



Buffalo Hunt, Chase, plate 5 from the "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date

1845

Primary Maker

George Catlin

Medium

Color lithograph on paper

Description

In this picture we have the Indian mounted on his wild horse, which he has captured in the mode described above; and thus converted it to his use, as the means of procuring his subsistence. For want of the fleetness and fangs of the ferocious brutes, Man has wisely been endowed with reason and invention which have enabled him to use the legs of the horse, and to construct deadly weapons, as the means of holding his ascendancy over all the beasts of the forest, and of appropriating so much of their substance as is necessary for the clothing and subsistence of his family. The wild horse is the swiftest animal of the American prairies; and the Indian, from his well-trained horse's back, with his sinewy bow and lance, easily deals death to the quadrupeds of the country; having, from a lifetime of practice, rendered himself quite equal in the chase, to the most skilful of hunters; and in war, to the most efficient cavalry of lancers and bowmen in the world. Here is seen the mode in which the Indian generally approaches the Buffalo, always on the right (or off side) of the animal, that he may throw his arrow or strike with his lance, to the left. The death is usually produced when the animal and the horse are at the fullest speed; and most often, as in this case, when the hunter has forced his victim from the herd, when he pursues it with less danger to himself and horse, and with much more certainty of producing the death. The Indians, in their native state, generally ride, in war and in the chase, without saddle, and always without bridle. They make, and use on most ordinary occasions, a very good saddle; but when preparing to go into this desperate chase, they halt half a mile or so from the herd, without danger of putting them in motion: when each hunter throws off his shirt, quiver, head-dress, shield, and whatever else of his dress that may become an incumbrance or hindrance to the free use of his limbs; carrying in the left hand, firmly clenched, his bow and some half dozen arrows, with his heavy and cruel whip attached to the wrist of his right arm. In this disrobement he puts off the saddle, and often lashes a bear or other skin, with the girth, to his horse's back, astride of which he throws himself, feeling more secure as he is nearer his horse's back, by which both the horse and his rider derive great benefit from feeling each other's motions; and in this plight he dashes off at full speed, the rein in his hand, which is but a small halter of raw hide or of horsehair, fastened around the under jaw of the horse, and hanging loosely on the neck. The Indian has little use even for this, after he has directed the attention of his horse to the animal he wishes to pursue, and has separated it from the herd; for such is the extraordinary training of most of these little horses that they will with certainty bring their rider alongside without the guidance of the rein; allowing the Indian to fix his arrow upon the string, and to place himself in the proper position for giving the deadly shot, which is done at the instant the horse is passing the animal, and that generally within the distance of four or five paces, as is seen in this plate. The very great disparity in size between the horse and the buffalo, in this instance, which is much more than is usual, nevertheless correctly illustrates the actual difference that often occurs between an Indian pony of thirteen or fourteen hands, and a huge bull, as is here represented, weighing, as they sometimes do, 1800 or 2000 pounds. In giving the arrow under these circumstances, the bow is pulled with great suddenness, and the arrow flies with terrible and almost incredible effect; generally striking the heart or the region of it, so that death is most commonly produced by one arrow; and if the first fail to enter deep enough, a second one is sent in an instant, and the huge animal, with a few leaps more, tumbles down and is dead in a few moments. After the fatal arrow has flown, the horse, which has passed the animal, is often guided to another and another, until in a similar manner several will get their deaths from a handful of arrows, all of which are dealt out in a minute or two of time. After this, the halter is used to "pull up," and in fact, is of little other use, the Indian generally guiding the horse, when guidance is necessary, by leaning quite forward, and suddenly, but gently, striking the right hand over one or the other of the horse's eyes, bending its course with ease and with grace, in any direction.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 3/8 x 18 13/16 in. (34 x 47.8 cm) Sheet: 15 9/16 x 22 1/8 in. (39.5 x 56.2 cm)