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The Ledger Art of Fort Marion

Anne Bentley 00:04

This is a buffalo hunt. We've got the buffalo that have been herded in the lower left corner of the left page, and we have all of these hunters on their horses and each one has a bow and arrow and I love this particular one because I could hear the sound of the buffalo racing from these hunters when I see this. I mean, everything's flying. The horses are flying. The buffalo are flying. Parts of the hunters' costumes are flying.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:35

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:41

This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:42

And this is The Object of History.

Katy Morris 00:45

A podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:48

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 00:55

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:10

In this episode, we are examining the sketches produced by Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne prisoners held at Fort Marion, Florida in the 1870s. They were imprisoned for nearly three years in an effort by the U.S. military to combat further indigenous resistance in the Red River War.

Katy Morris 01:28

The prisoners including Making Medicine, Bear's Heart, Howling Woolf, and others produced a collection of artworks while at Fort Marion, documenting their memories and experiences. To understand the story, we'll speak with historian Jason Pierce.

Jason Pierce 01:43

Federal troops start chipping away at Comanche strongholds.

Katy Morris 01:46

MHS Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley.

Anne Bentley 01:49

In minimal images that give you the story.

Katy Morris 01:53

And Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey.

Peter Drummey 01:56

Are their drawings a form of resistance?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:59

Together, we shall take a close look at a few of these sketches. Learn about the makers and finally, how these works ended up at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Katy Morris 02:10

Before we get started, a quick note to listeners. During this episode, you'll hear us use the term, 'Assimilation.' For those unfamiliar with the term in this context, we are referring to the historical effort among white Americans to intentionally destroy indigenous cultural practices and replace them with white American habits. As we'll see in this episode, such assimilation programs were met by resistance among many native groups.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:37

Now to the story. We first spoke with Jason Pierce to understand a little bit about the events that led up to the creation of these sketches at Fort Marion.

Jason Pierce 02:48

So, primarily, the folks that were captured and taken to Fort Marion were Cheyenne, Comanches and Kiowas. And collectively, they were Plains Indians peoples, kind of the southern and central plains. But these are kind of the southern branch of the Cheyennes along with the Comanches and Kiowas, who kind of long lorded over the southern plains all the way back to when Texas and New Mexico were still part of the Spanish Empire. Once they acquired the horse, somewhere around 1700, they start to build a kind of big empire on the southern central plains, where they raid settlements in Texas and New Mexico, but they also trade with those places sometimes, and also trade with horses, horses for weapons and things like that with the northern plains tribes. And so, by doing that, they made themselves the power on the southern plains, especially the Comanches. The Kiowas were always allied to them, although they were a much smaller tribe in terms of numbers. Together, then they formed this, this powerful alliance. They're amazing horsemen. The Comanches and Kiowas, they raid everywhere from, you know, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the plains of southern Colorado, all the way into Mexico, covering hundreds and hundreds of miles of distance on horses. And so, this makes them a real impediment to the Spanish, later to the Mexicans. And then later, finally, to the Texans and it's not until Texas is annexed by the United States in 1845 that the pressure really starts to build up on the Comanche and the Kiowas.

Jason Pierce 04:18

The Civil War is kind of a period that there's a little bit of a breathing room for these tribes. But after the war, there's a big push by the federal government kind of at the behest of the Texas government, because this is reconstruction to really rein in the Native Americans. And of course, by that time, the big problem the Comanches and Kiowas have is that they're now surrounded by white settlements. You know, you have Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and so the circle just kind of starts to close in on them by the 1870s. Federal troops start kind of going out into the Comanche strongholds and are just kind of chipping away at the independence of the southern Plains Indian tribes. And that finally culminates with the Red River War and the kind of decisive battle of that occurs in the fall of 1874. It's the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon. And that really forces a lot of the Cheyennes, Comanches and the Kiowas onto reservations.

Jason Pierce 05:13

The campaign that the army wages is to really destroy their food, destroy what they've managed to save. Attack their villages, burn the teepees, burn all of their belongings, and most importantly, kill their horses. At the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon, which is the decisive battle of the war, the Army shows up the people you know, the soldiers arrived, people flee with very little warning that the soldiers are coming, so they just run. So, they leave behind their teepees, their belongings, and their horses. And so, the soldiers burn that all their teepees and all their belongings, and then they round up over 1000 horses, and they take those to an arroyo very close by and they just shoot them and then they leave. And that's the battle is over. At that point, the survivors have no choice but to walk about 200 miles or so from Palo Duro Canyon to the agency in Oklahoma to surrender. And so, it's really kind of, uh, you know, less important to actually kill people in combat than it is to just destroy their way of life. And that's really the strategy that the army is using.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:04

So, the federal government creates these reservations. But Camp Marion is not a reservation, right? This is they separate people and take them to different places. Can you talk a little bit about why they did that and who was sent to Fort Marion and places like it?

Jason Pierce 06:37

Most of the people in a tribe most of your Cheyennes, most of your Kiowas was put onto reservations, and they've set up reservations, of course, Indian Territory [Oklahoma] is set up to be kind of the dumping ground, if you will, for all these different tribes. Of course, they first moved eastern Indian tribes, like the Cherokees, and others, to Indian Territory. But as the Indian Wars in the west are coming to an end, they're sending different tribes and giving them reservations in Oklahoma, or what becomes Oklahoma. There are a bunch of reservations set up and many of those are still there, the Kiowas are still there, for example, the Comanches are still there. But what they do, then to get back to your question, is they want to separate the political and military leaders from the people, right? They think if we can just get the average ordinary Kiowa, Comanche person, they're going to accept the reservation system of this and what we'll do then is take the troublemakers basically, right, young warriors, political leaders, maybe religious leaders, I want to take those folks and we're going to separate them and send them somewhere else. And this will be a strategy that they'll use not just with the Kiowas and Comanches, but also eventually Apache peoples in Arizona. You know, Geronimo, right, is famously sent to Florida. He doesn't go to Fort Marion, but he's in the vicinity of that. So that was the fundamental idea is we can take these, you know these troublemakers, separate them from the rest of their people. And then this will make forcing assimilation easier on people back on the reservations. That was the idea.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:05

And so, they want to separate these troublemakers. What are they doing to them in places like Fort Marion or is it just isolation?

Jason Pierce 08:12

They're basically prisoners of war and they really don't know what to do with them. So, they send them to Fort Marion. Richard Henry Pratt is an officer I think he's a he's a captain, well he may even be a lieutenant at the time. Anyway, they get this officer, and they give him I guess about two dozen or so Cheyenne, Kiowas and Comanches and a load them all onto a train and they send them to Fort Marion. And you know, he doesn't really know what to do with them. He famously does what you would do if you went to Florida, he takes him to the beach, right? They're from you know, Oklahoma and places like that. They've never seen the ocean. And so, they go and they hang out, camp out on the beach a couple of days. And he's just kind of whiling away the time. He starts to hit on some ideas like towards assimilation eventually coming to that perspective. For example, they get some cast off, you have second hand military uniforms. So, they take them out of their traditional clothes, put them in the secondhand uniforms. They eventually cut their hair. And you know, he kind of supposedly has this epiphany that if you put them in western clothes, and you cut their hair, they don't look like savages anymore. They look like real human beings. And so, he thinks, 'Well, you know, what these guys need is they need some discipline, right? Good old fashioned military discipline, get up at the sun rise, make your bed, march around the grounds of the fort.' So, he starts to do that and then the next phase is well maybe we should we need to start teaching these guys English and then eventually it just kind of will snowball into this whole kind of assimilation idea. I mean, he famously sums up his educational philosophy. He says, "You must kill the Indian to save the man," is what he says very famously.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:50

Oh, that's him?

Jason Pierce 09:51

That's him. Yeah, yeah and you know, that's the idea that we got to take all the Indian out of these people and then that's the way we can save them.

Katy Morris 10:04

In the face of Pratt's assimilation campaign, the prisoners at Fort Marion produced sketches that depicted the way of life that Pratt was trying to destroy. We asked Peter to help us explore this tension.

Peter Drummey 10:19

Now the same person responsible for transporting them, Army officer named Richard Pratt was responsible for their custody at Fort Marion, but also to start an educational program that would essentially deracinate them. That is to introduce them to white European life and education, formal education to take them from being Plains Indians, and make them into some people certainly hoped they would become Christians but make them into acceptable citizens of this new country coming into the being in the American West. And one of the things they're doing is they're given ledger books, blank books, measuring about eight inches high and the pages are about six inches wide, much like schoolbooks that people had at the time and until relatively recently, but with unlined pages, at least, the ones that I'm familiar with, and what they did was the individuals, individual Native American artists. Some people had really quite extraordinary artistic talent would illustrate them with their life on the plains. It's depicting this life that they had left behind, vividly. People have argued that this follows a tradition of painting on hides, that is recording events and Native American life on the plains, both as a sort of calendar, and as individually as a herald of your bravery in battle, rather than things in your own personal life. So that this draws upon a tradition, but it flowers into something quite different. These are not the only things depicted in the drawings, but that's the ledger art.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:15

If the purpose is to assimilate them, in essence, and teach them the ways of white American society, why would they be encouraged to draw pictures of their life on the Great Plains? That seems like I mean, if you look at the pictures of young children who are taken to places like Carlisle [Indian Industrial School], they come in, they're still dressed in traditional garb, their they cut their hair

there, given western clothing. Here, this activity of the sketches seems to be asking them to remember and relive those scenes from the life that the idea is to help them get rid of.

Peter Drummey 12:56

Yes. This is an extraordinarily interesting point. That is are their drawings, a form of resistance, that is in depicting their life on the plains that they had left behind, is that keeping their life alive? And is this something they did on their own? This seems to have developed essentially, organically. It's very hard to know exactly what is going on, in the sense that these people being confined at a great separation from your home and family, and traditional way of life, this art is being produced, in some respects, at least at Fort Marion, under coercion. Whether the topics are being suggested to the captives or the captives are generating this on their own, and essentially are refusing to accept. They're not they're not sitting down and necessarily drawing this way of life they're being introduced to but drawing the way of life that they've left. But yes, it's how do we read this? And how is the person drawing it, seeing it as something that sort of records and preserves this life that was recent memory? These are complicated transactions.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:27

We asked MHS, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley to discuss the sketches in our collection.

Katy Morris 14:37

I'd love to start just with your general impressions of them as a whole as a collection.

Anne Bentley 14:42

Well as a group, they are just a fascinating window into their former plains existence because these are drawn while they are incarcerated in Florida as far away from the Great Plains as you can get in this country, and it is a memory of what their life used to be. We have 29 drawings in what is called a ledger book. These are the books that the military used to keep their accounts. So, they are just little handsewn paper, commercial books, nothing, nothing large, just these little, almost like

homework books for kids. And then they're lined in faint blue lines, and we have 29 of these drawings in one of these ledger books. The medium in which they worked were provided for them by the powers that be. Ours are done mostly in, in graphite, in ink and in watercolor more than colored pencils. So, the there's just there's just an explosion of color. And every time you turn the page, they're very exciting that way. They're vivid, and they're almost modern, when you look at them without trying to analyze them or anything. It's just they're a feast for the eyes, you have page after page, they just jumped out at you. They're wonderfully immediate.

Katy Morris 16:14
They are. Yes, our listeners can't see them. Tell us about some of the colors.

Anne Bentley 16:18
Oh, the colors are reds and blues, yellows, greens. The horses are red, blue, yellow, and green, depending. The tipis all are each specified. There's a large circle of a specific color and there's a border at the base of another color. And the just the warriors' outfits and their leggings are just, it's just an explosion of color. I know I don't know whether these are higher or heightened colors in natural because they would be using natural dyes. So, I don't know if this is a dream color or if this is actual color, but it makes for really, really exciting artwork.

Katy Morris 17:00
You just want to get inside the artists head and ask them, 'What did these colors mean to you?' I have so many questions I wish I could have answered by them.

Anne Bentley 17:09
There are so many things I don't recognize I'm not sure what I'm seeing. You spend time looking at these and puzzling them out. Now, if art is meant to be interacted with, these are art to the nth degree.

Katy Morris 17:24

It's true. When I first saw them, I didn't know what I was seeing. So, I still don't with all of them. But it's true. You almost need a guide to go through them. Well, and before we move on to look at a couple of specific ones, are is there anything you want to share with us about the makers, about their lives or their art that you think it's important for us to know?

Anne Bentley 17:45

So, before we look at any of the paintings, it's important to know that Western art and Western landscape as we have developed it is a singularly egocentric thing. There is one point of view, that's the viewer looking out at the landscape. So, it's from the point of view of the viewer, very egocentric. You're looking at it at a vanishing point on the horizon. But it's unique to the viewer. Native art in the plains were working from the sacred wheel, which meant that they were not unique. They were part of a whole. And so, they cannot separate themselves from nature. They are nature. So, there is no viewpoint in Plains art. To the Western eye, everything's floating around without any up, down no horizon, no any and this is on purpose because the artist, the men are no more important than the animals or the landscape. If you grasp that and stop looking for Western expression, I think that you will be able to assimilate these the stories that they're telling a little bit better.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:11

We asked Peter and Jason to take a look at a few of these sketches with us, a military scene by Bear's Heart and a buffalo chase believed to be drawn by Making Medicine.

Peter Drummey 19:25

So, the volume we have has images of buffalo and wolf hunts on the plains, a lot of pictures of combat, usually against other tribes, confrontations with the military, but also domestic pictures. Although the drawings in the ledger book that we hold, have less of the depictions of everyday native life in the West, so that there are a smaller number of images of women and children. They

are represented within this genre of art. The Fort Marion prisoners being all men are and being people out of a warrior culture, that part of this art is focused on men in battle to be sure.

Peter Drummey 20:16

And you're also to my own way of thinking there's an interesting documentation in them that is looking at the other. We have lots of examples of photographs and paintings and drawings of Native Americans essentially seen through Western eyes. But here you have people of European descent and the white world seen through the eyes of Native Americans. So, when the cavalry confronts Native Americans on the plains, what's really interesting to me about it is the cavalry because they rode in formation. They were of a Western way of fighting was fighting in formation. They're shown as essentially having a caterpillar's shape. They're not individuals. They're in units, by units mass together. It is very powerful and some of it is a very interesting insight. There's a drawing by Bear's Heart, which is understood to be perhaps a depiction of his witnessing as a teenager or a child the attack on Sand Creek in 1864 in the Colorado territory, a massacre of southern Cheyenne and other people living there. And here, whether this is this is certainly not a depiction that shows the details of that event. But it shows the differentness of the U.S. military in formation. And then on the other side of the page is essentially Indian life, a village where the warriors are mounted, essentially setting out to protect their homes and families. Again, probably not a depiction of the events of late November 1864 in the Colorado territory, in detail, but this depiction of sensibility, which is really quite striking.

Jason Pierce 22:16

This one is really fun because it really kind of gives you a visceral sense of what the buffalo hunt is like, you know? You see them running and then you've got some splintering off in the middle here. You've got some that are killed, right, successfully hunted. But my favorite part is this guy over here. Buffalo hunting is an incredibly dangerous way to get your lunch. And these guys are incredibly skilled. You ride up to the side of one of these buffalo and your target area is kind of you can see in the bottom right here, this buffalo that has an arrow sticking out of side either of them. There's kind of this woolly front fur that gets to the smoother fur in the heart of the animal is right

there. And so, your target is to kind of hit them right there in the heart. And these guys are really good at doing that. But you'd have to get pretty close to do that. If you didn't do it as successfully, then what would invariably happen is you just wounded this, like 2500-pound animal, with these really huge horns, and it's now not very happy. And so, what would occasionally happen is bison would turn those big horns, and they could literally tear out the entrails of a horse and kill the horse and the rider. And so a really good buffalo horse, when you let go that bow string, the sound of that bow string being let go, the horse would hear that and actually move away from the buffalo so that if the buffalo turns to come at them, it's put some space between them and that's the horse doing that that's not the rider doing that. So, if you have a horse that can do these kinds of things, this is your most valuable possession by far, but it's still dangerous, right? And so, our friend here and the yellow horse and the rider are not doing so hot, right? The horse is fallen over it looks like you can see the motion lines by it's back hoof there. So, it's fallen and the rider is now horseless flying through the air because this he's he hasn't done a successful hunt, you know? So, it's a cool picture. I just liked this shot of this guy. You can kind of see him going, 'whoa!', you know, in the chaos of the hunt.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:28

I was struck by these sketches when I first saw them and part of this all was, I did not expect to see them. How on earth did these sketches about life on the plains end up at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Peter?

Peter Drummey 24:47

One of the young captives man named Howling Woolf, Southern Cheyenne. He has problems with his eyesight, and the idea is to take him to a hospital and at first there is an idea he'll go to New York and one of the officers at Fort Marion, a man named Edmund Zalinski is coming to Boston to get married. So, he serves as the escort for bringing Howling Woolf from Florida to Boston by a series of ship passages and in Boston Howling Woolf is treated at the new Massachusetts Eye and Ear hospital and spends several months here in Boston. When he returns to captivity in Fort Marion, the supposition is as a token of appreciation for the good treatment that he received in

Boston, one of these ledger books, which is the creation of many different artists, not Howling Woolf himself, but a number of people contribute drawings to it is sent as sort of a token and gift to the person who serves as his perhaps chief host oversees him while he's here in Boston, Francis Parkman, a romantic historian living in Boston, but someone who had traveled in the West as a young man as and seen here locally as a person with expert knowledge of Indian life and affairs. So, this is a long-winded way to get you from people living on the plains taken captive in warfare, one of the captains traveling from Florida to Boston for a medical treatment and as a result of stay here in Boston, this token, this gift book, essentially comes here and is in Francis Parkman's possession.

Jason Pierce 26:46

Americans, we you know, we have always had a sort of, I don't know dichotomous relationship that's the right word towards Indian culture. We romanticize it. We make movies about it. We celebrate it and then you know, we did everything we could to utterly destroy it. So, it's, it's a contradiction kind of at the heart of this nation.

Peter Drummey 27:08

There is the way that Europeans and people of European descent have traveled everywhere in the world, treating everyone else as exotic and bringing back material to do with all of their wonderful colorful traditions and way of life and that includes the American West in the 19th century. There is a lot and that sense of terms of thinking of the collecting of it is collecting exotica or trophy but trying to trying to figure out everything that's going on in this. There were a lot of different things to take into account at the same time.

Anne Bentley 27:44

So, they took this little ray of hope, and they just continued to draw their memories and the things that were important to them, so that they wouldn't lose them wouldn't forget them. This is important. This is how we tell our story. It's a defiance, very quiet, but it's there. You may make me learn English, you may put me in western clothing, you may take away everything that I love, but you can't take my memories, you can't take the life I lived before.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:22

[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in this episode, and to learn more, please visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. You can also email us your questions and comments to podcast@masshist.org. We would love to hear from you. To learn more about ledger art, and the Native Americans who were incarcerated at Fort Marion, we recommend consulting the following books, Ledger Narratives: The Plains Indian Drawings in the Mark Lansburgh Collection at Dartmouth College, edited by Colin Calloway, Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art by Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors by Denise Low and Ramon Powers, A Kiowa's Odyssey: A Sketchbook from Fort Marion, edited by Phillip Earenfight, Janet Catherine Berlo, Brad D. Lookingbill and George Miles. Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage: Plains Drawings by Howling Wolf and Zotom at the Autry National Center by Joyce Szabo. Fort Marion Prisoners and the Trauma of Native Education by Diane Glancy. If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the podcast with your friends. Stay up to date with our latest episodes by subscribing on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcast. The Object of History is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, and Professor Jason Pierce of Angelo State University author of Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Poddington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.