

Art City: Audubon bird prints offer fresh view of genius

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel August 26, 2016



(Photo: Milwaukee Public Library)

John James Audubon painted the natural world with a deep love and a nearly obsessive lust.

His renditions of North American bird species are some of the most celebrated depictions of the natural world ever created. The Paine Museum in Oshkosh is exhibiting a wealthy display of some of Audubon's most recognized works from his opus "Birds of America." The exhibit features first edition, hand-colored prints created from Audubon's original watercolors. Observing these large and lavishly colored works on paper is like seeing them for the first time.

The entrance to the exhibit displays a bravura composition of two barn owls. Audubon's dynamic animals strut and preen, stretching to show their characteristic wing patterns in an analytic display. But Audubon also creates narrative tension within the scene. One of the owls holds a dead chipmunk from a branch and looks out at the viewer while the other stands on a lower limb screeching in jealous complaint. This print, along with several others in the show, is on loan from the Milwaukee Public Library.

This balance between theatricality and minute naturalism is where Audubon reaches unexplored artistic territory. His depiction of two peregrine falcons feeding on ducks is as frankly violent as nature itself. One bird's beak drips with the viscera of its prey while a single downy feather hovers in the air nearby. The other falcon lowers its head and appears to hiss at the viewer to back off. In the midst of this action the descriptive detail in all of the animals on the scene is thrillingly evident.

Audubon has been posthumously criticized for hunting his subjects and painting their carcasses from life back in the studio. To our sensibilities this seems in conflict to the life of a naturalist. His tender image of a passenger pigeon feeding its mate is prophetic and luckily included in this show. However, Paine curator Laura Fiser reminds the viewer that Audubon was working before the advent of practical photographic techniques and that his artworks would have been impossible to produce without the innovations he brought to taxidermy in his research for his paintings.

Audubon was as obsessed with the minutiae of the production of his art as he was with its subjects. He sought out master printer Robert Havell in England to reproduce his paintings. Havell's editions are hand colored and all of the animals printed life size. That meant that many of the prints were created using "double elephant folio" sized sheets of paper, the largest in production at the time. The resultant prints are richly colored with beautifully etched lines in a magnificent scale. The first print of the series, Audubon's "Wild Turkey," is a giant, and a masterful anchor of the exhibit.

"Birds of America" has become an authoritative lens through which we see the intersection of art, nature and science. Contemporary artists continue to use Audubon's signatures in their work. Wisconsin painter Katie Musloff echoes Audubon in an earnest way, cataloging with watercolor and pencil the world around her home on the banks of the Mississippi River. Walton Ford uses Audubon's formal language and depicts large-scale allegories of animals in environmental dystopias. Both of these artists quote directly from Audubon in order to guide the viewer.

We all know the birds of John James Audubon. They have been displayed and reproduced nearly to extinction. It's hard to appreciate their integrity, beauty and drama when they are seen endlessly on greeting cards and coffee mugs. It is well worth visiting these birds in their original habitat.

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