John James Audubon and Campephilus Principalis

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Perhaps no painter holds a more curious place in the annals of American art than the hunter and woodsman John James Audubon (Figure 1). His work opens to our view a vanished America, and brings before us as well a singularly attractive man of varied talents. Although he painted a number of portraits to help support himself and his family, his only true interest— an interest amounting to a passion— was painting portraits of birds. No other artist in his day brought so much concentration to bear upon such an exclusive subject. To the exacting art of ornithological illustration he gave new dimensions, by bringing to it the vision of an artist.

His approach to ornithological illustration was actually quite simple, and based upon ideas that would naturally occur to an artist unhampered either by scientific learning or current artistic conventions. Audubon’s birds are always presented in natural attitudes— they dart and turn among flowers and leaves; they are caught in the act of feeding or flight; they scatter in alarm before their enemies, or swoop and pounce upon their prey. Audubon always drew birds life-size and in full and accurately studied color. But what really separates his work from earlier ornithological illustration is the fact that although for the sake of accuracy he worked from dead specimens, each of his drawings is a composition consciously designed to display the living bird to best advantage. When the famous naturalist Cuvier first saw Audubon’s great portfolio of illustrations, *Birds of America*, he stated that it was the most magnificent monument yet raised by art to science.

The directness and vitality of Audubon’s pictures nonetheless caused astonishment, disbelief, and pained flutterings among certain closet-naturalists of the day, who preferred their birds securely stuffed and mounted under glass. Audubon’s contributions stand out most clearly when his work is contrasted with that of his chief contemporary rival and fellow American, Alexander Wilson. Wilson’s birds (Figure 3) are always presented in inanimate profile, crudely engraved and colored, and small in scale: his drawings are in fact not far removed from mere diagrams. Audubon had to endure harassment and denigration from Wilson’s partisans George Ord and Charles Waterton, who tried in every way to damage Audubon’s reputation by seeking out errors in his work. Wilson himself took no part in these pedantic squabbles, having died before Audubon’s work was published. But Ord in particular— who, incidentally, had a financial interest in Wilson’s book— did everything he could to stifle competition.

Actually the only close parallel to Audubon’s work as a bird painter is to be found, not in Western art at all, but in Chinese and Japanese painting (Figure 5). This is not to suggest that Audubon ever saw any bird paintings by Oriental artists, but that similar concentration and searching observation may produce similar results in the work of artists widely separated in time, space, and cultural environment.

Audubon was born in 1785, the natural son of a prosperous French shipowner and merchant living temporarily in Les Cayes, Haiti. As a child he was taken to France, where his father was a
prominent citizen in the town of Nantes. There at an early age Audubon began to draw pictures of birds. When he was about seventeen, he was allowed to study drawing for a few months in the Paris atelier of the regal classicist Jacques Louis David, but by his own account this short exposure to academic art served only to disgust him with the dry pretensions of drawing from antique plaster casts. At any rate, it constituted his only formal training as an artist.

He was sent to America by his father in 1803, apparently to escape service in Napoleon’s army. In 1808 he married Lucy Bakewell, daughter of a neighbor in Pennsylvania. Although at first he led the life of a country gentleman there, he eventually moved to Kentucky, and became involved in several unsuccessful business ventures that left him penniless and cast into jail for debt. When he was released, in 1819, he had only the clothes he stood up in, his gun, and his drawings of birds. From this time forward he devoted himself almost entirely to hunting and drawing birds, while his long-suffering wife helped support herself and their sons by working as a governess and schoolteacher.

About 1820 Audubon conceived the idea of recording in his drawings all the birds of North America and having engravings of them published. He dedicated the rest of his life to this end. In 1826, having failed to arouse much enthusiasm for his grandiose project in this country, he set out for England, with over four hundred drawings, to look for an engraver and publisher there. The quality of his drawings as well as his handsome person and gracious manner opened doors both humble and grand. When the draw-

1. John James Audubon, by his sons John and Victor Audubon, about 1845-1850. Oil on canvas. The American Museum of Natural History

2. Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, by John James Audubon (1785-1851), American. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches. Rogers Fund, 41.18
ings were exhibited, first in Liverpool and later in Edinburgh, he suddenly found himself the man of the hour, and when the king himself subscribed to his publication, he found many other customers for the expensive portfolio of plates he proposed to produce. These sales enabled him to keep his family in relative comfort. Audubon lived for several years in Edinburgh while writing his *Ornithological Biography* to accompany the plates, and supported himself by painting oil copies of his drawings. On his return to the United States, in 1831, he was a famous man. Illustrating, writing, financing, and supervising all phases of the publication of his *Birds of America* was a monumental task that kept him busy from the inception of the idea to the issue of the final volume in 1839. About 1841 he bought some land in upper Manhattan along the Hudson River (now Audubon Park), built a house, and spent his remaining years there. He died in 1851.

Audubon's books were very expensive by the standards of his time. The set of *Ornithological Biography*, five stout volumes of text, sold for one hundred dollars; the set of engraved color plates cost a thousand. Today a set of the original edition of these plates is said to be valued between thirty and forty thousand dollars, and certain individual plates, when they are available, command astonishing prices. In recent years plates of the Snowy Heron and Wild Turkey have sold for more than the original price of the whole set.

Audubon worked primarily in water color, painting with freshly killed specimens of the actual birds before him. Some of Audubon's works have nonetheless been criticized by ornithologists because of the distorted positions in which Audubon was forced to put the birds in his desire to show them in their natural size. Audubon used a paper sheet size known as double elephant folio (39 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches), and how he managed to


5. Hawk, attributed to Kano Tsunenobu (1636-1713), Japanese. Ink and colors on silk, 10 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.100.1398d

carry these huge sheets of paper safely through forests and swamps is a mystery. Even this paper, however, could not easily accommodate some of the larger birds without some distortion. Nevertheless, viewed simply as works of art, his solutions to such design problems are always ingenious and graceful, if not always ornithologically correct down to the last feather.

From his water colors the plates for his book were engraved to exactly the same scale, and colored by hand (Figure 6). Most of the engraving was done by Robert Havell, Jr., in London. Audubon also made oil copies of some of the drawings, both before and after the publication of the engravings. Such oils were the only works of his own hand he sold; he held onto his precious water colors, and virtually all of them have since passed into the collections of the New-York Historical Society. The Metropolitan owns one of his oils, of three ivory-billed woodpeckers (Figure 2), acquired from the estate of Francis P. Garvan, to whom it came directly from a member of the Audubon family. Our painting combines a number of features characteristic of Audubon’s work. The birds themselves are handsome creatures, busy and alert. The design is simple but elegant, partly because of the striking contrast of the black and white plumage, but also because of the gracefully asymmetrical composition. On the back, the canvas is inscribed “Painted by J. J. Audubon/Certified by Lucy A. Williams/B. P. Audubon.” The signers were grandchildren of the artist. The inscription is especially significant since the verification of Audubon’s oil copies is complicated by his employment, in 1831, of a young Scottish artist named Joseph Bartolomew Kidd to make such oil copies of his water colors, with landscape backgrounds added. These paintings were to form a natural history gallery in New York called the Ornithological Gallery, which never materialized. Audubon’s granddaughter, in Audubon and His Journals, states that all these copies by Kidd were painted on millboard rather than canvas, but Audubon’s biographer Francis Herrick, in Audubon the Naturalist, says that Kidd worked for three years on this project “and produced numerous pictures on canvas or mill-board.” Perhaps in the case of our picture it is best to accept the certification of Audubon’s grandchildren and the traditional attribution, since there is incontrovertible proof that Audubon himself also painted a number of such oil copies.

The Museum’s painting also has a value as a record of a rapidly vanishing species. Audubon called this bird Picus principalis, but by modern classification it is Campephilus principalis. It may now be extinct. Even before the European hunter appeared with his gun, the Indians used the ivory bill and red topknot of feathers for personal decoration and as highly valued articles of trade. With the clearing of the land in the natural habitat of the species, its favored breeding and feeding grounds have been constantly reduced. If any of these spectacular creatures still exist, they have not been recently reported. A few were seen as late as 1950, living in swampy areas of northern Florida.
Audubon’s bird biographies reflect the unusual character of the man. His sense of the wild beauty of the land and his adventures as a hunter wandering in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys enliven his descriptions. His writing forms a perfect complement to his paintings and shares their individual and highly finished style. He makes such an interesting account of the ivory-billed woodpecker that one would like to quote the whole essay, but the following excerpts will have to suffice:

“I wish it were in my power to present to your mind’s eye the favourite resort of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Would that I could describe the extent of those deep morasses, overshadowed by millions of gigantic dark cypresses, spreading their sturdy moss-covered branches, as if to admonish intruding man to pause and reflect on the many difficulties which he must encounter, should he persist in venturing farther into their almost inaccessible recesses, extending for miles before him, where he should be interrupted by huge projecting branches, here and there the massy trunk of a fallen and decaying tree, and thousands of creeping and twining plants of numberless species! Would that I could represent to you the dangerous nature of the ground, its oozy, spongy, and miry disposition, although covered with a beautiful but treacherous carpeting, composed of the richest mosses, flags, and water-lilies, no sooner receiving the pressure of the foot than it yields and endangers the very life of the adventurer, whilst here and there, as he approaches an opening, that proves merely a lake of black, muddy water, his ear is assailed by the dismal croaking of innumerable frogs, the hissing of serpents, or the bellowing of alligators!

“The flight of this bird is graceful in the extreme, although seldom prolonged to more than a few hundred yards at a time, unless when it has to cross a large river, which it does in deep undulations, opening its wings at first to their full ex-

tent, and nearly closing them to renew the propelling impulse. The transit from one tree to another, even should the distance be as much as a hundred yards, is performed by a single sweep, and the bird appears as if merely swinging itself from the top of the one tree to that of the other, forming an elegantly curved line. It never utters any sound whilst on wing, unless during the love season; but at all other times, no sooner has this bird alighted than its remarkable voice is heard, at almost every leap which it makes, whilst ascending against the upper parts of the trunk of a tree, or its highest branches. Its notes are clear, loud, and yet rather plaintive. They are heard at a considerable distance, perhaps half a mile, and resemble the false high note of a clarionet.

"The Ivory-bill is never seen attacking the corn, or the fruit of the orchards, although it is sometimes observed working upon and chipping off the bark from the belted trees of the newly-cleared plantations. It seldom comes near the ground, but prefers at all times the tops of the tallest trees. Should it, however, discover the half-standing broken shaft of a large dead and rotten tree, it attacks it in such a manner as nearly to demolish it in the course of a few days. I have seen the remains of some of these ancient monarchs of our forest so excavated, and that so singularly, that the tottering fragments of the trunk appeared to be merely supported by the great pile of chips by which its base was surrounded."

Out of disasters and trials that would have discouraged any man less dedicated, Audubon forged success in an occupation regarded by many as at least eccentric if not useless. He had none of the advantages of the modern ornithologist: there were no foundations to grant him money; natural history collections and museums were not numerous; there were no reference books he could refer to and few colleagues with whom to discuss his problems. His teachers and colleagues were the wild creatures he loved, his reference library was the grand book of the American wilderness spread before him.

From the somewhat macabre exhilarations of the young French gentleman-hunter, killing birds for amusement, he transformed himself into an American woodsman as canny and tough as any Indian, and made himself America's most noted ornithologist. Untrained as a scientist, he opened the eyes of scientists. Relentless as a hunter and killer of thousands of birds, he inspired the conservation movement for the preservation of American wildlife. Untrained as an author, writing in a foreign tongue, he produced a series of books that remain after more than a hundred years as readable as they are important. Untrained as a salesman, indeed a conspicuous failure in business, he managed late in life to sell his expensive volumes in sufficient quantity to put him in easy circumstances. And, though untrained as an artist, his powerfully individual illustrations of American birds have won for him a special place in the history of American art. Their vigor and delicacy, their liveliness and carefully planned design give them a timeless air of perpetual freshness and modernity, transforming them from a display of ornithological specimens into works of art.