JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S "MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION"

> "I am persuaded that alone in the woods, or at my work, I can make better use of the whole of myself than in any other situation, and that thereby I have lost nothing in exchanging the pleasure of studying men for that of admiring the feathered race."[1]
>
> John James Audubon

John James Audubon's lasting significance in art, history, and science is not simply due to his artistic mastery, tenacity, and the overwhelming ambition of his undertaking to portray, as realistically as possible, all the birds of the American wilds. In large part, it is due to his ability to convey the life beneath the feathers; to transmit the spirit of these beautiful creatures, tenuous and fleeting, and ignite in us, the spark that fueled him all those years: his joy in discovering the intimate life of birds.

Born in 1785 in present-day Haiti, young Audubon subsequently spent an idyllic childhood in the French countryside.[2] Despite the surrounding tumult of the French Revolution, his father bestowed upon him his first natural history lessons of birds and pointed out their unique, emotive features.[3] Audubon began to develop the desire to recreate these observations in the most life-like manner, and strove tenaciously to learn both the technical skills he would need as an artist, as well the fundamentals of his chosen field through the work of other naturalists and ornithologists of his day.[4]

Audubon left France at age eighteen to avoid conscription into Napoleon's armies, just as the Napoleonic Wars were beginning.[5] After several failed business attempts managing a family estate in Pennsylvania and his own enterprises in Kentucky, followed by a brief imprisonment for debt, Audubon disembarked on a trip down the Mississippi River in 1820 with little more than inspiration to create and publish a bird book of epic proportions.[6] He describes the crystallization of his idea to copy and reproduce nature exactly as it was, living, breathing, moving as, "a thought that struck my mind like a flash of light."[7] It would take nearly twenty years, the help of his two sons, a few artist collaborators, and a highly skilled British engraver, Robert Havell, Jr., for Audubon to complete his grand opus, *The Birds of America*: 200 double-elephant-folios, measuring almost 40 by 30 inches closed, each containing 435 hand-colored etchings, depicting the nearly 500 species of birds known to inhabit America's vast landscapes.[8]

Despite Audubon's charismatic nature, his early prosperity, and rapport with many key historical personages of his day, he suffered countless difficulties realizing his massive tome: he struggled to find a printer and then to finance his masterful printing scheme; he fought to command the respect of other naturalists; he was apart from his family for years at a time; and his wife, Lucy Audubon, died penniless years after Audubon's own death and decline into senility, but not before she was forced to sell off all of her husband's original watercolors and the engraved copper plates used to make *The Birds of America* prints.[9]

Though Audubon was himself responsible for the deaths of thousands of birds and other species, which he captured and killed in order to accurately draw, towards the end of his travels he began to assume serious concern for the welfare of both the birds and animals, as well as the landscape of America.[10] Several of the species he depicted in *The Birds of America* are now extinct or endangered, including the Passenger Pigeon and the Whooping Crane.[11] Thus, it is fitting that the National Audubon Society established in 1905 in his name, continues to protect these natural treasures, and keeps his flame ignited.[12]

AUDUBON AND UNION COLLEGE

Union College President Eliphalet Nott demonstrated his characteristic progressive nature when he purchased a complete set of the four-volume, double-elephant-folio, *The Birds of America*, from Audubon in the summer of 1844.[13] The artist was visiting the campus to tour fellow naturalist and Union professor, Captain Issac Jackson's garden.[14]

Nott's tremendous purchase remained safely within the care of the college library until Commencement 1971, when the entire contents of Volume One of *The Birds of America*, on display in a locked glass case in the library for the weekend's festivities, was wrenched from its cover and case by two thieves, leaving a bloody trail as evidence of their deed.[15] The prints, some bloodstained and severely torn, were eventually recovered with the help of the FBI and a rare book dealer from Texas.[16] The harrowing recovery tale has received some controversy of its own in recent decades, and the reliability and possible culpability of the book dealer, John Holmes Jenkins, who was ostensibly murdered in 1989, has been called into question.[17] The Audubon portfolios remain one of Union's most precious Special Collections holdings today.

The New-York Historical Society purchased the entire cache of 474 original watercolors Audubon painted as preparatory studies for *The Birds of America*, acquiring 470 from Lucy Audubon in 1863.[18] Of these watercolors, 435 served as the models for the final Havell engravings for *The Birds of America*, but thirty-nine were not included for a variety of reasons.[19] The Schaffer Library at Union College has recently purchased, with gifted funds from alumnus David Seeley, a member of the class of 1970, twelve facsimile prints from these thirty-nine "to complete our flock." Seeley made this gift in honor of former College President Harold Martin. These full-size replicas were printed using the original watercolors, which have been on display recently in an on-going, three-part exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, *Audubon's Aviary: The Complete Flock,* 2013-2015.

Union College is also fortunate to have recently acquired another group of facsimiles this time of the final Havell engravings, rather than the original watercolors, from a 1985 collaboration between the National Audubon Society and the Abbeville Press. To produce this group of full-size facsimiles of all 435 prints to commemorate Audubon's 200th birthday, the Audubon Society's copy of *The Birds of America* was used and the printing was done in Tokyo, Japan on paper from New York's own Mohawk Paper Company.[20]

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[1] Roberta J.M. Olson, *Audubon's Aviary: The Original Watercolors for the Birds of America* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2012), frontispiece.
[2] Lee A. Vedder, *John James Audubon and the Birds of America: A Visionary Achievement of Ornithological Illustration* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 2006), 5.
[3] Ibid; Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 17-18.
[4] Vedder, *John James Audubon and the Birds of America*, 6, 9.
[5] Ibid, 7.
[6] Marshall B. Davidson, "The Birds of America," in *John James Audubon 'The Birds of America,' June 16 and 17, 1983, Sale Number 5054* (New York: Sotheby Parke Bernet, Inc., 1983).
[7] Vedder, *John James Audubon and the Birds of America*, 8.
[8] Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 11, 30.
[9] Wendy Moonan, "Central Park's Winged Tenants, By Audubon," *New York Times*, December 26, 2003, E49; Bill Steiner, *Audubon Art Prints: A Collector's Guide to Every Edition*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), xviii, 224.
[10] Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 35.
[11] "Audubon's *Birds of America*: Extinct Birds," National Audubon Society, accessed July 8, 2014, http://web4.audubon.org/bird/BoA/BOA_index.html.
[12] Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 36.
[13] "The Great Audubon Caper, Revisited," *Union College Magazine* (March/April, 1986): 20-21.
[14] John James Audubon to W.G. Audubon, Esq., 16 July 1844, Schenectady County Historical Society.
[15] Phillip J. Wajda, "True Crime or Texas Tall Tale? Unraveling a 40-year-old Mystery," *Union College Magazine* (Summer, 2011): 4.
[16] Ibid, 6.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 8.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Steiner, *Audubon Art Prints*, 83.