



### LEDGER BOOKS AND LEDGER ART

The Lakota drawings in the exhibition were drawn by warriors who fought U.S. soldiers and civilians and other tribes to preserve their homelands, loved ones, and way of life. Lakotas evidently took the ledger from a gold prospector on the Bozeman Trail near the Big Horn Mountains in the late 1860s. U.S. soldiers found the ledger after the Battle of the Little Big Horn (1876). At least five separate artists drew their war exploits in the ledger; their identities are as yet unknown.

The term “ledger art” refers to a genre of Plains Indian pictographic drawing that emerged during the nineteenth century when Plains peoples acquired Euroamerican pencils, inks, and paper through trade, raiding, and warfare. Plains warriors, who had conventionally executed narrative drawings of their deeds and war honors on hide tipis and garments, began to record their experiences on the pages of bound accounting ledgers, books, and other paper documents. Unfortunately, many ledgers have been dismantled and dispersed, so that relatively few drawings remain in their context.

*Curators: Castle McLaughlin and Butch Thunder Hawk*



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# WIYOHPIYATA

LAKOTA IMAGES OF THE CONTESTED WEST



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## INTRODUCTION

*Wiyohpiyata: Lakota Images of the Contested West* presents nineteenth-century drawings on paper by Lakota (western Sioux) warriors together with historic artifacts from the Peabody collections and contemporary Native art by Lakota artist and co-curator Butch Thunder Hawk. The drawings are selections from a rare Plains Indian ledger book allegedly found on the Little Big Horn battlefield after the defeat of Custer's Seventh Cavalry in 1876. The ledger was later bound and donated to Harvard's Houghton Library, which has generously loaned it for this exhibition. *Wiyohpiyata* places these drawings in the context of Lakota cosmology and social structures and explores the role and nature of nineteenth-century Indian and Angloamerican visual cultures as they developed from and contributed to a joint history of contact and conflict.

## CONCEPTS OF "WEST"

In traditional Lakota belief, *Wiyohpiyata* (Wee-ohk-pi-yata), the West is one of four sacred directions that are associated with a color and animal spirits. *Wiyohpiyata* (black/blue) is home to the spirit of thunder and lightning, *Wakinyan*, the Winged-One or Thunder Bird. It controls the winds, the storms, and warfare. All things from the West are mysterious or holy.

In American history and art, the "West" is portrayed as a place of opportunity, adventure, and national growth. But for Native peoples, national expansion was devastating. Soldiers, miners, and civilians flooded onto their lands (some protected by treaties), bison were hunted to the brink of extinction, and tribes were confined to

reservations. Factions within federal and tribal governments disagreed about how to solve these

problems, and a variety of diplomatic solutions were attempted. However, violent conflicts escalated into a war for the Plains by the 1860s.

## WARRIOR SOCIETIES

*"Left Handed Shooter... came to my father's lodge and said to me, 'We want you to join the Elk warriors.' Oh, how important I felt at receiving this invitation."*

—Wooden Leg, Northern Cheyenne (1858-1940)

Most Plains men belonged to one or more warrior societies during their lives. Members gathered to socialize, discuss war and hunting excursions, elect officers, and instruct initiates. Meetings included feasting, singing, and dancing, especially when bands congregated during the summer months. Societies competed with one another in games and races, and sought to out-do one another in war. They also functioned as *akicita* (camp police) whose duties included guarding the camp, regulating social behavior, and organizing community moves and hunts. Members considered one another brothers, and they demonstrated an *esprit de corps* by parading together on important occasions. But they did not fight as an organized unit in battle.

Each group had its own pipes, dances, songs, rattles, and special regalia which empowered its members to perform deeds in war. Officers carried society lances and wore special bonnets, sashes, or garments, such as captured U.S. military uniforms. Society members sometimes drew their war experiences on the same tipi liner or in a shared ledger book. The Houghton ledger probably represents experiences shared by members of a warrior society.

*All ledger drawings:* Ledger drawings by unknown Indian warriors, probably Lakota, ca. 1865. Details from Half Moon ledger book. MS Am 2337, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Gift of Harriet J. Bradbury, 1930. Cover: Threshold design by Butch Thunder Hawk. *Inside:* Lakota Eagle feather bonnet, attributed to famous warrior Rain in the Face. Photo by Mark Craig. PM 985-27-10/60163. Sacred Hoop by Butch Thunder Hawk.

