



Buffalo Dance, plate 8 from the "North American Indian Portfolio"

Date
1845

Primary Maker
George Catlin

Medium
Color lithograph on paper

Description

This grotesque group, though not strictly a hunting scene, is so closely allied as to be often considered by the Indians indispensable to their success; and consequently deemed by me, of importance here, in conveying to the reader a full account of buffalo hunting. Amongst a people so ignorant and superstitious, the success of their hunts and wars is often attributed to the strict observance of several propitiatory modes of singing and dancing to the Great (or other) Spirit; soliciting his countenance, and promising to give to him (which they always do), by sacrificing the choicest piece of the animal slain in their hunts. The wild and deafening songs sung on these occasions are exceedingly curious, and called Medicine (Mystery) Songs. All tribes have their medicine songs peculiar for the hunting of each animal they choose to go in pursuit of, and by singing these songs they conciliate the supposed invisible deity or spirit presiding over these animals' respective destinies, and who must necessarily be consulted in this way. These Medicine Ceremonies, which are always conducted by their Medicine (or Mystery) Men, are almost invariably performed with more or less adherence to all the usual forms before starting on a hunting or war excursion; and however great the success may be, it is easily attributed to the observance of these forms; and if disappointment, or even disaster, attend the expedition, it is equally easy and convenient to attribute it to some culpable defect or omission in their Medicine operations. For the purpose of buffalo-hunting nearly every wigwam, in most of the tribes, has one or more masks of the buffalo (the skin of the animal's head, with the horns remaining on), which the Indian places on his head when he is called upon to join in the Metal or Medicine, for buffalo hunting. When the hunters have arranged these masks upon their heads, they often sing and dance for days together before they get the permission to start, from their oracle (the Doctor or Mystery Man), and his guarantee for their success, which often depends much upon the degree of liberality with which they bestow the necessary presents upon him. To the same means, also, will they often resort in times of great scarcity; at seasons when the buffaloes seem to desert the vicinity of their villages, which is often the case, threatening them with hunger and starvation. The Doctors, in such emergencies, assemble together with the chiefs in consultation, and it is decided very gravely that the buffalo-dance must be commenced, "to make the buffaloes come;" and when such is the case, the dance is kept constantly going, both night and day, by the young men "relieving each other," stepping out of the ring as they become fatigued, and others dancing in, in constant rotation, until "buffaloes come." i. e. until their sentinels in the vicinity of the village, or others, bring in the news that buffaloes are near, when the dance ceases, and preparations are made for the hunt.

Dimensions

Composition: 13 3/4 x 15 9/16 in. (34.9 x 39.5 cm) Sheet: 15 9/16 x 22 1/8 in. (39.5 x 56.2 cm)