

1993

# Homage to Audubon: The Illustrated Bird Book 1300-1860

Tanner, Wesley B.

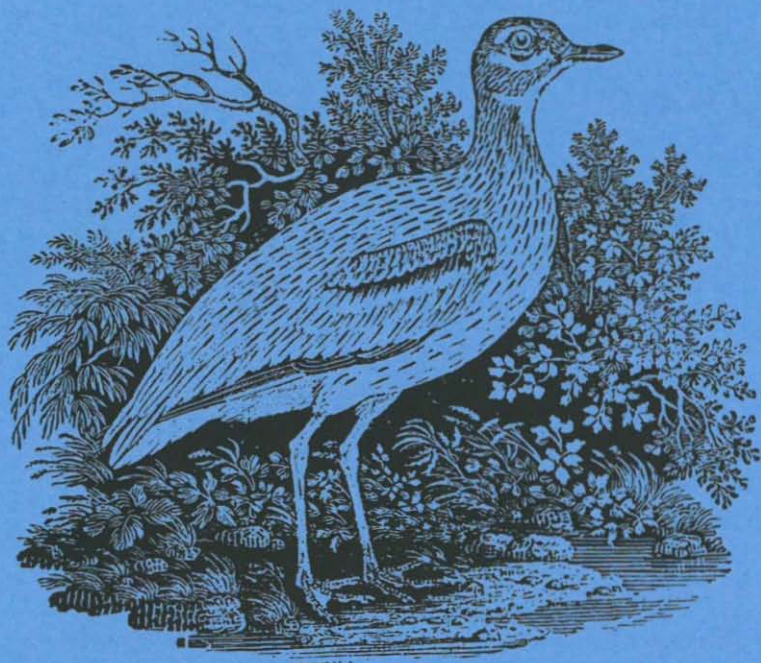
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*Homage  
to  
Audubon*



The Illustrated Bird Book 1300 – 1860

HOMAGE TO AUDUBON

*An Exhibition*  
*June 1, 1993 – July 28, 1993*

*Homage*  
*to*  
*Audubon*

The Illustrated Bird Book  
1300 – 1860

Special Collections Library  
The University of Michigan Library  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

## *Introduction*

*John James Audubon was born on April 26, 1785, on the island of Santo Domingo. After a comfortable childhood in France Audubon emigrated in 1803 to the United States, where he was to spend a lifetime as an artist and naturalist recording the fauna of his adopted country. It was not until after repeated business failures that Audubon was able to find a proper outlet for his talents, in 1820 he published his drawings of American birds. Audubon's Birds of America, with 435 hand-colored engraved plates depicting in actual size virtually all species of American birds then known, was completed in 1838, and remains one of the extraordinary publishing ventures of all time.*

*Audubon's drawings are among the most appealing and arresting zoological illustrations ever done. Although Audubon worked primarily from mounted specimens, as did other bird illustrators, he enlivened his drawings with insights gained from extensive field observations. Ornithologists often found the drawings too emotional and impressionistic to be useful for serious research. In his fondness for dramatic poses Audubon*

*occasionally placed his birds in anatomically impossible positions. Still, their attraction remains undiminished.*

*Audubon's Birds of America has very special significance for the University of Michigan Library. It was the first book purchased for the collection. The Regents authorized its acquisition on February 5, 1838, and the Library's copy was obtained the following year from William A. Colman, a New York bookseller. The purchase price was the then considerable sum of \$970, quite an act of faith for a new university which had yet to hold its first class or erect its first building! Today, six million volumes later, Birds of America remains the single most valuable printed book in the University Library's collection.*

*With this exhibition, we pay homage to Audubon by displaying alongside Birds of America some of the notable illustrated bird books acquired by the Library in the ensuing 155 years.*

#### HOMAGE TO AUDUBON

## *Manuscripts. 13<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries*

Virtually every human culture has endowed birds with special symbolic attributes such as the almost universal interpretation as birds being symbols of the soul and as messengers. Bird illustrations, therefore, have served to give these symbols a pictorial representation. But birds have also played a purely decorative role. Usually the birds depicted in early manuscripts are artistic creations and represent no species in particular. Though, in later manuscripts with more sophisticated illuminations, birds can sometimes be identified with surprising accuracy.

### *Case 1. Symbolic and Decorative Illustration*

Michigan MS. 80

*Gospels*. Greek. 1287 A.D.

Michigan MS. 91

Calendrical tables. Armenian. 15th century.

Michigan Islamic MS. 280

Firdawsī. *Shāhnāmah*. Persian. 16th century?

Michigan Islamic MS. 342

Ṣā'ib, Mirzā Muḥammad 'Alī, d. 1669 or 70.

*Dīvān*. Persian. 1692 A.D. [Displayed for the binding.]

## *Printed Works. 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> centuries*

The art of printing and the development of the woodcut did much to promote interest in natural history. In the early period the accuracy of the pictures was not particularly good, the artists often working from their imaginations or only scanty description. The medium of woodcut also limited their abilities to depict the bird accurately.

### *Case 2. Early Woodcut Illustration*

Brant, Sebastian, 1458-1521.

*Stultifera navis*. Basel: Johann Bergmann, de Olpe, 1 Mar. 1497.

Turberville, George, 1540?-1610?

*The booke of falconrie or hawking; for the onely delight and pleasure of all noblemen and gentlemen ...* London: Printed by Thomas Purfoot, 1611.

Gesner, Konrad, 1516-1565.

*Historiae animalium. Liber III. Qui est de avium natura*. Francofurti: In bibliopolio Andreae Cambieri, 1604.

Aldrovandi, Ulisse, 1522-1605.

*Ornithologiae, hoc est de avibus historiae libri XII*. Bononiae: Apud Franciscum de Franciscis Senensem, 1599.

## *Printed Works. 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*

By the end of the seventeenth century, woodcut illustrations had been almost entirely superseded by copperplate engravings. Because such plates (reproduced by the intaglio process) had to be printed independently of the text (which was produced in relief), something of the organic unity of the book was lost. On the other hand, more care could be taken with the execution of the plates themselves and the illustrations reached a new height of accuracy, both from this new artistic process and the scientific awakening that had been taking place. Ornithological illustration reached a high level of excellence in the more than two hundred years (ca. 1600-1830) during which engravings were commonly used.

### *Case 3. Emergence of Scientific Ornithology*

Olina, Giovanni Pietro.

*Uccelliera ...* Roma: Presso M. Angelo de Rossi, 1684.

Jonstonus, Joannes, 1603-1675.

*Historiae naturalis de avibus libri VI*. Francofurti ad Moenum: Impensa Matthaei Meriani, 1650.

Willughby, Francis, 1635-1672.

*The ornithology ... in three books ...* London: Printed by A.C. for John Martyn, 1678.



#### Case 4. Early Color Plate Books

Catesby, Mark, 1679?-1749.

*The natural history of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands ...*  
London: Printed at the expence of the author, 1731-43.

Pennant, Thomas, 1726-1798.

*The British zoology.* London: J. and J. March, 1766.

#### Case 5. Eighteenth Century Ornithology

Manetti, Saverio, 1723-1785.

*Storia naturale degli uccelli ...* Firenze: Nella stamperia Mouckiana, 1767-76.

Buffon, Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de, 1707-1788.

*Histoire naturelle des oiseaux.* Paris: De l'Imprimerie royale, 1770-83.

Gmelin, Samuel Gottlieb, 1744-1774.

*Puteshestvie po Rossii ...* St. Petersburg: Pri imp. Akademii Nauk, 1771-85.

#### Case 6. Ornithology in the Americas

Dumont d'Urville, Jules Sébastien César, 1790-1842.

*Voyage de la corvette l'Astrolabe exécuté par ordre du Roi, pendant les années 1826-1827-1828-1829 ...* Paris: J. Tastu, 1830-35.

Beechey, Frederick William, 1769-1856, ed.

*The zoology of Captain Beechey's voyage.* London: Henry G. Bohn, 1839.

Richardson, Sir John, 1787-1865.

*Fauna boreali-americana; or the zoology of the northern parts of British America ...* London: J. Murray, 1829-37.

Sagra, Ramon de la, 1798-1871.

*Histoire physique, politique et naturelle de l'île de Cuba.* Paris: A. Bertrand, 1838 [i.e. 1839]-1857.

#### Case 7. Audubon's English Contemporaries

Jardine, Sir William, bart., 1800-1874.

*The naturalist's library. Ornithology. British birds.* Edinburgh: W. H. Lizars, 1843.

Bewick, Thomas, 1753-1828.

*History of British birds.* Newcastle: Beilby & Bewick, 1797-1804.

Bewick, Thomas, 1753-1828.

Original woodblock of a golden plover, engraved by for his *History of British birds.*

Gould, John, 1804-1881.

*A monograph of the Trochilidae, or family of hummingbirds.* London: The author, 1849-61.

#### Case 8. Audubon's Birds of America

Audubon, John James, 1785-1851.

*The birds of America; from original drawings by John James Audubon ...* London: Published by the author, 1827-38.

Few books enthrall the viewer like Audubon's "double-elephant folio," but its visual power was not achieved easily. Audubon trav-

eled to Britain in 1826 in search of an engraver capable of undertaking the massive project. William H. Lizars of Edinburgh completed the first ten plates before withdrawing. Audubon then transferred the project to Robert Havell, Jr. of London, who finally brought the work to completion in 1838. Working from Audubon's original watercolor drawings, Havell first engraved each picture on a large copper plate. After the engravings had been pulled, each print was carefully hand-colored with watercolors according to Audubon's directions. The number of copies actually printed was probably less than 190, of which only some 125 complete sets exist today — the rest having been broken up, lost, or destroyed. [New plates will be shown daily.]

Audubon, John James, 1785-1851.

*The ornithological biography, or an account of the habits of the birds of the United States of America* ... Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1831-39.

Audubon planned to supplement his *Birds of America* with a letterpress text in which each illustrated bird would be described in plate number order. He chose to issue the text separately from the plates, however, thus avoiding the otherwise onerous expense of satisfying Britain's copyright deposit laws. Another practical concern was Audubon's lack of scientific training. He sorely needed a collaborator to edit the text and to supply taxonomic and other details. A co-author was found in William MacGillivray of Edinburgh, who saw the *Ornithological biography* to completion in five volumes in 1839. The text makes engaging reading, for it consists largely of Audubon's comments on bird habits and anecdotes derived from his wide-ranging travels.

Audubon, John James, 1785-1851.

*The birds of America* ... Re-issued by J. W. Audubon. New York: Roe Lockwood & Son, 1860.

This never-completed reprint, published by Audubon's son,

John Woodhouse Audubon, is of great rarity. Only some 50 complete copies are believed to exist. Sadly it is little known, because though not quite equal to the original, it is a masterpiece of printing in its own right. The plan was to reissue all 435 plates in full-size reproduction printed entirely by chromolithography. The noted chromolithographer Julius Bien first used the original engraved copper plates to transfer an accurate image to the lithographic stone. Then Bien painstakingly *printed* the colors through a series of multiple lithographic impressions. The plates are not exact facsimiles, for Bien made occasional compositional changes, simplified the backgrounds, and, in the case of smaller birds, reproduced two plates side-by-side on one full-size sheet. Publication ceased in 1860 after only 150 of the original plates had been reproduced on 105 sheets. [June 14-19 and July 19-24 only]

### *Reading Room Exhibit Case*

Audubon, John James, 1785-1851.

*The birds of America, from drawings made in the United States and their territories*. New York: J. J. Audubon, 1840-44.

Audubon recognized the commercial potential for an inexpensive edition of *The Birds of America* which combined plates and text. No sooner did Audubon return to the United States from England in 1839 than he began work on this lithographic reprint, commonly styled the "octavo edition." It was eventually published in seven volumes at one-tenth the price of the folio edition. The letterpress text, a slightly revised version of Audubon's *Ornithological biography*, was accompanied by 500 hand-colored lithographic plates instead of the folio's 435. Although considerably reduced in size, the plates are close reproductions of the folio plates. A camera lucida was probably used to reduce the plates to the correct size for transfer to the lithographic stone. [New plates will be shown daily.]

*Wall Case 1, 2 & 4*

Cassin, John, 1813-1869.

*Mammalogy and ornithology* [atlas]. Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman & Sons, 1858.

*Wall Case 3*

Engraved portrait of John James Audubon by Charles Turner after a painting by Frederick Cruickshank [ca. 1835?].

*Wall Case 5 & 6*

Grayson, Andrew Jackson, 1818-1869.

*Birds of the Pacific Slope*. San Francisco: The Arion Press, 1986.

This work was never published during Grayson's lifetime. The original paintings are housed in The Bancroft Library, University of California.

