

Lakota (North American, Great Plains region)
Winter Count, 20th century
Pigment on canvas (muslin)
26 1/4 x 67 1/8 in.
Gift of the Weiser Family Foundation, 2002.163

Theme

Like many other Plains Indians, the Lakota created “winter counts” to record significant events that happened during each year. These pictographic calendars serve as important reminders to Lakota of their history and their ancestors.

Background

When the first European explorers arrived on the shores of North America over 500 years ago, several million culturally diverse people speaking hundreds of languages already populated the continent. Archaeologists believe that Native people migrated approximately 20,000 years ago across the Bering Strait from Asia into present-day Alaska and Canada. When Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, he mistakenly believed that he had landed in the East Indies, and he called the people he encountered “Indians.” This misnomer has prevailed into the 20th century, although many Native people of America today prefer to be called Native Americans or American Indians.

The Plains Indians once freely occupied a large central area of North America, reaching from the Mississippi in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west and from Canada south to Texas. The Lakota are one of many groups of Plains Indians that lived in this vast region, mainly inhabiting what is now North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska and continue to live in these areas today. Before taking up a nomadic way of life, the Lakota were closer to their Dakota relatives in present-day Minnesota and living a more sedentary riverine lifestyle, which included fishing and cultivating wild rice. After 1640, conflicts with neighboring tribes, westward expansion of European settlers, and the pursuit of bison herds led the Lakota to relocate further west, away from their sedentary lifestyle. Once the Lakota became strictly nomadic, their art had to be relatively portable. The everyday objects of their lives were richly decorated with pigments, quills, beads, and other ornamentation. Every object was both useful and a work of art.

The use and decoration of bison, elk, and deer hides have a long history with Plains Indians. The hides provided a useful material for the construction of clothing, tipis, moccasins, and many types of containers. Painting on hides was one more way of honoring the animal for giving up its life. Men displayed pictorial records of their personal achievements—their *coups* (acts of bravery), accounts of battle exploits, and numbers of horses they owned—on their hide robes and tipis. The first Lakota winter counts were painted on animal hides.

Winter Counts

Winter counts are paintings on animal hide or muslin to record a year's event. The Lakota measured years from the first snowfall of one year to the first snowfall of the following, and each year is represented by one pictograph on a winter count. Because winters were incredibly harsh on the plains, it was a triumph and blessing to make it through each winter. Winter counts served two important functions in Lakota society: to place events into time and to relate history. By using a winter count, individuals could calculate their age, which was done by counting back to the year an individual was born. Pictographic images were used as memory triggers to tell stories of the past.

Extended kin groups, or *tiyospaye* (tee-osh-pá-yeh), are found within the social structure of the Lakota. Each *tiyospaye* had a winter-count keeper who was appointed to record an event that everyone would remember from that year.

Winter counts are a window into how Lakota people thought about their own history. These counts provide a unique understanding of what was considered important enough during a year to remember from a Lakota perspective. The artist represents images of many battles, trade events involving horses, and deaths that would have affected many people. Historically, winter counts demonstrate Lakota understanding of the past through their own eyes. They show significant events such as disease epidemics, ceremonial events, and the conflicts over U.S. expansion into Lakota territory. The MIA's Winter Count, like many Lakota winter counts, starts with an image of a calumet decorated with



feathers that symbolizes a ceremony that blesses the elderly (the past), expectant mothers (the creators of the future) and children (the future).

Artistically, these calendars exhibit finely drawn images depicting important themes in 19th century Plains Indian art, such as horse imagery and battle exploits. Winter counts also demonstrate continuities between earlier pictographic representation and the late-19th-century boom of ledger art.

Winter Count Keepers

Traditionally, older, prominent men in a Lakota *tiyospaye* held the role of the winter count keeper. It was vital that these men be excellent storytellers, as keepers were responsible for relaying the community's history through pictographs on the winter count. The keeper, along with the community elders, would decide on the most memorable event of that year to be depicted and add an image representing that event to the winter count. During the dark days of winter, the winter count keeper would show the winter count to children and tell the stories of each pictograph, giving the children a sense of their people's history. Usually, the role of winter count keeper was passed down from one family member to the next, as typical winter counts span over 100 years. When a new keeper would take over, a new copy of the winter count would be created.

Winter counts are often named for their keepers. By comparing the MIA's Winter Count to others in existence, it is believed that the creator was a man named Long Soldier. Long Soldier was well known, signing the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1868 and, along with many others, participating in the last bison hunt at Standing Rock in 1882. The Long Soldier count comes from a Hunkpapa *tiyospaye*. The Hunkpapa were the western-most

division of the Lakota, renowned for producing warriors like Sitting Bull and Gall. Later this band was forced to move to Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. Long Soldier drew at least four of the five counts attached to his name.

Materials

Initially, winter count pictographs were painted on animal hides with pigments. When the hide became too worn and new materials became available, the images were transferred to muslin cloth and paper. Winter counts were also copied when a new keeper was appointed or if the keeper simply ran out of room. An outside market for winter counts eventually developed after people studying the Lakota requested copies.

Because the Lakota's history was mostly passed on orally between generations, the earliest winter counts were strictly pictographs. With the advancement of white settlers, literacy and use of written language grew more widespread throughout the Lakota community. As the use of pictographs waned and written language grew, some winter count keepers used both as a way to communicate a year's event. Eventually, the custom of pictographs declined as a way to record Lakota history.

Enduring Traditions

With the introduction of written language in 1880, the Lakota moved away from pictorial winter counts in favor of written words to document the events of a year. Also around this time, the Lakota were forced to give up their land and move onto reservations. In the process, the Lakota were faced with giving up or changing many of their ways of life. By recalling the stories shown on the winter counts, the Lakota keep their connection to the history of their people and their past through their own eyes.

Details of the MIA's Winter Count Explained



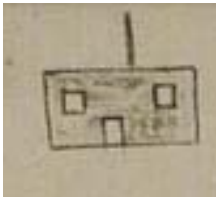
1799: The first white trader visits the Lakota.



1833: Large meteor shower on the night of November 12, 1833.



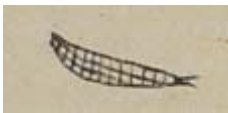
1837: The second wave of smallpox comes across the plains. Within 3 weeks, over 10,000 Plain Indians were killed by this disease.



1819: A well-known trader named Joseph built a wooden house. The event is also widely recorded by many Lakota winter counts.



1821: A comet fell to the ground and made a loud noise



1827: This was a winter of deep snow, and snowshoes were used on the plains to hunt bison.



1890: Sitting Bull, a famous Lakota warrior and holy man, was killed during his arrest on December 15, 1890.

Suggested Questions

1. Winter counts were a community collaboration to determine a significant event of each year. As a class, come up with what you believe to be the year's most important or significant occurrence. How would you depict that occurrence in a pictograph? What image would you choose and why?
2. Winter counts are mnemonic devices, meaning that the pictographs are created as a memory trigger for the story associated with the image. Mnemonic devices are also verbal, like ROY G BIV for the colors of the rainbow (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet). What other mnemonic devices do you use to help you remember important facts? [Examples: Every good boy does fine (EGBDF—the notes on a scale) or math hints (six times eight, swinging on a gate, now they turn 48!)]
3. Do you think the keeper of the MIA's winter count was more concerned with the actual pictograph or the story it represented? Why were/are these stories so important?
4. Look at this winter count closely. Can you tell where the winter count begins and ends? How many horses do you see depicted? Why do you think there are so many drawings of horses included? [Horses became incredibly important to the Lakota, especially for the bison hunt.] What other images do you see drawn more than once? Do you notice any patterns?
5. Winter counts would have been passed through generations to continue the history of the *tiyospia*, or extended kin groups. Do you have any family artifacts that have been passed down from your parents? From your grandparents? From even your great grandparents? Why are these items important to you and your family?
6. How do we keep records of our family histories today? Do you or someone in your family have a scrapbook or photo album of important family events?
7. A pictograph is an image representing a word or an idea. Can you think of any modern uses for pictographs? [Logos, restroom signs, etc...]
8. Winter counts were the history of the Lakota from the Lakota perspective. Examine your history or social studies textbook(s). Whose perspective do you think is being depicted? Why is it important to see history through the eyes of the Lakota?
9. Sitting Bull is a famous warrior and holy man of the Lakota. Many winter counts depict his death as the significant occurrence of 1890. By including a pictograph to represent his death, the Lakota have memorialized him as a significant member of their community. Compare the Winter Count to *Reminiscences of 1865* and the *Portrait of George Washington*, memorials of Presidents Lincoln and Washington. Compare and contrast the ways these three men have been represented.
10. It is important to remember that when the Lakota and all Native Americans were forced onto reservations, their cultural traditions and heritage continued on. Examine some contemporary Lakota artists (Martin Red Bear, Frances Yellow, Arthur Amiotte, Todd Yellow Cloud Augusta, Oscar Howe, Carla Running Horse, John Goes in Center—all artists in the MIA's collection). How does their art compare with the MIA's winter count?