The bird in natural history : before, during, & after Audubon.

Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983

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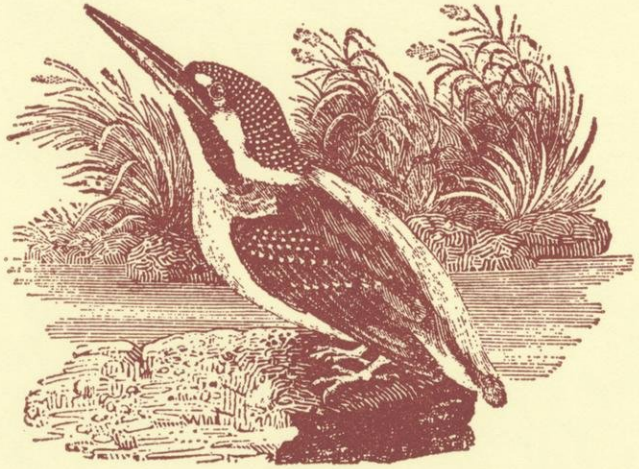


An Exhibition Organized by
Robert A. McCabe & Katherine Harper Mead

December 6, 1981 - January 24, 1982

Elvehjem Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Silver Buckle Press · 1983

Cover illustration:

JOHN GOULD & H. C. RICHTER. *Lady Amherst's Pheasant*. Hand-colored lithograph. Pl. 20, Vol. 7, John Gould, *The Birds of Asia*, 1853-1880.

Title page illustration:

THOMAS BEWICK, Kingfisher. Wood engraving. Page 14, Vol. 2, *History of British Birds*, 1804.

Dedication

This limited edition is dedicated to the memory of Katherine Harper Mead, director of the Elvehjem Museum of Art from January 1981 to July 1, 1983.

Mrs. Mead served as catalyst for the exhibition outlined in these pages. She worked closely with the author in the selection of the works to be exhibited & arranged for the production of the offset and fine press editions of the catalogue.

Katherine Mead will be remembered by her University of Wisconsin-Madison colleagues and members of the community as a person of vitality and enthusiasm. During her brief tenure as director, she became at once the strength and the articulate voice of the Elvehjem. Her interest in art was as sensitive and perceptive as it was cosmopolitan. She set high standards for herself & her staff, and she worked relentlessly to make the Elvehjem a comprehensive resource.

Katherine Harper Mead, 54, died in an automobile accident near Manitowoc, Wisconsin on July 1, 1983.

Foreword

The alliance between art and science is an ancient one. For Pliny the Elder, who wrote in the first century A.D., art was a part of natural history. For the artists of the Renaissance, for Leonardo, for Dürer, art was the mirror of nature, and the skill displayed in a drawing of the human anatomy or the fur of a rabbit was placed as much in the service of knowledge as it was in the service of beauty. For the nineteenth century, for Ruskin, "Truth to Nature" acted as a moral imperative to art.

In the last hundred years the challenges from the avant-garde to the concept of art as the representation of nature, while radically altering many of the directions of art, have in no way affected the art of the naturalist-artist. Although the importance of habitat, for example, or the impact of photography have brought changes to the portrayals by the modern naturalist-artist, his concern for accuracy is similar to the one inspiring Edward Lear more than a century ago.

This exhibition and catalogue pay homage to the union of art and natural history in the form of one of its more ravishing and seductive products — the image of the bird. Keystone to the exhibition is a representative group of ornithological books dating from the late Renaissance to the early twentieth century, which have been selected from the far broader context of the Chester Thordarson Collection, a remarkable collection of illustrated, scientific books in the Rare Book Department of the Memorial Library. It was the shared desire of the Library, the Elvehjem Museum of Art, and the Department of Wildlife Ecology to make this collection, one of the treasures of the Madison campus, known to a wider public than the Rare Book Department could accommodate. At the same time, in order to make its presentation of the bird in

natural history more complete, the exhibition has included additional, unbound illustrations from other collections, public and private, as well as examples in various media by artists more recent than those represented in the Thordarson Collection.

Corollary to this exhibition of fine and rare books is the hand-printed, limited edition of the catalogue produced by the Silver Buckle Press. The publication was never intended to catalogue the entire exhibition. Its goals were more modest — to record the books on loan to the Elvehjem from the Rare Book Department and to tell the story of the bird in natural history from the point of view of a naturalist long familiar with birds and the art devoted to them.

Katherine Harper Mead
Director, Elvehjem Museum of Art

Preface:
The Chester Thordarson Collection

Most of the books included in the exhibition *The Bird in Natural History: Before, During, and After Audubon* came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1946 with the purchase of the book collection of Chester Thordarson, Chicago electrical engineer. At that time it was one of the largest collections of early works on science and technology in private hands; it was, and remains, the largest book collection (some 11,000 volumes) the University has ever acquired, and its acquisition set a precedent for the purchase of source materials in the humanities and the sciences that has since had a major impact on historical research not only at UW-Madison but also statewide. The purchase of Thordarson's books led directly to the establishment of the Rare Book Department in the Memorial Library, and subsequently to the acquisition of several important supplemental collections, so that today the University Library is one of the major resources in the country for the study of the history of science.

Chester Thordarson's biography has many elements of the American legend. An immigrant from Iceland at the age of five, he settled with his family first near Madison, then moved on to the richer lands of the Dakotas. At eighteen, still uneducated, Thordarson went to Chicago to seek an education and his fortune. He put himself through the seventh grade in Chicago public schools, then went to work in an electrical firm. "I was twenty-seven years old," he stated in an interview, "and I had saved seventy-five dollars when I decided to go into business for myself. I gave up my job, got married, and started the business all at the same time—and all on the seventy-five dollars. . . . Today our sales run into millions of dol-

lars." He manufactured not only his own electrical inventions, but also the machines he used to make the inventions. It was not all immediate success, of course, but in the end he became a very rich man. "There was," he said, "hard work and what I call good deportment. Good deportment includes a number of things, but briefly it means doing right by all the people with whom you deal. We pay the best wages the business can afford, and we try to treat one another in such manner that in this building we may meet with pleasure."

Very early he became a book collector. He recalled his early days in Chicago when he was living on four dollars a week: "I paid two dollars a week for my room and breakfast. I walked to work. That left me one dollar each week for other meals, which consisted of stuff bought mostly at bakeries. One dollar remained. With that I bought books."

At first he collected books on his native Iceland, but it was not long before his collecting interests centered on the history of English science and technology. As his fortune grew, he began to collect in earnest, with the guidance of J. Christian Bay, Librarian of the John Crerar Library. The collection became vast and included many of the most fundamental and rarest books in physics, chemistry, alchemy, zoology, botany, scientific travels, scientific illustration, technology, agriculture, surveying, building arts, cooking, medicine, and cultural history.

Natural history was one of Thordarson's early enthusiasms. The ornithological works exhibited here are only a small part of the enormous number of books on natural history that he assembled in his lifetime. Ornithology was second only to his love for botany. From the relatively crude woodcuts of Aldrovandus and Willughby to the magnificent folio plates of Audubon and Gould and the charm of Catesby's drawings, Thordarson's collection of bird

books contains some of the finest examples of illustrated books ever produced.

Thordarson's early concern for the conservation of land and wildlife was one of the reasons cited by University of Wisconsin President Glenn Frank in 1929 for awarding him an honorary degree. He had purchased Rock Island in Lake Michigan off the tip of Door County because it reminded him of his native Iceland (the island is now a state park); there he built an estate which he used as a vacation retreat for both himself and his employees and there moved his entire library. Thordarson died in 1945. In his will he stipulated that the University be given the first option to purchase his collection, which, through considerable efforts on the part of Gilbert Doane, then University Librarian, and A. W. Peterson, Director of Business and Finance, was finally accomplished a year later.

Ever since their acquisition by the University, Thordarson's books have served several generations of scholars and book lovers. The present exhibition emphasizes aspects of the collection that also appealed strongly to the man who assembled these books: the book as a means of both scientific and popular study of nature and the book as a work of art.

John Neu
History-of-Science Librarian
Memorial Library

Introduction

The Thordarson collection of ornithological books, many here displayed, provides a vehicle for examining the representation of birds from the time of the birth of ornithology in the work of Francis Willughby (1678) to the period of photolithography at the turn of the century (1900). Paintings of some more recent artists are included in the exhibition to provide an additional sounding board, as it were, and to extend appreciation of the portrayal of birds in natural history into our own time.

In the period covered by the Thordarson collection, i.e., from the late Renaissance to the early 20th century, portraits of birds started first as line drawings (woodcuts and engravings), then developed as colored lithographs, and expanded with time and reluctant acceptance to enlarged and meaningful foregrounds and backgrounds in which the birds were placed. If these settings were appreciated and understood, the birds they included gave the painting credibility and character. If the artist was skillful, subtle artistic exaggeration of the bird or the setting could be accomplished without doing harm to either. Indeed some of the most dramatic paintings do just that.

Rarely will two persons viewing the same painting of a bird or any other piece of art react in the same way. Personal experiences, education, family background, and peer associates play a role in how the mind interprets what the eye provides. An artist may be concerned with composition, color, use of medium, mood created, and expression when he observes another artist's painting of a bird, or a painting that includes birds. A naturalist, on the other hand, will be concerned with the accurate portrayal of both habitat and bird anatomy, as well as with the behavioral action depicted. When a naturalist can taste the salt on his lips while

viewing a scene of oceanic birds, smell the heather in a red grouse picture, or hear the scream of an agitated eagle from its portrait, he relates to the art of his hobby or profession.

Historically, graphic art was perhaps the first step that our earliest ancestors took toward what today is referred to as civilization. It even preceded a language and the written word. The Abbé Breuil, in his exploration of French and Spanish caves in the 1920s, uncovered wall drawings of animals, including birds, from the paleolithic era. These simple representations predate the more sophisticated drawings of ancient Egypt or the well-turned sculpture of Assyria.

The widely heralded artistry of the Gramaldi man of the upper Paleolithic era in the cave at Lascaux in France depicts, among other drawings, a wounded bison attacking the hunter. In that same action picture, almost forgotten in the drama, is the drawing of a bird. It is perhaps the first bird drawing, fashioned almost 100,000 B.C. Birds as part of murals or depicted in flocks were occasionally part of cave art for thousands of years.

In the ageless periods of antiquity when the depiction of birds first took wing, hunter-artists had only crude instruments. Nonetheless, they portrayed birds and beasts of the field with an insight and reverence that could only have been nurtured by constant observation of animal behavior and a knowledge of the physical structure of their quarry. This association is not unlike the one today's naturalists strive for. The close relationship between hunter and the hunted experienced by our forebears, however, was prompted in the main by gastronomy rather than a contribution to culture.

It would be an arduous task to follow the checkered development of bird painting from cave art, to the crypt paintings of Egypt, through Greek and Roman history into the Middle Ages

and beyond. In particular, such an exercise would not be germane to this exhibit.

Bird illustration accompanied the evolution of printing in the Renaissance. Rendered with more imagination than realism, these early illustrations awed or horrified the reader with exaggerated avian anatomy. Raptorial birds such as hawks and eagles were emblazoned on heraldic devices and coats of arms when these personal advertisements were in vogue. At that time also, these flesh-eating birds were coveted for falconry where the capture of live prey by trained raptors was a sporting event. Artists of the day did not fail to record royalty engaged in the sport of falconry and at the same time to glorify or woo a patron.

It was during the age of exploration that the representation of birds began in the 18th century to gain genuine credibility. The nations of Europe that possessed great fleets sailed their ships to new and unexplored areas of the globe in search of trade routes and wealth through conquest. Later, naturalists and artists, accompanying exploratory expeditions, articulated much of the biological inventory in this course of empire. For example: William Swainson was the naturalist on Henry Koster's second expedition to Brazil in 1816. Titian Ramsey Peale was the artist on William Maclure's expedition to the east coast of Florida in 1818; Claude Wilmott Wyatt joined the British Science Expedition as its ornithologist in 1869. Even as late as 1899 the contemporary American artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, was the bird artist on the Harriman Alaska Expedition.

Birds in the form of prepared skins or drawings were no small part of the riches claimed by sovereignty. The often bizarre form and garish color of new-found birds excited the wealthy who thus became enlisted subscribers, patrons, or sponsors, and who engaged the artists to illustrate these new species in great detail

and vivid color. Elegantly bound books on birds resulted. To possess such a book and see birds in resplendent plumage was in itself a status symbol of the privileged class, and the cultural amenity associated with the wedding of art and ornithology only trickled down to the common man. Indeed, illustrated bird books for the public at large were not available until about 1900 when color reproduction became relatively inexpensive and plates for books or for framing could be reproduced quickly and, therefore, cheaply.

Perhaps the inauguration of the era of serious bird artistry occurred when Hans Sloane (1660-1753), an English medical doctor and naturalist, became a patron of artist-naturalists like Mark Catesby (1683-1749) and George Edwards (1694-1773). Sloane's generosity and foresight set the stage for the private support of artists. Individual patrons were not uncommon in Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries, but as the cost of colored reproductions increased and demand grew, multiple sponsors were solicited. A single collection of bird paintings, with an often anemic text, had as many as a hundred contributors attracted primarily by the beautiful artwork. An affluent Britain was able to accelerate the growth of bird drawings at a time when exploration and growth of empire produced birds new to science. Had England been a poor country, this aspect of enlightenment might have been delayed or, in many respects, lost.

It has been said that art and science (in this case ornithology) have more in common with each other than they have with other branches of human endeavor. The acme of bird art occurred in the mid-19th century when many skilled artists were available to record the new species, a plethora of which were gaily colored and exotic in form. Also, many of the artists were ornithologists (or vice-versa) who took pride in combining their art and science.

The hub of this graphic art form was in England with her far-flung empire; her civil servants, merchants, army officers, and medical doctors provided the specimens and data on natural history to be catalogued and made part of the scientific literature and art of world culture. Indeed, many skilled bird artists of Europe were lured to London, the British Museum then being the world center for ornithology.

Often the artist who drew and painted the bird was his own engraver or lithographer as well, but usually a drawing in color by the artist was turned over to a skilled copier who made the transfer to copper or stone, sometimes adding background or foreground trappings. Several artists, including such notables as John Gould (1804-1881) and Henry Leonard Meyer (1798-1865), married other artists who became lithographers for their husbands' drawings, in addition to raising a family. Children of some artists who took kindly to art colored the lithographed drawings, making the effort a family affair.

Duplication during the mid-19th century was mostly accomplished by lithography, a process whereby an original drawing was copied in reverse on a porous limestone block. C. E. Jackson described the process as follows:

> The process is based on the principle of the antipathy of grease to water. The lithographic stone has a natural affinity for grease so the image is drawn by the artist on the stone, in reverse (so that when the paper is pressed onto the surface face down, the image would transfer with the design the right way round) with greasy lithographic chalk or ink. This drawing will attract the oily ink used in printing. The rest of the stone is etched with a gum arabic and nitric solution. The acid opens the pores of the stone and allows both the gum and grease to enter. The gum arabic surrounds the greasy portions and repels water, and it also prevents the grease from spreading and blurring the

image. In printing, the stone is dampened, the gum arabic repels the water and a film of printing ink adheres to the greasy drawing. The paper is pressed onto the face of the stone and the ink is transferred to the paper.

In order to transfer drawings evenly from stone to paper, a hand press and ultimately a machine press was required. The transferred drawings were then colored by hand to match the artist's original colored model. Eventually lithotint was developed to provide the first color printing with limited use of color. Full chromolithography followed, but these techniques ultimately gave way to today's photolithography. Whether the sophistication of modern color reproduction captures the charm and vivid likeness of birds compared with the hand-colored plates of earlier lithography is a question that can be resolved only by those who have seen both.

The early bird artists had to be precise draftsmen whether or not their birds were portrayed in accurate anatomical structure or position. Thus, the blurring of wings in the flight of hummingbirds, sometimes used in modern bird painting, and the impressionistic portrayal of birds or of their body parts were not even considered when exactness was required for identification of newly discovered birds. Almost every bird artist attempted to keep each part of the illustrated bird in clear focus. Strong shadowing with shades and hues of color was employed with great caution. It was not until chromolithography and photolithography were widely used that artists exercised more freedom in the use of shadow and interplay of habitat on bird color and attitude. It was not always possible, however, to be precise in avian feather structure. Mark Catesby's ivory-billed woodpecker, for example, shows breast and abdominal feathering similar to the pelage of a mammal because the barbs on the edges of the contour feathers

appear hairlike. In that same illustration the tail feathers are turned atypically sideward in an effort to show the gross feather morphology. Eleazer Albin (c. 1713-1759), on the other hand, attempts, as seen in his gaudy portrait of a turkey, to outline each feather and part of the bird that he saw or imagined.

In order to understand bird art, it is necessary to know the *modus operandi* of the artist. The basic differences among artists lay not only in skill and training but also in experience with the birds portrayed. Although some artists like Gould and John Gerrard Keulemans (1842-1912) were widely travelled, many artists worked indoors with caged birds, dead birds, or bird skins shipped from remote corners of the world. Some artists, on the other hand, took great pride in field skills and observation at a time when binoculars, cameras, and strobe flash were not even on the drawing boards. Artists like Josef Wolf (1820-1899), who insisted on field study, were able to meld their birds into proper habitats and lifelike composition as opposed to the beautiful but somewhat flat renditions produced by Keulemans and Edward Lear (1812-1888).

In the progress from the earliest crude woodcuts of Belon (1517-1564) and Ulysses Aldrovandus (1522-1605) depicting birds on stumps, hummocks, and out-of-proportion branches, birds have gradually been given the backgrounds and habitats that show them at home. In more recent times (1700s-1800s), sponsors and scientists, relying on accurate and detailed portrayal, caused artists to minimize habitat in their paintings in order to focus attention on the bird itself. Those artists who painted largely for identifications, such as William Swainson (1789-1855), Gould, working in the mid-1800s, and Henrik Gronvold (1858-1940), may rightly be called bird illustrators. Each would doubtless have been capable of bird-in-habitat paintings had such been expected or demanded

of them. Other painters, who also relied on lithography, worked as much habitat material into their illustrations as seemed prudent to the objective of the effort or the charge of a commission. Audubon, Wolf, and Keulemans were of this group. It was George Edward Lodge (1860-1953) and Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935) in the period of chromo and photolithography in the late 1800s and early 1900s who included meaningful habitat settings for the birds they painted. Even the diminutive songbirds were properly staged, particularly by Thorburn. In large measure they bridged the period between hand-colored lithographic and modern color photographic techniques in which settings play as important a role as do the birds themselves. Indeed the habitats in contemporary bird art have given life to birds and focused on the ecology depicted instead of on the techniques of feather structure, sheen, or eye highlighting.

In America Mark Catesby (1683-1749) predated Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) and John James Audubon (1785-1851) and gave us the first illustrations of American birds. Since Catesby was an accomplished botanist, he placed his birds among plants associated with the bird in question, a technique of composition few artists attempted to emulate. Wilson made the first attempt to produce an illustrated book on American ornithology; in this effort he was eminently successful. As works of art, his plates are less than inspiring, but as to individual bird illustration, his paintings are strong and vibrant, varying from the primitive to the precise. His plates combined odd combinations of birds, each numbered to be identified in a legend at the bottom of the plate after the system used by English artist Selby. Although overshadowed by Audubon, Wilson may rightfully be regarded as the father of American ornithology.

Audubon followed Wilson with his now famous double

elephant folio portraits of American birds. These 435 copper plate engravings reproduced on broad sheet paper (39-½ x 29-½ inches) were hand-colored. This flamboyant style, using lifesize reproduction after the fashion of Lear, captured the interest of art patrons in England before America responded. Whether these paintings and accompanying scientific text dampened the enthusiasm for further comparable efforts in bird art is difficult to say. Certainly the post-Audubon period in America was very lean in bird drawings and paintings.

Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) along with Abbot Thayer (1849-1921) and his son, Gerald Thayer, partially filled the post-Audubon void. They were not, however, outstanding as bird artists, although each used birds in his paintings. Heade was primarily a landscape painter with a particular interest in hummingbirds. He painted these delicate birds against a backdrop of misty tropical settings where the greenery and colorful flowers and dark backgrounds overwhelmed his beloved hummingbirds. The Thayers were well-schooled artists in a classical sense and were preoccupied with the phenomenon of cryptic coloration and camouflage. The running argument between the Thayers and President Theodore Roosevelt on the subject of concealing coloration in the animal kingdom is as well known as any of their paintings. The basic difference (although not the only one) was whether sombre color or varied high contrast coloration, as postulated by Gerald Thayer, provided the better protection against predators or concealment from prey. The charges and counter charges were often bitter, involved, and for the protagonists, unresolved. Birds played no small part in the paintings that supported the Thayer thesis.

A new awakening to bird art began with the stimulating and spirited work of Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927), the ornithologist-artist. Fuertes, born in Ithaca, New York, was a self-trained

ornithologist who was encouraged in his bird art and bird study by the eminent ornithologist Eliott Coues. He traveled widely and enjoyed many commissions. In this writer's opinion, Fuertes was the most successful bird painter who ever plied his art to render motionless the living beauty of birds. His use of draftsmanship, color, form, and composition was superb. Most important of all, he captured the essence and ecological context of the birds and their habitats. His portraits are never sterile and, moreover, do not have to rely on bright color or large size to be enjoyed. The backgrounds in his paintings do not dominate his birds but are more than adequate to do justice to the environment.

In the mold of Fuertes there grew a cadre of fine bird artists. Among them was George M. Sutton, a pupil of Fuertes who, like his mentor, produced both illustrations and full habitat paintings of high quality.

It would be difficult in this era of burgeoning bird artists to name all the outstanding painters. The floodtide of talent occurred during the first half of the 20th century. At the expense of causing an undeserved omission, the following bird painters must be recognized: Roger T. Peterson, Allan Brooks, Sir Peter Scott, Ernest T. Seton, Walter Weber, Walter Breckenridge, Edward Kalmbach, O. J. Murie, Owen Gromme, Francis L. Jaques, H. Albert Hochbaum, Robert Gillmor, T. M. Short, Chas. Tunnicliffe, A. Menaboni, C. W. Schwartz, Arthur Singer, Richard Bishop, Robert Mengel, R. Bruce Horsfall, and D. Eckelberry.

From 1950 to present there has been a virtual eruption of bird painters of varying skill, but most are good, some are excellent, and others truly outstanding.

In the last ten years, bird portraiture, apart from regional bird books, has given way to bird pictures with detailed habitat settings and action composition. Raptorial birds and game species

have been most popular, and artists are marketing color reproductions to capture this new trend led primarily by sportsmen, birdwatchers, printshops, and commercial collectors.

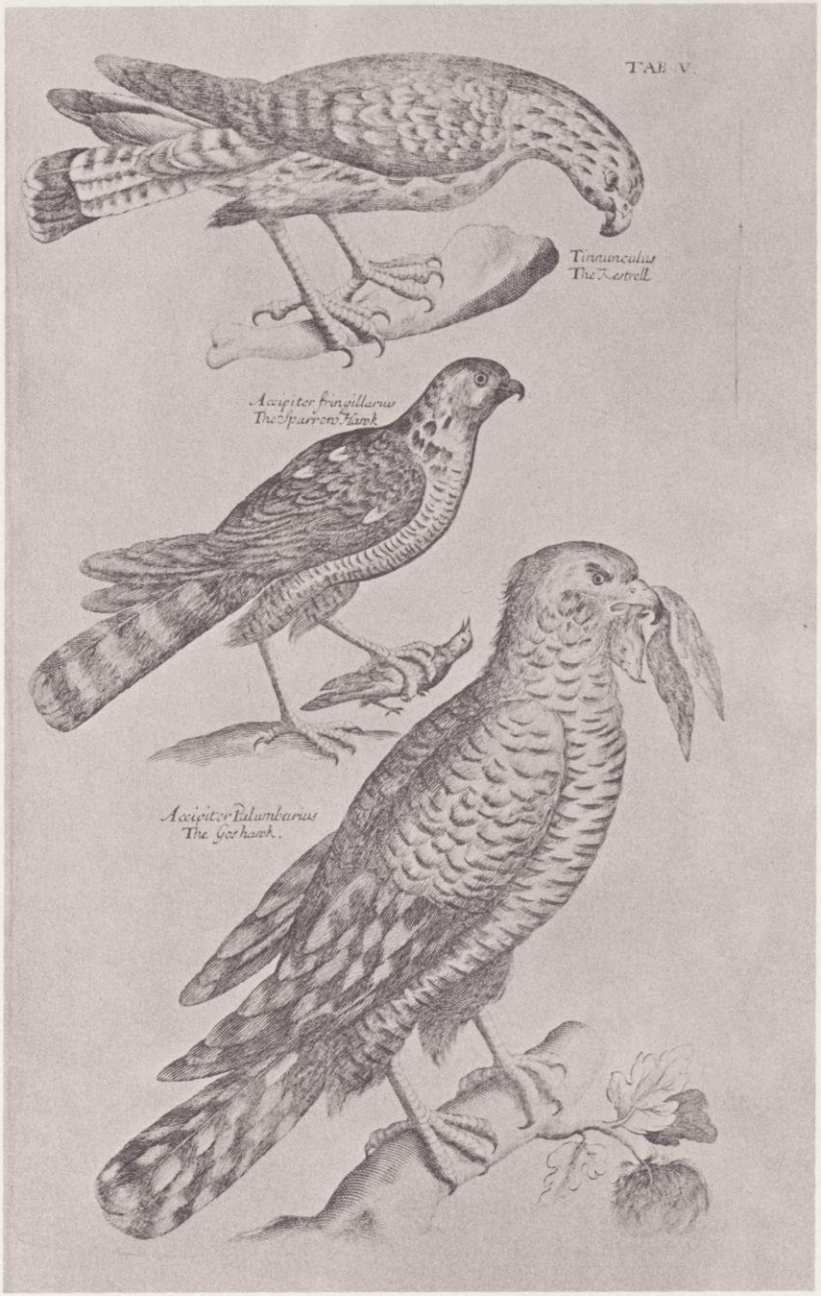
Thus we have come full cycle. Today's original bird paintings of quality are affordable only for the wealthy as were the hand-colored lithographs of Gould and engravings of Audubon. At the same time, however, technology in color reproduction has put the beauty of bird paintings into the hands and homes of people of modest means. In addition, art galleries and museums provide an opportunity to view a spectrum of prints and drawings of birds, an opportunity not always available in the 19th century. National and state competition, moreover, for the painting or drawing reproduced on the annual waterfowl stamps, has become a mark of recognition. As a result of these and other recent trends, both the artists and viewers are becoming more acutely aware of artistry devoted to birds.

Robert A. McCabe
Professor of Wildlife Ecology

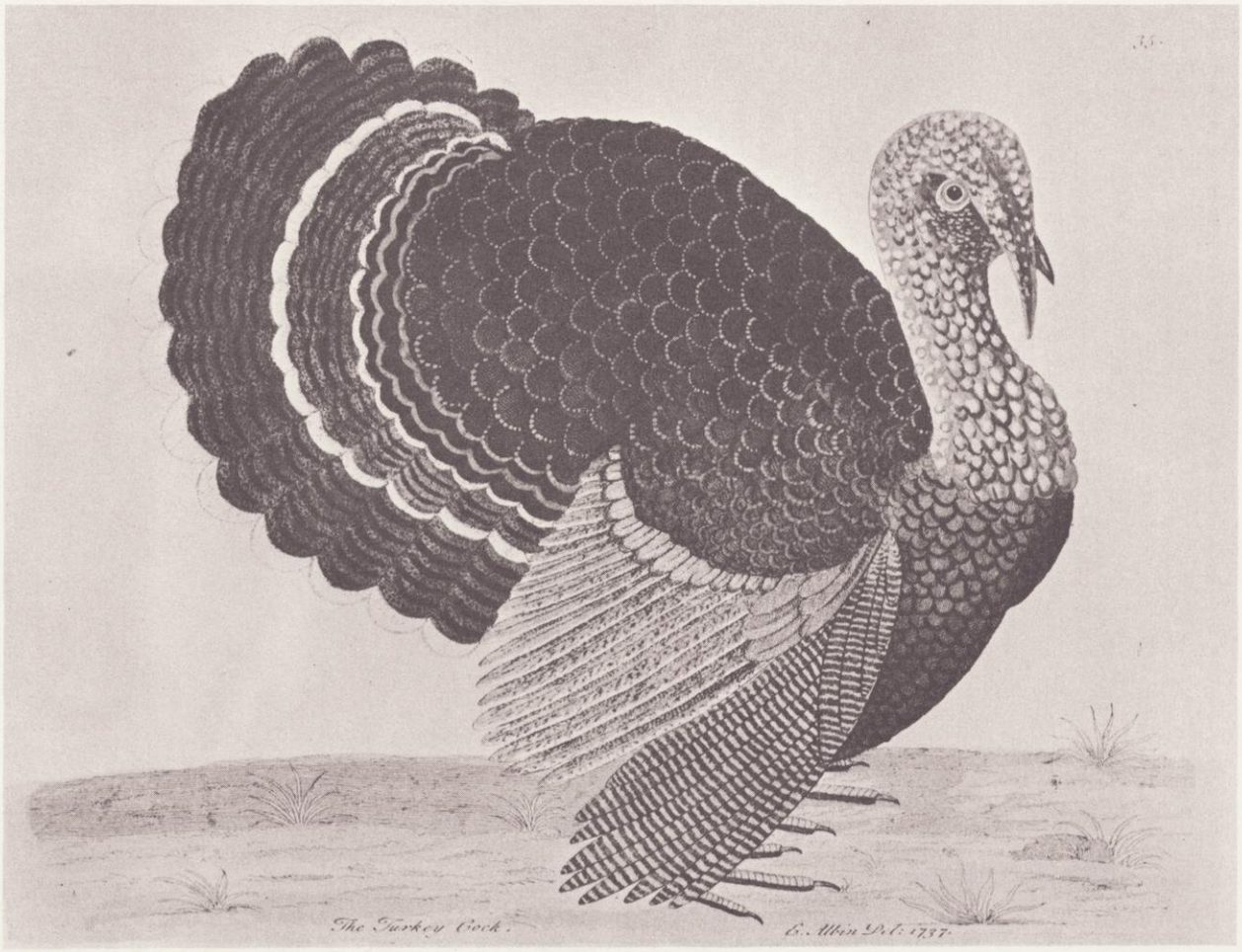
The Bird in Natural History:

Before, During, & After Audubon

Christoforo Coriolano (engraver). *Goshawk*. Woodcut. Chapter 2, Book 5, Ulysses Aldrovandus, *Ornithologiae*, 1599-1603.

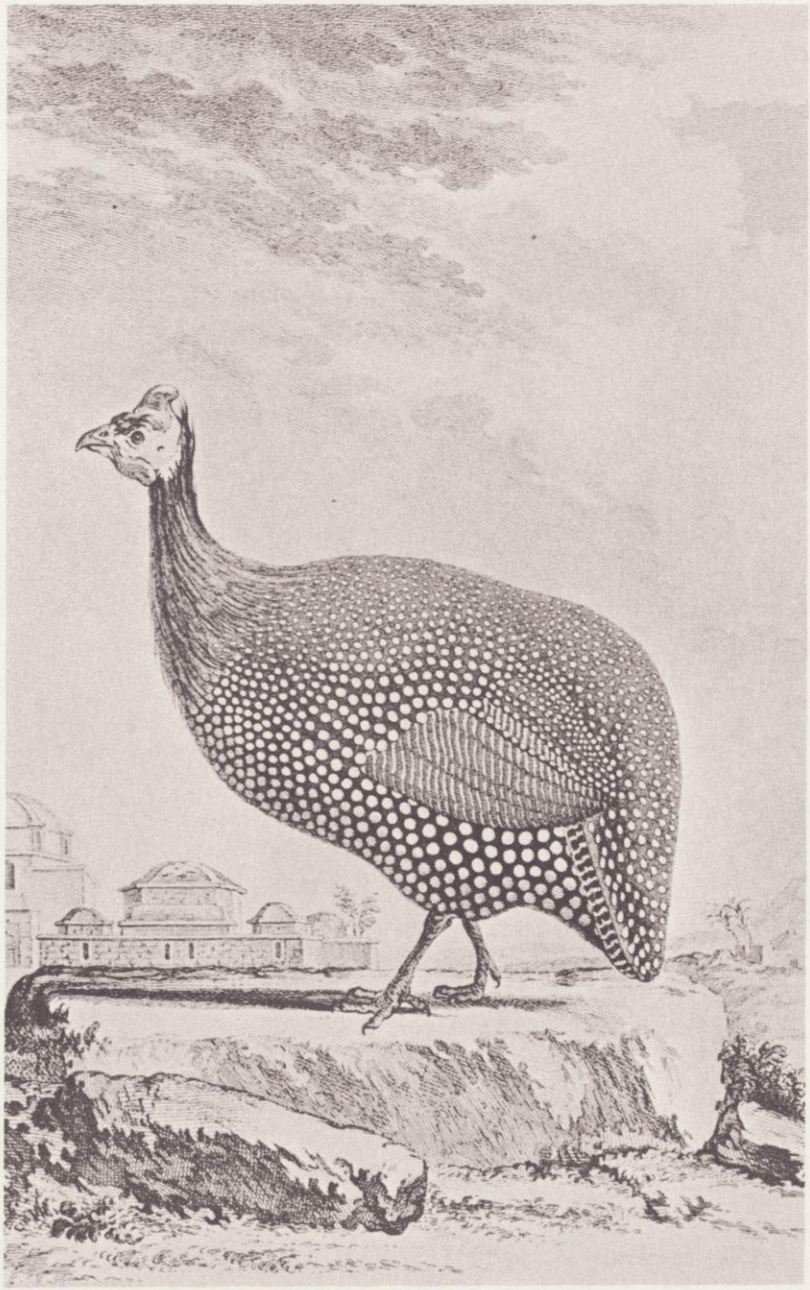


FRANCIS WILLUGHBY. *The Goshawk.* Engraving. Pl. 5, *Ornithologiae Libri Tres,* 1676.

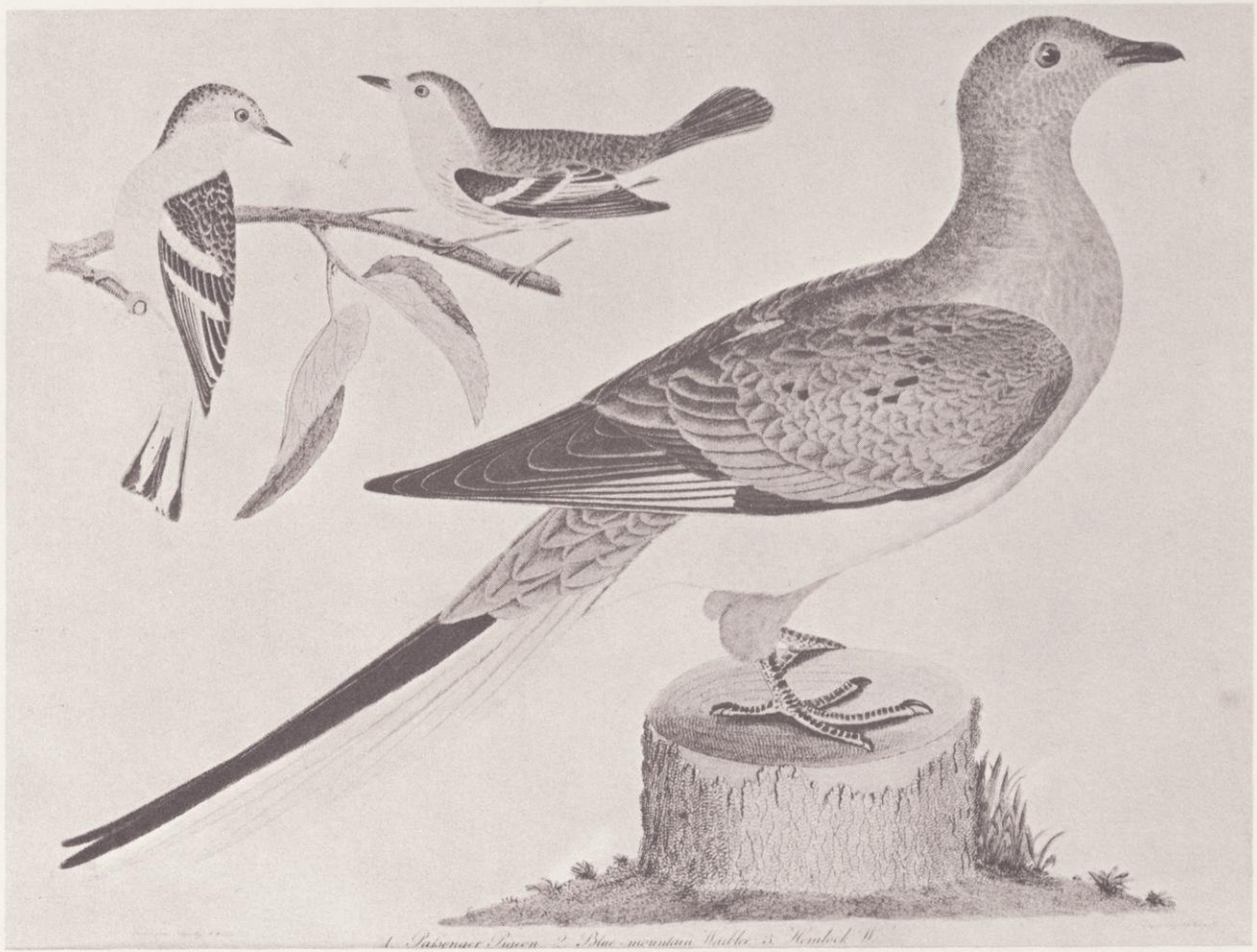


ELEAZAR ALBIN. *The Turkey Cock,* 1737. Hand-colored etching. Pl. 35, Vol. 3, *A Natural History of Birds,* 1731-1738.

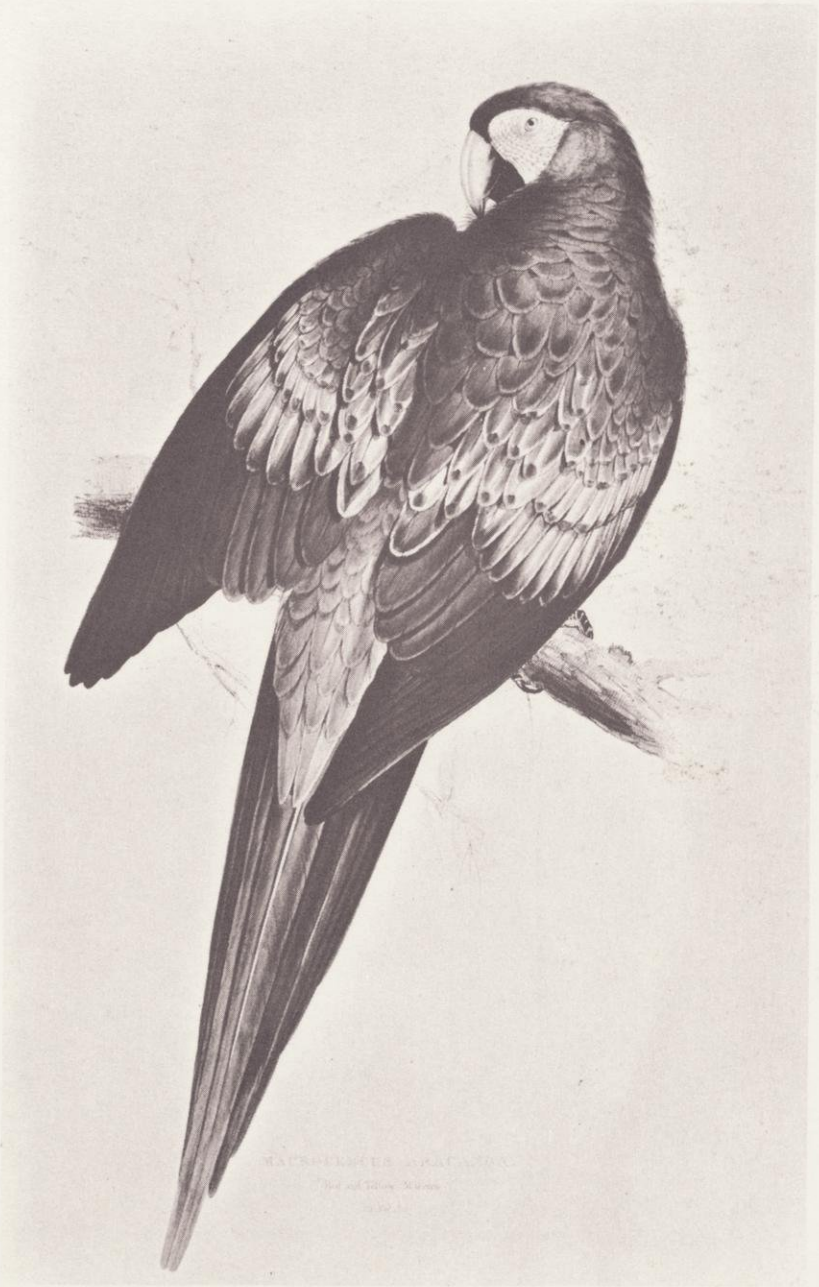
MARK CATESBY. *The Largest White-Bill Woodpecker* (The Ivory Billed Woodpecker). Hand-colored etching. Pl. 16, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands,* 1754.



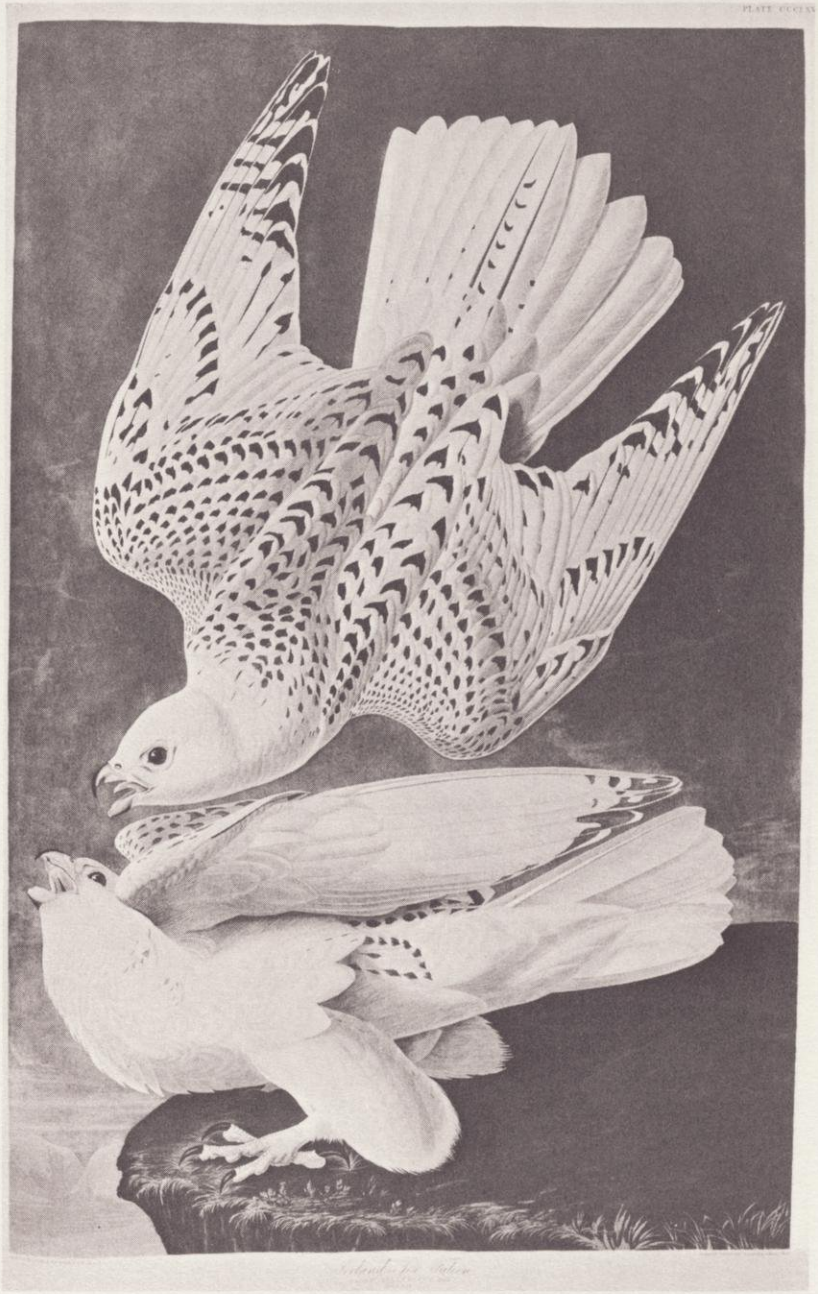
J. DE SEVE. *The Guinea Hen.* Engraving and etching. Pl. 4, Vol. 2, George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux,* 1770-1783.



ALEXANDER WILSON. *Hemlock Warbler (Blackburnian Warbler),* left; *Blue Mountain Warbler* (as yet not satisfactorily identified with any known species), center; and *Passenger Pigeon,* right. Hand-colored engraving and etching. Figs. 1-2, Pl. 54, Vol. 5, *American Ornithology,* 1808-1825.



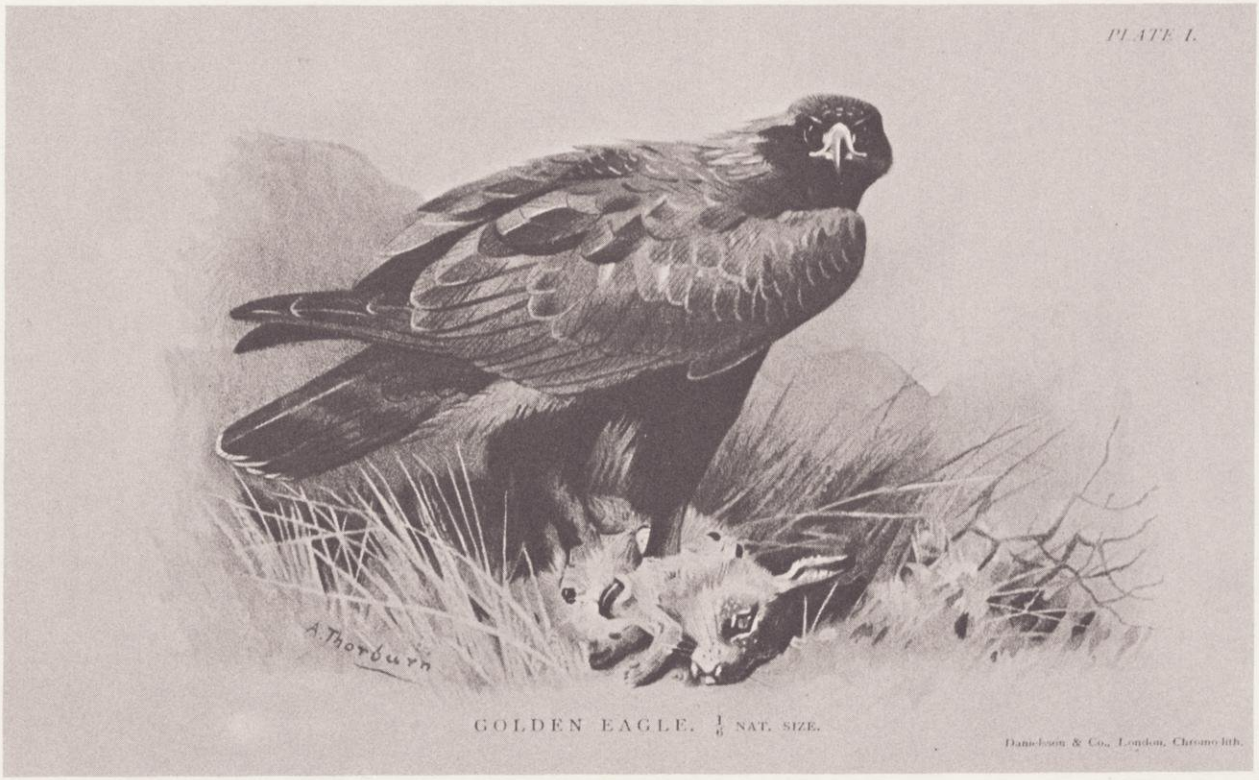
EDWARD LEAR. *Red and Yellow Macaw*. Hand-colored lithograph. *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae or Parrots*, 1832.



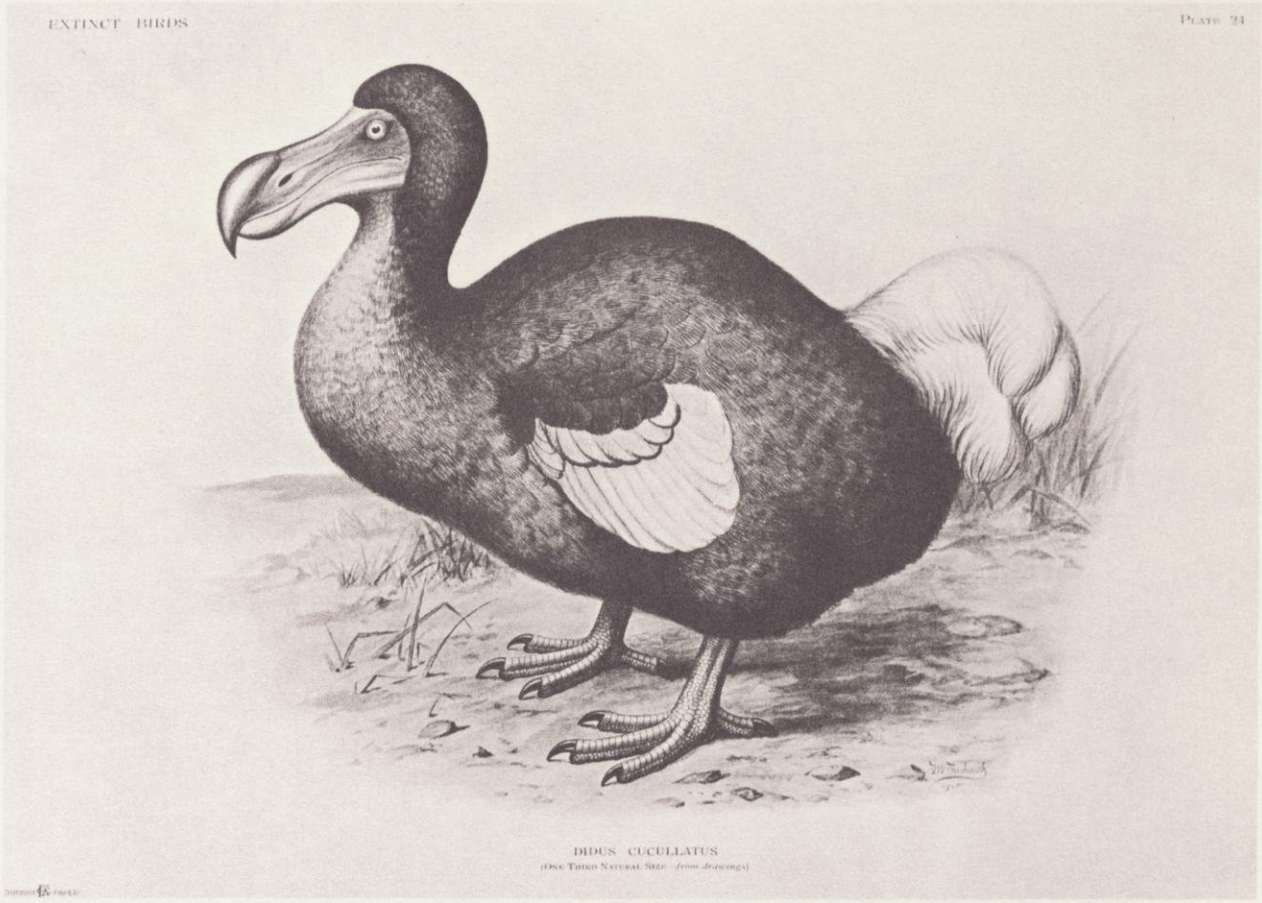
JOHN JAMES AUDUBON. *Iceland or Jer Falcon* (Gyrfalcon) 1837. Hand-colored engraving and aquatint. Engraved and colored by Robert Havell [Jr.]. Pl. 366, Vol. 4, *The Birds of America,* 1827-38.

JOHN GOULD & H. C. RICHTER. *Toco Toucan.* Hand-colored lithograph. Pl. 1, John Gould, *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae or Family of Toucans,* 1854.

JOSEF WOLF & JOSEPH SMITH. *Marquis de Raggi's Bird of Paradise.* Hand-colored lithograph. Pl. 3, Daniel Giraud Elliot, *A Monograph of the Paradiseidae or Birds of Paradise,* 1873.



ARCHIBALD THORBURN. *Golden Eagle.* Color lithograph. Pl. 1, W. H. Hudson, *British Birds,* 1895.



FREDERICK WILLIAM FROHAWK. *The Dodo.* Color photolithograph. Pl. 24, Walter Rothschild, *Extinct Birds,* 1907.

Notes on selected artists represented in the Thordarson Collection

by Robert A. McCabe

Eleazer Albin (circa 1713-1759)

Virtually nothing is known of this artist's early life except that he was a teacher of drawing who could have benefited from additional lessons himself. He engraved his birds on copper plates and with his daughter Elizabeth provided the sometimes uneven hand-coloring. He was primitive as an artist, and his plates display more charm than accurate portrayal. Although he had a substantial sponsorship for his *magnum opus, A Natural History of Birds* (1731-1738), Albin could not claim to be a scientific ornithologist.

Albin was, as he claimed to be, a naturalist fascinated by the form and color of insects, flowers, and birds, and always drew from life.

Alexander Wilson (1766-1813)

Wilson, the poet-artist turned ornithologist, is, in the minds of most, America's pioneer ornithologist. A vain, self-taught artist with more energy than skill, he developed the idea for his great work, *American Ornithology* (1808-1825), by studying the works of other bird artists in the library of the great naturalist William Bartram. Like many artists of the time, he traveled afield to capture the feeling for his subjects in their natural environments. The culmination of this effort was to be covered in the eleven volumes on which he worked with great zeal from 1808 to his death in 1813; seven volumes were published when he died. Ultimately, nine volumes were completed with the assistance of George Ord with whom Wilson traveled on his last trips afield.

Although his drawings were well executed and attractively colored, he had to rely on others to engrave his plates. The backgrounds for the plates are often weak or nonexistent. He sometimes crowded his plates with odd combinations of birds, usually num-

bered on the plate in the manner of the English artist P.J. Selby His drawings improved markedly over time with the result that the plates in *American Ornithology* vary in quality. Wilson's interaction with Audubon was not discussed in any detail by either artist, and thus it may be inferred that it was not cordial. In spite of Audubon's greater renown, Wilson is considered by most ornithologists to be the father of American ornithology — artistry aside.

Wilson was involved with many of the people in the mainstream of public life, including President Jefferson who claimed him as a friend. The life of this restless, tireless man reads like an adventure novel with avian overtones. Although his "ornithology" was the driving force in his life, he never abandoned poetry.

John James Audubon (1785-1851)

The life of this artist, apart from his paintings, is the story of striving and failure. He was no businessman, farmer, miller, or shopkeeper. In his wanderings from place to place, his artist's tools were active, and his portfolio of bird paintings grew accordingly.

Although he lacked rigorous training in the fundamentals of graphic art, he attempted to make his drawings lifelike by supporting the dead subjects with wires. This ploy resulted in the sometimes awkward positions rendered in the final painting. One astute critic listed three persistent types of failure: (1) a poor understanding of the avian eye and face; (2) an unfamiliarity with the position that birds assume; and (3) a deficient knowledge of the mechanics of flight. A fourth failure explained at length, although not listed so by the critic, is the use of eye and "facial" expressions of humans in situations soliciting horror, determination, chivalry, filial love, etc.

In the pre-ethology (i.e., study of bird behavior) period, these facial expressions and postures allowed viewers to relate to the emotion that accompanied the depicted action. Perhaps Audubon believed that his subjects were capable of responding with human reaction.

In spite of his shortcomings, Audubon was skilled in the drawing of detail and drew the texture of feathers with deft precision. Audubon's best work was probably done before 1835 when the pressures to paint *all* the birds of America had not yet developed. His composition is regarded by some as pleasing and harmonious, and his graphic art as superb. Certainly the plates engraved by Robert Havell and Son for the double elephant folio publication of *The Birds of America* (1827-1838) have played an important role in establishing Audubon's reputation.

It is not only bird paintings that have given stature and a kind of immortality to Audubon, it is the man himself. Self-made as an artist, surmounting failure, indefatigable, with a flair for painting outdoors, a flamboyant charisma, and dedicated perseverance, Audubon simply would not accept any mantle except that of greatness. This buckskin Rembrandt set the standard until the early 1900s for bird painting. That standard, however, since exceeded, no longer convinces some interested in birds or in bird art.

William Swainson (1789-1855)

Swainson was one of the first ornithologist-artists to use lithography to reproduce his paintings. Because he was willing to change from metal and wood engraving to lithography, he was forced to repeat some of his drawings several times as the reproduction technique was imperfect. Swainson the artist persisted and, in time and with improvement in the reproductive process, became

a competent lithographer. Many of his paintings were autolithographed, and he produced some of the first hand-colored lithographs for bird books.

As an outdoorsman and traveler he collected and preserved many zoological specimens. His first love, however, was ornithology and on an expedition to Brazil he managed to collect specimens that ultimately resulted in a three-volume account, *Zoological Illustrations* (1820-1823), containing 70 autolithographs of birds.

Dr. John Richardson spent seven summers and five winters in the Arctic as naturalist on Sir John Franklin's two land expeditions into northern North America. The data gathered on birds were Richardson's but Swainson catalogued the birds and drew 49 lithographs that were colored by hand. The birds in *Fauna Boreali-Americana* (1831) are nicely finished although devoid of background and lacking in vitality. The larger birds are particularly handsome, and colors on all the illustrations are bright and accurately distributed. Accompanying the text of Volume II of *Fauna Boreali-Americana* is a series of heads of birds reproduced by woodcuts that offer no enlightenment in natural history or identification.

Henry Leonard Meyer (1798-1865)

Meyer was a trained artist whose efforts were shared by his entire family. Mrs. Meyer, like Mrs. Gould, not only drew birds and sketched for the reproductions under the Meyer name, but was also an accomplished lithographer. The six Meyer children (except for Victor, the youngest) were artistic, particularly Charles and Constance; each had a major role in the exquisite hand-coloring of the lithographs.

Meyer was by avocation a naturalist, and his drawings, therefore, were rendered more real and alive than any previous portraits of birds. Unfortunately, as was the case in most early paintings of birds, the habitats are simple and add no depth or mood to the painting. The family was concerned primarily with the artistry, and there is only a modicum of natural history to accompany the otherwise outstanding plates. Perhaps the most distinguishing quality of the Meyer paintings is the astute use of color, although the attitudes of the birds are also valued for their lifelike quality and their fidelity to the characteristics of the bird.

It is surprising that the Meyers had so few commissions for illustrating major bird books. In only three publications by H. L. Meyer, the family contributed 751 hand-colored plates. The fine illustrations in these volumes are virtually forgotten in the deluge of colored plates on birds that were produced before and after the Meyer contribution.

John Gould (1804-1881)

A man of humble beginnings, Gould started his life as a bird artist by becoming a taxidermist and, at his death, was the most prolific European illustrator of birds. Gould was born in Lyme Regis, Dorset, England. His ornithology came through on-the-job training and contact with the work of others. An aggressive business man, his first financial success, engineered by himself, was the book *A Century of Birds . . . From the Himalaya Mountains* (1831). He and his wife, Elizabeth, produced the plates of birds from the hill-country of India and N. A. Vigors supplied the text. From this beginning he produced over 3200 plates of birds in his lifetime, all hand-colored, life-sized lithographs. Much of the credit for the beautiful plates in his name was due his wife, Elizabeth Coxen Gould, also an artist and lithographer.

Gould was not liked by fellow artists. He was brusque, self-centered, an unreliable returner of borrowed specimens, and not averse to putting his name to plates of hired artists. His success also was due to devoted field assistants and a procession of excellent lithographers: E. C. Gould, Edward Lear, H. C. Richter, W. Hart, B. W. Hawkins, and Josef Wolf. Critics regard Gould's *The Birds of Great Britain* (1862-1873) as his best effort largely because of fine habitat settings. The chicks, eggs, and nests were often added to the main subjects in attitudes that made them more lifelike than in previous plates.

There is a uniformity in his paintings that has been referred to as the *Gouldian formula.* In brief, most of his paintings have these aspects in common: (1) birds perched on a tree or the ground; (2) fairly well delineated foregrounds, including plants and terrain; (3) lightly sketched backgrounds; and (4) a pale blue sky. While this repetition implies lack of imagination, other bird artists of this time often used the Gouldian formula.

Gould relished being called "The Bird Man." Yet he was only one of the galaxy of great bird artists of the mid-19th century when Victorian affluence made patronage possible, painting profitable, and garret studios no requisite for brilliance.

There will always be some concern about the contribution Gould's staff of artists have made to his prodigious output. Certainly H. C. Richter, Lear, Wolf, and Mrs. Gould played no small part since they sometimes worked from rough sketches. Much laudatory comment has been given these sketches as providing the vitality of Gould's art. The same could be said of other artists with equal emphasis. Charles Tunnicliffe was surely equal, if not superior, in his sketches. Whatever else may be said of Gould, he was the premier producer of the elegant folio-size bird books of the Victorian lithographic era in bird painting.

Edward Lear (1812-1888)

Edward Lear was a bird painter turned landscapist who enjoyed the patronage of four generations of Earls of Derby. This family of animal lovers gave him commissions to paint the birds of their menagerie at Knowsley, and in later life he and his paintings were always welcomed at the Derby estate.

He is perhaps best known for his paintings of parrots in a volume entitled *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae* (1830-1832). He excelled as a zoological draftsman. His drawings were very precise and showed taxonomic differences among the birds he drew. In addition, he was a skilled lithographer and worked with Gould on several of the latter's major works for which he received minimal credit. Gould learned much from Lear, particularly the use of folio sheets to produce life-size likenesses of colorful birds.

Lear was a clever and amusing man who wrote limericks and nonsense verse to amuse the Derby family children. When poor eyesight forced him away from detailed drafting, he turned to landscape painting — mainly scenes from Italy and the Mediterranean area. The landscapes, although much appreciated by connoisseurs and art historians, in this writer's opinion are for the most part pedestrian and belie his earlier skill as a bird painter.

Josef Wolf (1820-1899)

The artist Wolf was born on his father's farm near Coblenz, Germany where he began painting and drawing as a young man. Farming was not his calling, and his artistic talents were soon made known to the elite of Germany's ornithologists. He emigrated to England to avoid being drafted into the army. Wolf's first

employment was as a lithographer. Both his early paintings and lithographs lacked animation, and his backgrounds were weak and added little to his paintings. His first major work was illustrating Gray's *The Genera of Birds* (1849) for which he provided 345 lithotints, 11 colored lithographs, and 59 monochrome plates. Wolf used a pale tint (wash) as the background color, giving the colored birds a special perspective. Gould and Wolf worked together but Wolf did not regard Gould highly as a person. Of particular interest is the excellent work Wolf did on the birds of prey for Gould's *The Birds of Great Britain.* Unlike Gould, he never overcolored his birds and always tried to avoid the sameness that characterized Gould's scheme for presenting his birds.

The key characteristic of Wolf's birds is that they appear live and active; to see them on paper is like looking out of a window into their lives. This trait is based on a Wolf dictum: "We see distinctly only what we know thoroughly."

John Gerrard Keulemans (1842-1912)

Keulemans, a Dutchman, was another continental artist lured to England by the British Zoological Society and the British Museum. Colorful bird books describing new birds or showing the beauty of form and color in a single taxonomic group of birds were in vogue when he arrived in London in 1869. Thus Keulemans' first important contribution was the illustrations for Dr. Richard Bowdler Sharpe's *Monograph of the Kingfishers* (1868-1871). These two men were closely associated for over thirty years as scientist and artist.

Keulemans' drawings were uniformly of high quality, but they changed little in style from the beginning to the end of his career. He was in his time sought after by virtually every orni-

thologist who wrote a book on birds. While his bird drawings demonstrated great exactness, the habitats for his birds were often inadequate by comparison. As a lithographer he also excelled, frequently drawing directly on stone. Most of his prints were colored by hand and only a few were chromolithographed. Although he had wide geographic experience, he drew most of his birds indoors from preserved specimens. Occasionally he lithographed for other artists (e.g., Wolf's pheasant drawings in Elliot's *Monograph of the Phasianidae*).

Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935)

Archibald Thorburn, born in Midlothian, Scotland, was the son of a painter (Robert Thorburn). His training as an artist came from St. John's Wood School of Art in London. Birds of the British Isles claimed most of his attention, and his best known works among ornithologists are the illustrations in his four volumes on *British Birds* (1915). The set is better known for the plates than for the text. Thorburn's hallmark in bird illustration was to keep closely related species on a given plate rather than to accommodate the plate size with odd combinations of birds. He was a sound technician and his detail and texture of plumage were excellent. His portraits of large raptorial birds are particularly striking with habitats showing the remote and wild places characteristic of his subjects. Thorburn entered the print market where large numbers of his pictures were reproduced and sold — a practice current among many bird artists today. He and G. E. Lodge could have been cut from the same bolt of cloth as regards their painting style.

It is sometimes overlooked that Thorburn was an accomplished wood engraver. Close examination will reveal that his effort in this art form challenges that of Thomas Bewick.

George Edward Lodge (1860-1953)

George E. Lodge was a British artist who was especially skilled in oil painting and wood engraving, although the latter technique was not his main forte. Like Thorburn, he placed his birds in exciting backgrounds that often depicted a dramatic aspect of the bird's life. He was regarded without peer in the painting of birds of prey. It is regrettable that he was born thirty years too late for folio size reproductions of his large paintings of falcons, since these would have been truly magnificent. Lodge had the same flair for realism that characterized the work of Josef Wolf. His paintings pay close attention to details and are almost photographic in their likeness. His ability to achieve a lifelike composition was due in part to his skill as a taxidermist which gave him a feel for body structure and feather texture.

He was not an illustrator of many ornithological works, but produced a considerable number of plates for the books that he illustrated, e.g., 421 plates for Lilford's *Coloured Figures of the Birds of the British Islands* (1885-1898) and 600 plates for Mathew's *The Birds of Australia* (1910-1925).

It is said that he was less successful with his painting of small birds, but only an extremely discerning eye could, at best, be mildly critical.

Frederick William Frohawk (1861-1946)

The artist-lithographer Frohawk was one of the lesser known English luminaries during the hey-day of bird painting. Born in Norfolk, he began his career as a painter of insects and birds for a variety of books and periodicals. Frohawk's first major commission was to produce 60 hand-colored lithographs for Butler's *For-*

eign Finches in Captivity (1894-96). This led to a second commission with Butler for his *Birds with their Nests and Eggs* (1896-98) for which Frohawk produced 318 plates in monochrome. His international exposure came when Sergius Alpheraky asked Frohawk to produce 24 chromolithographs to accompany the text of his book on old world geese entitled *The Geese of Europe and Asia* (1905). The goose portraits are crisp and distinct, but the backgrounds are weak and muted, which makes the well-executed birds appear pasted on rather than painted in. The frontispiece could have been omitted since Frohawk obviously knew little of what geese look like in flight and, painting without that knowledge, he produced an amateurish scene.

Frohawk's chromolithographs in Tegetmeier's *Pheasants for Coverts and Aviaries* (1873) are also strong portraits on weak backgrounds. C. E. Jackson claims that his paintings ". . . deserve much more attention than they have hitherto received." If so, I fail to see why, either as art or natural history.

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