Picturing the American Buffalo: George Catlin and Modern Native American Artists

In the nineteenth century, American bison (commonly called the buffalo) thundered across the Great Plains of the American West in the millions. They symbolized the abundance of the land, and for centuries played a vital role in the lives of Native Americans, providing sustenance and spiritual nourishment. Wild and majestic, revered and hunted, buffalo have long captured the popular imagination, and their iconic images figure prominently in America’s art.

This installation considers the representation of the American buffalo from two perspectives: a selection of paintings by George Catlin (1796–1872), and works by nine modern Native artists. Catlin was among the earliest artists of European descent to travel beyond the Mississippi River, and in the 1830s he journeyed west five times to record, as he called it, the “manners and customs” of Native cultures, painting scenes and portraits from life. His ambitious project was largely fueled by the fear that American Indians, the great buffalo herds, and a way of life would one day vanish. In hundreds of canvases, he captured the landscape and tribal figures, together with the central importance of the buffalo to Native lifeways.

The twentieth-century sculpture and works on paper advance a narrative reassuringly different from Catlin’s: one of vibrance and continuity. With an innovative use of line, form, and color, each work affirms both tribal presence and the enduring importance of the buffalo to American Indian cultures. All works on view are from the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Picturing the American Buffalo: George Catlin and Modern Native American Artists is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with generous support from the Knobloch Family Foundation, American Prairie Reserve, Tania and Tom Evans, Kavar Kerr, Margery and Edgar Masinter, and Maggie and Dick Scarlett.
Buffalo Bull, Grazing on the Prairie
1832–33
oil on canvas

George Catlin
born Wilkes-Barre, PA 1796–died Jersey City, NJ 1872

In this iconic painting of a buffalo bull, Catlin presents a magnificent specimen, his eyes locked on the viewer, his tail raised in excited confrontation. Thanks in part to the popularity of Catlin’s imagery, the buffalo came to symbolize the bounty of the American wilderness: in the 1850s, approximately 30 million to 60 million roamed the Great Plains. But by the end of the nineteenth century, such images would become a grim reminder of their near extinction, due in large part to flagrant overhunting and westward expansion.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.404

Introduction

Between 1830 and 1836, George Catlin made five extended trips among the Indian tribes along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and through the Great Plains. His goal was to chronicle the customs of each tribe he encountered, and paint notable individuals. His concern for the fate of American Indians following President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830 gave his travels a sense of urgency, as he feared that unless the Indians assimilated into white American society it would lead to their eventual destruction. Catlin became the most vocal and prolific American artist whose works were intended to engender sympathy and concern for American Indians.

During this era, American buffalo were still plentiful and provided food, clothing, and shelter for many of the tribes Catlin visited. But within fifty years of Catlin’s first journey, buffalo had been slaughtered to the brink of extinction as eastern settlers made their way west. Catlin understood the intertwined destinies of Native peoples and the buffalo. “The Indian and the buffalo,” he wrote, “joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilized man; they have fled to the great plains of the West, and there, under an equal doom, they have taken up their last abode, where their race will expire, and their bones will bleach together.”

This exhibit features thirty-six of the 629 works by Catlin in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The numbers on many of the frames correlate to a brochure Catlin distributed when he first showed his Indian Gallery in London, in 1840. The brochure identified the title of the painting, the name of the sitter, and the sitter's tribal affiliation.

All Catlin quotations are from his two-volume work, Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians (London, 1841). Catlin’s tribal designations are noted with the artworks, where appropriate, followed by the tribes’ names in their own language, where they differ.
Buffalo Cow, Grazing on the Prairie  
1832–33

Catlin wrote of the buffalo bull and cow:

*The buffalo bull is one of the most formidable and frightful looking animals in the world when excited to resistance; his long shaggy mane hangs in great profusion over his neck and shoulders, and often extends quite down to the ground. The cow is less in stature, and less ferocious; though not much less wild and frightful in her appearance.*

Buffalo Bulls Fighting in Running Season, Upper Missouri  
1837–39

During the autumn rut, which Catlin called “the running season,” buffalo bulls fight for mating rights. Catlin noted:

*It is no uncommon thing at this season, at these gatherings, to see several thousands in a mass, eddying and wheeling about under a cloud of dust, which is raised by the bulls as they are pawing in the dirt, or engaged in desperate combats, as they constantly are, plunging and butting at each other in the most furious manner. In these scenes, the males are continually following the females, and the whole mass are in constant motion; and all bellowing (or “roaring”) in deep and hollow sounds; which, mingled altogether, appear, at the distance of a mile or two, like the sound of distant thunder.*

Comanche Village, Women Dressing Robes and Drying Meat  
Comanche/Niuam  
1834–35

In most American Indian tribes, women prepared the buffalo hides used for garments and dwellings. Catlin admired the efficiency of plains tribes in making and striking camp, something he noted in a description of this painting of a Comanche village:

*In the foreground is seen the wigwam of the chief; and in various parts, crotches and poles, on which the women are drying meat, and ‘graining’ buffalo robes. These people, living in a country where buffaloes are abundant, make their wigwams more easily of their skins, than of anything else; and with them find greater facilities of moving about, as circumstances often require; when they drag them upon the poles attached to their horses, and erect them again with little trouble in their new residence.*

Self-torture in a Sioux Religious Ceremony  
Western Sioux/Lakota  
1835–37

Catlin witnessed this Sioux religious ceremony, in which promising men of the tribe, hoping to attain the title of “medicine man,” underwent heroic tests of endurance. A participant leans back against a supple pole decorated with a buffalo skull, his body weight pulling against a cord threaded through his pectoral muscles. The successful initiate, as Catlin described him, must spend all day “looking at the sun,” remaining conscious from sunrise to sunset.
Bátiste, Bogard, and I Approaching Buffalo on the Missouri
1837–39

Catlin descended the Missouri River in the summer of 1832 with a pair of guides: Bátiste, a French-Canadian trapper, and Bogard, a “Yankee” who had spent ten years hunting in the Rocky Mountains. Here Catlin depicts the three of them hiding in a ravine, preparing to hunt the unsuspecting buffalo.

Buffalo Bulls in a Wallow
1837–39

As a means of cooling off, buffalo often dig into the soil so that water can collect there. These “wallows” provide temporary respite from the summer heat, and then become fertile ground for vegetation. Catlin noted that early settlers, confused as to the origins of these features, often referred to them as “fairy circles.”

Medicine Buffalo of the Sioux
Western Sioux/Lakota
1837–39

The lives of tribesmen revolved around procuring buffalo meat to sustain their families and fellow villagers. In this painting Catlin illustrates the Sioux practice of cutting the silhouette of a buffalo out of the turf on the prairie, creating a totem their tribes would visit to take “medicine” and ensure a successful hunt.

White Wolves Attacking a Buffalo Bull
1832–33

Wolves are one of the buffalo’s few natural predators. Catlin described not only how wolves selected an aged or wounded buffalo to attack, but also how the buffalo fought back: “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—and oftentimes deals death by wholesale, to his canine assailants, which he is tossing into the air or stamping to death under his feet.”

View in the Grand Detour, 1900 Miles above St. Louis
1832

Catlin’s eloquent descriptions of the landscape helped his viewers appreciate the unfamiliar scenery of the frontier. Of the countryside along the upper Missouri, Catlin wrote:

One thousand miles or more of the upper part of the river, was, to my eye, like fairy-land
. . . I was most of the time rivetted to the deck of the boat, indulging my eyes in the
boundless and tireless pleasure of roaming over the thousand hills . . . where the
astonished herds of buffaloes, of elks, and antelopes, and sneaking wolves, and
mountain-goats, were to be seen bounding up and down and over the green fields.
In 1832, Catlin spent five months with the Mandan, whose permanent villages were located near Fort Clark on the upper Missouri River in present-day North Dakota. Here he depicts the village from within the adjacent burial ground. Upon the death of a Mandan, the body was placed high on a scaffold. Once the scaffold had rotted away, the deceased’s nearest relations take the skulls . . . and place them in circles of an hundred or more on the prairie – placed at equal distances apart . . . with the faces all looking to the centre . . . In the center of each ring or circle is a little mound of three feet high, on which uniformly rest two buffalo skulls (a male and female); and in the centre of the little mound is erected a ‘medicine pole’ . . . supporting many curious articles of mystery and superstition.

The Hidatsa maintained a permanent village of earthen lodges close to the Knife River. Catlin was struck by the unusual boats the Hidatsa made from buffalo hides stretched on a wooden frame. He described and painted an idyllic scene along the banks of the Knife River:

The scenery . . . from village to village, is quite peculiar and curious; rendered extremely so by the continual wild and garrulous groups of men, women, and children, who are wending their way along its winding shores, or dashing and plunging through its blue waves, enjoying the luxury of swimming, of which both sexes seem to be passionately fond. Others are paddling about in their tub-like canoes, made of the skins of buffaloes.

Catlin’s description of sketching a wounded buffalo bull is a reminder that he was not thinking about ecological issues, but focusing instead on learning how to depict the massive animal at a dramatic moment, up close:

I drew from my pocket my sketch-book, laid my gun across my lap, and commenced taking his likeness. He stood stiffened up, and swelling with awful vengeance, which was sublime for a picture . . . sometimes he would lie down, and I would sketch him; then throw my cap at him, and rousing him on his legs, rally a new expression, and sketch him again.
The surround was one of the deadliest hunting methods for the buffalo, but it was also one of the most dangerous for the hunters, as Catlin noted:

_The hunters . . . divided into two columns, taking opposite directions, and drew themselves gradually around the herd. . . . In this grand turmoil . . . the hunters were galloping their horses around and driving the whizzing arrows or their long lances into the hearts of these noble animals . . . and in the space of fifteen minutes, resulted in the total destruction of the whole herd, which . . . were doomed, like every beast and living thing else, to fall before the destroying hands of mighty man._

Catlin painted this work in his studio during the winter of 1832–33. He did not witness the winter hunt himself, but likely heard stories from Indian agents and interpreters. He could have seen similar scenes painted by Peter Rindisbacher, a Swiss-Canadian artist who was also spending time among the Indian tribes. “In the dead of the winters,” Catlin wrote, _which are very long and severely cold in this country . . . the Indian runs upon the surface of the snow by the aid of his snow shoes, which buoy him up, while the great weight of the buffaloes, sinks them down to the middle of their sides, and completely stopping their progress, ensures them certain and easy victims to the bow or lance of their pursuers._
George Catlin

George Catlin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1796. In 1826, he witnessed a delegation of American Indians visiting Philadelphia and became fascinated by their appearance and culture, vowing thereafter to visit and study every Native tribe in North America. Between 1830 and 1836, Catlin made five expeditions into the West, making notes and paintings on the cultures he visited.

Catlin also collected Indian artifacts, from clothing and personal ornament to painted hides and a Crow wigwam. These he displayed along with over 500 of his paintings, in a room he called his Indian Gallery. There he would dress the part of an Indian, and explain to visitors the dances, ceremonies, and customs of the Indians he had encountered. All of this was designed to inspire curiosity and sympathy for the tribes. Catlin showed his Indian Gallery in major cities on the East Coast until 1839 and in England and France from 1840 through 1845. In London he published a collection of his written work, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, which was reprinted multiple times during his life.

In 1879, Catlin's Indian Gallery was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution and is part of the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. All of the paintings on view are oil on canvas, gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr.

*La-wée-re-coo-re-shaw-wee, War Chief, a Republican Pawnee*

Pawnee
1832

Catlin may have later finished the legs of War Chief after he had painted the head and shoulders, which gives the figure a short, stout appearance. The artist included a highly decorated buffalo robe with a scene of mounted horsemen. Such pictographic robes were painted by the wearer, and the individual scenes and symbols demonstrated his exploits.

*Crow Lodge of Twenty-five Buffalo Skins*

Crow/Apsáalooke
1832–33

Teepees made from bison hides facilitated the migratory existence a number of plains tribes had adopted since the introduction of the horse by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. In this picture of a Crow teepee, or lodge, Catlin portrays the methods of curing the hides. On the left, a tribeswoman appears to be stretching or smoking a skin, securing it with stakes plunged in the ground, while on the right, another woman scrapes and cleans a hide mounted on a scaffold.

*Bird’s-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis*

Mandan/Numakiki
1837–39

In this painting Catlin adopted the perspective from atop the Mandan earthen lodges. Four large poles are seen in the foreground—one holds a rare white buffalo skin, which held special significance for many Plains Indian tribes, while the others support scarecrow figures made of expensive trade cloth. Together these totems represented a powerful offering to the Great Spirit.
In addition to reinforcing the way easterners and Europeans viewed the buffalo and the buffalo hunt, Catlin helped cement an image of the chiefs as dignified tribal leaders. Chief Black Rock’s decorated robe chronicles his exploits. His headdress features buffalo horns, a rare honor, according to Catlin:

"There is occasionally, a chief or a warrior of so extraordinary renown, that he is allowed to wear horns on his head-dress, which give to his aspect a strange and majestic effect. . . . [The horns] are attached to the top of the head-dress on each side, in the same place that they rise and stand on the head of a buffalo; rising out of a mat of ermine skins and tails, which hang over the top of the head-dress. . . . No one wears the head-dress surmounted with horns except the dignitaries who are very high in authority, and whose exceeding valour, worth, and power is admitted by the nation."

Catlin depicts He Who Ties His Hair Before in a buffalo robe painted with symbols of rifles as well as a geometric sunburst. His hair reaches to the ground. Catlin found the long and carefully cared-for hair of the Crow to be of particular interest:

"The Crows are generally handsome, and comfortably clad; every man in the nation oils his hair with a profusion of bear's grease, and promotes its growth to the utmost of his ability; and the greater part of them cultivate it down on to the calf of the leg, whilst a few are able to make it sweep the ground."

These four portraits depict The Smoke, his wife, their son, and one of his son’s wives. All wear some element of buffalo, and their story is completely intertwined with the diminishing herds. Catlin wrote of a conversation he had with The Smoke:

"The Puncahs are all contained in seventy-five or eighty lodges, made of buffalo skins, in the form of tents. . . . This small remnant of a tribe are not more than four or five hundred in numbers; and I should think, at least, two-thirds of those are women. This disparity in numbers having been produced by the continual losses which their men suffer, who are penetrating the buffalo country for meat, for which they are now obliged to travel a great way. . . . The chief, who was wrapped in a buffalo robe . . . shed tears as he was descanting on the poverty of his ill-fated little community, which he told me, "had once been powerful and happy; that the buffaloes which the Great Spirit had given them for food, and which formerly spread all over their green prairies, had all been killed or driven out by the approach of white men, who wanted their skins; that their country was now entirely destitute of game."
Catlin wrote that White Buffalo “combines with his high office, the envied title of mystery or medicine-man . . . who necessarily is looked upon as ‘Sir Oracle’ of the nation; . . . on his left arm, he presents his mystery-drum or tambour, in which are concealed the hidden and sacred mysteries of his healing art.” White buffalo are incredibly rare and remain highly venerated by Plains Indian tribes; to be given the name of White Buffalo was a special honor.
The Buffalo Today
By the late 1800s, the American buffalo had been hunted to near extinction, dropping in population from an estimated 30 million to only a few hundred. The loss of the buffalo devastated Native tribes, their suffering compounded by a series of restrictive federal measures, which removed these indigenous communities from their tribal homelands and relegated them to reservations.

In addition to his paintings and writings, Catlin is sometimes credited as the originator of the national park idea, or as he called it, “a nation’s Park.” In 1832, he envisioned allocating the entire western two-thirds of the country for a single protected space for the Indian tribes and the herds of buffalo to live. Part of Catlin’s vision was realized with the foundation of Yellowstone in 1872, the nation’s first national park and the current center of buffalo recovery in the United States.

Today, there are approximately 500,000 buffalo in public and private herds, a recovery spurred by a wide range of groups, including Native tribes who seek to recapture the deep connections they had maintained with the American buffalo for centuries. In 2014, two female buffalo arrived at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo, in celebration of the Zoo’s 125th anniversary. And in 2016, President Obama signed legislation honoring the American bison as the country’s national mammal.

Modern Native American Artists

The American bison, or buffalo, has been an integral part of indigenous cultures in North America for centuries. It was a source of food, clothing, and ornament for many Native tribes, and continues to play a significant role in ceremonies and spiritual rituals. The artists on view in this room represent different tribes and several generations of modern and contemporary reflections on the personal and tribal importance of the buffalo.

Woody Crumbo, Paul Goodbear, Julián Martínez, Awa Tsireh, Thomas Vigil, and Beatien Yazz created works during the early twentieth century, as the former Indian Territories were absorbed into modern U.S. states. Their individual styles vary, but one unifying thread is the evolving modernization of the presentation of traditional dances, rituals, and buffalo hunts. The works of Allan Houser, Fritz Scholder, and Jaune Quick-To-See Smith reflect the principles of pop art and abstraction in the postwar period. For each of the artists, using modern materials becomes a visual tool for the continuity of tribal heritage. Innovative line, color, and forms enliven their histories and customs, reaffirming the vital, animating force of artistic expression across time.

All of the artists have ties to the American Southwest, specifically Arizona and New Mexico, an epicenter of Native American cultures. Three lived their entire lives in New Mexico, while the Santa Fe Indian School provided training and teaching opportunities for three others. The remaining three either received art instruction in the state, or have lived and worked there. For many Native artists working today, the Southwest continues to foster a deep and abiding connection with their cultural heritage.
Artist at Forty as a Buffalo
about 1977
color lithograph on paper

Fritz Scholder (1937–2005)
Luiseño

To celebrate his fortieth birthday in 1977, Fritz Scholder made one hundred prints of *Artist at Forty as a Buffalo*, and distributed forty of them. In this self-portrait, Scholder identified as a buffalo. Dressed in a Western shirt emblazoned with stars, the artist’s gaze is at once appraising and sardonic, as if to ask, “What is an Indian?” Presenting himself as both Indian and buffalo, the two most powerful symbols of Native culture, Scholder wished to deconstruct the romantic stereotypes of the Indian popularized by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century illustrations and paintings.

Scholder was part Native American, and he did not identify as Indian, a paradox he increasingly embraced after joining the faculty of the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1964. Influenced by abstract expressionists Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, Scholder used vivid color and bold compositions to create his “Indian” series of paintings in the 1960s and ’70s, exploring Native identity and fashioning a powerful new idiom for depictions of Native Americans in the twentieth century.

Gift of Adelyn D. Breeskin, 1977.96

Buffalo Dance—Six Dancers, Two Drummers
about 1920–25
gouache and pencil on paper

Thomas Vigil (1889–1960)
Tesuque Pueblo

Vigil’s artwork focuses on the customs and rituals of the Tesuque Pueblo. Historically, buffalo dances honored the bison as a sustaining force during the long winters. In autumn, as the weather cooled, Pueblo communities would send out hunting parties to find the migrating herds as they moved south.

The Buffalo Dance, shown here, was commonly performed during the 1920s, when public interest in Pueblo Indian culture grew, and tourists came to the Southwest to witness dances and purchase artwork from Native artists. Here, three men wear buffalo headdresses, their clothing decorated with a black-skinned horned serpent (*avanyu*). The three buffalo maidens wear an embroidered, one-shoulder dress (*manta*). The men symbolize both the hunter and the quarry, while the women persuade the buffalo to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the tribe.

Corbin-Henderson Collection, Gift of Alice H. Rossin, 1979.144.63
Buffalo Dance, Oklahoma
about 1939
watercolor on paper

Paul J. Goodbear (Chief Flying Eagle) (1913–1954)
Tsistsistas/Suhtai (Southern Cheyenne), enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes

Born and raised on Oklahoma’s Cheyenne Indian reservation, Paul Goodbear brought to his art-making a deep understanding of his tribe’s history and reliance on the buffalo. Buffalo Dance, Oklahoma merges the buffalo with an art deco elegance, the areas of flat color and arcing lines characteristic of the artist’s mature style.

Goodbear was the grandson of a Cheyenne chief who had fought at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. In 1936, Goodbear began his studies at the Santa Fe Indian School, and enrolled in the University of New Mexico before the outbreak of World War II. He served in the U.S. Army during the war, and was wounded at Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. In addition to making his own art, Goodbear helped with the restoration of Pre-Columbian murals at the Coronado Historic Site, near Bernalillo, New Mexico.

Gift of the Ford Motor Company, 1966.36.90

Buffalo Hunt (study for mural)
1939
gouache on paper

Citizen Potawatomi Nation

This mural study blends a historical subject, the buffalo hunt, with a style typical of Woody Crumbo’s mature work, and reflects his lifelong advocacy for the preservation of tribal knowledge. The finished mural, completed in 1941, is in the Stewart Lee Udall Department of the Interior building, Washington, D.C.

Orphaned at age seven, Crumbo was raised by the Native community around Sand Springs, Oklahoma. A talented dancer and flute player, he supported himself during school performing Indian dances and was a featured soloist for the Wichita Symphony in 1933–34. As he toured, he collected information on Native dances and rituals, sharing it with other tribes, encouraging the retention and dissemination of tribal customs. In 1938, Crumbo was appointed director of the art department at Oklahoma’s Bacone College, where he taught students to use stylized form, color, and line to create modernist works that honor and preserve the Native American past.

Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1965.18.2
Buffalo Dance
1983
Indiana limestone

Allan Houser (1914–1994)
Fort Sill Apache Tribe–Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache

In this large-scale work, Allan Houser created a modern monument to American Indian culture. With its row of voices lifted in prayer or song, Buffalo Dance evokes the communal spirit in the buffalo hunt dances celebrated by the Chiricahua Apache. The dances, held twice a year at a time determined by their holy men, bring together numerous bands for family gatherings, weddings, and feasts.

Houser was the great-nephew of Geronimo, and his parents were born at Mount Vernon Barracks in Alabama, where the U.S. government imprisoned the Apache after Geronimo’s surrender in 1886. Congress released the Apache in 1913; Houser was the first member of his tribe to be born outside captivity. He went on to become a Golden Gloves boxing champion, and in 1934 enrolled in the Santa Fe Indian School, where he learned to paint the customs and rituals his parents had taught him. His murals, created in 1940 under the auspices of the New Deal, grace the Stewart Lee Udall Department of the Interior building in Washington, D.C.

Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, Frank E. Everett, and the Alice Henderson (Rossin) Colquitt Fund in honor of William Penhallow Henderson, 1995.11

Bison at Bay
about 1940–60
watercolor on paper

Beatien Yazz (born 1928/29)
Diné (Navajo)

Beatien Yazz was born Hoska Ye Ta Das Woot, and began studying art at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1943, where he used the name Jimmy Toddy, and was nicknamed “Little No Shirt.” He may have lied about his age in order to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II, and may have been one of the 400 Navajo Code Talkers recruited during the war.

After the war, Yazz embarked on a career drawing and painting illustrations for books and popular magazines. His life story and his illustrations were featured in Spin a Silver Dollar (1945), a book that brought him national attention. In Bison at Bay a buffalo fends off two hunters in the midst of a snowstorm. Characteristic of the artist’s mature style, this work was likely painted between 1940 and 1960.

Gift of the Ford Motor Company, 1966.36.205
Buffalo Hunter
1920–25
watercolor, ink, and pencil on paperboard

Julián Martínez (1879–1943)
San Ildefonso Pueblo

Julián Martínez was both a potter and painter, best known for his collaborations with his wife, the eminent potter Maria Martínez. Along with Awa Tsireh, Julián was part of the San Ildefonso Self-Taught Group, whose work focused on the ceremonial dances and daily life of the Pueblo communities. *Buffalo Hunter* retains the feel of nineteenth-century ledger drawings, the composition a classic confrontation between a buffalo bull and a mounted hunter.

Martínez was elected governor of San Ildefonso in 1925, and after the founding of the art program at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932, painted murals for that institution. Like many of his contemporaries, he focused on depicting the public ceremonies popular with the growing tourist audience, deflecting attention from the private and sacred rituals at the core of their community beliefs.

Corbin-Henderson Collection, Gift of Alice H. Rossin, 1979.144.84

Untitled, from the portfolio *Indian Self-Rule*
1983
color lithograph on paper

Jaune Quick-To-See Smith (born 1940)
Enrolled Salish member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation

Jaune Quick-To-See Smith often combines traditional Native American symbols with the principles of abstraction in works addressing modern tribal politics, human rights, and environmental issues. This color lithograph is part of *Indian Self-Rule*, a portfolio of prints by five Native artists. The project, commissioned in 1983 by the Institute of the American West, explores the impact of fifty years of federal Indian policy on tribal progress toward self-rule, beginning with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

The five buffalo represent Indian attempts at self-rule over the same fifty-year period, a symbolism deepened by Smith’s palette. Yellow represents the tanned hide of the buffalo, a heritage skill central to Plains Indian survival; red ochre, often called “Indian red,” is used for ornamentation; black denotes smoke or charcoal from fire, essential for life; and blue forms the field for the Stars and Stripes, the U.S. flag. With this print the artist “mapped” the turning points in federal Indian policy, and expressed the rupture caused by these policies.

Gift of the Institute of the American West, 1984.78.3
Awa Tsireh (1898–1955)  
San Ildefonso Pueblo

Awa Tsireh, also known by his Spanish name, Alfonso Roybal, was the son of two prominent San Ildefonso Pueblo potters. Self-taught, he began decorating pottery and developed his skills in painting and silversmithing. *Buffalo Deer Dance*, in which dancers dressed as deer and buffalo emerge from the hills against a winter landscape, is among his earliest works.

The Buffalo Dance, or Game Dance, is a sacred ceremony of the San Ildefonso Pueblo. It is celebrated annually on January 23rd, the Pueblo's feast day. This dance was one of Tsireh's favorite subjects because of the public and social nature of the performance. At a time when the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs attempted to restrict Pueblo cultural and religious practices, the watercolors of Awa Tsireh and other Pueblo artists helped to affirm the importance of ceremonial dance and ritual to their cultural survival.

Corbin-Henderson Collection, Gift of Alice H. Rossin, 1979.144.34

*Buffalo Dance, Mandan*  
Mandan/Numakiki  
1835–37  
oil on canvas

George Catlin  
born Wilkes-Barre, PA 1796–died Jersey City, NJ 1872

The Mandan performed the Buffalo Dance when buffalo were scarce, and they continued dancing until buffalo were seen near their village. Such dances could last several weeks. As Catlin noted:

Every man in the Mandan village . . . is obliged by a village regulation, to keep the mask of the buffalo, hanging on a post at the head of his bed, which he can use . . . whenever he is called upon by the chiefs, to dance for the coming of buffaloes. . . . When one becomes fatigued of the exercise, he signifies it by bending quite forward, and sinking his body towards the ground; when another draws a bow upon him and hits him with a blunt arrow, and he falls like a buffalo—is seized by the bye-standers . . . his place is at once supplied by another.

Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.440