“I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand-saw.” In matters ornithological there are few authorities on Chinese art who can say as much. If they would let well enough alone they would keep out of mischief, because esthetically it does not matter much. If a distant bird in flight in a Chinese painting is a white-fronted goose, a bean goose, or even a Jankowski swan (Cygnus bewickii jankowski, Alpheraky—a millstone of a name for any bird to carry). But they do not let well enough alone. They quarrel, they squabble, they wrangle: sometimes they come very near brawling.

Not unlike birds are the savants themselves when they congregate for learned conference. In such assemblies the bird-minded cannot but think of crane and owl, of hawk and heron, and of other species lean and hungry, voluble and dignified. Something like this must have been in the minds of the Chinese when they chose birds as appropriate insignia for their civil officials, including in the higher ranks the lordly peacock and the melancholy crane, in the lesser ranks the retiring quail and the loquacious oriole.

The art experts are funny enough, but when they call in the ornithologists the confusion and tumult are greatly increased. At the recent Princeton conference a minor altercation took place between two authorities as they confronted each other before a very good version in the Morris collection of the painting generally known as Hui Tsung’s White Eagle. One protested at a suggestion that this great white bird be called a golden eagle. The other, triumphant, quoted a famous ornithologist to the effect that, as there is no such thing as a white eagle, the bird must be an albino golden eagle; whereupon the first retorted that albinos have pink eyes and Hui Tsung’s eagle’s eyes are yellow. In the end the dispute was resolved by labeling Princeton’s bird succinctly “Eagle.”

The bitterest strife, of course, is about the birds which appear in the highly conventionalized designs of the early Chinese ceremonial bronzes; particularly those, on a series of early vessels, which have for a long time been called owls and quite recently have been put forward as pheasants—and tragopan pheasants at that. The question is far from settled. It is obvious that in later Chinese art a pheasant is the unmistakable progenitor of the Flowery Bird of the twelve sacrificial symbols and of the feng huang, mistakenly called phoenix; and it is true that the owl appears much less often in Chinese art and literature than the pheasant. It is also obvious that in the formalized and symbolic decoration of bronzes of the Shang dynasty (about 1558—about 1050 B.C.) representations of a bird are intended. They are, however, so highly conventionalized that it is surprising that anyone in his right senses would try to determine from them even a genus, far less a species. Who but Western scholars of the twentieth century would squabble over the species of these birds of three thousand years ago?

Isn’t it the important thing that in the symbolism of the early Chinese a Beast and a Bird played a great part? Does it matter much which bird, which beast? While our iconographers bicker and wrangle over the bull and ram, the tiger and water buffalo, the pheasant and owl, most of them persist in ignoring the answer to the magnificent rebus of the t’ao t’ieh, that interlocking composite of bird and beast which is the symbol of one fundamental precept of Chinese thinking—the balanced dualism of yin and yang, of darkness and light, of moon and sun, of female and male.

Creel, in The Birth of China, demonstrated most of the elements of this rebus. He pointed out—and no one has contradicted him—that, if you bisexual the mask of the front-facing monster, you will find that the two halves of the design
may be read as profile pictures of beast facing beast nose to nose. He also demonstrated that the same profile may be read backwards, in which case the hindquarters of the beast become a bird facing in the other direction. Only one thing remained: to demonstrate that the bird, full face, with wings outspread, is an integral part of the front-facing mask. This was most ably done in the November, 1938, issue of The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, a publication light in weight but rich in content into which many such jewels are cast.

While we are making merry over the contentiousness of picture-critics and ornithologists we are flirting with a very serious difference between two things which should not necessarily be in opposition but often seem to be—the difference between art and science. Is there any good reason why an artist should not paint a bird accurately enough to content a scientist? Would anyone dare to say that a bird inaccurately limned is more pleasing than a bird correctly drawn? Look in the following pages from Audubon’s Golden Eagle to Hui Tsung’s White Eagle, from Audubon’s Snowy Egret to the Egret after Chao Tzö-ku in the Metropolitan Museum, from Audubon’s Cedar Waxwing to the Chinese Waxwing in the Philadelphia Museum.

But before we arrive at our conclusion, which will be, of course, that Chinese painters have always done everything better than anyone else, let us diverge for a moment to look at birds as depicted in American guidebooks by illustrators selected by the ornithologists themselves. There are a number of notable bird-painters, including Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Francis Lee Jacques, Roger Tory Peterson, Lloyd Sandford, Allan Brooks, and Don Eckelberry, and many more are coming up.

It is interesting to observe that, more and more, in our American bird guides drawings are preferred to photographs (a fact which gives pleasure to those of us who think the camera lies more frequently than it tells the truth). It is interesting to note also that, more and more, the bird-painters show the birds in varied action. Furthermore, and to the advantage of scientific bird-observers, the illustrations for such books as Roger Tory Peterson’s bird guide have achieved, by the elimination of almost everything but shape outlines and outstanding markings, “a ‘boiling down’, or simplification, of things so that any bird could be readily and surely told from all the others at a glance or at a distance.” Now what is this? art or science? or, for once, art and science walking happily hand in hand?

Yet even the best of bird pictures cannot exactly represent a bird. I knew one fourteen-year-old bird boy who hurled his Christmas gift of Audubon indignantly at his offended parents (who had sought to please him), because, he said, the pictures therein did not look like the birds. He was quite right. He knew his birds in field and swamp, alive and singing on the wing. Pictures drawn from taxidermists’ birds wired on branches disgusted him. Your true bird-lover must have his birds alive and preferably wild in their own habitat. For the scientist, however, no picture will do at all; he must have the real bird, alive or dead (although at least one naturalist, with Walrus tears, expressed regret when he felt forced to murder a rare warb-
ler in Central Park to prove that he had seen it there—an operation which not only added to the record but made a rare species rarer still).

If we may go so far—that is to say that no picture can exactly represent a bird—it would appear that all paintings of birds should be considered art. (Art, of course, is a word which did not invade the Chinese language until quite recently, but it is so much used in America that it cannot always be conveniently avoided.) As there still seems to be a considerable divergence of opinion as to what is art and what is illustration, where pictorial representation is concerned, for the present discussion may we not say that the instant one leaves the actual bird—the instant one resorts to paper and brush—the result is art, good or bad as the case may be?

All paintings of birds are art. On the basis of this assumption we may forego the bootless quarrel between art and science and discover that the argument turns into something like a personal prejudice in favor of what, for want
of better terminology, we call realism or impressionism.

With this in mind let us look at the bird guides of, say, the past fifty years. The illustrations in the early books in this series are hopefully realistic, but, wonder of wonders, as the century progresses they become simpler and livelier. It would seem either that impressionism has been seeping in or that the illustrators have been consciously trying to fuse realism and impressionism. Actually, it is not that the painters have had any intention of sacrificing correctness but that they have been trying to present birds as our eyes see them at a distance, not dead in the hand, and that in doing so they have been adding suggestions—realistic impressions—of the birds’ movements. As a result, in place of the meticulous drawings and colored photographic reproductions of badly stuffed goldfinches and tanagers of the early twentieth century, we now have, as has already been noted, Roger Tory Peterson’s simplifications and the lively pages that Don Eckelberry has recently done for Richard Pough’s *Audubon Bird Guide*.

Whence came this happy change? The an-

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*Snowy Egret. Water color by Audubon for plate 242 of Birds of America*
swer could be very simple. It could be that, as we strive to adapt our educational system to the inevitable changes time brings to us with increasing rapidity, the labors of the United States Department of Agriculture and of the Audubon Society are bearing fruit. It could be that, in the campaign for conservation, the attempt to halt the tragic ravages upon our wildlife made by the rapacious nineteenth century, our bird-guide illustrators have been developing, of their own volition, a way of representing birds which will not only inform but charm a greater public. It could be as simple as that.

But when we look back to the early nineteenth century (Audubon) and the eighteenth century in Europe (Nozeman) we find that bird books were both informative and pleasing to look at. The charm of birds is not a modern American discovery. It was known to Western civilization. For a short time it seems to have been lost; but it is being recovered.

Just when did the West discover the charm of birds, particularly of birds by themselves or in compositions of flowers? It is undesirable here to diverge into a history of birds in Western art—to skim from the geese of ancient Egypt or its hawk- and vulture-headed gods, to be diverted by the sensational career of the eagle from Greek myth to national emblem of such different governments as Czarist Russia and the Presidential United States, or to look into the symbolism of the pelican and the dove in the four “Mirrors” of the mediaeval encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais. Yet it would be interesting to discover at what point Western artists began to paint birds, not merely as accessories or symbols, but by themselves.

Think of the woody birds surrounding Saint Francis in Giotto’s chapel, at Assisi, or the stiff fowl in the monastery garden in Carpaccio’s Saint Jerome Taming the Lion, in Venice. Surely it was not until the eighteenth century that birds began to be pictured as really lively and important for themselves, represented in what are almost stage scenes of flowering trees and ornamental rocks. Was this a European invention? Of course it wasn’t. It must have been inspired by the importations of ornamental vases and wallpapers from the Orient.

Our histories of art are well aware of the influence of Chinese art upon the decoration of the eighteenth century, but has it occurred to our naturalists that possibly it influenced their way of representing birds and flowers too?

Those gaudy color plates made for Buffon, many of them are like enough to Chinese work to have been plucked bird by bird from one of the cruder wallpapers. That enchanting frontispiece for Cornelius Nozeman’s Nederland-sche Vogelen, with a galaxy of birds swinging on branch and rush, isn’t there at least a whiff of China here? There is no evidence that naturalists deliberately copied a way of presenting birds from the Chinese, but may they not have

been unconsciously influenced by exposure to Chinese birds and flowers?

Practicing painters are rarely cordial to historians. Why should they be? When one is bent on making pictures of the world as he sees or dreams it, he likes to think it entirely his own creation and usually does not relish being told by outside observers that he is plagiarizing even famous masters of the past. With rare exceptions, he does not even like to have it pointed out that the greater his visual experience of old masters the richer and profounder is the new thing that he may add to the infinite possibilities of expression. Not for a moment would we have tried to demonstrate to Louis Agassiz Fuertes, for instance, that he might be an American offspring of eighteenth-century China. He might properly have resented that. Nevertheless, may we not suspect that in Western painting a new way of looking at birds, flowers, and insects appeared when the arts and crafts of China became fashionable in eighteenth-century Europe?

Once discovered, this new attitude was never entirely lost to the decorative arts. In the bird-book illustrations, however, there seems to have
been a break in the tradition, a brief period of doldrums which is now coming to an end. While no one could say that present-day bird-book illustrators are directly influenced by the Chinese (unless some of them come forward to say it themselves), may we not consider the possibility that indirectly the influence is there?

What are the main differences between Western and Chinese painters of birds and flowers?

In the painting of birds and flowers, what did Western artists learn from the Chinese?

There is no question of the interest of Western man in nature from earliest times; one has only to regard, for example, the capitals in mediaeval churches or the myriad birds and flowers of the Unicorn tapestries at The Cloisters, where many species are most accurately and carefully depicted. It is the Western attitude that is different from the Chinese.

Western artists delineate things in nature with care, but they usually subordinate them as parts of a grand scheme in which human beings are the most important elements. The Chinese, on the other hand, painted birds for their own importance as early as the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1279), treating them almost as we treat portraits. They have had a tendency to regard the humblest bird, flower, or insect with affection and respect and to represent it with the same dignity and importance that the West has reserved for Man—until, of course, Rosa Bonheur came along to make the harmless lioness look like a sleek matron at the Albert Hall (sweet creatures both) but she is an exception. The Chinese never sentimentalize about birds and grasses, but neither do they underrate them. The European painter tends to favor accuracy, on the whole. The Chinese painter is accurate about certain general aspects, yet for specific details he cares nothing at all. It is his


interest to give an impression of a bird, an impression of a bird alive, frozen forever in a moment of time but suggesting always time’s flow and movement.

It is difficult, as you see, to try to tell Westerners about Chinese painting or thinking without becoming grandiose. The principles are really very simple, but translations of Chinese terms are bound to sound fancy or quaint. Your Western interpreter, struggle as honestly as he may, sounds at best Maeterlinckian. How can you convey to a practical Yankee from Maine that the Chinese are bent on painting the very souls of trees and rocks and birds, that they sacrifice minute detail in their desire to convey the essential character of a particular kind of tree or rock or bird? Westerners see what they see and are stubbornly practical. But, unwilling as they may be to adopt another point of view, eventually they will learn that the Chinese way of looking at things is a subtle virus and catching.

One cannot blame Western naturalists for finding fault with Chinese painting. It must be irritating to our ornithologists to have Hui Tsung turn up with a White Eagle when there is no such thing as a white eagle. One can sympathize. As West and East fuse, one may even hope that Chinese painters, without losing any of their skill in presenting wings and movement, may make their birds a little more recognizable. Until then, most of us are bound to admire the birds they do present—sometimes alone, almost as portraits; sometimes in rhythmic compositions so satisfactory to the eye that few of us care that they are mind birds, half real, half fanciful. Chinese painters cannot but be aware of the elegance and grace of birds wherever they see them: Their ecstasy is in their eyes. They are aware of different shapes, of different kinds of flight. They can indeed tell a hawk from a handsaw, whichever way the wind blows. They can also tell the difference between a hawk and a sparrow quite a lot of the time. But once they have observed the generic differences they really don’t care much about the regrettable multiplicity of sparrows—or of ducks—as described by our bird books. Cygnus bewickii jankowski, Alpheraky, indeed!

I am indebted to Miss Hazel Gay, the Librarian of the American Museum of Natural History, for help with bird books and to Mr. Richard H. Pough, Director of Research at the Audubon Society, for other helpful suggestions.

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The Chinese bird painting illustrated by a detail in color on the cover of the Bulletin is shown in its entirety at the top of this page. Audubon, alas, did not see this bird, the red-billed blue magpie of China, but several live ones are on view at the New York Zoological Society, which also houses, in the Administration Building, Rosa Bonheur’s portrait of a lioness.