

*Ballplay of the Sioux on the St. Peter 's River in Winter*  
**Seth Eastman**  
**1848, Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 35 1/4 inches**  
**Acquisition in memory of Mitchell A. Wilder, Director,**  
**Amon Carter Museum, 1961-1979**

### **About the Artist**

Seth Eastman was appointed to the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1824. In 1831, he was sent to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and there he became acquainted with the people and the area that would be the subjects of his painting for the next 45 years. In 1833, he returned to West Point to assist the newly appointed instructor of drawing. His assignment there enabled him to grow artistically.

The years from 1841 to 1848 were ones of artistic achievement for Eastman. He returned to Fort Snelling, the northern outpost of a string of forts established to maintain peace among the Indians and to protect settlers on their way west. The fort overlooked the junction of the St. Peter's and Mississippi Rivers. Eastman spent five years there and completed 400 pictures of the Indians and the Minnesota landscape. His fascination with the many aspects of Indian life is recorded in these works.

### **About the Art**

This painting shows the viewer an event of importance in the life of the Sioux Indians in a particular place and during a specific time period. The many details of the landscape, the clothing, the other objects shown in the painting, as well as the placement of the figures, tell us about the excitement and the intensity of the game and what it meant to the people involved in playing and in observing the sport.

### **Additional Information**

In this painting, Sioux Indians are shown in elaborate and colorful dress on a gray winter day on the frozen St. Peter's River. The trees are bare and the viewer can see tepees in the background. One member of the team has the ball and is racing toward the goal which is out of sight. Sometimes the goal could be as much as a half a mile away. The player with the ball is pursued by members of both teams. The opposing team tries to stop him, while his own team members try to clear the way for him to reach the goal. The objects on the ground in the lower left corner are prizes wagered on the outcome of the game. They are weapons, cooking utensils, clothing, and other valued objects guarded by older members of the tribe.

The game the Indians are playing was called lacrosse by the French and was popular among the Sioux tribes. The game was played by the Six Nations of the Iroquois in upper New York State before 1500, and the Cherokees called it little brother of war because of the good combat training it provided. A painting by another artist, George Catlin, shows

hundreds of Choctaw Indians playing the game, each with two bats. Dances and elaborate ceremonies were planned before the games, which could often go on for many days.

In a letter of 1849, Seth Eastman's wife, Mary, wrote that the object of the game was to get the ball (a piece of baked clay covered with deer skin) beyond a certain line.

Mary Eastman wrote a book about the Sioux Indians while she and her husband lived at Fort Snelling. Her book, *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling*, describes the daily life and customs of the Indians there. In the chapter entitled Wenona, Mrs. Eastman describes the ball play shown by her husband in this painting, but her description is of the women playing this very rough game. She wrote:

"The maidens of the village were all dressed in their gayest clothing, with ornaments of beads, bracelets, rings, and ribbons in profusion. They cared not half so much for the prizes, as they rejoiced at the opportunity of displaying their graceful persons....The women, young and old, were divided into two parties; but, as one party threw the ball towards the space marked off, the others threw it back again far over their heads, and then all ran back, each party endeavoring to reach it first, that they might succeed in placing the ball in the position which was to decide the game."

Mary Eastman's description of the game also tells us that the women played as roughly as the men, often inflicting serious injuries on each other. Prizes were given, but it seems that the most exciting reason for both men and women to play the game was the thrill of competing and the opportunity to show their skill.

### **About the Time and Place**

Many changes were taking place in the United States during the mid-1800s. In 1848, the year *Ball Play of the Sioux* was painted, New York became the first state to allow married women to own real estate. That same year, a group of women organized the Woman's Rights Convention. They met in Seneca Falls, New York, and made the first appeal for the right of women to vote. It was many years before all women in the United States could vote, but this group was important in bringing the issue before the people.

An equally significant social reform of this era was the Abolition Movement. By the early 1800s, every Northern state had outlawed slavery, but the plantation system in the South still depended on slaves for most of its labor. North and South continued to be on opposite sides of this issue, leading to the withdrawal from the Union of eleven Southern states in the 1860s. On April 12, 1861, the Civil War began.

Two other important historical events occurred in 1848: the United States won the Mexican War, gaining vast territories in the West, and the gold was discovered in California leading to the Gold Rush.