

Plains Ledger Art: Contemporary Style
Art Key: In the Moment
Recommended for Grades 4 and Up

Avis Charley is a graphic artist of the Ihanktonwan Dakota Oyate band of the Oceti Sakowin and Diné (Navajo) descent. Her family is from the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, and the Diné are from the Four Corners region (Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona). Avis was born and raised in Los Angeles, California.

In her early years she was a graffiti artist, and later went to art school to hone her skills. For her work *In the Moment*, shown on the next page, Avis chose to draw on ledger paper, which is a special type of paper normally used in business and accounting that has lines and columns for recording financial transactions. Historically, different types of paper such as sketchbooks or ledger books were used by Native artists. Ledger art is pictorial drawing using pencil, pen, or watercolor paint that is created on ledger paper.

Today, those artists who practice their pictographic traditions may choose ledger paper, sketchbooks, or another medium, taking inspiration from the adaptability of their ancestors and continuing to create. What do you notice about the ledger paper that Avis has selected? Why do you think she chose this paper?

Although ledger drawing was historically practiced by Native men on the plains, Avis draws from her ancestry, Ihanktonwan Dakota Oyate, and visually documents scenes that are important in her life, often drawing on her own stories of healing and growing as a woman to becoming a better mother, relative, and friend. Although she works in a historic style, she contemporizes the art form by adding her own personal touch. Avis is one of a handful of contemporary Native women artists who work in this tradition. Through her drawing and beadwork, Avis emphasizes these important traditions to her daughter, Woniya.



Avis Charley, (Dakota/Diné)
Photograph by James Franklin,
courtesy of Avis Charley.



In the Moment by Avis Charley (Dakota/Diné), colored pencil.
Photograph courtesy of Avis Charley.



Painted muslin by His Fight (Hunkpapa Lakota) depicting a horse raid against the Apsálooke (Crow), ca. 1880.
South Dakota or North Dakota. National Museum of the American Indian. (6/7932)

Like Avis, many contemporary Native American artists use historic work for their inspiration. Her basic style is reminiscent of His Fight's drawing, which can be found on page 3. To learn more about His Fight's drawing, [click here](#). When comparing Charley's work with His Fight's work, we notice that both artists use line drawing to create their figures and designs. Not only do the lines in the drawing outline the figures, they also emphasize details like the accoutrements that were used by His Fight, or the vines and flowers in Avis Charley's work. Like many drawings of this type, there is no attention paid to perspective or shading. The figures and subjects float in space. Lastly, the artists only featured objects that are relevant to the story.

In her work *In the Moment*, Avis emphasizes the importance of being self-aware. The young girl stands in the center of the page, confident but humble. She wears traditional clothing, clothing that was worn both in historic times and today during special occasions such as celebrations or powwows. The artist purposefully does not confine the woman to a specific time period; the concept of being aware transcends time, while the traditional outfit emphasizes the importance of being Native throughout time. The playful vine of floral motifs encircles the young lady. It can be interpreted as a shape that is loosely based on a heart. The vine also originates from her head. This could reference the thought process, something that never happens in a straight line, but searches for a place to go while creating beautiful flowers in its path.

Avis dresses the main figure in traditional clothing, and the subject of the drawing holds a beaded purse. The artist ensures the accuracy of her artwork by conducting careful research. Avis uses both Woodlands style (which contains a lot of floral designs) and Plains style (which tends to be more geometric) in her work, just like her people, the Ihanktonwan Dakota Oyate, did. How is the young



lady's dress in the drawing similar to or different from the dress shown at the right?

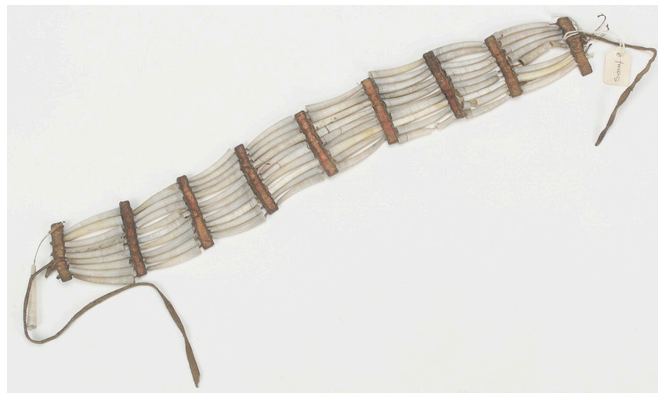
Woman's dress shown at right, Sicangu Lakota (Brulé Sioux), ca. 1880. South Dakota. Wool cloth, glass bead/beads, dentalium shell/shells, ribbon, sequins, thread. (21/969)
Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.



Dentalium shells were historically harvested from deep waters around the Pacific Northwest coast because they were highly valued by Native communities there. People of the Pacific Northwest would also trade dentalium with people like the Lakota, on the Great Plains, in exchange for foods, materials, and hides.



Shown at right, Earrings, Oglala Lakota, 1883. (15/0147) Photograph by NMAI Photo Services



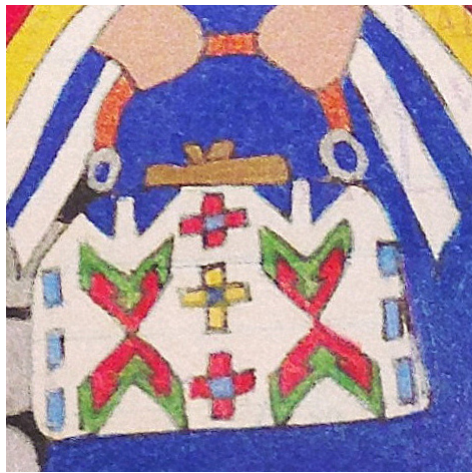
Choker, Lakota, 19th c. (10/8379) Photograph by NMAI Photo Services

The leather belt that the main figure in the drawing wears has silver discs. What else do you notice about the belt?



Belt, Lakota, ca. 1910. (02/5994) Photograph by NMAI Photo Services

The purse she holds is a Western doctor's bag that has been decorated with glass beads. Doctors' bags were used by physicians in the 1800s to make house calls on their patients. In these bags, they would carry all the equipment they needed to service their patients' needs. Many Native women on the Plains bought or traded for this type of bag and decorated it with glass beads. What types of things do you think a Dakota woman in the late 1800s would carry? How does this differ from what Avis might have in her handbag in Los Angeles today?



Pocketbook or doctor's bag, Lakota (Teton/Western Sioux), ca. 1890. North Dakota or South Dakota. Hide, metal items, glass bead/beads, metal bead/beads, twine/string. (25/982) Photograph by Katherine Fogden.

Women's leggings, a strip of decorated cloth or hide that covers the legs, are shorter than men's. Since women wore dresses, less leg was exposed. Modesty is an important cultural value of the Dakota people that is still practiced today. Are there other things about the painting that might show modesty? What are they?



Leggings, Oglala Lakota, ca. 1890. (15/7070) Photograph by NMAI Photo Services



Moccasins, Lakota, ca. 1890. (23/0695) Photograph by NMAI Photo Services

Because the Dakota people were the farthest east of all three of the Oceti Sakowin, they had interaction with their neighbors, the Ojibwe. The Ojibwe, from the Woodlands area of the Great Lakes, often use floral designs in their clothing and other objects in their culture. Notice the floral designs on the Ojibwe bandolier bag and in Avis Charley's work. Why do you think different Native groups often emphasize flowers, trees, berries, and other plants in their personal items? What types of designs would you put into your clothing if you made it? What might this tell us about your cultural values?



Bandolier bag, Ojibwe, 1880-1950. (23/2965)
Photograph by Janine Sarna-Jones.