



The Buffalo Hunter



The Buffalo Hunter

Unknown Artist

Oil on Canvas

1840

This primitive painting by an unknown artist was the beginning of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's American collection. The Museum's first Director, Donald Bear, said, "If I had that painting I could develop a great American collection around it." That was in 1939. *The Buffalo Hunter* continues to this day to be one of the most popular works in the Museum's collection. What "magic" does this painting have that has made it so popular, even today? Do you feel the same way about it? Why or why not?

Some would argue that it is the mythic subject matter of the buffalo hunt that makes this painting exciting. The buffalo symbolized the wild untamed prairies of the West and the hunt became an archetype of the noble savage and his equally noble prey. We can explore the myth and the reality of the subject by looking at first hand accounts of actual buffalo hunts and at the rituals and beliefs surrounding them. The hunt for buffalo at once represents the beauty and balance of the Native American way of life and the destruction of that balance.

Description

Look closely at the buffalo in the painting and describe it using sensory details (2.0)
When you have finished, read the description below. How does your description compare with that of Washington Irving? Could his description apply to the buffalo in the painting? Why or why not?

From Washington Irving's *A Tour of the Prairies*

There is a mixture of the awful and the comic in the look of these huge animals... the end(of their tail) whisking about in a fierce yet whimsical style, and their eyes glaring venomously with an expression of fright and fury...of all animals a buffalo, when close

pressed by the hunter, has an aspect the most diabolical. He is a perfect picture of mingled rage and terror.

Oral tradition and Story telling

Storytelling is the traditional way knowledge has been passed down through generations of Native Americans. It is a way of describing both the world and the way to live in it. The buffalo hunt had tremendous significance in the lives of the Native American people and was the subject of many such stories. As one first hand account said, *“It was an event for which every Sioux boy eagerly waited. To ride side by side with the best hunters of the tribe, to hear the terrible noise of the great herds as they ran, and then to help bring home the kill was the most thrilling day of any Indian boy’s life.”*

Using the painting, *The Buffalo Hunter*, as inspiration, imagine you are the hunter. Tell the story of the hunt, using details to make the day come alive.

Songs and Poetry

Native American priests or shamans often recited rhythmic poems or songs asking for a favorable hunt or giving thanks for a successful hunt. The following is an example of such a ceremonial song from the Pima Indians, designed to bring success when heading out on a deer hunt. Note that it is sung from the deer’s perspective, not the hunter’s. It is as if the deer is telling the story of his own death; the desire and intention of the hunter.

At the Time of the White Dawn

At the time of the White Dawn
At the time of the White Dawn,
I arose and went away,
At Blue Nightfall I went away.

I ate the thornapple leaves
And the leaves made me dizzy,
I drank thornapple flowers
And the drink made me stagger.

The hunter, Bow-remaining.
He overtook and killed me,
Cut and threw my horns away.
The hunter, Reed-remaining.
He overtook and killed me,
Cut and threw my feet away.

Now the flies become crazy
And they drop with flapping wings
The drunken butterflies sit
With opening and shutting wings.

Write a similar ceremonial song from the point of view of the buffalo. Try to use the same patterns used in the example: repetition of words, phrases, and sounds.

The End of the Buffalo

Meriwether Lewis, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, sent by Thomas Jefferson to explore the Western two thirds of the American continent, writes in his journal from 1804, "This scenery already rich, pleasing and beautiful was still further heightened by immense herds of buffalo. I do not think I exaggerate when I estimate the number of buffalo which could be comprehended at one view to amount to 3000."

When *The Buffalo Hunter* was painted in the middle of the 19th century buffalo were still plentiful, though less so than they had been at the century's beginning. By 1887 there were only 400 wild buffalo left and about the same number in captivity. By 1890, the frontier was closed, and the buffalo gone from the plains.

To the Indian hunters the near extinction of the buffalo meant the disappearance of their way of life, as a Kiawah woman named Old Lady Horse, describes in this story:

Then the white man hired hunters to do nothing but kill the buffalo. Up and down the plains those men ranged, shooting sometimes as many as a hundred buffalo a day. Behind them came the skinners with their wagons. They piled the hides and bones into wagons until they were full, and they took their loads to the new railroad stations that were being built, to be shipped east to the market. Sometimes there would be a pile of bones as high as a man, stretching a mile along the railroad track.

Does the fact that the buffalo all but vanished make you feel differently about the painting, *The Buffalo Hunter*? Explain.

Research the state of the buffalo today and write a brief summary of what you find.