXL)

There are certainly more that could be listed, but the idea remains the same. Ledger art enters these conversations, activating conversations through its use of imagery and mixed media. And, with the digital turn, ledger artists have looked to the internet to spread their work—using hashtags like those above to circulate their productions. In 2014, the #ledgerart hashtag became popularized.

NOTES:

IN THE CLASSROOM

PRIMARY GOAL: Making our students aware of the sheer diversity in the ways of thinking about materiality and maker culture, as well as how made-things within these communities carry public power.

Perhaps not necessarily centered on student production or performance of ledger art and other indigenous creations, but rather an awareness of meaning-making within those (and other) communities.

This may take the form of research, inquiry, and investigation of **production**. Looking at the materials used in creating.

Then, placing that production into conversation with the interpreted narrative, as placed within societal, cultural frames. Especially with an eye toward culturally-embedded meaning.

Specifically concerning ledger art, have students consider what institutional documents they might use for such a purpose and how they might resist those genres.

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