

Oral History & Ledger Art - Donald Montileaux - OSEU 5

My whole art that I do is oral, because the Lakota people had no language, and so they put everything down on hides with symbols and designs, and then they would tell stories about what those symbols and designs meant. And once the buffalo were gone, they had to find a new way to put those down, so they started bartering with soldiers and storekeepers for their ledger books, to put those same designs and retain that history and that culture and those ceremonies through those symbols on books. Well, that's where I come in as an artist.

My mentor taught me how to hide paint, but he was too good and I had an ego, and I thought, no, this isn't going to happen. I'm not going to get honorable mention as long as he's alive, you know. So I learned about the bartering system, I learned about ledgers, and I started being a ledger artist. I knew all the symbols, all the designs, what their meanings were, so the transition was fairly easy, and it's a traditional transition, too.

So I transitioned from a hide painter to a ledger artist, and I don't care who the canvas painters are, the watercolor artists, or whatever, I'm the ledger artist. And I use simple tools, I use the tools that were available back then, I use pencils, colored pencils, and inks, you know, they had Indian inks, so I used those, and I do find, I find ledger books that are 1860, 1870s, they're hard to acquire, but I do have them.

And so oral history is very big for me, I mean, oral history is storytelling, and every time I show my piece of artwork, I have oral history, because all my drawings represent Lakota way of life, and especially warriors, and especially their horses that they have, their buffalo that they had, you know, that's my main gig, is horses, buffalo, and warriors, and tipis, you know, but shields now. But they're all oral, and the drawing itself is just an image that brings that story to mind, so we are all people.