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ARH215

5/3/2017

Audubon in Context

John James Audubon’s significant work as a naturalist is unique in style that distinguishes him from other naturalists when it comes to an overall era of the Natural History. His extensive study and documentation of birds and depicting them through life-sized watercolor paintings captures one’s attention and raises one’s awareness about nature and its creatures. It is very important to show off his work through a website in order to reach a larger audience and raise awareness in them about nature, birds and the Natural History.

John James Audubon, born April 26, 1785 in Les Cayes, in what is now Haiti, was an American naturalist and a painter, known for his extensive studies and documenting all types of American birds. At the age of eighteen, the son of a French sea captain, John James Audubon came to United States because of the war that broke out between France and England.[[1]](#footnote-1) He lived in Mill Grove, Pennsylvania where also conducted his first scientific studies. In 1808, Audubon married to Lucy Bakewell whom he met and fell in love the year after his arrival in America.[[2]](#footnote-2)  
Fascinated with the beauty of nature, Audubon decided to focus his fascination upon the birds of America. He traveled throughout the country in order to draw and study birds in their natural habitats by carefully observing their behavior. His most well-known work is a color-plate book named *The Birds of America* that contains illustrations of a various species of American birds. In order to print The Birds of America, Audubon had to sail from New Orleans to Liverpool with his portfolio of more than 300 drawings. As a result, in 1826, he raised enough money to publish his Birds of America which consists of 435 hand-colored, life-size prints of 497 bird species which were made from engraved copper plates of different sizes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After the publication of *The Birds of America* that earned John James Audubon worldwide fame, the last ten years of Audubon’s life were spent on documenting four-legged mammals. Even though the proposed project was very difficult to accomplish, Audubon thought he would collect, identify, paint the portraits, and write the description of each of them. With such an enthusiasm, he immediately announced the future publication of *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Soon, he received a letter from his friend John Bachman who offered his help saying “…are you not too fast in issuing your prospectus…? … The animals have never been carefully described, and you will find difficulties at every step. Books cannot aid you much. I have studied the subject more than you have… Say in what manner I can assist you.”[[5]](#footnote-5) As a result, John Bachman did a significant contribution in producing the *Quadrupeds* by determining the validity of species, writing all scientific descriptions, and contributing his personal observation on habits of the animal.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other hand, Audubon with the help of his son John Woodhouse Audubon, painted and produced 150 drawings that were included in *The Quadrupeds of North America*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Audubon used several artists to reprint his paintings. For example, a skilled lithographer, J.T. Bowen who was from Philadelphia had a contract with Audubon to lithograph and color his paintings. Printing, on the other hand was done by other Philadelphian craftsmen.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When it comes to a context of the Natural History and ornithology, Audubon was not the first person to document and paint all species of birds of America. Certainly, there were many other naturalists before and after him. For example, Mark Catesby was an English naturalist who arrived in America to publish the first scientific description of America’s plants, animals and birds through his observations. Between his two visits to America, from 1712 and 1726, he produced a two volume Natural History of Carolina and Florida that consisted of 209 plates of 109 bird species.[[9]](#footnote-9) On the other hand, Alexander Wilson was a Scottish-American naturalist and ornithologist who is regarded as the “Father of American Ornithology” before Audubon.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, John James Audubon has been a significant figure in the field of ornithology whose work surpasses other naturalists’ work for several reasons. For example, Audubon’s prints were life-sized watercolors that made his work very special and original. Audubon insisted on drawing birds and then printing each of the birds at actual size.

“The excessive bulk of *The Birds of America* deprives primarily from Audubon’s insistence on drawing and then printing each of the birds at actual size. After killing a bird and posing it in the desired attitude, he used a drawing compass to transfer the measurements of the arrangement to his watercolor page. When the watercolor was later printed, he demanded that the dimensions of the bird in the original drawing be preserved without altercation. Birds with large sizes placed extraordinary demands on the representational support and required that the entire project be printed on double elephant folio paper, the largest art paper then manufactured. One of the reasons that the project had to be printed in London was that it was impossible to obtain large enough copper sheets for the engravings in America.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Many other ornithological books presented bird illustrations at natural size. However, if the actual size of the birds exceeded the actual size of paper being printed, they would simply depict the bird smaller than its actual size on the paper.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus, printing birds in their actual size is one of the reasons that makes his work superior compared to other naturalists’ work.

John James Audubon’s work is a significant contribution to the history of natural history. His books such as *The Birds of America* raise one’s awareness about one’s natural world and its natural creatures. That is why, it is very important to show off Audubon’s significant work and contributions to our society through art exhibitions. Since a lot of people, nowadays, use social media on a daily basis, it would be even more convenient to familiarize people with the work of Audubon through websites that are dedicated to John James Audubon. Bringing together materials from the College Art Collection and Special Collections and Archives, Berea College art class organized an exhibition that explores the work of John James Audubon within the larger context of the history of natural history. “Beginning with one of the first accounts of the fauna of the Americas and ending with a print made on Berea College’s campus, this exhibition situates Audubon’s monumental work into a larger conversation about the natural history of North America. This exhibition was curated by the students in Meghan Doherty’s ARH 215: History of Printmaking class.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, in order to reach a larger audience, a website entitled “Audubon in Context” was created in order to make the exhibition be available online to anyone interested in John James Audubon’s work.

Here’s a link to the website: <https://bereaart.github.io/art_project/>

Thank you very much for a wonderful class Meghan. It’s been a pleasure taking your class))

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3. Benjamin Weiss, “Audubon’s Birds, Audubon’s Words,” *Magazine Antiques 181,* January. 2014, 168-173 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Victor Cahalane*, The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1967), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cahalane*, The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals*, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cahalane, *The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. Cahalane, *The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals*, xv [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Robin W. Doughty, *the Mockingbird* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Clark Hunter, *the Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson* (Philadelphia: Philosophical Society, 1983), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jennifer Roberts, *Transporting Visions the Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014*),* 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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