

# The Silver Horn Legacy

AN UNEXPECTED FIND ADDS LUSTER  
TO AN ALREADY VALUABLE MUSEUM GIFT



courtesy SNOMNH

Detail of ledger book drawing by the Kiowa artist, Silver Horn.

BY LINDA COLDWELL

The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History recently has been the recipient of a significant gift of Native American art and artifacts, including a rare collection of ledger-book drawings by Kiowa artist Silver Horn dating from the early 20th century. The story of how the ledger book was discovered and made its way to the museum is like a tale from the Antiques Road Show.

One afternoon late in the fall of 2001, Marcia Bassity was searching an old safe kept by her late great aunt, Nelia Mae Roberts. As executor of her estate, Bassity had been carefully combing through Roberts' belongings, including the hundreds of Native American cultural objects in her collection. This afternoon, however, she was sorting personal papers, looking for the title to Roberts' car. After cleaning out the safe, Bassity reached underneath to be sure nothing had slipped there by mistake. She discovered a bundle of papers, carefully wrapped in brown craft paper and tied with string.

Inside the bundle, Bassity found an extremely fragile sheaf of crumbling lined pages, each covered with drawings in colored pencil and ink images of Native American life from a time long past. It was a set of ledger book drawings, nearly a century old. The ledger's original wrappings bore the faded name "Silver Horn," written in pencil. Inside the wrapping was an equally faded receipt showing that Roberts apparently had purchased the ledger some time in the 1950s—for \$15. The ledger, now confirmed as the work of the Kiowa artist, is valued today at more than \$90,000.

Nelia Mae Roberts was the owner and proprietor of Roberts Indian Store, which operated in Anadarko from the late 1930s to the early 1970s. During that time, Roberts dealt with Native artisans across the state and region, selling beads and other crafting supplies, purchasing traditional handcrafted objects for resale. Roberts became something of a collector, accumulating hundreds of pieces of artwork and cultural objects. When she died in 2000, the collection went to Bassity, who decided to donate everything to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

"Before my aunt died, we talked about where her things should go," Bassity explains. "She told me she wanted it all to come to me, but I recognized the fact that what she had was so valuable and of such interest to other people that it would be ridiculous for me to have it in storage somewhere. My husband and I are both OU alumni, and we had been to the new museum, so I suggested to her that that's where the things should go. After I told her about the museum, she agreed that it would be a good place for the collection."

In December 2001, according to her great aunt's wishes, Bassity donated the ledger pages, along with her entire Native American collection to the museum. The donation is an important one for the museum's ethnology collection. It includes hundreds of objects, including beaded rosettes, dance clothing, German silver jewelry, cradleboards and artwork, dating from roughly 1875-1975. However, the crown jewel of the collection is certainly the ledger book.



Although the name Silver Horn on the covering seemed to indicate that the work was indeed produced by the famous artist—and the works themselves seemed consistent with his style—Jason Jackson, ethnology curator for the museum, wanted to be certain. Jackson sent photographs of the first pages of the book to Candace Greene, an anthropologist from the Smithsonian Institution and former OMNH employee who specializes in Silver Horn's work. After examining these pages, Greene enthusiastically determined that they are indeed the work of the prolific Kiowa artist.

"There is no question that this is the work of the noted Kiowa artist Silver Horn," Greene reported. "Silver Horn was one of the premiere artists of the Plains, and his delicate drawings are unmistakable. I have examined over 1,000 works that Silver Horn produced on paper, hide and muslin, and these are a fine example of his mature style."

"The book contains a pictorial calendar, which the Kiowa and other tribes produced to mark the passage of years and organize their oral histories," Greene continued. "Silver Horn made a similar calendar for the Smithsonian anthropologist James Mooney in 1904, which is now in our collections at the National Anthropological Archives. This is a wonderful discovery, which should be of great interest to Kiowa people as well as to those interested in Plains Indian art, history and culture. I am delighted it will be at the University, where it will be available for study."

The Roberts collection is valuable to the museum for a number of reasons: first because it represents a time period, between 1920 and 1975, that is woefully underrepresented in this and other museums' anthropology collections. "By the 1950s, museums were no longer acquiring contemporary Native American traditional art," explains Jackson. "Most museums were biased toward older objects, dating from the 1880s to around 1920. The period of from 1940 to today has been largely overlooked."

Secondly, the Roberts collection is large and diverse, with dozens of similar objects from different artists and different tribes, making it possible for researchers to see the range of styles. "Hundreds of beaded rosettes in a stunning variety of colors and patterns are among the items donated," says Jackson. "Such items were bought and sold in trading posts like Roberts Indian Store. These trading posts linked Native people from various tribes and provided a non-native marketplace accessible to tourists and collectors. Only a trading post collection would contain the range and type of items in the Roberts gift. No private collector would accumulate so many similar objects."

Finally, in addition to the Silver Horn drawings, the collection includes other individual items that are extremely valuable in their own right. Among these are a rare Osage cradleboard, dating from around 1940, and several items of German silverwork by Julius Caesar, Murray Tonapahote and other notable artists.

"This is a fantastic collection of incalculable value," says Jackson. "There are hundreds of pieces from the Southern Plains tribes. Any museum would be absolutely thrilled to get this collection."

The first few pages of the Nelia Mae Roberts ledger book were photographed and sent to Candace Greene at the Smithsonian for authentication as the work of the famed Kiowa artist, Silver Horn.

## Plains Indian LEDGER ART

With the destruction of the great buffalo herds after the Civil War, the buffalo hide yielded to paper, muslin and canvas as mediums for Plains Indian artists. Beginning in the early 1860s, a major source of paper was the frontier accountants' ledger books, obtained by trade or raid. Plains Indian men adapted their representational style of painting to the smaller size of the ledger sheet and adopted colored pencils, crayon and occasionally watercolors in place of the traditional paints and bone and stick brushes used on hide.

This new form of Native American art, with a wealth of detail unattainable with the old materials, also reflected changes in content. To scenes of battle and heroism, Plains artists added depictions of ceremony and daily life mirroring the social and cultural alterations brought about by the forced relocation to reservations. The Plains Indian Ledger Art Digital Publishing Project identifies ledger art as the link between traditional (pre-reservation) Plains painting and the Plains and Pueblo Indian painting styles that emerged during the 1920s in Indian schools in Oklahoma and New Mexico.