

ART REVIEW

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Fine feathered friend

Audubon's passion for birds now on vivid display

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | August 20, 2010

NEW BEDFORD — At a glance, it's not hard to see what's going on in plate 116 of John James Audubon's four-volume magnum opus, "Birds of America." A snake is attacking the nest of a ferruginous thrush, or *turdus rufus*, and the fluttering family of said *turdus rufus* doesn't like it one bit.

On the other hand, don't take my word for it. Here's Audubon himself narrating the action: The male thrush, he explains, "exerts all his powers to extricate his beloved mate from the coils of the vile snake which has already nearly deprived her of life. Another male of the same species, answering the call of despair from his 'fellow creature,' comes swiftly downwards to rescue the sufferers. With open bill he is already preparing to strike a vengeful blow at the reptile, his bright eye glancing hatred at his foe. See a third grappling with the snake, and with all of its might tearing the skin from its body!"

The author goes on in a similar vein, his prose oscillating charmingly between mauve and bright purple. What's amazing is that you look back at the image and find that it's all . . . *exactly* . . . as he describes it!

It's nothing short of marvelous.

Audubon's illustrations of birds scarcely need an introduction. First presented to an admiring public in the 1820s and '30s, they remain to this day the most famous images of birds in the world.

From afar — or in the context of a quick flip through an Audubon book — it's easy to be lulled by their guise of meticulous objectivity, their conscientious attention to detail. They're images that belong, after all, to a tradition of ornithological illustrations going back to the 16th century.

But when you actually look at them, you can't help getting caught up in the extraordinary passion and excitement they convey. This excitement was Audubon's signal contribution to the genre of ornithological illustration, and it had repercussions that went way beyond bird-watching.

Audubon's approach melded the disinterested spirit of scientific inquiry (the product of the 18th-century Enlightenment) with a new, Romantic sensibility. The result was an early manifestation of an engaged, at times passionate, spirit of inquiry to which today's environmental scientists are heirs — an approach that seeks to banish superstition and ignorance even as it proselytizes on its subjects' behalf.

In a text, for instance, that accompanies Audubon's beautiful illustration of a glossy, blue-black American crow perched on the branches of a walnut tree, he mounts a spirited defense of the poor crow. Against the popular image of this loathed creature ("He who sees a crow sees his end," as the old saying goes), he describes a shy, useful, grub-eating, courageous but put-upon bird, whose numbers have been decimated by superstitious, trigger-happy men.

Mind you, Audubon could be trigger-happy himself, and he was by no means free from vanity. "In dealing with Audubon," wrote the critic Robert Hughes, "one must realize, right off, that he was not a nice guy. He was self-inflated, paranoid, and a bit of a thug. He jeered bitterly at the good work of rivals, or, worse, claimed it as his own."

"Taking Flight! The Birds of John James Audubon From the Collection of the New Bedford Free Public Library" is a rather special exhibition. On the ground floor of the New Bedford Art Museum, it displays 60 hand-painted double elephant folio engravings from the New Bedford Free Public Library's collection of Audubon's "Birds of America."

"Double elephant folio" is no joke: These images — about 40 by 30 inches — were the biggest available in Audubon's

day, allowing him to depict his subjects life-size. (Ever the entrepreneur, he subsequently made a second set of smaller, more affordable prints.) Since they're hand-painted, the plumage of the birds and the details of their habitat are spectacularly vivid.

The collection was a gift to the library by New Bedford whaling merchant James Arnold back in 1866. Arnold knew Audubon well, and was an early subscriber to "Birds," which was published serially, in 87 parts of five prints each. But since then, Arnold's gift has mostly languished in storage, largely because of the delicate nature of the watercolors.

The prints would not look nearly as fresh as they do were it not for the exhaustive restoration efforts of a team headed by project conservator Robert Hauser. Hauser, according to the exhibition's catalog, has personally removed 89 feet of tape from the prints, made 145 mends to tears, and humidified 36 print corners.

All of these repairs, as well as new mounts and frames, have been made possible by a community-wide effort over two years, drawing on the expertise of staff at both the library and the museum, and sponsorships from private New Bedford citizens and various corporations.

The Audubon prints are complemented by a number of other works of art, including paintings and prints by artists influenced by him (among them Walton Ford, Roger Kizik, Andy Warhol, and Winslow Homer). There are also three mounted taxidermy specimens of birds once belonging to Audubon; a portrait of Arnold, the benefactor; and a painting of red-shouldered hawks, after Audubon, by Joseph Bartholomew Kidd.

Downstairs in a show organized by Tom Puryear, a large gallery is lined with the works of dozens of Audubon's predecessors in the field of ornithological illustration, dating from the 16th century and arranged chronologically. It's an enlightening display, although it serves mainly to return us to Audubon's project with renewed admiration.

Audubon, we're reminded, was not the first artist to observe live species of birds in the wild, nor was he the first to combine in a single image both birds and the plants they live among. He wasn't the first to show birds interacting with each other, and he wasn't even the first to depict them life-size. All these approaches had been introduced by noteworthy predecessors such as the Englishman Mark Catesby and the Scottish immigrant to America Alexander Wilson.

Audubon's genius, as Janice Hodson neatly puts it in the catalog, was to seize upon all these innovations and "amplify them beyond anything attempted before."

A keen draftsman and passionate rambler from early childhood, Audubon did not decide to pursue his career as an artist until he was 34. He had been born in Haiti to a French merchant and slaver and a Haitian chambermaid (unmarried). His mother died early and he was raised in Nantes by his father's family.

He claims to have been briefly taught by the great French neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David, but there's no evidence to support this. When he was 18 his father sent him to America to manage one of his estates, near Philadelphia. He had terrible luck in his business dealings, and in 1819 he was declared bankrupt and put in debtors' prison.

Only after this, having moved to Cincinnati, did he embark on his extraordinary project, "Birds of America," a huge, four-volume book of 435 full color engravings based on his own drawings in watercolor and pastel. Although he had no academic or scientific background to speak of — a fact which lost him support in the scientific community — Audubon did have tremendous experience in the field:

"No man living knows better than I do the habits of birds," he declared in 1830; "no man living has studied them as much as I have done."

He was boasting, no doubt. But when you see an image like his monumental depiction of a "hooping" crane (or "whooping" crane, as it's often spelled) bending over to snap up a lizard, you don't doubt him. The vantage point is very low, so that the bird's long slender legs and magnificent white plumage loom spectacularly over the tall trees in the background.

The crane's neck and head bend down in a snowy, sinuous S (Audubon adored nature's arabesques), culminating in the crimson alarm of its face. Cunningly, a part of the bird's neck, its beak, and the very tip of its tail feathers all

extend slightly beyond the edges of the image, creating a kind of visual pop, pushing the bird out of the depicted space and into our own.

Not all the images are so visually dramatic, although plenty do depict dramatic events: dive-bombing hawks, dead mice, striking rattlesnakes, doomed squirrels, eviscerated gadwalls, and talon-pierced hares.

Everyone will have a favorite. Me, I like the two great-footed hawks who are having such fun gutting the gadwalls. One of them looks out at us with a greedy leer, daring us to object. A single, downy feather floats above his mate's head — Audubon's way of signaling, perhaps, the transience of all beautiful things.

Or was he just trying to show us the remarkable markings of those downy feathers?

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