

# Brief, Productive Love Affair With 'Big Dog'

When Christopher Columbus first came to America, there were no natives on horseback to greet him. That is not only because he landed on an island in the Bahamas. It's also because there were no horses in the New World. They originated here 40 million years ago and spread to other parts of the globe, but by 1492

## ART REVIEW

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horses had been extinct in the Western Hemisphere for 10,000 years. On his second trans-Atlantic voyage, in 1493, Columbus brought along 25 horses and reintroduced the species to America. Many more were brought later by French, English and Dutch colonizers.

This is just one remarkable piece of information to be gleaned from "A Song for the Horse Nation," an exhibition of 98 artifacts relating to native horse cultures, opening on Saturday at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan. Including saddles, riding blankets, clothing and beaded bags adorned with equine imagery and much more, the exhibition brings to light a fascinating and ultimately sad chapter in American history.

Organized by Emil Her Many Horses, a curator at the museum, the show presents most of the artifacts, all from the Smithsonian's collection, that were pictured in a small paperback of the same title published in 2006 (by the museum and Fulcrum Publishing). In his introduction the historian Herman J. Viola, a curator emeritus of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, tells of the rise and fall of American Indian horse culture, which thrived for only about 100 years.

As Mr. Viola explains, scholars now believe that horses began to proliferate among Indians in the West after Spaniards in Santa Fe fled a Pueblo uprising in 1680, leaving behind hundreds of horses and other animals. At first the Indians were frightened and mystified by the large and unfamiliar creatures. They called it names like Big Dog and Big Elk. But by the time of the French and

"A Song for the Horse Nation" opens Saturday and runs through July 7, 2011, at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, One Bowling Green, Lower Manhattan; (212) 514-3700, nmai.si.edu.



SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

A Piikuni Blackfoot horse mask, made of hide, buffalo horn, beads, hair locks, porcupine quills, brass tacks and more.

Indian War (1754-63), Plains Indians were among the world's best horsemen. A century or so later, their horse culture was dead, a victim, as Mr. Viola put it, of "too many white people and too few buffalo."

As the exhibition's many different sorts of artifacts show, the horse was much more than just a beast of burden. It was a highly efficient form of transportation, and it enabled Plains Indians to hunt buffalo, a primary source of food and material for clothing and shelter. So Navajo, Crow, Comanche, Pawnee and other tribes were able to expand their territories and flourish.

Three rifles that belonged to prominent leaders — the Apache Geronimo, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and Chief Rain-in-the-Face of the Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux — illustrate a less fortunate development. Indians traded horses for guns with Europeans, allowing them to pursue war more effectively with rival tribes and white settlers.

But most of the materials are of a more peaceful kind, and

## A Song for the Horse Nation

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

many have a delicate beauty. Saddle blankets decorated with geometric beaded patterns around the edges are among the most visually captivating pieces. Objects like a wooden Hunkpapa Lakota dance club from about 1899, with one end carved in the shape of a horse head, have an extraordinary sculptural elegance. Others, like a horned mask for a horse, resembling a buffalo's head (Lakota, around 1860), exude a scary ferocity.

Also compelling are hides on which historical events were recorded. A mid-19th-century Piikuni Blackfoot robe made from an elk skin features painted red, yellow and blue horses; teepees; and battling tribesmen evenly distributed on an off-white field. It documents both a war with Indian enemies and a fight with bears.

In many of the works here, including a Cheyenne River Sioux

leather shield cover from the 1890s depicting a lively Indian-on-Indian skirmish, the flattened and simplified abstraction and intense colors seem timeless and also, to 21st-century eyes accustomed to primitivist tendencies in modern art, oddly contemporary.

Some pieces have a historical significance beyond their aesthetic virtues. A black cloth coat decorated with beaded bison heads, horses and human figures from about 1895 represents a short-lived religious movement based on a vision of the Oto prophet William Faw Faw. He taught his followers to reject European influences and return to their traditional roots. Such movements were common among tribes at the end of the 19th century, when their ways of life were coming to a tragic end.

Captivating as the exhibition's contents are, hardly anything in it is spectacular in the sense that European art and artifacts produced with elaborate refinement and expensive materials can be. There is an exceptionally appealing modesty and subtlety to many of the objects. A late-19th-century Sioux pipe tamper with one end carved into a horse head is among the smallest and most affecting things in the show.

The exhibition's general ambience, however, is regrettably aggressive. With loud graphics, interactive videos, mural-scale reproductions of old photographs papering the walls and the sound of clip-clopping piped in throughout, it seems as if the designers didn't trust that the objects would be interesting enough by themselves. The show looks as if it were conceived with an audience of attention-challenged children in mind. The modern paraphernalia threatens to overwhelm the historical materials, inadvertently recreating the collision of worlds that ended traditional Indian ways more than a century ago.

In recent years American Indians have been working to revive their horse cultures. The exhibition includes some contemporary works, like Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty's colorful recreation of a Sioux horse mask made of porcupine quills, beads, brass buttons, feathers and hide. But in today's irretrievably industrialized world, returning to horse-based life is a dream unlikely ever to be completely realized.