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Audubon's "The Birds of America": A Sesquicentennial Appreciation

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Audubon's *The Birds of America*: A Sesquicentennial Appreciation

BY DAVID TATHAM

In 1896, James J. Belden (1825–1904) presented to Syracuse University the munificent gift of a complete set of the 435 engravings that constitute John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, along with its accompanying five volumes of *Ornithological Biography*. Belden, a native of nearby Fabius, was a banker who had served as mayor of Syracuse in 1877–78 and as United States congressman from 1887 to 1895. He had been a trustee of Syracuse University since 1872. His gift followed by less than a decade the University's acquisition of the incomparable library of Leopold von Ranke (1887) and the remarkable (and still inadequately studied) Wolff-Leavenworth Collection of prints relating to the history of science (1889). Belden's gift of Audubon's great work marked the culmination of the University's first sustained effort to assemble a library of national distinction.

Audubon had published the engraved prints of his *Birds of America* in groups of five beginning in 1827. The eighty-seventh and final group went out to subscribers in 1838. He had produced the prints in Great Britain, the first few in Edinburgh and the remainder in London. In these cities he had access to presses and papers necessary to his venture but unavailable in the smaller and still provincial graphic arts communities of the United States. During the eleven years of production he repeatedly crossed the Atlantic with portfolios of watercolor drawings he had made in the field. While in Great Britain he closely oversaw their engraving and hand coloring, exhorted his production team to do their best, and then returned to America to record further species.

Each print in the series is Double Elephant Folio in format, or about twenty-six by thirty-eight inches. Audubon required sheets of this size to show such birds as the Wild Turkey and the Bald Eagle life size. The 435 prints portray 1065 birds of 489 species. Each print

carries an engraved legend identifying the bird, the artist, and the printer, but no other text. Audubon's essays on the birds came in the five volumes of his *Ornithological Biography*, published between 1831 and 1839 in octavo format. These essays hold a significant place not only in the literature of natural history but also in American Romanticism. Indeed, Audubon's historical importance is tripartite, resting on his contributions to science and literature as well as art. He quickened the intellectual currents of the 1830s that found in American nature the great Romantic subject of the age.

By any standard, American or European, the costs involved in producing *The Birds of America* were daunting. Audubon scoured the United States, Great Britain, and parts of Europe for subscribers willing to pay two guineas or ten dollars for each installment of prints. He secured 279 of them, but over the dozen years required to complete the project, death, declining fortunes, and other circumstances substantially reduced the subscription list. In the event, Audubon issued only about 200 complete sets of the engravings. Of these, just over 130 survive intact, 90 of them in the United States.

The Syracuse University set of *The Birds of America* is one of the very few put together by Audubon after he had supplied his subscribers. He (or one of his two sons, who were his indispensable associates in this enterprise) sold the set in 1853 to Dr. Haller Nutt of Longwood, near Natchez, Mississippi. Longwood was, and remains, one of the great antebellum plantation houses. There Dr. Nutt had gathered a natural history library that ranked among the most important in the Old South. With the dissolution of this library in the 1890s, the Nutt set of *The Birds of America* and its companion volumes of *Ornithological Biography* found their way to the antiquarian department of Brentano's book shop in New York, where Belden purchased them in 1896 and soon after presented them to his university.

Audubon's achievements have been so widely and justly praised from his lifetime to the present that it is sometimes forgotten that the idea for an encyclopedic illustrated study of North American avian life was not original with him. A good start on such a project had been made by the English naturalist Mark Catesby with the publication in London, beginning in 1727, of his *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*. Catesby depicted 102 species of American birds (with other flora and fauna) on 100 engraved plates.

North American birds remained a subject of keen interest to European naturalists throughout the eighteenth century, since the New World offered many species unknown to the Old. But only in the first decade of the nineteenth century was an attempt made to record these birds comprehensively. This task was undertaken by Alexander Wilson, a Scottish weaver, poet, and social reformer, who emigrated to Philadelphia and with the encouragement of the botanist John Bartram and the artist-naturalist Charles Willson Peale, became a naturalist.

Though long overshadowed by Audubon's accomplishments, Wilson's achievements as a naturalist and writer were considerable. He was an important model for his younger and more audacious competitor. Wilson's *American Ornithology* appeared in nine volumes between 1808 and 1814, the last volume issued posthumously and the project left incomplete. He crowded more than 200 birds into 76 engraved plates, portraying them with scant naturalism. His limitations as an artist almost certainly motivated Audubon to excel him grandly in this respect with depictions of birds in flight, in combat, and nearly always in active relation to their environment. Wilson had financed his *Ornithology* through subscriptions, and Audubon needed to persuade some of his own subscribers that his venture would not merely repeat his predecessor's work. The two men knew each other. They met first when Wilson sought to add Audubon, then a relatively unknown young man, to his subscription list. Audubon declined, saying that he intended to publish a competing work. This was but one of the many rebuffs Wilson encountered in his struggle to bring his *Ornithology* to print. Even now, his text is too little noticed as an early example of American nature taken as a Romantic subject. Bad luck dogged him. Later editions of his work were expunged of their most interesting passages in a misguided attempt to make his text seem more scientifically objective. The George Arents Research Library owns a set of the original Wilson as well as part of Catesby's *Natural History*.

Catesby, Wilson, and Audubon viewed themselves as men of science for whom art was a tool rather than an end in itself. Their interest in American birds, and their readers' interest as well, extended beyond the boundaries of science, however. Birds, perhaps more than any other form of life, were perceived to be sources of ever-changing beauty to both the eye and the ear. In their free flight

they were nature's symbols of liberty, and these two words—nature and liberty—carried powerful meanings in the century that spanned Catesby and Audubon. And what more fitting home for such symbols than a continent still (in the 1820s) largely pristine in its natural setting, one in which had been founded a new Republic on the idea of liberty. Further, in an age that saw nature as the greatest of teachers, birds presented instructive and cautionary parallels for humans in the nurturing of their young, in their industry, valor, vanity, gluttony, and the like.

Most such associations in the engravings by Audubon's contemporaries register only faintly on present-day viewers. Audubon's art, on the other hand, has retained its powers to engage minds and feelings. His engravings still transmit the excited sense of wonder that he first brought to the task. This is the basis for a demand for his work that far exceeds the supply. Nearly all of the original watercolors for his *Birds of America* have been owned by the New-York Historical Society since the nineteenth century. Most of his other original works have also gravitated to museum collections. Only his engravings come regularly to sale, and this supply is fed by the dismantling of sets. The steadily increasing prices realized at auction for single engravings from *The Birds of America* has made precious objects of them. The intrinsic worth of an intact set is not monetary, however, but historical, intellectual, educational, and aesthetic.

The Syracuse University set has one special distinction—its state of preservation. Despite decades in Mississippi humidity and more than half a century in less than ideal circumstances in the University's Carnegie Library, the Syracuse set reached the mid-1980s in good condition. Still, it suffered from problems inherent in the papers, inks, pigments, pastes, and other materials used to make the plates. In 1984–85, Cathleen Baker, now Professor of Paper Conservation at the State University of New York College at Buffalo, thoroughly examined and conserved the set. She also traced its history, plate by plate, from printing in Great Britain through every stage of its itinerary in the United States. She established Haller Nutt as the original owner. Her study, cast in part as a thesis for the M.A. in Fine Arts, was awarded the Graduate School Prize in 1985.¹ If the

1. Cathleen Baker, "Audubon's *Birds of America*: A Technical Examination and Condition Survey of the Four Volume Folio Set Belonging to Syracuse University" (M.F.A. thesis, Syracuse University, 1985).

Syracuse set is not now the best documented and best conserved of all those still in existence, it has few peers.

In recent years the Syracuse *Birds of America* has served students in such fields as art history, printmaking, papermaking, rare books, bibliography, museum studies, the history of science, American Romanticism, and art conservation. We may confidently assume that in the coming century and a half it will serve many other fields as well.