



War Record

Unknown Lakota artist

ca. 1880

Ht: 36"; L: 26'4"

T0371

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1008/war-record?ctx=e334d5979dbd953831670f116db43b73460339f4&idx=0>

By Heather Caverhill
University of British Columbia



During the Otsego Institute's 2015 workshop, I had the opportunity to look closely at *War Record*, a massive painting on muslin, which was created in the 1880s by a Lakota artist. Plains narrative art is an aspect of my doctoral research on visual culture in early twentieth-century Western Canada. The Thaw Collection includes works by North American Plains artists rendered on various materials including hide, fabric and paper. I benefited from discussing narrative drawing practices with faculty and fellow participants. The workshop's central theme of *Materials and Materiality* helped me to think through the ways that visual culture mediates social relations and accrues meaning over time.

War Record, which is over eight meters long, shares subject matter and stylistic conventions with Lakota hide and tipi illustration from earlier decades of the nineteenth century. The giant muslin evokes the dynamic practices of Great Plains warrior artists who painted animal skin garments and tipis in order to document, display and celebrate their battles and hunting successes. The composition is dominated by evenly spaced representations of warriors on horseback moving, for the most part, from right to left. Most of the human figures are delicately sketched with pencil, ink and watercolour, atop brightly coloured, elongated horses. A few smaller and livelier representations of people and horses are rendered in a different style. This other hand is responsible for the only scenes of physical interaction represented in the work—a cluster of people gathered around a tipi and some battling pairs on foot.

The creators of the muslin painting are not documented, however Ted J. Brassler has suggested that the dominant painting style closely resembles the work of Čehu'pu, also known as Jaw or His Fight.¹ Details in *War Record*, such as attire and weapons, indicate that the scenes portray the experiences of specific Lakota and Crow individuals. Comparable representations of Lakota and Crow encounters, painted on muslin, have been attributed to Čehu'pu.² He was among a number 2 of artists at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Fort Yates, North Dakota who participated in the intercultural commerce that developed around Plains narrative art in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

According to provenance notes, *War Record* was once in the possession of Major James A. McLaughlin, who was the United States Indian Agent at Standing Rock in the 1880s and 1890s. McLaughlin and other members of the United States military were among the non-Indigenous patrons who collected Plains narrative works in the decades around the turn of the century.³ Epic sized muslin paintings like *War Record* could be hung from the upper interior walls of a building, to produce the panorama effect of encircling a room. While specific individuals and encounters are represented in the muslin, an audience unfamiliar with the histories might read the painting as a general scene of pre-reserve life on the Plains.

¹ Ted J. Brassler, "Central Plains" in *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection* edited by Gilbert T. Vincent, Sherry Brydon, and Ralph T. Coe, 103–185 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 142–143.

² *Ibid.*, Joyce M. Szabo, "Mapped Battles and Visual Narratives: The Arrest and Killing of Sitting Bull," *American Indian Art Magazine* 21, 4 (Autumn 1996): 74.

³ *Ibid.*

War Record is an example of a work that was likely created to meet consumer demands for generic scenes of the past, and to benefit its makers financially. Lakota artists also created narrative works that represent personal biographies and contemporary life during a period of rapid change, cultural violence and dispossession.⁴ These artists drew from the established practices of past generations in order to negotiate difficult conditions of their late-nineteenth century present. Their complex works continue to resonate with artists of today.

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⁴ Janet Catherine Berlo, "A Brief History of Lakota Drawings," in *Plains Indian Drawings 1865– 1935 Pages From a Visual History* edited by Janet Catherine Berlo, 34–39. (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Federation of Arts and the Drawing Center, 1996), 35.