



Catching the Wild Horse, plate 4 from the "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date

1845

Primary Maker

George Catlin

Medium

Color lithograph on paper

Description

Taking the wild horse and "breaking him down" is one of the proudest feats of the Indian, and requires the sudden rallying, and desperate use, of all his manly faculties; and even with the complete exhaustion of all these he is often compelled to relinquish his pursuit in despair. The most frequent mode of catching the horse is by "throwing the laso," from the back of a horse at full speed, as is seen in the distant part of this picture; and by "choking the animal down," as is seen in the group in the foreground. For this desperate feat the Indian prepares his laso, which is a braided thong, made of raw hide, fifteen or twenty yards in length, and coiled upon his left arm, with a noose at the end of it; which, when he throws out its coil, drops over the horse's neck. This done, by holding back upon the other end of the laso, or by having it fastened to the girth of his own horse, he gradually tightens it upon his running victim's neck, until its speed is materially checked by the stoppage of its breath. He then dismounts, and leaves his riding horse, balancing on his feet as he is dragged along by his strangling prize, until it falls from exhaustion. He then instantly rushes upon his game, and having fastened a pair of hobbles on its fore-feet, and a short halter, with a noose, firmly around its under jaw, loosens the laso around the neck, enabling the horse to breathe; and leaning back with the weight of his body and all his strength, at the end of the halter, to prevent the horse from rising upon its feet or from throwing itself over and receiving an injury by falling upon its back. In this struggle, which is called "breaking down," and generally lasts about half an hour, there is a desperate contention for the mastery, which is easily seen to be decided by reason and invention, rather than by superiority in brute force. The Indian leans back upon his halter, which is firmly held in both hands, and as the horse is getting breath and strength to rise, repeatedly checks it, preventing it from gaining any advantage; and gradually advances, hand over hand upon the tightened halter, towards the horse's head, until the poor, affrighted, trembling, and conquered animal, covered with foam, allows the caressing hand of its new master to put it on the nose, and in a few minutes to cover its eyes, when the exchange of a few deep-drawn breaths from their meeting nostrils seems to compromise the struggle; the animal discovering in its conqueror, instead of an enemy, a friend, who has from that moment little else to do than to mount upon its back, with the halter around its jaw, and ride it into camp, his willing slave for the rest of its life. In these desperate struggles the finest and the fleetest of the band are seldom if ever overtaken; nor would such misfortune often befall the hindmost, were it not that the pursuing horse gets advantage of the ground, and shortens the distance, by the superior judgment and guidance of man.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 15/16 x 18 1/2 in. (35.4 x 47 cm) Sheet: 15 9/16 x 22 1/16 in. (39.5 x 56 cm)