

Lakota (North American, Great Plains region)  
Winter Count, 1900s  
Pigment on canvas (muslin)  
26 1/4 x 67 1/8 in.  
Gift of the Weiser Family Foundation, 2002.163

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### **Theme**

Like many other Plains Indians, the Lakota created “Winter Counts” to record significant events that happened during each year. These pictographic calendars (calendars which use images to represent an event) serve as important reminders to the 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 lived here. Many of these culturally diverse people lived in similar ways, depending upon the geographical region where they were located.

Plains Indians once freely occupied a large, central area of North America. Their territories reached from the Mississippi River in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west and throughout Canada to the north and down into Texas in the south. The Lakota are one of many groups of Plains Indians that lived (and continue to live) in this vast region, mainly in what is known today as North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska.

At one time, the Lakota were closer to their Dakota relatives in present-day Minnesota, living a more settled lifestyle which included fishing and cultivating wild rice. However, after 1640, conflicts with neighboring tribes, westward expansion of European settlers, and the interest in hunting of bison herds led the Lakota to relocate further west and to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. As the Lakota lifestyle changed, their artwork also evolved, becoming more portable. To show honor and respect for the everyday objects they relied upon, utilitarian items were richly decorated with pigments, quills, beads, and other ornamentation, making each object both useful and beautiful.

The use and decoration of bison, elk, and deer hides has a long history with Plains Indians. The hides were primary sources for protection against the elements, and were used as material for clothing, tipis and moccasins. Decorating the hides was a way of honoring the animal for giving up its life. Men also displayed pictorial records of their personal achievements—their *coups* (acts of bravery), accounts of battle, and numbers of horses they owned—on their hide robes and tipis. The first Lakota Winter Counts were also painted on animal hides.

### **Winter Counts**

Winter Counts, called *Wañiyetu Wówapi* (wah-NEE-yeh-tu WOE-wah-pee) by the Lakota, are paintings on animal hide or muslin, which recorded one event to represent each year in the tribe’s history. *Wañiyetu* is the Lakota word for winter, which was measured from the first snowfall of one year to the first snowfall of the following. *Wówapi* means anything marked on a flat surface that can be read or counted. Each year was represented by one pictograph. 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 record

the passage of time and to relate the tribe's history to its members. Using a Winter Count, individuals calculated their age by counting back to the year they were born, and the pictographic images were used as memory triggers for the Winter Count Keepers to tell the stories of the past to the tribe.

Extended kin groups, or *thiyóšpaye* (tee-YOSH-pá-yeh), are found within the social structure of the Lakota. Each *thiyóšpaye* had a Winter Count Keeper who was appointed to record an event that everyone would remember from each year.

The Winter Count allows us to think and talk about Lakota history through their own accounts, rather than through a history book. They provide a unique understanding into the Lakota perspective, because they allow us to see how events were prioritized in the minds of the people, and they help us understand which events were considered important enough to represent an entire year. The Keeper depicted images that would have affected many people, such as battles, trade events, and deaths. They also show significant events such as disease epidemics, ceremonial events, and the conflicts over U.S. expansion into Lakota territory. Mia's Winter Count, like many Lakota Winter Counts, depicts the importance of cycles to the Lakota people. It starts with an image of a calumet decorated with feathers, which symbolizes a ceremony that blesses the elderly (the past), expectant mothers (the creators of the future) and children (the future).

The Winter Count Calendars exhibit finely drawn images depicting important themes in 1800s Plains Indian art, such as horse imagery and battle exploits. Winter Counts also demonstrate continuities between earlier pictographic representation and the late-1800s boom of ledger art.

### **Winter Count Keepers**

Traditionally, older, prominent men in a Lakota *thiyóšpaye* held the role of the Winter Count Keeper. It was vital that these men be excellent artists and storytellers, as keepers were responsible for not only drawing the depictions, but also for relaying to the people the community's history as depicted 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 an image representing that event would be added 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 Mia's Winter Count to others in existence, it is believed that the creator was a man named Long Soldier. Long Soldier was a well-respected Lakota man who signed the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1868 and, along with many others, participated in the last bison hunt held at Standing Rock in 1882. The Long Soldier count comes from a Hunkpapa *thiyóšpaye*. 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.

### **Materials**

Initially, Winter Count pictographs were painted on animal hides with natural pigments. When the hide became too worn and/or as new materials became available, the images were transferred to new surfaces, such as muslin or paper, using paint and colored pencils. 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 scholars and other interested parties began studying the Lakota people and requesting copies.

Because the Lakota's history was mostly passed on orally between generations, the earliest Winter Counts were strictly pictographic. With the advancement of white settlers, literacy and the use of written language grew 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 altogether 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. This process forced the Lakota to give up or change 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 the eyes of their ancestors. It is important to remember that although the Lakota way of life was changed dramatically through colonization, they have survived and remain a great people with a vibrant and contemporary culture.

### **Suggested Questions**

1. Look closely. Where do you think the Winter Count begins and ends? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Take a moment to notice how many horses are included in this Winter Count. Compare and contrast some of the horses. Why do you suppose there are so many drawings of horses included?
3. Winter Counts were a community collaboration to determine a significant event of each year. As a group, come up with what you believe to be the year's most important or significant event so far. How would you depict that in a pictograph? What image would you choose and why?

## Details of Mia's Winter Count Explained



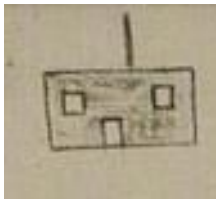
1799: The first white trader visits the Lakota.



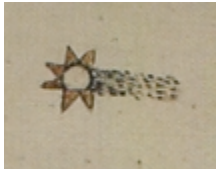
1833: Large meteor shower on the night of November 12, 1833.



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.