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Review of 'Audubon's Birds of America' at the National Museum of Scotland

Peter Adkins

This is a review of the exhibition 'Audubon's Birds of America', held at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh from 12 February to 8 May 2022.

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Sent to subscribers between 1827 and 1838, the four-volume *Birds of America* is widely considered one of the landmark works of American ornithological art. Even today, it remains an imposing proposition: printed on paper that measures 99 by 66 centimetres (a size fittingly called 'double elephant'), the work presents 435 hand-coloured prints that look to capture their subjects in life-size scale and often *in situ*, whether pouncing on a rabbit or stripping corn ears.[1] A kind of giant index of America's avian life, the book aimed to display every bird species in North America.

Not shy of publicizing the ambition of the project, its author, John James Audubon (1781–1851), was something of a raconteur. Presenting himself as an American woodsman when looking to authenticate his knowledge of the continent (and raise money for his projects), Audubon was French Haitian by birth, growing up in France and emigrating to the USA at the age of eighteen to escape conscription in Napoleon's army. Forging his passport on entering the country, purporting to have been born in Louisiana, Audubon's precariously financed career as an artist and ornithologist was at least partially built on performing a certain idea of American identity.[2] A self-taught artist, he also taught himself how to outwardly embody the rustic ideals of his adopted country, especially when around those to whom such an identity was exotic and alluring.

Indeed, key to Audubon's ability to produce *Birds of America* was winning backers and collaborators in Britain, where he found a warmer reception than in the USA due, in part, to his willingness to play up to the imagined idea of the frontiersman. Edinburgh, in particular, played a vital role in getting *Birds of America* off the ground. Finding himself welcomed by the city's cognoscenti after exhibiting his paintings in the Royal Institution, Audubon was approached by local engraver William Lizars, who proposed he might engrave and publish the images in a book.[3] It is this connection with Scotland's capital that seems to have provided the impetus for his recent major exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland.

Presenting visitors with the chance to see Audubon's work up close and in person, 'Audubon's Birds of America' ran from 12 February to 8 May 2022, showcasing '46 unbound prints from National Museums Scotland's collection, most of which have never been on display before, as well as a rare bound volume of the book'. The latter,

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[1] At the time of its publication it was the largest paper commercially available and only two paper mills in Britain produced it.

[2] Antoine Traisnel, *Capture: American Pursuits and the Making of a New Animal Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 39.

[3] Duncan Macmillan, 'Art Reviews: Audubon's Birds of America | Andrew Mackenzie | GPS Showcase', *Scotsman*, 24 February 2022 <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/art/art-reviews-audubons-birds-of-america-andrew-mackenzie-gps-showcase-3585318> [accessed 13 June 2022].

incidentally, was not taken from the museum's extensive Audubon collection but was on loan from the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. The fact that the museum holds only an incomplete edition of the book, having let its subscription lapse during the original publication run, speaks to one of the many practical and economic problems that Audubon appears to have faced in keeping the project going.[4]

Fig. 1: John James Audubon, print of Bird of Washington, *Birds of America*. Wikimedia Commons.

Spread over three rooms, the exhibition offered an opportunity to take in the breadth of the book's ambitions and scope, from a print of the Great American Cock (more commonly known as the wild turkey), which was the first painting to be engraved, to his Bird of Washington, an eagle species yet to be found and which has led some critics to charge him with invention (*Fig. 1*). In many respects, the Bird of Washington highlights the spirit of Audubon's drive not just to document but to innovatively capture the essential character of his subjects. With its imposing talons and powerful wings, it was to Audubon 'indisputably the noblest bird of its genus that has yet been discovered in the United States'.[5] The fact that it probably does not exist has not detracted from its appeal over the centuries.[6]

The critics and biographers of Audubon who appeared as talking heads on the videos that accompanied the images seemed to agree that, on the whole, his work serves as an admirable compromise between aesthetics and documentation. And there seems little disagreement that Audubon's contributions to the natural sciences were significant: he identified over twenty new species of birds through his efforts to find, observe,

[4] 'Audubon's Birds of America', National Museums Scotland Press Release, 20 October 2021 <https://media.nms.ac.uk/news/audubons-birds-of-america> [accessed 13 June 2022].

[5] As quoted on the accompanying label. The exhibition sign also pointed out that kinder critics have suggested Audubon mistook a juvenile bald eagle for a new species.

[6] In December 2019 a complete four-volume edition, first purchased via subscription by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, was sold by Sotheby's New York to a private buyer for $6.6 million.

and paint the continent's avian life. And while other birds he identified as being newly discovered to science are now accepted as subspecies, the exhibition insisted on his place within the complicated legacies of nineteenth-century science, as well as art.[7]

Yet, to insist too much on his work's documentarian dimensions is, as the exhibition made clear, to overlook the romanticism that so clearly guided his vision. Audubon captures many of his avian subjects at their most intense, and often most violent. The Golden Eagle is presented clawing out the eye of a white rabbit, a jet of viscera shooting from the wound (*Fig.* 2), while his plate framing the Red-Tailed Hawk shows two of the species battling over an ensnared and bloodied young hare defecating in fear. Viewed at their intended scale, the images are vivid and thrilling (apparently the colours were unusually bright due to the fact that the prints on show had been largely kept in storage since publication). Even the image of the Snowy Owl, one of only a small number given a nocturnal backdrop, clearly looks to evoke moodiness; dark clouds break in the sky as two of the birds cast a side-eye at the viewer from their perch atop a dead tree. It is a quality that speaks to the success of Audubon's ambitions to capture not just the birds but the 'spirit of the moment', as he described it in a letter to Sir William Jardine included in the exhibition, and which in person lands somewhere between a proto-ecological sensibility and an eye for the drama of the natural world.

Fig. 2: John James Audubon, print of Golden Eagle, *Birds of America*. © National Museums Scotland.

Reading Antoine Traisnel's chapter on Audubon in *Capture: American Pursuits and the Making of a New Animal Condition* (2020) at home afterwards, I realized that I had missed a tiny self-portrait in the print of the Golden Eagle, which apparently presents

[7] Charles Darwin attended a lecture delivered by Audubon on turkey buzzards at the Natural History Association in Edinburgh, and Audubon is cited in both *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). See Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 305–06.

Fig. 3: John James Audubon, Golden Eagle with miniature self-portrait. Wikimedia Commons.

the artist astride a fallen tree trunk lodged between a mountain precipice, a gun and a dead eagle strung over his back (*Fig. 3*). Continuing to read, however, I discovered that in fact I had not missed it, since it was not there. When Audubon returned to his painting and readied it for inclusion in *Birds of America*, he kept the tree trunk but removed the miniature hunter (Traisnel, p. 55). This self-conscious erasure of both artist and hunter from the canvas (not mentioned in the exhibition signage) speaks to the way in which *Birds of America* both does and does not want to acknowledge its origins in acts of violence against its subjects.

Perhaps too easily absolved by the argument that all ornithology of the period was couched in a culture of hunting, Audubon used fresh corpses for his models. His process was to spend an extensive amount of time finding and observing his subjects, taking in movement and behaviour, before then shooting the targeted bird (he was, apparently, an exceptional shot). Not shying away from this part of Audubon's process, the exhibition stressed the importance of his 'position board' for the modelling of the dead birds. It was on this instrument that he was able to pose the corpse according to what he had observed in the field (as the exhibition pointed out, it had been convention to rely on taxidermy).

The liveliness of the prints then, in some respects, derives from this process of 'pinning birds into realistic poses he had observed in life and painting on the spot'.[8] Yet, the position board also seemed to have invited artifice and manipulation, especially when the larger birds would not fit onto even the largest paper available. The Golden Eagle, for instance, is painted with its wings positioned in such a way that its pose is

[8] 'Audubon's Birds of America', National Museums Scotland Press Release.

aerodynamically impossible (possibly the most egregious example and certainly the most commented upon). While the talking heads recorded for the exhibition are keen to defend Audubon from accusations of anthropomorphism, it is, in fact, this aspect of his work that makes him so interesting. The tension between a documentary naturalism and a seductive romanticism is strangely productive. Even produced at life size, the sense of natural scale is allusive — the birds seem often larger than life, perhaps a correlative to the fact that it is impossible to lose sight of the fact that what we are being confronted with is a *huge* book, imposing in both size and weight. The book cannot quite *not* point to its own artifice, both in terms of what it is representing and as an artefact in itself. All of this constantly draws attention to the way in which, on encountering Audubon's work, we are always firmly in the world of representation and viewership at several removes. The works on display register a remarkable veracity while also offering a way into thinking about human-avian relationships, in which (despite Audubon's desire otherwise) we cannot ever quite remove ourselves from the frame.

The result is not a lack of realism: the taxidermy displayed in the exhibition looked surprisingly less real than the two-dimensional images. Partially, this is down to what Audubon *is* able to include on the page. His attention to habitat situates the birds within a specific context in contrast to the violent decontextualization of the glass-encased taxidermy. His insistence on the environments that sustain America's birds finds him having intuited the idea of ecological interdependence. The Blue-Winged Yellow Warbler plate positions two of the species creeping around the encompassing bloom of a large-flowered hibiscus, presenting an image of fragile dependence, while the Purple Grackle plate draws the eye to the flesh-coloured corn husk being torn open for sustenance as much as to the less colourful birds (*Fig. 4*). Elsewhere, ecological harmony is suggested through aesthetic sympathy. The yellows and blues of the Carolina Pigeon are mirrored in the matching colours of lichen covering the branch on which they

Fig. 4: John James Audubon, print of Purple Grackle, *Birds of America*. © National Museums Scotland.

Fig. 5: John James Audubon, print of Carolina Pigeons or Turtle Doves, *Birds of America*. © National Museums Scotland.

are perched (*Fig. 5*). Yet, at this juncture, the exhibition again invited reflection on the tension between artistic arrangement and verisimilitude. It is precisely because of the plate's formal harmony that it is able to draw the viewer to ecological realities.

Its willingness not to shy away from Audubon's many contradictions was one of the strongest aspects of the exhibition. Aged in his forties by the time he began the project, he was, as the signage and videos pointed out, an enthusiastic beneficiary of slavery and an unapologetic white supremacist. At the same time, he was a man less of principle than of pragmatism, willing to name one of the birds he 'discovered', the Roscoe's Yellow Throat, after a prominent abolitionist who also happened to be one of the project's backers, William Roscoe.[9]

One of the missed opportunities, then, is to have not capitalized on how Audubon's compromised positionality might offer the exhibition's visitors a chance to reflect on the contradictions that accompany ecological self-consciousness in the twenty-first century. The last room in the exhibition was dedicated to prints of Audubon's birds that are now in crisis (including the Blue-Headed Vireo, the Eastern Towhee, the Dark-Eye Junco, and the Snowy Owl), as well as those already extinct (the Carolina Parakeet and Passenger Pigeon). Although habitat destruction and industrial agriculture are singled out as impacting on ecosystems, the more ethically complicated question of the role of institutions, organizations, and government policy in hastening such violence was unaddressed. Also ignored were some of the trickier questions around the way in which Audubon was contributing to a colonial settler project that was erasing as much as it was documenting a world in the process of being 'discovered'. Including contemporary responses to Audubon, such as the self-reflexive work of Walton Ford (1960–), or having included indigenous ways of knowing and thinking about the natural world that

[9] This was one of Audubon's misidentifications, now believed to be an example of the Common Yellowthroat.

were in the process of being actively displaced in the nineteenth century, would have offered one way of situating *Birds of America* both within a postcolonial frame, as well as having pointed to the challenges of finding an aesthetic expression adequate to our own moment of ecological crisis.[10]

This would have required an exhibition with a far more radical eco-politics than the National Museum of Scotland was willing, or able, to have delivered. Instead, the exhibition focused on the legacy of a troubling and troubled man, the ongoing ability of *Birds of America* to impress and beguile, and the degree to which, more often than not, art, science, and ecology come as a package rather than as discrete modes of knowing.

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[10] See Matthew Whittle, 'Lost Trophies: Hunting Animals and the Imperial Souvenir in Walton Ford's *Pancha Tantra*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 51 (2016), 196–210.