

## A CLOSER LOOK

# Buffalo Hunter

**Unknown Artist**

*Buffalo Hunter*, ca. 1884

Oil on canvas

SBMA, Gift of Harriet Cowles Hammett Graham in memory of Buell Hammett, 1945.1

## An Unknown Artist

Many paintings are created by unknown artists. Given the style and disproportion of the painting's figures, *Buffalo Hunter* was likely made by an artist with little or no formal artistic training. We call these artists “self-taught” or “folk” artists. Folk artists were integral to documenting early American life and culture, and continue to contribute to the rich cultural history of art in the United States.

## Themes

- Native American Culture
- US History
- US Western Expansion
- Oral Tradition + Storytelling

## Overview

This painting marked 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.

To this day, *Buffalo Hunter* continues to be a popular work in SBMA's collection. It depicts a Native American man astride a white horse and aiming his bow and arrow at a buffalo. The figures are depicted in wide open plains and tall grass, with the sun peeking through dark clouds in the distance.

Some would argue that it is the mythic subject matter of the buffalo hunt that makes this painting exciting. The buffalo symbolized the untamed prairies of the West and the hunt became an archetype of the noble Native American 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 represents both the beauty and balance of the Native American way of life and the destruction of that balance.

What “magic” does this painting have that has made it popular? Do you feel the same way about it? Why or why not?

## Compare and Contrast

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

*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.*

- Washington Irving, *A Tour of the Prairies*, 1835

## Oral Tradition + Storytelling

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

## Activity: Songs + 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, 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.



## Research: The End of the Buffalo

In 1804, Meriwether Lewis, of the Lewis and Clark expedition that explored the western two-thirds of the North American continent, wrote in his journal, “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 three thousand.”

When *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 four hundred wild buffalo left and about the same number in captivity. By 1890, the frontier was closed, and the buffalo gone from the plains. To Native American 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, *Buffalo Hunter*? Explain. Research the state of buffalo today and write a brief summary of what you find.