



Ball-play Dance, plate 22 from "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date

1845

Primary Maker

George Catlin

Medium

Color lithograph on paper

Description

As I have mentioned in former pages that for nearly all their hunts,

wars, or games, the events of which the Indians superstitiously believe to be controlled by the agency of some supernatural influence, they must needs give a dance and a song; so for a guarantee of success in this important and desperate game, each party must invoke the countenance and aid of the spirit or genius supposed to preside over it, by preluding the play with the singular and picturesque mode represented in this plate, called by them the "Ball-play Dance." This curious scene was one which I witnessed in the tribe of Choctaws, seven hundred miles west of the Mississippi, in 1836, and I introduce it here as absolutely necessary in enabling the reader to form a just notion of the Ball-play to be described in the succeeding plate. This famous play took place within a few miles of the Choctaw Agency's Establishment, and on a beautiful prairie where were engaged some five or six hundred youths selected for the play, and surrounded by a multitude of five or six thousand spectators, of all colors, amongst whom several officers of the garrison and myself had mingled to witness the day's sport. For this purpose we rode out to the ball-play ground in the afternoon previous to the day of the play, in order to witness this important preliminary ceremony, and took up our position in the midst of their numerous encampment. There were two points of timber about half a mile apart, in which the two parties for the play, with their respective families and friends, were encamped, and lying between them was the beautiful and level prairie on which the game was to be played. My companions and myself, although we had been apprised that to see the whole of a ball-play we must remain on the ground all the night previous, had brought nothing to sleep upon, resolving to keep our eyes open and see what transpired through the night. During the afternoon we loitered about amongst the different tents and wigwams of the two encampments; and afterwards, at sundown, witnessed the ceremony of measuring off the ground and erecting the byes or goals which were to guide the play. Each party had its goal made with two upright posts about twenty-five feet high, and six feet apart, set firm in the ground, with a pole across at the top. These goals were about forty or fifty rods apart; and at a point just half-way between was another small stake driven down where the ball was to be started by throwing it straight up at the firing of a gun, for the contention of the players. All this preparation was made by some old men who were, it seems, selected to be the judges of the play; who drew a line also from one bye to the other—to which line came directly from the woods, on both sides, a great concourse of women and old men, boys and girls, and dogs and horses—where bets were to be made on the play. The betting was all done across this line, and was chiefly left to the women, who seemed to have marshalled out a little of everything that their wigwams and fields contained. Of these goods and chattels were knives, dresses, blankets, pots and kettles, drums, guns, bows and quivers, kegs of whiskey, war-clubs, tomahawks, shields and spears, horses, dogs, and saddles, and yet a catalogue of lesser Indian "valuables;" and all were placed in the possession of stakeholders who sat by them on the ground, and watched them during the night preparatory to the play. The ground having been thus prepared, and the preliminaries of the game all settled, the bettings made, and the goods all "staked," night came on without the appearance of any players on the ground; but soon after dark a procession of lighted flambeaux was seen emerging from each encampment, escorting the players to the ground, where they were in a few moments assembled around their respective byes, in their ball-play dress. When, at the beat of their drums, and chaunts of the women, the two parties simultaneously commenced upon the "Ball-play Dance," as seen in the illustration. For this dance the entire number of players on each side, in full dress and ornaments for the play, with their waving tails of white horse-hair attached to their girdles, and their ball-sticks in their hands, assembled and danced for a quarter of an hour in several concentric circles around their respective byes, their faces all looking to the centre, and both hands raised as high as they could reach them, brandishing and rattling their ball-sticks together, whilst they all united their voices in the most deafening chorus as the encircling mass moved rapidly around its centre. At the same time the women of each party, who had put their goods at stake, formed into two rows on the line between the two parties of players; and facing each other, danced with an uniform step, and in exact time to the music, uniting their voices to the Great Spirit—soliciting his favor in deciding the game to their respective advantage; and also encouraging the players to exert every power they possessed, in the struggle that was to ensue, for the protection of their property. In the meantime four old Medicine Men (who were to have the starting of the ball on the next morning, and

who were to be the judges of the play, two of them with their bodies painted red and the other two white, and were seated at the half-way point where the ball was to be started) faithfully and respectively claimed, for their own sides, the favor of the Great Spirit; and his assistance in enabling them to judge rightly between the contending parties: all of which they were humbly imploring for in fumes which they were passing through the sacred stem of the calumet, during the whole night, whilst they sat or reclined around a little fire which they kept burning precisely upon the dividing line or point between the two byes, and from which the ball was to be raised to commence the struggle. This dance, as the reader can easily imagine, was one not only grotesque and wild in its appearance, but of exceedingly picturesque and pleasing effect; and not only repeated at intervals of every half hour during the whole night, but continued in the morning until about nine o'clock, at which time the players consider themselves (after a sleepless night and one of extreme excitement and fatigue, with stomachs empty under the strictest denial of sustenance of any sort), prepared to enter upon this exciting game, which generally exercises the highest keys of their lungs, and the almost constant and desperate exertion of all their limbs, through the greater part or the whole of the day.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 13/16 x 18 9/16 in. (35.1 x 47.1 cm) Sheet: 15 9/16 x 22 3/16 in. (39.6 x 56.3 cm)