

Basic Detail Report



Wild Horses at Play, plate 3 from the "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date

1845

Primary Maker

George Catlin

Medium

Color lithograph on paper

Description

Next in importance to the Buffalo, for the use of Man, is the Horse, which is found joint-occupant with the Indian and the Buffalo over most of the vast plains and prairies of America as yet unoccupied by cultivating Man. These, though not aborigines, may still have been, by the inscrutable design of Providence, placed in this country for the benefit of man; and we therefore find him in almost every part of North America mounted upon their backs, his faithful and attached friends and companions, in deadly war and in the excitements of the chase. I believe that these noble animals were first introduced to the American continent by the Spanish invaders of Mexico, and that they have strayed away from their masters and taken wild pasturage, having in time stocked the prairies, as we now find them, to the fifty-fifth degree of north latitude. Like the Buffaloes, they graze over the vast plains at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, and congregate in large families or bands, oftentimes to the amount of several hundreds together. The fact is a very remarkable one, that although these animals have escaped from the familiar hands of man, they should be everywhere found the most rapidly flying from his approach, the shyest animals of the prairie; detecting their enemy, Man, by the extraordinary power of the eye, at a much greater distance than any other animal of the country; and generally, when in motion, running several miles before they stop. By several times forcing myself into close company with these bands on the prairies, on a fleet horse; and by often deliberately reconnoitring them with a good glass, as well as from the many thousands of them I have seen in the use of the Indians, I have found them to be generally small, and delicate of limb, but tolerably fleet; and a band together, completely, and most pleasingly, mottled; often presenting as many varieties of colors and forms of marks as a kennel of hounds. They are certainly animals capable of performing wonderful feats, and of enduring great fatigue; and, like the Buffalo, subsist entirely on the grass of the prairies; and that in very cold as well as in southern latitudes. I have found that in the northern and western prairies of America, where the Indian has not been degraded by the withering proximity of avaricious White Man, he has been decidedly improved in his independence and manly and noble bearing, by the use and companionship of the horse. No fact is more apparent than this, to the traveller through the Indian tribes of America, nor anything more readily admitted by all, than the powerful and graceful manner in which these people, by a lifetime of practice, ride and manage the Horse. They are cruel masters, yet no people set a higher value on the merits of a good horse, nor any perhaps who take greater care, or exercise greater skill, in cultivating and maintaining in them a bold and hardy spirit. The Indian's cruelty to the horse is confined to the occasional incredible gallops which they force them through with great sternness, but which they are paid for by a life chiefly of freedom, and exemption from the first cruelty that is practised by the hands of civilized man, the more than barbarous cruelty of the knife. The range of country to which the sagacity of the wild horses has driven them before the advance of their enemy Man, as with the buffaloes, is now confined to a strip of the prairie country near the base of the Rocky Mountains; and in the view of the band here presented, is also given a faithful portrait from Nature, justly illustrating the character of that part of the American prairies, with a slight glimpse of the perpetually snow-capped summits of parts of the Rocky Mountains in the distance, which are often seen in clear weather, with great distinctness, over a range of sixty or seventy miles.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 3/4 x 18 11/16 in. (34.9 x 47.5 cm) Sheet: 15 5/8 x 22 1/8 in. (39.7 x 56.2 cm)