

"I bless every canvas first, with sweetgrass or cedar. I ask whatever image wants to come out, to come out," Buffalo Spirit says. With the slightest smile, she adds, "Then the paint goes on smooth as butter."

There is almost always music playing in the studio. At the beginning of a new canvas, it's usually flute music by her friend Joe Fire Crow. Further into a painting, the soundtrack varies, sometimes blues, sometimes jazz. Today it's Spanish love songs.

She has already named the work in progress perched on her lap. She calls it "Angels Walk the Earth." It was commissioned by a dear friend who helped Buffalo Spirit when the artist was recovering from surgery. The painting is almost complete. An angel wearing a Cheyenne dress holds a feather and a gourd in her hands. Her wings are patterned with a Native star quilt design, colorful checks and feathers intertwined. The dress flows to the earth and blends into it. Pansies, tulips, daisies, and roses grow in the space where dress and earth merge. At the moment, Buffalo Spirit is adding detail to the stems and petals.

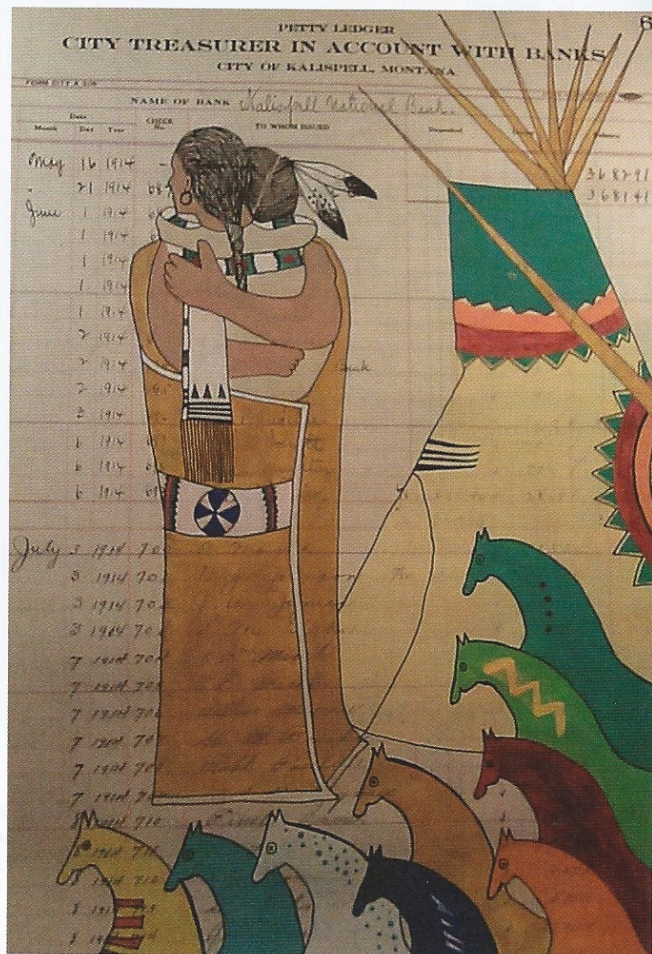
For years, her artistic endeavors were more of a hobby. But during a particularly difficult season in her life, she realized painting was her lifeblood. Quite literally, it saved her. In a three-year period, the artist survived breast cancer, grieved the death of her adult son, and took in his children. It was the kind of time when one questions how things could possibly get worse—then the answer comes the next day.

All the while, she turned to painting for her own sense of healing. "I used it as art therapy," she says. "I came out of those dark spaces." On the day when her grandchildren left to go live with their biological mother, Buffalo Spirit could not watch as the car was backing out of the driveway. She turned away and began to paint. Time after time, her art gave her the will to push through the most difficult moments, gave her hope.

In 2004, she went to the desert southwest with a friend, a voyage that became much more than just a getaway. Rhonda Greenberg, an interior decorator in Scottsdale, Arizona, saw some of Buffalo Spirit's jean jacket panels and encouraged her to take the hobby more seriously. "Have you ever thought of painting large wall-hangings?" Greenberg asked and showed her a valance of soft white leather. The interaction inspired Buffalo Spirit to try larger formats and craft a home furnishing line. She began painting curtains and wall-hangings.

Then she discovered ledger painting.

Originally rooted in pictographic works on stone



and leather, "ledger art" as we know it today dates back to the earliest European battles with Native American tribes. Indigenous people found scraps from ledger books, volumes designed to track the details of commerce, and used them as canvases for detailed paintings recording those battles. The original artists would have regarded these pieces more as historic documentation than expressive art. Those ledger works, most now in museums, rarely include facial expressions. "You'll see riders on horseback; no detailed features. It was just to document, to show what happened, not to show emotion," Buffalo Spirit says.

Ledger art was almost always rendered by men, and usually only those who were high-ranking—tribal leaders and accomplished warriors. Regardless, Buffalo Spirit found the art form irresistible. She learned all she could about its history and the painters who practice it today. Then, she got a call from an acquaintance who had heard about her interest in the craft. The woman offered her a stack of ledger papers from 1832 and encouraged the