

A Celebration of Life: The Art of Gordon Yellowman.

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Art serves a number of purposes as a dynamic of culture. It can relay information about status and social relationships between and within groups; transmit religious and/or political ideologies; promotes specific world views; act as a marker of ethnic identity, and; satisfies basic expressionistic needs for artists and viewers. Regardless of its intended purpose, art is a highly emotive means of communication and in pre-industrial societies often augmented verbal systems of communication. The manner in which art is and has been applied throughout the history of Native American communities varies widely, often celebrating a myriad of cultural aspects including drama, such as dances, ceremonial reenactments, personal exploits, and vision imagery. This is especially true of ledgerbook art.

A number of artists have continued to create ledgerbook style works in a modern context, including Randy Lee Smith, Linda Haukaas, and Gordon Yellowman. A problem faced by all of these artists is what W. Jackson Rushing refers to as "...a hierarchical system of cultural otherness [that capitulates]...to an aesthetic ideology that valorizes certain media at the expense of others."¹ Contemporary Plains Indian artists continue a visual legacy that articulates an art form that continues to reinforce, inculcate, and further a sense of distinct cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world.

The article focuses on the work of the Cheyenne-Arapaho artist Gordon Yellowman. The inspiration for Gordon's art is nineteenth-century graphics traditions, yet rather than merely emulating an earlier style, the artist translates this visual tradition into a contemporary statement of identity and personal expression. One thing the artist stresses is the need for knowing and understanding the general culture, something, he states, many Native artists today do not take into account. Instead they simply mimic a graphics style based on their forefathers' works.² Gordon not only continues a traditional art form, but infuses his works with an understanding of general cultural knowledge that has been lost to many of his people, especially the youth, as a direct result of assimilation. His work is a tool to re-educate his people about Cheyenne-Arapaho culture before knowledge of this is lost entirely. A great deal of cultural knowledge has steadily been eroded as more people immerse themselves in the wider culture and move away from the community and a traditional lifestyle.

Gordon Yellowman wears many hats. He is a cultural broker, spiritual leader and advisor, husband, father, educator, and artist. He is also a member of the Chief's Council and serves as Director of the Culture and Heritage Program for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. The artist feels fortunate to have strong traditional families on both his father's and mother's sides. As a community leader, Gordon Yellowman is actively involved in "traditional" aspects of life, as a Sun Dance priest, and actively pursues a contemporary vision for himself and his people. He successfully navigates both Cheyenne-Arapaho and Anglo-American worlds as a respected community leader and as a practicing artist and scholar. Yellowman has won numerous awards including the prestigious Red Earth Indian Art Festival held annually in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where he was named Red Earth Honored One for 2010.³ He also teaches as an Adjunct Professor for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal College's Department of Art at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, and

is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Arts and Sciences Degree in Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma.

On surface examination his work appears to fall within the nebulous category of “traditional” art. Yellowman has produce a variety of work, such as the illustration on a book jacket cover for a collection of traditions, stories, and personal experiences told by two Arapaho women (Figure 1). In addition to book illustrations, the artist also produces graphics and banner designs.



Figure 1: Gordon Yellowman. *Captured*. 2004.
Watercolor on illustration board.

In an historic context biographic art created by Native peoples in the Plains was the venue of men, a visual record of martial prowess, everyday and ceremonial life, as well as collective history. The cultural values of the period centered on inculcating a warrior aesthetic in youths, and biographic art, comprised of battle scenes, coup counting, horse raiding, hunting, camp and courting scenes played an integral role in this process. Biographical works were originally created on lodge covers and bison robes, the latter worn periodically as a public statement of a man’s military record. After the mid-eighteen hundreds, the art form was translated to a new format, collectively referred to as “ledgerbooks”, due primarily to artists’ use of accounting ledgers and sketchbooks. This change was very much a matter of convenience, as ledgerbooks and sketch books were lightweight and less cumbersome than bison robes.

Historic ledgerbooks identified the hero through distinctive elements of dress or regalia, or a name glyph placed above and connected to the head by a line. Certain conventions were applied to figures and scenes. Schematized forms were outlined in carefully delineated lines of equal weight; figures were rendered with frontal torsos and profile heads, with the figures always in action; color was applied as an un-modulated, solid fill; details were limited to highly stylized costumes and regalia that served to identify friend from foe; horses were depicted in classic Plains style with small heads, gracefully arched necks and splayed legs indicating speed; backgrounds lacked extraneous details, and; the action read from right to left.⁴

After confinement to reservations, there was no longer a cultural need for the production of such works, as the incentive for doing so, horse raiding and warfare, had been eliminated. However, a number of artists

continued the practice at the behest of ethnologists and others intent on creating an anthropological/ethnographic record. The most notable examples of such works include those created by Southern Plains warriors incarcerated at Fort Marion, Florida in the 1870s, the Kiowa artist *Haungooah*, or “Silverhorn”, and early twentieth-century works by the Kiowa Five under the auspices of Oscar Jacobson Brouse at the University of Oklahoma, all of which served as transitions from nineteenth to twentieth-century expressions of the art.

Scholarly works examining this transition to a modern form include Janet Catherine Berlo’s insightful article on the work of one young Cheyenne artist, Howling Wolf, as a “Plains Artist in Transition,” and Hermann J. Viola’s *Warrior Artists*.⁵ The Fort Marion artists routinely investigated subjects such as landscape, dance, hunting, and courtship scenes in a format that bore great similarities to works created by their Plains contemporaries, while at the same time adopting and adapting elements of Euro-American conventions in their works. The resulting synthesis of the Southern Plains and Studio styles during the early decades of the twentieth century focused heavily on satisfying expectations of the wider culture for “traditional” themes such as hunting, dances, and ceremonies to satisfy Anglo misperceptions of who Native peoples were. This trend continued well into the twentieth century, supplying collectors and the general public with visual works readily identifiable as “Indian”, and this trend continued until well after the founding of the Institute of American Indian Art in 1962, and in some cases continues today. In an effort to counter such generic expressions of “Indian-ness”, Yellowman produces visual works embodying basic elements of culture that continue to be foundational to the people’s identity today. An example of this is expressed through clothing.

Clothing continues to be a primary means of expressing, providing a vehicle for the expression of basic cultural tenets. Today people continue to wear their finest dress and regalia for public observances as well as ceremonies. In Figure 2, *Cheyenne Women*, we are presented with a scene that is still part of the cultural landscape of the modern Cheyenne world, women dressed in their finest for a ceremony or dance.

Through carefully modulated hues, color changes from one form to another establish a bold visual rhythm accentuated by the alternating hues that make up the geometric border. Each woman is shown with her butcher knife and ration ticket pouch, wide belts sporting silver conchas, and hair ornaments made of colored cloth strips and silver conchas. The dresses’ yokes are lavishly decorated with tin-cone tinklers and elks’ incisor teeth. In the nineteenth century such ornaments indicated that a woman’s husband was wealthy and a good provider. Elk have four incisors, and to procure enough of them to embellish a garment’s yoke was testament to his skill as a hunter and provider for his family. The handling afforded the yokes, with their alternating curves, creates a secondary visual rhythm that reinforces the primary one, that of the figures themselves.

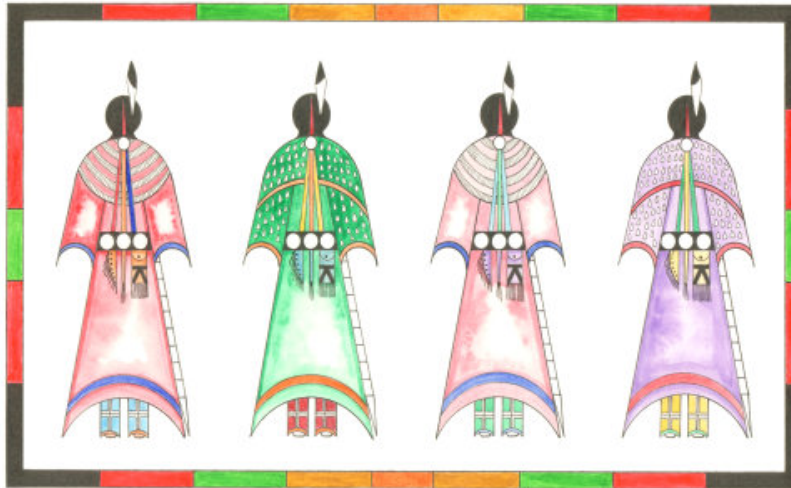


Figure 2: Gordon Yellowman. *Cheyenne Women*. Ca. 2004.
Watercolor on illustration board.
16''x20''. Private collection.

A common misconception in the past was that Native women held little more status than chattel property, working constantly while the men, when not hunting or making war, lounged lazily around the camp. Such ethnocentric views by early Euro-American explorers were a pervasive feature of the period's literature. In reality, historically, women held a position of great influence and prominence in both economic life and in ceremonial matters as well, an influence still exerted today.

Continuing the theme of women's place in culture is the compact figural group of three women in *Cheyenne Ladies* (Figure 3), which exhibits a number of interesting features. Three women converse under the shade of their parasols, a status symbol for Cheyenne Women. Placed together to create a single form tied together by the parasols and linear elements in the hems of their dresses, the form a single large shape area broken up in geometric patterns by the blanket designs. These designs set up an interesting visual interplay where a sense of form dissolves into abstraction. Of note are the central figure and the one to the left. As one's eyes move up their forms from the dress hems toward their shoulders and heads, there is an effect of reverse perspective that comes into play. Nuances of shape areas within shape areas, patterning, and the use of reverse perspective render a common domestic scene as a visually rich and vibrant composition.



Figure 3: Gordon Yellowman. *Cheyenne Ladies*. 2004.
Print. 8"x10". Artist's collection

Plains women's dances are typically restrained and dignified, incorporating a sense of beauty in the perfect unison of the dancers within a contained dance style. Dancing in unison is not only aesthetically desirable, but underscores Native American notions of interdependency. Gestures don't extend far beyond the body's center and typically steps are small progressions with little elevation. Dances exemplify a sense of the beautiful.

This is expressed in Figure 4 through subtle asymmetrical balance in the forms of the two women dancers. With the exception of the fan and parasol, the two forms would be nearly identical repetitions of one another. The offset placement of the parasol held by the woman on the right balances the composition against the more vibrant color treatment given the dress and shawl worn by the woman dancer on the left.



Figure 4: Gordon Yellowman. *Women Dancers*. 2005.
Print. 8"x10". Artist's collection. Watercolor on illustration board. 8"x10".
Private collection.

The subjects in Figures 5, 6, and 7, *Sun Dancers*, and *Pledger's Wife Carrying the Buffalo Skull to the Altar*, are from a series of works recording elements from one of the major surviving tribal ceremonies the Cheyenne observe, commonly referred to as the Sun Dance, or, more properly, the New Life Lodge. The New Life Lodge is one of three major ceremonies historically observed by the Cheyenne, including the Arrows Renewal, and the *Massaum*.⁶ The New Life Lodge ceremony is held every year as a re-enactment and reaffirmation of creation and mankind's place in the universe, and continues as an integral part of modern Cheyenne life and identity. This series of works includes two male pledgers participating in the ceremony, and the primary pledger's wife shown carrying the bison skull to the altar. These works were created by



Figures 5, 6, 7.

Gordon Yellowman. *Sun Dancers and Pledger's Wife*.

2004. Pen, ink, watercolor on illustration board.

Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History.

the artist as a component of repatriating a painted bison skull that was part of the Life Generator Lodge, collected by James Mooney in 1902. The three images are part of a container designed to house the skull in an appropriate manner.⁷

The figures are handled with an interesting mixture of naturalistic and stylized features. A subtle modulation of hues in the heads, torsos, men's kilts, and the woman's dress lend the forms sculptural quality. This is countered by a stylized handling of other areas, such as the sage wreaths and bracelets worn by the figures. Each figure is treated in a manner that evokes a sense of dignity and solemnity befitting the ceremony. The ceremony is a festive occasion in the sense that people come together to celebrate creation and life, with a great deal of socializing and feasting going on. At the same time, there is a marked restraint exercised during the ceremony out of respect for the Creator and his beneficence. Observers sit outside the Lodge, visiting quietly as they watch, immersed in the proceedings and supporting the dancers. As tradition requires, even the children are quiet, and do not play or run. One cannot help but be acutely aware of the importance this observance has in Cheyenne world view.

The ritual knowledge requisite for such ceremonial observances is embodied in the wisdom of the Elders. The Elders have always held a position of honor and privilege among Plains peoples, and are still highly respected today for the cultural values and knowledge they possess. Figure 8, *Grandmother*, effectively

captures a sense of grace, dignity and serenity that comes only with maturity and experience. The figure possesses a sense of monumentality through the vertical sweep of her blanket that terminates in her kerchief covered head and peaceful countenance. The yellow crescent moons emblazoned over the surface of her blanket also speak of woman's connection with the deep earth, a source of power, as it is from the deep earth that plants spring and new life comes from. As life-giver, it was and still is the grandmother's place to instill and continue a sense of culture in children.



Figure 8. Gordon Yellowman. *Grandmother*. 2004.

Watercolor. 10"x14".

Private collection.

Historically, other expressions of domestic life depicted courtship and hunting scenes featuring certain species of game animals. These served as visual metaphors for warfare and conquest,⁸ and is particularly evident in the Fort Marion drawings. While the artists were not comfortable creating scenes of warfare while literally "under the guns" of their captors, they were quite at ease in creating metaphorical images representing warfare and themes of conquest. In many cases such scenes were slices of everyday life recorded by homesick individuals.

Yellowman's work entitled *Cheyenne Courtship* (Figure 9), portrays a young man and the object of his desire seated together on the ground outside his lodge. Their courtship unfolds under the watchful presence of the moon, rendered in blue in the sky above them. The figures of the young couple meld into one another, evoking a sense of intimate relationship between people in love. The man's posture declares that he is proud, happy, and affectionate, and the pair embracing in the blanket signifies the love of courtship as the moon shines on them. The streamers attached to the lodge poles tell us that the man is a warrior of prominence, this reinforced by his favorite horse next to his favorite maiden.

Colors choices used by the artist have cultural import, rather than merely being arbitrary selections. The colors on the lodge cover speak volumes about basic concepts of world view. The red smoke flaps and border element are references to the east, the sun, warmth, blood, and life force. The yellow field of the

composition is associated with the south, concepts of renewal, ripeness, youth, beauty, and perfection. The four circles rendered in blue and red represent the four points of the Cheyenne universe, with a blue crescent moon on the left, evoking associations with the west. Blue is also the color of the creator figure, Maheo. Its application in the form of the moon is significant. The moon was placed in the Blue Sky space by Maheo to guard against the darkness, nightmares, deep water and death, and all those things that “go bump in the night”. The crescent moon is turned upward, signifying that it has been, or is a visual prayer for, a year of plentiful rainfall, that many Cheyenne babies were born, and as a representation of the camp circle.⁹

The use of blue not only represent Maheo, it is the manifestation of him overseeing the unfolding courtship and the continuance of life. The use of the three primaries and white in the middle bands of the lodge cover’s lower border represent concepts and elements associated with the four directions and the structure of the physical universe. Yellowman states that the painted lodge reflects the Cheyenne universe. The specific power referenced in lodge cover designs denotes nothing less than the creative principle, or what can be referred to in a Western context as “God”.¹⁰ The artist goes on to point out that “The tipi is connected to you. The tipi reflects the Cheyenne universe...a way of life, a life style. This is who we are.”¹¹ As such, it represents the continuance of the Cheyenne way of life.



Figure 9: Gordon Yellowman. *Cheyenne Courtship*.
2003. Pen, ink, watercolor. 14”x11”.
Private collection.

Two images (Figures 10 and 11) deal with what was referred to historically as wife capture, a custom whereby a warrior would secure a wife by stealing or “capturing” her from her family or husband. In the first image we see the warrior leading the woman’s mount by its rope tether. Her head tilted slightly forward in an attitude of intimidation by her capture or give away expresses her emotions, and her dress identifies her as a woman of prominence.

During the nineteenth-century it was a common occurrence for a man to seek a wife literally by capture. At other times, chiefs would “gift” their daughters to leaders of other bands or tribes whom they wished to

honor out of respect or for some deed they may have performed. The woman depicted in the scene might represent a Ute or Pueblo belle, alluded to by her headpiece, or she may be a gift or capture from an enemy tribe.¹² Her wrists are bound, and her hands grasp the saddle horn. As in previous images, forms are handled through a mix of hue modulation suggesting sculptural qualities of form in some areas, while rendering others as flat, stylized shape areas. This stylistic convention creates visual interest and energy in the forms as they race across the page, the action accelerated by the wider stance of the legs on the warrior's horse. Further intensity is lent the scene in the sharply pointed "hooves" of the animals, a convention representing lightning's energy¹³, and hints at the moment's urgency.



Figure 10. Gordon Yellowman. *Captured*.
2005. Watercolor on illustration board.
Collection of Dr. Virginia Stutter.

The second image (Figure 11), *Return to Camp*, while handled in a fashion quite similar to the previous image, has a different feel to it. There is less a sense of urgency conveyed through the positioning of the animals' legs in a mirroring fashion. Each animal's legs, including those of the colt, exhibit similar strides in contrast to those depicted in the previous work. Additionally, the woman appears to be a Plains type, versus Southwestern, and her hands are not bound.

Nineteenth-century practices sometimes allowed for a young couple to elope, for a number of reasons. The girl's parents and family may not have found the male suitor to be a fitting choice for their daughter, the couple simply could not wait an appropriate length of time, or the woman could have been married. Men and women sometimes countered such restrictions to their love by slipping away surreptitiously in the night, leaving the camp to live alone for a period of time. After allowing a sufficient period of time for things in the home camp to settle down, they would return to set up their lodge on the outer edge of the camp circle. In many cases, by this point the family would be resigned to the union. In the case of a jilted husband, were he a man of standing, proper etiquette would require that he accept the situation without demand or expectation of restitution.



Figure 11: Gordon Yellowman. *Return to Camp*. 2006.
Watercolor on illustration board. 11"x16".
Private collection.

In the final image to be discussed a sophisticated interplay of complimentary hues occurs throughout the figure of the *Cheyenne Warrior* (Figure 12). This use of color creates an interesting and vibrant rendition of the quintessential Plains warrior in all his glory. Visual regression occurs along a vertical axis in the center of the form. The placement of the blue pendant against the orange shield pushes it forward visually against the stark, electric quality of the magenta horse. Above the shield, the green yoke of the warrior's shirt pushes the shield's upper edge forward, and the patterning set up by the placement of feathers around the shield and pendant set them off as separate shape areas that take on an abstract quality.

The vertical character of the focal point in the shield is countered by a subtle horizontal axis created in the horse's form, and is reinforced by the angle of the lance and rope on one side, and the animal's tail on the other. The artist states of this piece that he used purple for the horse as that represents the artist's contemporary colors.¹⁴ Other symbolic elements are the red earth paint from the sacred mountain of Bear Butte on the warrior's face, the silver conchos hanging from his scalp lock, and the lightning bolts painted on the horse's legs representing both the animal's fleetness, and the warrior's ability to strike his enemies swiftly and surely.

To say that the works of Gordon Yellowman are simply a continuation of nineteenth-century graphics traditions would be a misnomer. Much to the contrary, they are a continuation of traditions that have been kept alive, active, and vibrant from a time before Plains peoples were confined to reservations in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Works of this sort have often assumed the form of commissioned art created for ethnographers engaged in "salvage ethnology", calendar histories, and personal remembrances meant to keep cultural memory and identity alive through artistic expression. Gordon Yellowman's art not only represents personal expression, but, more importantly, cultural continuity.



Figure 12: Gordon Yellowman. *Cheyenne Warrior*. 1996.
Watercolor. 11"x14".

Dr. Robert H. Pamplin, Jr., and Marilyn Pamplin Collection.

In today's increasingly globalized world preserving a distinct sense of cultural uniqueness is critical for indigenous peoples around the world. Indigenous cultures around the world face the amplified threat of losing their cultural distinctiveness, and risk being subsumed in a generic humanness that denies cultural differences. In response to this, Gordon Yellowman's art performs a function geared toward keeping Cheyenne life and identity alive, a living visual process through which the past informs both the present and the future.

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Figure 12. *A Cheyenne Warrior*. Watercolor. 11"x14". 1996. Dr. Robert H. Pamplin, Jr., and Marilyn H. Pamplin collection.

Notes

¹Eric Oesch. *Traditional Cheyenne Artist Named 2010 Red Earth Honored One*. www.redearth.org May 15, 2010.

²Gordon Yellowman. Interview with author, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 29, 2009.

³Janet Catherine Berlo. "Howling Wolf: A Plains Artist in Transition." In *Art Journal* 44:4 (Winter, 1984). 367-373; Hermann J. Viola. *Warrior Artists: Historic Cheyenne and Kiowa Ledger Art Drawn by Making Medicine and Zotom*. Washington: National Geographic Society, 1998.

⁴W. Jackson Rushing. "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art." In *Art Journal* 51:3 (Autumn, 1992). 6-14.

⁵Karen Daniels Peterson. *Plains Indian Art From Fort Marion*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971). X.

⁶Karl H. Schlesier. *The Wolves of Heaven: Cheyenne Shamanism, Ceremonies, and Prehistoric Origins*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987). 3-18.

⁷To read more about the "buffalo skull project", refer to <http://anthropology.si.edu/repatriation/projects/buffalokull.htm>

⁸Candace Schroeber Green. *Women, Bison, and Coup: A Structural Analysis of Cheyenne Pictographic Art*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1976.

⁹Gordon Yellowman. Interview with author, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 29, 2009.

¹⁰Gordon Yellowman, Quoted in Bradley A. Finson. *Embodiments of Power: Nineteenth-Century Warrior Art Among the Cheyennes and Kiowas*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2003. 154.

¹¹Gordon Yellowman, quoted in Bradley A. Finson. Ibid.

¹²Gordon Yellowman. Personal communication via email, June, 2009.

¹³Gordon Yellowman. Personal communication with author via email, May, 2009.

¹³Gordon Yellowman. Personal communication. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 2010.

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