



The Bear Dance, plate 18 from the "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date

1845

Primary Maker

George Catlin

Medium

Color lithograph on paper

Description

Next in importance to the buffalo hunts, and not less exciting and spirited in its character, is the mode of hunting the Bear. Several varieties of this bold and ferocious species are found joint occupants with Man, the buffalo, and other animals, through the various wild latitudes of America; and, like the others, their skins and their flesh contribute largely to man's comfort and subsistence. The bear, so different in its habits and haunts from the buffalo, is entrapped and hunted by the Indians in a greater variety of modes than the buffalo, though their hunting excursions for this animal are often on horseback; and when in pursuit of the Grizzly Bear, the most formidable and dangerous animal of the brute creation to be met in the prairies and forests of America, the hunters deem it most prudent to be mounted on their horses' backs, instead of trusting to their own legs in contention with so awkward and dangerous an enemy. As in their preparations for buffalo hunting, already described, the superstitious of the Indians make it necessary to appeal, by their mysteries, to supernatural aid and protection; so, while preparing to start on a hunt for the grizzly bear, they dance and sing to the invisible Spirit supposed to watch over the destinies of this animal. This grotesque and amusing ceremony is called the "Bear Dance;" and all who wish to participate in the pleasures and honor of the hunt, must unite in the dance, which is often continued for several days together previous to the start, with beating of drums, shaking of rattles, and uniting their voices, invoking the aid and protection of the "Bear Spirit," which they think holds somewhere an invisible existence, is sure to be present on all such occasions, and must needs be consulted before they can count upon a reasonable prospect of success. This droll masquerade is one that I witnessed while in a Sioux village on the Upper Missouri River, where one of the medicine men, who seemed to be the leader of the dance, placed over his person the entire skin of a bear, and led off the dance as he was peeping through the skin, which formed a mask that hung over his face. Several others in the dance wore masks over their faces, made of the skins of bears' heads, while each one wore a patch of the bear's skin and hair tied around his ankle. In this curious plight they all tilted off in rapid succession, following in a circle, raising both feet equally in their jumps, and that in perfect time to the frightful chaunts of their voices; whilst all were closely imitating the habits of the animal by the motions of their hands, representing the bear in motion, or (by the hanging of their paw) sitting upon its hind feet and looking out for the approach of an enemy.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 5/8 x 18 5/8 in. (34.6 x 47.3 cm) Sheet: 15 1/2 x 22 1/8 in. (39.4 x 56.2 cm)