SOFTWARE & TECH

The Birds Of America John James Audubon

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The Enduring Legacy of John James Audubon and The Birds of America

In the annals of natural history and art, few works command as much reverence and fascination as **The Birds of America** by John James Audubon. This monumental collection, a breathtaking fusion of scientific observation and artistic genius, stands as a timeless testament to one man's obsessive pursuit of documenting the avian life of a young, untamed continent. More than just a book, it is an artifact of exploration, a masterpiece of printmaking, and an indispensable record of species that have since vanished. For collectors, ornithologists, and art lovers alike, the name **The Birds of America John James Audubon**evokes a sense of wonder, a connection to a wild America that existed before industrialization reshaped its landscapes. This article delves into the life of its creator, the monumental effort behind its creation, the sheer scale of its ambition, and the enduring legacy that continues to influence how we see and understand birds today.

Who Was John James Audubon? The Man Behind the Magnum Opus

To truly appreciate **The Birds of America John James Audubon**, one must first understand the man who willed it into existence. Born Jean-Jacques Audubon in 1785 in Haiti (then Saint-Domingue), he was the illegitimate son of a French sea captain and a Creole chambermaid. Raised in France, he developed a passion for nature, art, and particularly birds from a very young age. His formal education was sporadic, but his self-taught skills in drawing and observation were sharp from the start.

In 1803, at the age of 18, Audubon was sent to the United States to avoid conscription in the Napoleonic Wars. Settling on a family-owned farm near Philadelphia, he embarked on a life that was forever torn between business and his true calling. He tried various entrepreneurial ventures—a lead mine, a general store, a gristmill—but each ultimately failed. His wife, Lucy Bakewell Audubon, was often the steady financial and emotional anchor while Audubon pursued his consuming passion: wandering the American frontier, shooting birds, and drawing them with a lifelike intensity never before seen.

What set Audubon apart from his contemporaries, like the more scientifically rigid Alexander Wilson, was his romantic and dramatic approach. He did not simply depict birds in stiff, profile poses. Instead, he painted them in dynamic, often life-threatening action—hunting, feeding their young, or fighting. He insisted on showing birds at true life-size, which would become a defining—and nearly impossible—challenge for the printing of his work. This relentless drive to capture the "soul" of the bird, combined with his incredible skill as a watercolorist, laid the foundation for his masterpiece.

The Herculean Task of Creating The Birds of America

The creation of **The Birds of America John James Audubon**is a story of sheer determination against overwhelming odds. After years of accumulating hundreds of detailed watercolors, Audubon realized that no

American publisher could handle the scale or expense of his proposed project. In 1826, he sailed for England, a country he believed would appreciate his artistic ambition. He was right.

In Liverpool and then Edinburgh, Audubon was a sensation. His wild appearance—long hair, frontier clothes, and an air of untamed nature—made him a celebrity. More importantly, his paintings astounded the British public and scientific community. He secured a subscription-based model to fund the publication, with subscribers paying in installments for what would become a series of 87 hand-colored engraved plates, issued in sets of five, over a period of 11 years (1827 to 1838).

The printing process itself was a marvel of its time. Audubon chose the "double elephant folio" format, the largest paper size available, measuring roughly 39.5 inches by 28.5 inches. This was a non-negotiable requirement so that he could depict every bird, including the wild turkey, the great blue heron, and the bald eagle, at its true-life size. The copperplate engravings were executed by master engravers like Robert Havell Jr. in London, who translated Audubon's rich watercolors into black-and-white etchings, which were then painstakingly hand-colored by a team of colorists. The result was a work of immense physical presence and extraordinary artistic detail. Only around 200 complete sets of the "Double Elephant Folio" are believed to have been produced, making original copies among the most valuable books in the world today.

The Art and Science of Audubon's Plates

What is it about the individual plates in **The Birds of America John James Audubon**that continues to captivate us? It is the revolutionary combination of scientific accuracy and dramatic composition. Prior to Audubon, bird illustrations often felt lifeless, like specimens pinned to a board. Audubon changed that narrative forever.

Dynamic Poses and Behavior: Audubon was a keen field observer, and he did not shy away from depicting the brutal realities of nature. His famous plate of the "Mockingbird" shows two birds fiercely defending their nest from a rattlesnake. The "Golden Eagle" swoops in to feast on a freshly killed hare. These were not just illustrations; they were narrative scenes filled with tension and vitality. This "action painting" approach was his signature and a radical departure from the static illustrations of his predecessors.

Life-Size Accuracy: As mentioned, the scale of the folio was driven by a dedication to representing birds at 1:1 ratio. This was an incredible challenge, particularly for larger birds. For example, the "Wild Turkey" plate requires the viewer to hold the massive book at arm's length to fully appreciate the bird's imposing stature. This insistence on scale gives the viewer a profound sense of the bird's actual presence in the wild.

Botanical and Environmental Context: Audubon did not just paint the bird; he painted its habitat. He meticulously incorporated the plants, flowers, and even the landscapes where he found his subjects. These backgrounds are not merely decorative. They are scientifically valuable, often showing the preferred food sources and nesting habitats of the species. This holistic approach, combining ornithology with botany, added a rich layer of depth to the work that continues to be studied by ecologists and environmental historians.

The Enduring Impact on Ornithology and Conservation

The legacy of **The Birds of America John James Audubon** extends far beyond the realm of fine art. It is a foundational document of American ornithology. Audubon identified and named 25 new species and numerous subspecies during his travels, including the familiar "Audubon's Warbler" and "Audubon's Oriole." His detailed notes, published in the accompanying text titled *Ornithological Biography*, remain a valuable source of information about bird behavior, migration patterns, and population densities in the early 19th century.

However, the work also serves as a haunting elegy for a wilderness that was rapidly disappearing. Several species depicted in the folio are now extinct, most famously the **Passenger Pigeon**. Audubon once described a flock of these birds that took three days to pass overhead, darkening the sky. It is a chilling document of the

staggering abundance of American wildlife at that time, an abundance that was decimated by the very forces of expansion and market hunting that Audubon, in some ways, romanticized. This paradox is central to understanding the complex figure of Audubon.

Today, the National Audubon Society, named in his honor, is one of the most prominent bird conservation organizations in the world. While the modern society grapples with the problematic aspects of Audubon's legacy—his participation in slavery and his controversial scientific methods involving killing vast numbers of birds—his work remains a powerful tool for conservation. Seeing the "Ivory-billed Woodpecker," a species likely extinct, rendered so vividly in his plates makes its loss feel deeply personal. The book serves as a powerful reminder of what has been lost and what must be protected.

Collecting and the Value of a First Edition

The world of rare books and art collecting has always held **The Birds of America John James Audubon** in the highest esteem. Original copies of the double elephant folio are among the most coveted and expensive books ever printed. When a complete set comes to auction, it typically commands prices in the millions of dollars. Several factors contribute to this staggering value:

- Extreme Rarity: As noted, only about 200 complete sets were ever compiled. Many have been broken up over the centuries, with individual plates sold as high-end art. A still-bound, complete set is an extraordinary find.
- Historical Significance: It is a time capsule of a young America, a masterpiece of both art and natural science from a pivotal period in history.
- Artistic Merit: The scale, the vibrant hand-coloring, and the dramatic artistry of the compositions are unparalleled.
- Provenance: Copies that were owned by famous figures or that have a well-documented history fetch even higher prices.

For those who cannot afford an original folio, there are many ways to appreciate Audubon's work. Later editions, such as the "Octavo" edition (1840-1844) which was a smaller, more affordable version, are still highly collectible and beautifully produced. Modern facsimiles and high-quality prints allow a new generation to experience the incredible detail of his art. The allure of owning a piece of this legacy continues to drive a vibrant market for Audubon-related material.

How to Experience The Birds of America Today

You do not need to be a millionaire to experience the wonder of **The Birds of America John James Audubon**. Many public institutions hold copies and often display them in special exhibitions. Here are some of the best places to see Audubon's work in person:

- New-York Historical Society: Home to all 435 of Audubon's original preparatory watercolors for the Birds of America. This collection is a national treasure and offers an unparalleled view of his creative process.
- The Audubon Museum at Henderson, Kentucky: Located at John James Audubon State Park, this museum houses a significant collection of his work and personal artifacts.
- The Museum of Science and Art in Edinburgh: The National Library of Scotland and other institutions often have exhibitions related to the printing of the book in their city.
- Harvard University and The University of Michigan: Both hold complete sets that are occasionally open for public view by appointment.

In addition, numerous online resources have digitized the entire folio. The University of Pittsburgh's "Audubon's Birds of America" website provides high-resolution scans of every plate, allowing you to zoom in and appreciate the delicate brushwork and the intricate details of every feather. These digital archives are a fantastic resource for students, artists, and admirers worldwide.

Conclusion: An Eternal Flyover of the American Soul

The Birds of America by John James Audubon is a breathtaking journey across the American continent as it existed in the early 19th century. It is the product of an obsessive, flawed, and brilliant man who dedicated his life to capturing the fleeting beauty of the natural world. While we now view his methods of collecting—shooting dozens of birds for a single study—with a modern conservationist's discomfort, the result of his work is an irreplaceable record that has awakened generations to the incredible avian diversity of North America. From the majestic bald eagle to the tiny ruby-throated hummingbird, Audubon gave these creatures a permanence on the page that defies time. His work remains a cornerstone of American art, a landmark of natural history, and a poignant reminder of the wild, feathered heritage we are entrusted to protect. To open a folio of **The Birds of America** is to look through a window into a lost world, and to be invited on an eternal flight of wonder.

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