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## Smithsonian

## National Museum of the American Indian

#### News

**Media website:** <http://newsdesk.si.edu>

**Fact Sheet**

**“Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains”**

 The National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center in New York’s exhibition “Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains” opens March 12 and continues through Dec. 4 in the museum’s East Gallery; admission is free.

 “Unbound” reflects the dynamic tradition of narrative art among Native Nations of the Great Plains. The exhibition traces the evolution of the art form from historic hides, muslins and ledger books to a wide selection of contemporary works by Native artists, the majority commissioned by the museum exclusively for this exhibition.

**Exhibition Facts**

* Curated by Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota), the exhibition reflects more than three years of research
* 4,000-square-foot exhibition is in the museum’s East Gallery
* 76 objects total: 17 historic works and 59 contemporary works
* Nearly all of the contemporary works will be exhibited to the public for the first time: 50 works commissioned exclusively for the exhibition; seven works acquired for the exhibition; two works already in the museum’s collection
* Historic figures/artists are: Long Soldier (Lakota/Nakota); Mountain Chief (Blackfeet); Bear’s Heart (Southern Cheyenne); Zotom (Kiowa); Chief Washakie (Shoshone); Canté-wani′ća, or No Heart (Yanktonai); Spotted Tail (Apsáalooke [Crow]); Ćehu′pa or Jaw (Hunkpapa Lakota); Black Chicken (Yanktonai); Rain in the Face (Hunkpapa Lakota); Old Buffalo, or Old Bull (Lakota)
* Contemporary artists are: Ronald Burgess (Comanche); Sherman Chaddlesone (Kiowa); David Dragonfly (Blackfeet/Assiniboine); Lauren Good Day Giago (Arikara/Hidatsa/Blackfeet/Plains Cree); Darryl Growing Thunder (Assiniboine/Sioux); Juanita Growing Thunder-Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux); Terrance Guardipee (Blackfeet); Vanessa Jennings (Kiowa/Pima); Dallin Maybee (Northern Arapaho/Seneca); Chester Medicine Crow (Apsáalooke [Crow]); Chris Pappan (Osage/Kaw/Cheyenne River Lakota); Joel Pulliam (Oglala Lakota); Martin E. Red Bear (Oglala/Sicangu Lakota); Norman Frank Sheridan (Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho); Dwayne Wilcox (Oglala Lakota); Jim Yellowhawk (Cheyenne River Lakota)
* Exhibition features interactive STQRY app for mobile devices, providing visitors with unique digital content, including 21 audio stories that provide additional curatorial information and personal perspective from many of the artists themselves
* Exhibition has four main sections: Introduction; From Past to Present; Warrior Art; Contemporary Expressions; and an additional discovery room

**Exhibition Sections**

**Introduction**: Warrior-artists from the Native nations of North America’s plains have long practiced a pictorial style of illustration. This dynamic tradition began with depictions of visionary experiences. Men also painted buffalo-hide tipis, robes and shirts to record their successes in battle and horse raiding. In the 1800s, Native artists began to use pencils, crayons, canvas, muslin and paper. Although the materials were new, their reasons for painting and drawing initially did not change. Freedom was vastly curtailed during the reservation era (1870–1920), as the U.S. government enacted policies that forced Plains people to give up their traditions and attempted to erase their Native identities. Pictorial drawings became a crucial means of addressing cultural upheaval. Since the 1960s, narrative artists have freely blended traditional and modern materials to depict everything from ceremonies and family histories to humor and contemporary life.

**From Past to Present**: Viewed together, Plains narrative artworks from the past and present reflect a strong sense of cultural identity. As life on the plains changed, artists used pictorial storytelling to record the past and preserve their culture. Hallmarks of the narrative or ledger art form—representational figures, strong solid colors, events shown in sequence and stylized symbols—are visible throughout this exhibition. Whether working 150 or five years ago, Native artists have used this style to express what is important in their personal and communal lives.

**Warrior Art**: Male warrior-artists traditionally painted tipis, buffalo robes and shirts with scenes of accomplishments such as taking horses, killing enemies or rescuing wounded comrades. These depictions served as public reminders and as validation. In the 1800s, as the buffalo were decimated, artists increasingly used cloth rather than hide. Paper also became widely available through drawing and ledger books. Warrior-artists used the new media to provide intricate chronicles of their own and others’ exploits. Often created with factory-made pens, pencils, brushes, ink, crayons and watercolor, such drawings provided a means of cultural continuity during the early years of the reservation era (1870–1920). Around the turn of the 20th century, many artists entered boarding schools and were introduced to Western-oriented styles. As a result, the production of narrative art declined.

**Contemporary Expressions**:The 1960s saw a resurgence of Native-led art. The establishment in 1962 of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., encouraged new expressions informed and inspired by cultural traditions. Ledger art flourished and was widely collected in the 1960s and 1970s. Today men and women artists draw upon their cultural traditions, personal experiences and artistic sensibilities as they continue to shape the Plains narrative style. In 2012, the National Museum of the American Indian commissioned new works from 11 prominent narrative artists. Artists were selected from Native nations that traditionally practiced pictorial storytelling. With no limits on theme or approach, each artist created works that embody his or her distinctive style and voice.

**Programming**

Exhibition curator, **Emil Her Many Horses** (Oglala Lakota) offers insight about the development of “Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains” and will be joined by several of the featured artists for a meet and greet in the exhibition gallery. A longtime curator for the National Museum of the American Indian, Her Many Horses is an award-winning artist who creates contemporary beadwork and dolls. The “Curator’s Talk” will be held Thursday, March 10, at 6 p.m. in the museum’s Diker Pavilion.

Though historically associated mostly with male artists, many women are now known for their fine ledger art. “Crossing Lines: Women and Ledger Art” examines the historical role of women artists within the narrative tradition by welcoming **Giago**, **Growing Thunder-Fogarty** and **Wakeah Jhane** (Comanche/Blackfeet/Kiowa) as they illuminate their own unique backgrounds and motivations as storyteller artists. The event coincides with the exhibition’s public opening Saturday, March 12, and takes place from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the museum’s rotunda.

The museum’s Annual Children’s Festival, held Saturday, April 30, and Sunday, May 1, will feature fun and games developed for Native children living on the Great Plains of North America. Many of these activities were more than pastimes and helped teach children survival skills. Activities include the ring and pin game and hoop throw, decorating a parfleche and creating a T-dress doll. Visitors will also hear stories of the Plains, explore the museum’s handling collection and be invited to join interactive dance experiences. The event takes place from noon to 5 p.m. each day.

Admission to all programs is free.

**About the National Museum of the American Indian**

The National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, is located at One Bowling Green in New York City. For additional information, including hours and directions, visit [AmericanIndian.SI.edu](http://www.americanindian.si.edu/). Follow the museum via social media on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/NationalMuseumoftheAmericanIndian/), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/AmerIndianNYC) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/smithsonian_nmainy/). Join the conversation using **#UnboundNarratives**.

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