

Standing Bear Muslins – Provenance and Dates

Standing Bear 1859-1934. Miniconjou although resided with Oglala camps. Traveled to Europe in 1887 and then in 1889-1890 with wild west shows. Father Powell suggests Standing Bear's reputation as an artist was well-known by 1900.¹ There are at least seven muslin paintings and two sets of drawings known to be by Standing Bear. One of the seven muslin paintings has not been seen since Father Powell examined it in the 1970s. Father Powell has seen an image of the St. Joseph painting and indicated it is not the one still to be found. Then owned by L. Drew Bax, Father Powell still believes it to be in Japan or Europe.²

The other six muslin paintings are located in the Karl May Museum, Radebeul, Germany; the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa, OK; the Charles and Valerie Diker Collection in New York, NY; the Foundation for the Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture, Inc. in Chicago, ILL; the St. Joseph Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri, and the South Dakota State Historical Society Museum, Pierre, SD. In order and in short-hand form they are May, Philbrook, Diker, Powell, St. Joseph, and Pierre.

The two sets of drawings are well-known and accurately documented. The set of 31 drawings in the Buechel Museum in St. Francis, South Dakota, is dated in 1928. There were originally 32 but drawing number 4 of Crazy Horse is missing. The *Black Elk Speaks* drawings were done in 1931 to illustrate Neihardt's book and are collected in the John G. Neihardt Trust in the University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri.

Dating the muslins is more problematic. Dates are given in ranges and provenances are in most cases sketchy. Of the six, two - the Powell painting and the St. Joseph painting - appear to have been documented from Standing Bear to its current holder. Paintings have been placed in order based on the earliest date in the range given for each.

1. **St. Joseph: 1890** - In April 1919, Harry L. George purchased the muslin from Vern Thornburgh. Thornburgh provided an affidavit from T. W. Comer who purchased it from Standing Bear at Pine Ridge in 1890. Comer operated a store near the reservation. Comer sold it to Allen A. Strong in the summer of 1918. Strong in turn sold it to Thornburgh who in turn sold it to George. The letters and affidavit are in the collection folder at the St. Joseph Museum. Of the six, this dating and provenance are without question while the Powell painting remains a close second.³
2. **May: 1890-1908 (1920) –**
 - a. Until 2009, the Karl May Museum in Radebeul, Germany listed this painting as by Curley, one of the six Crow scouts for Custer. Arthur Amiotte, in 2007, correctly identified the work as by his great grandfather and dated it around 1920 based on the degree of detail, etc.⁴
 - b. However, the museum staff, able to later research records more accurately after Amiotte's correct attribution, found the painting listed on a bill of lading shipping the painting from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania dated 29 July 1909. It was part of a collection sent by Emil W. Lenders to his home in Germany. The painting eventually found its way to the Karl May and was first noted there in 1936.
 - c. Lenders, a German immigrant, was an extraordinary collector of Indian culture, amateur ethnologist, performer in Wild West Shows, and had quite a following as an artist. After Philadelphia, he lived in Oklahoma, some of this time on the famous 101 Joe C. Miller Ranch. He sent items to museums in Dresden and Leipzig between 1907 and 1913. Radebeul is a suburb of Dresden.

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- d. The range of 1890-1908 has been established by the museum for documented reasons. I placed 1920 parenthetically as this is the second Standing Bear painting Amiotte dated in 1920. Interestingly, Lenders died in 1934 the same year as Standing Bear.
3. **Philbrook: 1892-1900 –**
 - a. This is the current date range used by the museum. The first exhibit of this painting that I could document was done by The Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach, California in 1975.⁵ The painting was not dated in the catalog.
 - b. The Newport Harbor Art Museum curator in 1999 indicated to me he had seen documentation indicating an earlier date but could not then find it. Correctly identified as “Sioux” in the catalog, the attribution was subsequently changed to Cheyenne with a date range of 1883-1905 when acquired by the Philbrook. That has been changed to the current attribution and date range. I have not been able to find out when and by whom the attribution was changed.
4. **Diker: 1920 (c1895-1900)–**
 - a. I’ve found one reference to Standing Bear telling his granddaughter, Amiotte’s mother, about the battles and sun dancing when he was constructing paintings on his kitchen table in 1925.⁶ This assertion was not documented nor referenced in any other discussion about Amiotte or his famous great great-grandfather and I have not seen it anywhere else.
 - b. I’ve added the “c1895-1900” date range parenthetically as this was the original dating I received from the Diker Collection with permission to use in my book. It is the dating in *Rubbing Out Long Hair*.⁷
 - c. I was able to attend a pre-opening of “Indigenous Beauty” at the Seattle Art Museum and meet the Diker’s. We talked about the painting, my book, and I noted then the 1920 date. Amiotte dated it as 1920 in 2006. Prior to that the 1895-1900 date had been used and an incorrect documentation had been provided to me.
 - d. No other information about the painting was shared.
5. **Powell: 1899 (1889-1903) –**
 - a. The first version of this provenance (2016) tentatively established the 1899 date as when commissioned by E. A. Burbank on his visit to Pine Ridge. Burbank kept his uncle and benefactor, Edward E. Ayer, informed of Burbank’s paintings and subjects routinely in letters now archived in the Newberry Library in Chicago.⁸ Burbank first visited Pine Ridge in May through July 1899, returning in September 1899. He wrote eight letters in the first visit and one letter on the second. Information was thought to be in the letters about the commission and purchase. Copies of the letters had not been received at that time.
 - b. Once the copies were received, the painting Burbank commissioned turned out to be from Kicking Bear. Burbank told his uncle of an Apache hide painting 3 feet by 6 feet that was being sent to him and that he had commissioned one about the Custer fight about the same size. The Kicking Bear painting in the Cranbrook Institute of Science is 3 feet by 5 ½ feet and is documented thoroughly to that letter. The Powell muslin measures 6 feet by 6 feet.
 - c. The 1889-1903 dating was used by J. Joe Bauxer, related to Burbank, who owned the painting before it was donated to Father Powell’s foundation. Father Powell’s research, assisted by Andrew Whiteford of Beloit College, established the 1899 date

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using documentation that yet to be located. The thoroughness of both men is known and the 1899-1903 range is believed to be valid.⁹

6. Pierre: Undated -

- a. Dan Brosz, Curator of Collections at SDSHS, provided new image. The only document in the collection file is a story that has no relationship to the events in the painting. This cannot be positively identified as to date at this time. There is little doubt that it is by Standing Bear.¹⁰

We have been unable to establish a direct connection between Standing Bear and the May, Philbrook, Pierre, and Diker paintings. For now, I believe that connection exists for the Powell and the St. Joseph painting. The direct connection exists for the two sets of drawings.

I compared all the pieces looking for oeuvre characteristics and any discernable changes. Frankly, the only differences in depiction that I found were minor and I believe had more to do with material, medium, and environment than with a change in artistic style. In fact, I see an amazing amount of consistency from earliest to last.

The two sets of drawings best show both consistency and differences using different media. The Black Elk water colors are not as crisp and fine-lined as the lead pencil drawings in the Buechel collection. But, there is no discernible difference in the manner of portrayal of people, animals, and objects.

The Diker piece dating of 1920 continues to be a question to me. Had the May Museum staff not been able to find the actual manifest from 1909, that painting would also be dated 1920. Given that Standing Bear's oeuvre shows no significant change over probably a forty-year time span, there should be no valid reason for such concern. But, there is the "incorrect documentation" with those dates.

Using the St. Joseph painting as a known date, comparing the drawings of both sets with that piece was most telling as to consistency. Dan Brosz just took the image of the Sun Dance muslin used on 20 April. From what I can see in that image, style change is not present in it either. There is no further information in the collection files for this piece in South Dakota.

The only other date issue I can see at the moment is the range for the Philbrook piece. At some point in time it was dated in 1883. Given the circumstances he and the rest of the people were going through during that timeframe (recent surrender and return of Sitting Bull, continued inter-tribal warfare, extremely difficult and sparse living conditions), I'm suspicious of 1883. All of these pieces are complicated, well-composed, and produced I think, in rather stable conditions, say a kitchen table for instance noted before. Those happened in his life after 1890. Well, more stable than canvas lodge coverings, hit and miss ration issues, etc., experienced before he and some families fled to Canada in 1878 and then after their return and those unsettled circumstances throughout the 1880s.

The location of the St. Joseph painting allows much to be firmed up as to Standing Bear's works. It is not often, at least in my experience, that such a piece is so firmly documented.

¹ Maurer, *Visions of the People*, 82

² Ibid., 102n1. When first researching for *Rubbing Out Long Hair*, I knew of only the three muslins described by Father Powell in Maurer's book. When I "found" the painting in the Karl May Museum I identified it as the missing Bax. After the book was published, Father Powell corresponded that it was not the Bax painting and it was still "unknown location." I did not include the Pierre painting as it was not about the Little Big Horn battle. I emailed John Powell,

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Father Powell's son, asking him to show the painting to Father Powell. After much study, Father Powell it is not the one he saw and still not located. Email in author's possession.

³ Letter, Vern Thornburgh to Harry George, April 9, 1919; Letter, Vern Thornburgh to Harry George, April 12, 1919; affidavit, T. W. Comer, February 27, 1919. The Harry L. George Collection, St. Joseph Museum, St. Joseph, Missouri.

⁴ Letter, Andre Kohler, Curator, Karl May Museum, 7 October 2009 to author detailing the Museum's decision to properly attribute to Standing Bear. Amiotte made the identification in 2007.

⁵ Byrnes, James B. Catalog and Exhibition Preparer. *The Artist As Collector: Selections from Four California Collections of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, the Amerindians and the Santeros of New Mexico*. The Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California. March 15 – May 4, 1975. See also "Muslin Painting: A Gift of Mrs. John Steele Zink." *Philbrook Members Bulletin*, March-April 1982, 6; Wade and Strickland, *Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art*, Philbrook Art Center and University of Oklahoma Press, 1981, 109.

⁶ Janet Catherine Berlo, Editor. *Plains Indian Drawings 1865 -1935: Pages From A Visual History*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1996, 151,

⁷ Thomas, *Rubbing Out Long Hair*, second printing, 189.

⁸ E. A. Burbank Papers, The Newberry Library, Chicago. Letters, Box 1, Folders 31 and 33.

⁹ Letter, J. Joe Bauxer to Father Peter Powell, September 28, 1959; Berloit College exhibition file, 1960 exhibition of Powell painting. Both documents in the Newberry Library.

¹⁰ Email, Dan Brosz, 22 April 2016, to author about provenance and history. In author's possession.