Audubon and the Art of Birds

Bell Museum of Natural History, University of Minnesota
October 5, 2013 to January 19, 2014 and February 1 to June 8, 2014
Followed by a national tour.

Exhibition Description

From cave walls of the Paleolithic to galleries and field guides day, the human fascination with birds has found expression in art and science. No other artist is more closely associated with the study and depiction of birds then John James Audubon. Using Audubon’s great work as a focal point, this exhibition traces the evolution of ornithological art from the Renaissance to the present day. From simple woodcuts to elegantly refined engravings and photo-realist paintings the exhibition engages visitors in the artistic struggle to understand the beauty, diversity and vitality of birds.

John James Audubon (1785-1851) is one of the most enduring figures in American art and culture. His biography reads like a romantic novel. Born the illegitimate son of a French sea captain in what is now Haiti, he was raised in France during the years of revolution. As a young man he came to America to seek his fortune on the western frontier. After years of struggle and business failure, Audubon decided to devote his
life on his true passion, the painting of birds. In 1820, at age 35, he set out to paint
every bird in America, life-size and in color.

Today, Audubon is synonymous with birds and the conservation of nature. His
images revolutionized the way we view birds and the natural world. Before
Audubon, artists depicted animals either as allegorical figures, or as stiff, dead
specimens. Audubon’s birds are not only technically superb, with every feather and
scale delineated, they reveal birds as living, dynamic creatures whose intrinsic
beauty and vitality are worthy of our study and preservation. Today, artists and
naturalists continue to find inspiration in his work and life, and his prints are as
popular as ever.

This exhibition focuses on the masterwork of American art, science and conservation
– Audubon’s *The Birds of America*. Organized around a series of themes, the show
compares the naive drawings of early naturalists such as mark Catesby and
Alexander Wilson, brilliant colors of Francois Levaillant’s engravings and the lavish
publications by John Gould. During the 20th Century artists such as Louis Agassiz
Fuertes, Francis Lee Jaques, Roger Tory Peterson took bird art in new directions. The
human fascination with birds continues today, and the show will include works by a
small, select group of living artists, such as Lars Jonsson and Walton Ford, whose
work is inspired by Audubon’s example.

The exhibition will include over 100 prints, drawings and paintings; approximately
12 antiques illustrated books; a selection of newly conserved original double-
elephant folio engravings from the *Birds of America*; 60 to 70 works by other artists
from the 1500s to the present day; interpretive panels, displays, hands-on exhibits
and activities on bird biology. The exhibition draws upon the collections of the Bell
Museum, University of Minnesota Libraries, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the
Woodson Art Museum, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, the Academy of Natural
Sciences, the National Museum of Wildlife Art and individual collectors and artists.