

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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Press Preview:

Tuesday, October 9, 1984

10am - 3pm

RARE AUDUBON ENGRAVINGS
ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
FOR FIRST TIME SINCE 1961

WASHINGTON, D. C. May 29, 1984. John James Audubon: The Birds of America, an exhibition of approximately thirty rare color engravings, goes on view October 14, 1984 through January 13, 1985 in the Gallery's West Building Ground Floor Galleries. The exhibition marks the 200th anniversary of the artist's birth.

The works have been selected from Audubon's Double Elephant Folio, so called because of its unusually large size. Executed between 1827 and 1838, the folio consists of 435 prints measuring 39½ inches x 26 inches. It is in the Gallery's permanent collection and is one of only two such complete sets of prints that have never been bound. The other complete, unbound folio is in the Darwin Museum in Moscow. The Gallery's set was a gift in 1946 by Mrs. Walter Belknap James of New York, in memory of her husband Dr. Walter B. James and his brother Norman James.

The exhibition has been organized by Carlotta J. Owens, assistant curator in the Gallery's Department of Prints and Drawings. Ms. Owens has written the exhibition brochure as well.

The creation and publication of these bird prints was due to the determination, energy and talent of John James Audubon, scientist, ornithologist and artist, who traveled extensively in this country and abroad and endured many hardships to fulfill his dream---to record every species of North American bird.

Birds at this time were usually drawn in profile from stuffed models, and appeared flat. Audubon, however, was the first artist to work exclusively from

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nature, showing birds in realistic poses, life-size, and in their natural habitats. An avid hunter, Audubon shot no fewer than one hundred birds a day which he then meticulously drew, frequently in watercolor. In many instances, several birds of one species are included in one engraving; thus there are 489 different species represented in the Double Elephant Folio. In addition, Audubon published The Ornithological Biography (1831-1839) composed of five volumes which describe the habits of birds in this country.

To support himself and his family during the production of this enormous portfolio, Audubon sought commissions for his paintings here and abroad. At the same time, he was seeking subscribers for the publication of the bird prints. While people in this country were less than enthusiastic, the British were very excited about the large size of the prints, and as a result, over three hundred individuals, including royalty and nobility, became his original subscribers.

The technique of color lithography was not yet in widespread use, and Audubon's bird pictures were engraved and then hand colored. Audubon collaborated with several engravers. W. H. Lizars printed the first ten plates in Edinburgh, but production was interrupted by a colorists' strike. Reluctantly Audubon found another engraver, Robert Havell, Jr., who became Audubon's indispensable collaborator. Among the works on view which Havell printed is Goshawk and Cooper's Hawk. It is particularly interesting because it shows Audubon's development as an artist---the Goshawk having been executed in 1809 and the Cooper's Hawk later in 1830. It was not unusual for Audubon to rely on other artists to fill in the backgrounds for his paintings and Havell did both the composition and the entire landscape of this print.

Audubon portrayed birds in tranquil moments and in moments of terror, too. One such example, Virginian Partridge, depicts eighteen bobwhites (males and females with their young) being attacked by a young red-shouldered hawk.

Another dramatic print is the well known Mockingbird that shows a rattlesnake about to strike a nest of young mockingbirds in a tree. Painted while the artist lived in New Orleans, Audubon drew from a rattlesnake which he had killed. At times scientists questioned the positions of some of Audubon's subjects. In this case, they claimed that rattlesnakes do not climb trees. It was later determined that indeed Audubon's depiction of the snake in the tree is accurate.

Also on view will be the engraving of a watercolor executed in 1838, The American Flamingo, a species first seen by Audubon in the Florida Keys. The work was in an exhibition of Audubon drawings in Edinburgh, brought the artist great acclaim there, and proved important in attracting subscribers.

The Carolina Parakeet portrays a bird that has been extinct since 1914. Ironically, Audubon, the great hunter who so immensely enjoyed the sport was, in his later years, aware of the need for environmental conservation and protection of America's endangered wildlife---a cause which today is synonymous with Audubon's name. Audubon was blind when he died at the age of sixty-six in 1851.

Three other exhibitions which focus on nineteenth-century America on paper also open on October 14, 1984: Thomas Moran's Watercolors of Yellowstone, American Naive Watercolors and Drawings and Index of American Design.

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