



John James Audubon:  
The Watercolors for  
*The Birds of America*

The Art Institute of Chicago  
May 7–July 17, 1994

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*“How often have I longed to converse with the feathered inhabitants of the forest.”*

—Audubon

One of the great romantic figures of the nineteenth century, John James Audubon (1785–1851) is remembered not only as an artist but as a naturalist, explorer, publisher, entrepreneur, writer, and environmentalist. His enduring fame rests on his monumental publication, *The Birds of America*, one of the most important documents of natural history in the world. Yet, Audubon’s greatest achievements were the beautiful and evocative watercolors he made in preparation for *The Birds of America*. Long before Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church made their reputations painting the wilderness, Audubon traveled more widely than any American artist before him, capturing the rich diversity of the natural world through its birds, from southern Florida to Labrador, from New York to the wilds of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Louisiana.

This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to appreciate Audubon as an innovative artist of great virtuosity. It was selected from more than 400 watercolors owned by The New-York Historical Society. In 1863, the Society raised public funds to purchase 464 original watercolors directly from his widow, Lucy Bakewell Audubon, who stated: “It was always the wish of Mr. Audubon that his forty years of labor should remain in this country.” Not as well known as the prints based upon them and rarely exhibited outside of The New-York Historical Society, the watercolors stand among the most creative and original works of nineteenth-century American art.

## EARLY YEARS

Audubon was born in Haiti (then called Santo Domingo), the illegitimate son of a sailor-adventurer and a chambermaid, who died soon after the birth of her son. Audubon grew up in France on the coast of Brittany; he first came to the United States in 1803, to avoid conscription in Napoleon’s army and to manage Mill Grove, his father’s estate outside Philadelphia. He settled here permanently in 1806. From childhood he had loved to draw birds and flowers and apparently received

basic instruction in drawing in France, although where and from whom are unknown.

Audubon later wrote that, from the moment he settled in America, he was “prompted by an innate desire to acquire a thorough knowledge of the birds of this happy country” and to draw each American bird “in its natural size and colouring.” After a series of failed commercial enterprises in Kentucky, he attempted to support his wife and two young sons by making portrait drawings, teaching drawing, and painting habitats for the new Western Museum in Cincinnati. Bankrupt in 1819, Audubon turned his back on commerce and, the following year, resolved to devote his life to finding and drawing American birds, to his “passion for rambling and admiring those objects of nature from which alone I received the purest gratification.”

In October 1820, Audubon traveled by flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, beginning the great project that obsessed him for the next



Fig. 1 *Northern Goshawk*, *Cooper's Hawk*, 1809, 1810-19, and about 1829. Watercolor, pastel, graphite, gouache, selective glazing, collage on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society





Fig. 2 *Yellow-billed Cuckoo*, about 1821–22. Watercolor, pastel, graphite, selective glazing on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society

eighteen years. Untrained in science as he was in art, he learned through direct experience, observing birds in their natural habitats and killing numbers of each species to study their appearance, to weigh and measure them, and to examine the contents of their stomachs. “I know I am not a scholar,” he wrote, “but meantime I am aware that no man living knows better than I do the habits of our birds; no man living has studied them as much as I have done.” During his career, Audubon described twenty-three new species and twelve sub-species of birds. His unparalleled ability as a field naturalist is clearly evident in the precision and immediacy of his depictions of birds as living, believable beings.

## THE WATERCOLORS

In the beginning, Audubon looked for guidance to the work of his European predecessors, notably the naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc, the count of Buffon (1707–1788). Buffon’s opinion that American birds were punier and uglier than European ones may have spurred Audubon to prove him wrong. The leading ornithologist in America, Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), whom Audubon met when Wilson was seeking financial support for his own book about American birds, was also an important fig-

ure for Audubon, first as inspiration and later as rival.

Audubon's earliest images of birds followed the long-established conventions employed by Wilson and other predecessors. They are static, profile views of single birds silhouetted against a blank page, looking more like stuffed specimens than living creatures. Very soon, however, Audubon began to challenge tradition by bringing his birds to life. The remarkable evolution of his style can be seen in *Northern Goshawk*, *Cooper's Hawk*, of about 1829 (fig. 1), where two profile views, cut from paintings made almost two decades before, are dramatically contrasted with the animated pose, fiercely gripping talons, and alert expression of the later goshawk that surmounts them.

Audubon revolutionized the tradition of bird illustration, devising techniques and formats to capture not only the physical attributes of his subjects but their behavior and habitats as well. In most instances, he drew directly from freshly killed specimens, threading them with wire and placing them in characteristic and aesthetically pleasing poses. Small birds were often composed in decorative vignettes, perched on branches with the flowers and fruits of their native environment. Larger birds may appear in a horizontal format, within a landscape setting. Without compromising accuracy, Audubon posed birds to allow the viewer to examine them from every angle—with closed and spread wings, from the side, top, and underneath (fig. 2).

Audubon was the first artist to depict each bird life-sized. Even using extremely large sheets of paper, he sometimes had ingeniously to find a pose for a huge bird that would enable him to fit it on the page. His decision to depict the tallest bird in North America in its characteristic curved feeding posture not only allowed Audubon to show the entire bird but actually emphasized its impressive size and powerful form (fig 3).

Audubon painted his birds feeding, flying, courting, fighting each other for prey. He believed that the behavior of birds and people was essentially alike. "I have lost nothing," he wrote, "in exchanging the pleasure of studying men for that of admiring the feathered race." In his five-volume *Ornithological Biography*, written to accompany *The Birds of America*, he often described the actions and interactions of birds in human terms. He characterized the whooping crane (fig. 3) as stalking



Fig. 3 *Whooping Crane*, begun 1821. Watercolor, oil, graphite, gouache, selective glazing, pastel on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society

through the marsh grass “with all the majesty of a gallant chief” and wrote of the breeding plumes of the great egret (fig. 4) as a “silky train [that] reminded one of the flowing robes of the noble ladies of Europe.”

It is clear that Audubon had a dual purpose in his watercolors, aiming on the one hand to give a maximum of ornithological information about each species and on the other to make works of art that were inventive, varied, and beautiful. He had a masterful sense of abstract design and pattern, delighting in the decorative and elegant silhouetted shapes of birds, such as the great egret (fig. 4). Fresher, clearer, and more vibrant than the familiar engravings for which they were made, the watercolors offer extraordinary insight into Audubon’s artistic process and his inventiveness as he strove to create highly lifelike images of the birds he knew so well.

The very survival of these complex, multimedia works is something of a miracle, as Audubon carried them throughout the United States and England and exhibited them regularly, often by pinning them to a



wall. They were handled frequently, used extensively as working drawings for the prints, and also employed as marketing tools to attract subscriptions to *The Birds of America*.

The grace and restraint of many of Audubon's compositions, with their careful placement of forms and sensitivity to the spaces of the background they enclose, are suggestive of Chinese and Japanese art. In fact, Audubon appears to have been aware of a variety of artistic traditions and to have drawn on them in an instinctive, rather than imitative, way. In America, his career parallels that of the landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801–1848), who also found his true subject matter in the American wilderness and created perfected images of scrupulously observed reality.

### AUDUBON'S TECHNIQUE

Determined to depict birds more beautifully and more accurately than anyone had before him, Audubon taught himself a full range of techniques for drawing with color. He began with the traditional French medium of pastel, with which he had worked since his youth. Finding that pastel alone did not allow the level of detail and sharp colors he desired, he perfected a clear watercolor technique, adding pastel for the soft and subtle textures. He developed an extraordinarily inventive use of graphite (pencil) for certain details and textures, sometimes applying delicate strokes over pastel or watercolor to suggest the iridescence of feathers. He also attached collage elements from earlier works, used layers of watercolor to create dense areas of solid color, and added transparent glazes of natural gum or gelatin to make eyes and plumage shine. Often, as in the majestic *Gyr Falcon* (cover), he freely combined media to give the birds the realism of life as well as to create dynamically patterned forms of great graphic power.

Although he rarely credited them, Audubon employed talented assistants throughout his career to help him create the settings for his birds. The first of these collaborators was Joseph Mason (1808–1842). As a boy of thirteen, Mason accompanied Audubon on his first trip down the Mississippi River to Louisiana and painted foliage, fruit, and flowers for about fifty of Audubon's birds (fig. 2). George Lehman (about 1800–1870) painted the backgrounds for many species in



Fig. 4 *Great Egret*, about 1831. Watercolor, graphite, white pastel, white gouache, selective glazing on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society

the southern states; his minutely detailed view of Charleston, South Carolina, appears behind the stately long-billed curlew (fig. 5). Maria Martin (1796–1863) painted flowers, insects, and butterflies to accompany more than twenty watercolors.

### *THE BIRDS OF AMERICA*

Audubon's formidable struggle to produce, publish, and market a comprehensive, illustrated book of North American birds began in 1824. To find an engraver, he went first to Philadelphia, the scientific and publishing center of the United States. Unfortunately, Alexander Wilson's many supporters in Philadelphia did not welcome Audubon's dramatically new approach to bird illustration and also found his abrasive, self-aggrandizing manner and slovenly, backwoods appearance offensive. Gaining no support, he sailed in 1826 for England, where within weeks his watercolors were being exhibited and praised. Audubon the frontier woodsman, with his



flamboyant personality, buckskin jacket, and long hair slicked with bear grease, delighted a British audience that loved the legends of Daniel Boone and the frontier stories of James Fenimore Cooper.

Audubon engaged the engravers Robert Havell and his son to produce *The Birds of America* in London. It was published from 1827 to 1838, consisting ultimately of 435 life-size engravings on “double-elephant” sheets of paper, measuring more than two feet by three feet. Audubon supervised every aspect of the laborious process by which the watercolors were translated into prints through a combination of etching, aquatint, line engraving, and hand coloring. Many changes were made during production, and some of the watercolors still bear Audubon’s handwritten instructions to the printer.

To gain the financial support necessary for the enterprise, Audubon issued the prints sequentially in eighty-seven groups of five prints each, to be sold at a total price of just over \$1000. With prodigious energy, he courted prospective subscribers in Europe and America among patrons of the arts, important political figures, and members of royal and noble families. He also promoted his project through exhibitions of the watercolors and speeches to scientific societies. Through dogged and tireless effort, he was able to gather orders for nearly two hundred complete sets of prints, many of which were bound into books. He also later issued a smaller octavo version of *The Birds of America* (about one-eighth the size of the double-elephant folio edition).

Audubon’s family played a major role in the success of *The Birds of America*. Lucy Bakewell Audubon worked to support the family through long years of isolation and poverty, as her husband single-mindedly pursued his dream; she also took responsibility for many aspects of the vast undertaking when Audubon was overseas. Their sons, Victor Gifford and John Woodhouse, worked on the project from childhood; they assisted with the painting of birds and backgrounds as well as supervising the printing process in London.

## AUDUBON’S LEGACY

Audubon’s name has long been associated almost entirely with the prints for *The Birds of America*. Only recently have scholars begun to give the watercolors

their due as beautiful and innovative works of art. They are highly significant as well as moving documents of the bounteous diversity of the vanished American wilderness; many of the birds Audubon depicted are now extinct or severely endangered. Exhibition co-curator Theodore Stebbins writes, "He had hoped to draw the birds of America for a book of great size, beauty, and scientific importance, and this project was wholly realized. But he accomplished much more. His name has become synonymous with love of birds and with preservation of the environment, in ways which would have astonished and pleased him.... He is now recognized as one of the most gifted and original artists of his time in America."



Fig. 5 *Long-billed Curlew*, 1831. Watercolor, pastel, graphite on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society

Brochure text prepared by Gilian Wohlauser, senior lecturer, Department of Education.

**Cover:** *Gyr Falcon*, 1837. Watercolor, graphite, gouache, selective glazing on paper. Collection of The New-York Historical Society

"John James Audubon: The Watercolors for *The Birds of America*" was organized by The New-York Historical Society from its permanent collection. Support for the publication of the catalogue has been provided by Fidelity Investments through the Fidelity Foundation. In Chicago, the exhibition is made possible by Illinois Tool Works Inc., Kemper Securities, Inc., and Mary P. Hines.

## *Related Events*

The following free programs complement the exhibition. Family programs are held in the Kraft General Foods Education Center (KGFECE), lower level.

### LECTURES

#### **Birds of Feather—Audubon and Other Artist Naturalists**

**May 20 and July 13 at 12:15**

Morton Auditorium

#### **John James Audubon—Producer, Promoter, and Publisher**

Dr. Annette Blaugrund, Andrew Mellon Senior Curator of Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture, The New-York Historical Society

**May 24 at 6:00**

Fullerton Auditorium

#### **“John James Audubon—The Watercolors for *The Birds of America*”**

**May 25 and July 5 at 12:15**

Morton Auditorium

#### **Field Museum Series—Bird and Animal Images Discovered in the Artistic Process**

Peggy McNamara, artist-in-residence,

The Field Museum

**May 31 at 6:00**

Fullerton Auditorium

#### **Non-Scientific Nature Painting and the Audubon Influence**

Ann Wiens, artist and editor of the *New Art Examiner*

**June 7 at 6:00**

Fullerton Auditorium

#### **The Art of Science—Audubon**

**June 10 and 20 at 12:15**

Price Auditorium, KGFECE

#### **The Genius of John James Audubon—Myth Versus Reality**

Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., curator of American painting, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**June 14 at 6:00**

Fullerton Auditorium

### FOR THE FAMILY

#### **Workshop: Our Feathered Friends (ages 4-6)**

**May 28 at 10:30**

Studio 18, KGFECE

#### **Workshop: Audubon's Birds—Watercolor (ages 7 and up)**

**May 28 at 2:30**

Studio 18, KGFECE



**Workshop: Our Feathered Friends (ages 4-6)**

May 29 at 12:30

**Workshop: Audubon's Birds—Watercolor (ages 7 and up)**

May 29 at 2:30

**Performance: Journey with John James Audubon**

Face to Face Productions, Ltd., presents a portrait for young audiences dramatizing stories from the artist's life.

July 12, 15, 16, and 17 at 1:30

Price Auditorium, KGFE

**Gallery Walk**

A 20-minute walk focusing on animals in art

July 12, 15, 16, and 17 at 2:30

Studio 18, KGFE

**ARTIST DEMONSTRATIONS**

**Scientific Illustration by Zorica Dabich**

May 8, 15, 22, 29 at 12:30; May 7, 14, 21, 28 at 11:30

Gallery 15, KGFE

**CONCERTS**

**Lark Ascending**

Swan Quintet

May 7 at 1:30 and 3:00

McCormick Sculpture Court, Rice Building

**On Wings of Song, a concert commentary**

American Women Composers

May 22 at 2:00

Fullerton Auditorium

**AUDIO TOUR**

An audio tour featuring Judith A. Barter, Field-McCormick Curator of American Arts, is available at the exhibition entrance: \$3.50, members; \$4, public. Free to legally blind visitors.

**EXHIBITION CATALOGUE**

"John James Audubon: The Watercolors for *The Birds of America*" (The New-York Historical Society with Villard Books, 1993) is available in the Museum Shops. Hardcover, \$75. Paper, \$39.95.

*General Information*

Members are always admitted free to exhibitions. General public tickets for this exhibition are sold at museum entrances daily. \$6.50, adults; \$3.25, seniors, students, and children under 12. For information on joining the museum, call (312) 443-3622 or ask at the Information Desks.

For information on group visits, call (312) 443-3933.