

Where
the
Buffalo
Roam

George Catlin (1796–1872),

Karl Bodmer (1809–1893),

and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902)

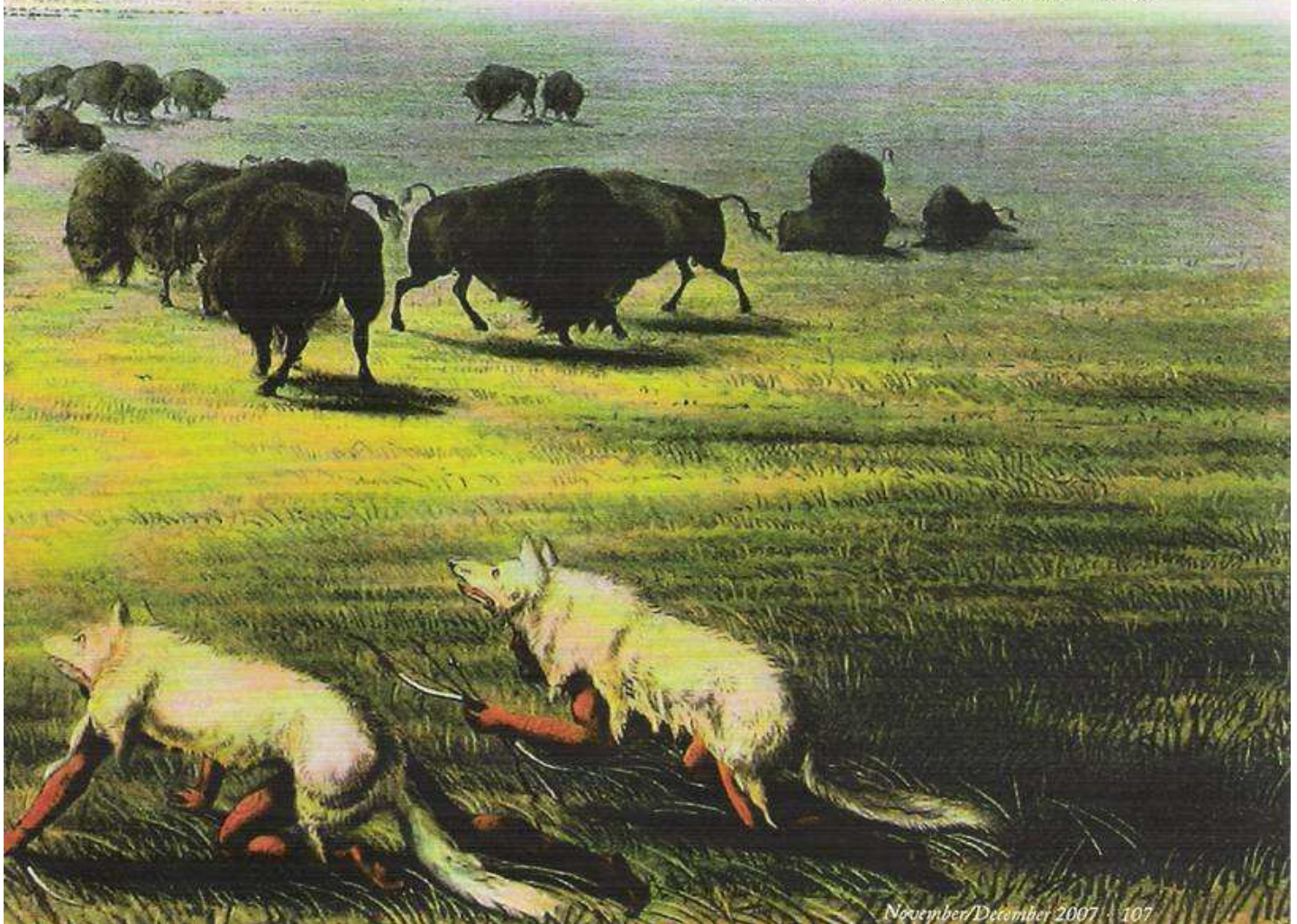
by Brooke Chilvers



Who would think that Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez's 1518 reintroduction of horses to the North American ark, after a 10,000-year disappearing act at the end of the last Ice Age, would contribute to the near extermination of bison 370 years later?

Native Americans had been hunting bison on foot for 400 generations when the Comanches acquired horses from the Pueblos in the early 18th century; the Black-foot obtained theirs from the Shoshones 20 years later. A 1781 Sioux pictograph shows the capture of wild horses. The Kiowa apparently preferred stealing their horses from the Crow.

Continuously displaced from their traditional homelands by the ineluctable pressures of Manifest Destiny (not to mention such Old World diseases as measles, typhus, and smallpox), the Cheyenne and Sioux had by 1780 abandoned agriculture and for the next 200 years lived as the equestrian nomads of the American Serengeti—the 1.25 million square miles of grasslands that stretched from the Missouri River Valley to the foothills of the Rockies, from Canada to Mexico—their





LAST OF THE BUFFALO, BY ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830-1902.)
COURTESY OF ARADER GALLERIES, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA.

INDIANS HUNTING BISON, BY KARL BODMER (1809-1893.)
COURTESY OF ARADER GALLERIES, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA.



subsistence livelihoods depending on a mobile, hooved resource they couldn't own: the American bison.

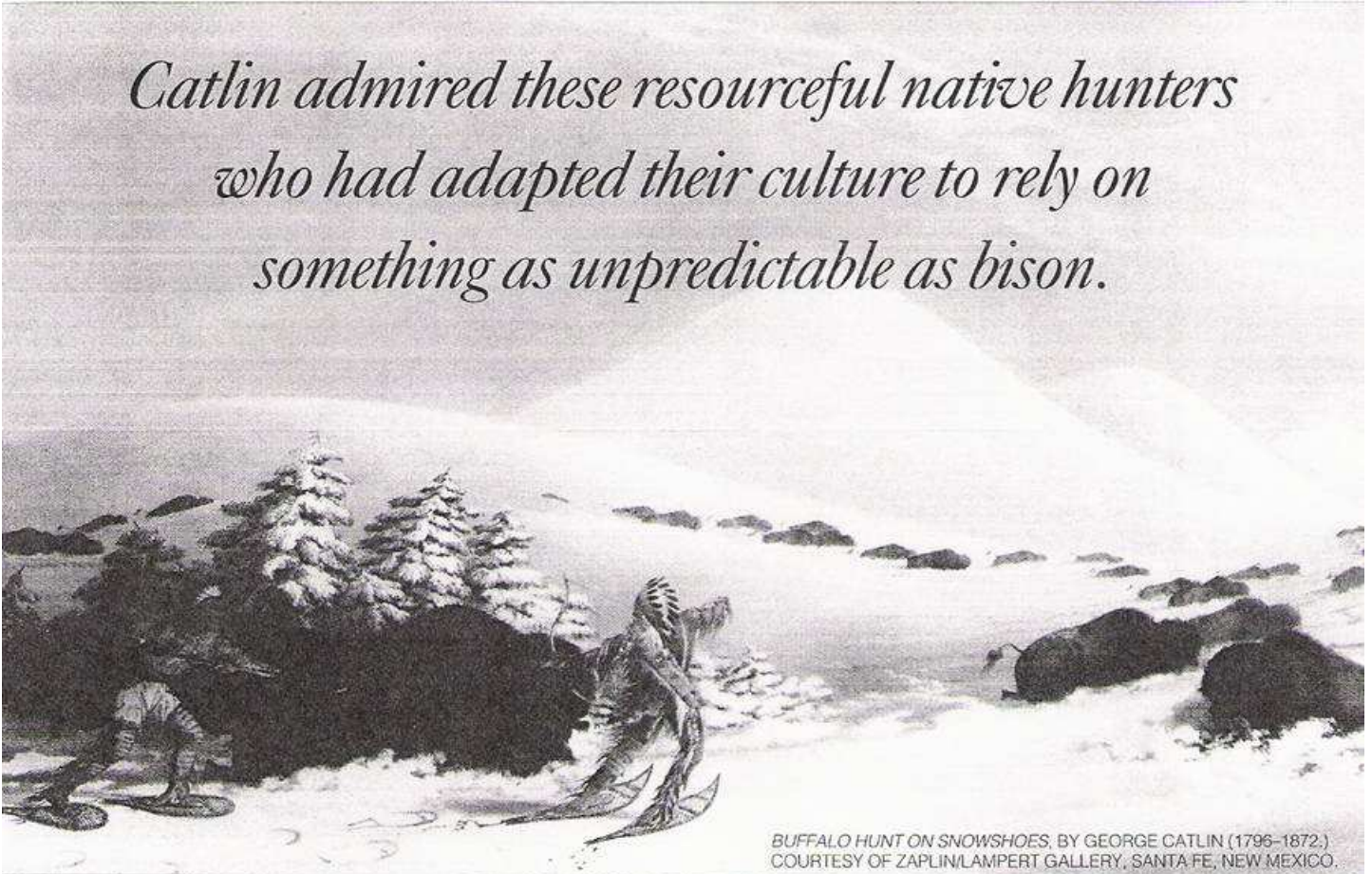
By the early 19th century, with some 60,000 Indians each keeping 6 to 15 horses, the 30 million bison of these arid grasslands competed for forage and water with 360,000 to 900,000 domesticated horses and an additional two million feral ones.

Pennsylvania-born George Catlin, the first artist

Jacob Astor's American Fur Company (later owned by the appropriately named R. Crooks). Soon, the Plains tribes alone were supplying 100,000 hide robes to traders each year.

During Catlin's six years of travel (1830–36) that took him 2,000 miles past St. Louis up the Missouri River, through Arkansas and all along the Mississippi, he visited some 48 tribes and painted more than 500 exuberantly colored "naïve"

Catlin admired these resourceful native hunters who had adapted their culture to rely on something as unpredictable as bison.



BUFFALO HUNT ON SNOWSHOES. BY GEORGE CATLIN (1796–1872.)
COURTESY OF ZAPLIN/LAMPERT GALLERY, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO.

to champion Native Americans, bison, and the concept of a national park to preserve them both, described in his copious writings how the Blackfeet and Crows, Sioux and Assiniboin moved six or eight times each summer "following the immense herds of buffaloes, as they range over these vast plains, from east to west, and north to south." They hunted them not only for the six or seven animals required per person each year for food, lodging, clothing, and intertribal trade, but also for barter "for white man's luxury" with John

works, hauling his pigments and canvases, writing, and collecting artifacts. Between producing spirited portraits, he participated in carefully orchestrated communal bison hunts that he captured in dozens of oils and later in hand-tinted lithographs. (See www.americanart.si.edu/catlin/highlights.html.)

Catlin admired these resourceful native hunters who had adapted their culture to rely on something as unpredictable as bison, the movement and numbers of which fluctuate, sometimes wildly, due to drought, disease, severe weather, and predation



by the wolves that Catlin noted claimed one-third to one-half of each year's calves.

Disguised with his guide in wolf skins, Catlin stalked bison: "Whilst the herd is together, the wolves never attack them, as they instantly gather for combined resistance ... The buffalo, however, is a huge and furious animal, and when his retreat is cut off, makes desperate and deadly resistance, contending to the last moment for the right of life. ..."

Few artists studied bison at such close range: "I rode around him and sketched him in numerous attitudes, sometimes he would lie down, and I would then sketch him; then throw my cap at him, and rousing him on his legs, rally a new expression, and sketch him again. I defy the world to produce another animal than can look so frightful as a huge buffalo bull, when wounded as he was, turned around for battle, and swelling with rage;—his eyes bloodshot, and his long shaggy mane hanging to the ground,—his mouth open ..."

Catlin's limited, fast-drying, sometimes-fanciful palette was well suited for "a vast country of green fields, where the men are all red." He was mostly self-taught, and has been criticized for his ignorance of human anatomy, despite his ability to sum up, with energetic strokes, a person's character in the face. He wrote hundreds of pages about the customs, beliefs, games, and dances of "a

vanishing race," but hardly discussed his art, except how it affected his elaborately preened sitters' behavior.

Catlin's lifelong struggle to sell his twice-produced "Indian Gallery" to the Smithsonian Institution (where, ironically, it resides since his death) is a tale of frustration and personal loss. Yet what astonishes above all is that during 35 years of self-exile in Europe (Baudelaire called him "the impresario of the red-skins" and found his colors "intoxicating"), walking museum halls and meeting royalty, his style of simple, harmoniously colored backgrounds, with scant attention to sources of light or the play of shadow to create perspective, remained unchanged.

Zurich-born Karl Bodmer, who traveled the frontier in Catlin's footsteps just two years later, was an entirely different fellow, with a different mission and vision. He learned watercolors and engraving at the age of 13 from an art-educated uncle, wetting his brushes in the landscapes of the River Rhine. At 22, the German scientist and explorer Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied (a Rhinish region administered by the Prussians) commissioned him (for meager pay) to paint a

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"faithful and vivid picture" of their 13-month journey up the Missouri River in the very same American Fur Company steamboat that had carried Catlin.

His legacy of fine lines and muted colors is mostly visual; his voice is strangely silent. Perhaps bound by contract to let Prince Max do all the talking, we have his description of Bodmer: "He is a lively, very good man and companion, seems well educated, and is very pleasant and very suitable for me; I am glad I picked him. He makes no demands, and in diligence he is never lacking."

In contrast to Catlin—an entrepreneur who staged his "Indian Gallery" in America and abroad with actual Ojibwas and championed his oeuvre until the end of his life—Bodmer's artwork for the book *Travels in the Interior of North America* (1832–1834) was owned by Prince Max, who felt the U.S. government had neglected to document the already fast-disappearing indigenous peoples of the Montana territory (including the modern-day Dakotas and Wyoming).

This was the first journey to the American West that combined scientist, illustrator, and a hunter-taxidermist; unfortunately, nearly everything they collected was either thrown overboard by the steamship crew or lost in an onboard fire on the voyage home. Not only did they visit Cree, Crow, Assiniboin, Blackfeet, and Sioux peoples, but they also spent five months in Hidatsa and Mandan villages (in present day Bismarck, North Dakota) just a few years before these tribes were swept away by the devastating 1837 outbreak of smallpox.

Bodmer made countless pencil and ink studies in the field as well as 400 watercolors, his pigments freezing during one harsh spell. Although he could work quickly under precarious conditions, he often returned to a spot to add detail or to see it from another vantage point. His works are more finely composed, more scientific in spirit, more remote, precise, and anthropological than Catlin's, whose spontaneity cap-

tured a deeper personal essence of the individuals he painted. Looking at their works side by side, one can hardly believe their careers overlapped.

Catlin ardently hunted buffalo; Prince Max described his hunts with aristocratic detachedness and purpose: "As we were rapidly carried down by the current ... we suddenly saw a herd of at least 150 buffaloes, quite near to us, standing on a sand bank in the river ... My people laid aside their oars, and let the boat glide noiselessly along within a short rifle-shot of the herd, which took no notice of us, doubtless taking our boat for a mass of drifting timber.... We checked, on this occasion, our sporting propensities, that we might be able better to observe those interesting animals, in which we perfectly succeeded."

It took 10 years and a team of 30 engravers to translate Bodmer's fieldwork into 81 engraved handcolored aquatints (48 tableaux and 33 vignettes) to illustrate this "visual equivalent of Lewis and Clark's journals." Five versions were printed using various papers, colors, even variants of the engravings themselves. Nevertheless, the project was a financial failure.

At age 40, Bodmer settled in the bucolic artists' community of Barbizon, south of Paris. He turned to forest settings and woodland animals to illustrate sporting magazines, and was closely associated with Jean-François Millet, Camille Corot, and Victor Hugo. He died blind and destitute, "a reclusive man beset by illness," having never painted another Indian subject.

Although it took more than 100 years for manufactured goods to infiltrate native cultures, Catlin foresaw that resistance to trade by tribes like the Blackfeet wouldn't last long. "Trinkets and whiskey ... will soon spread their charms amongst these, as it has amongst other tribes." The great thirst for guns, beads, and whiskey, which cost \$16—or five buffalo robes—per gallon, began to affect bison numbers. Only 200 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, the bison that had roamed every state east of the Mississippi except Connecticut, Rhode

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Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, were gone.

An Indian hunter on horseback could rarely kill more than three buffalo with bow and arrow; in 1859, this amounted to around 450,000 per year, or 2 percent of the population. But when the western tribes alone started bringing in 100,000 additional hides for trade, the take-off quickly climbed to an unsustainable 20 percent.

After the Civil War, with settlers and cattle pouring in along the Bozeman Trail between Montana and Wyoming, the Black Hills Gold Rush, the introduction of repeating, breech-loading rifles, plus the huge demand for buffalo hides for industrial belting back East, the slaughter began in earnest—by 1872 a million buffalo a year, with white hunters leaving 99 percent of the meat on the ground. A good hunter could take 30 to 40 bison a day; a great hunter, 75 to 100. One man boasted he'd killed 20,000 bison working three months a year for 10 seasons.

Only 30 years after trade began at Fort Pierre, South Dakota, the bison were gone from the central plains. With 3,000 hunters in the Texas Panhandle, 1882–83 marked the last great harvest of the southern herd. The Indian policy of President Grant's Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano, promoted the destruction of the bison as a means to force Indians onto reservations. Or as one colonel put it, "Kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."

Bearing native and white hunter alike, the horse had played a fundamental role in reducing millions of bison to fewer than 1,000 by 1889.

Albert Bierstadt was born near Düsseldorf, Germany (and raised in Massachusetts), the same year Catlin headed up the Missouri River. After four years of travel in Europe, at times in the company of other artists, he joined a surveying expedition in 1859 to sketch along the proposed Pacific

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Coast Railway route through Wyoming. This experience transformed him into a major interpreter of the American frontier. Although classified as a Hudson River School painter comparable to Frederick Church, he was an unstoppable, commercially enterprising traveler from California to the Bahamas, from Alaska to Europe, probably logging more miles than any artist of his generation.

Although a bit of a sportsman, with 14 elk trophies to his credit, Bierstadt's emblematic, glowingly lit, carefully composed Yosemite Valley, Yellowstone, and Colorado paintings, with their dramatic skies, sweeping valleys, rocky crags, and painterly manner of contrasting light and dark and sharp and fuzzy to convey great distances, are usually devoid of people or beast. The buffalo that appear in a dozen or so works out of hundreds (see www.xmission.com/~emailbox/glenda/bierstadt/bierstadt.html) are bathed in fading sunlight or moist air, evoking the vanishing of this American icon.

Compared to Catlin's Dying Buffalo,

Bierstadt's exacting studies of bison suggest his devotion to the detailed foregrounds within romantic landscapes of the Düsseldorf Academy, which he had studied from afar.

Because his elegant estate burned to the ground, it isn't clear from surviving papers whether he personally hunted bison. But if he did, his snobbish leanings caused it to be under absurdly different circumstances from his predecessors. In 1871, he contacted President Grant to help organize an "authentic" bison hunt for Grand Duke Alexis of Russia. On the Nebraska plains, with an entourage of 500 under the guidance of George Armstrong Custer, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, the Sioux warriors of chief Spotted Tail, and sustained by a wagon of champagne and caviar, "The hunt continued from one herd to the next, and the entire party joined in a 'free for all' slaughter. The Duke bagged several buffaloes during the two-day romp."

Bierstadt's famous final tribute to the bison, *The Last of the Buffalo*, was

rejected by the American selection committee for the 1889 Paris Exposition. Its foreground framed by a half-oval of dark bison with great vistas extending into pale light, its Indian rider poised for all time at the height of a powerful thrust of his lance, it is a fitting statement from an artist who died bankrupt and out of fashion in 1902—the same year that the U.S. government came to its senses and began stocking Yellowstone Park with bison. ■

In tribute to her favorite frontier artist, Brooke requested Julie Littlefield of Scenic Mesa Ranch in Hotchkiss, Colorado, to name one of her bison "Catlin."



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