

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

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CONTACT: Tina Coplan
Lila Kirkland
(202) 842-6353

FIRST MAJOR TRAVELING EXHIBITION OF AUDUBON WATERCOLORS

WILL PREMIERE AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Washington, D.C. -- An exhibition featuring almost ninety of John James Audubon's original watercolors for his famous print series The Birds of America begins a nationwide tour at the National Gallery of Art from October 3, 1993, through January 2, 1994. Organized by The New-York Historical Society, John James Audubon: The Watercolors for "The Birds of America" is the first traveling exhibition of these landmark works of art since they were acquired by the Historical Society from the artist's widow in 1863. The extraordinary freshness and vitality of the life-size images have been further revealed through recent conservation.

Following its opening at the National Gallery, the exhibition will travel to Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Memphis, New York, Seattle, and San Francisco. A group of early watercolors in the collection of the Houghton Library at Harvard University also will be shown at the National Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The exhibition at the National Gallery is made possible by NationsBank.

"We are delighted to display these rarely seen treasures of American art," said Earl A. Powell III, the Gallery's director. "The popularity of Audubon's work has been based on its widespread reproduction. This show provides the opportunity to marvel at the enduring wonder of the original sources and to understand Audubon's

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contributions as an important and innovative artist."

Born in 1785 in Saint-Dominique, now Haiti, Audubon was raised in France and came to this country at age eighteen. By the end of his life in 1851 he had become America's leading naturalist, identified in Europe as the archetypal American woodsman and an original, dynamic chronicler of America's birds.

Watercolors on view illustrate the range of Audubon's techniques and his development as an artist, from the early single profiles to his later animated portrayals of birds in their natural settings. The artist's most familiar works will be shown, including American White Pelican (1831-1832), Carolina Parakeet (c. 1825), and Gyr Falcon (1835-1836). Also displayed will be previously unpublished watercolors such as Anhinga (1822) and Great Egret (1832).

The Birds of America, Audubon's mammoth set of 435 images, was begun in 1820. By illustrating birds engaged in typical activities in their native habitats, the artist expanded on the long tradition of depicting plants and animals with single profile views, begun in medieval pattern books, herbals, and bestiaries, and continued during the Renaissance in printed botanical and zoological tracts. As Audubon himself wrote in a promotional prospectus for the sale of The Birds of America: "Some are seen pursuing their prey through the air, searching for food amongst the leaves and herbage, sitting on their nests, or feeding their young; whilst others of a different nature, swim, wade, or glide in or over their allotted element."

Unlike his predecessors, such as the Scottish immigrant Alexander Wilson, Audubon did not base his drawings on stuffed birds in a studio. Rather, he gained intimate, direct knowledge of his subjects in their natural settings through careful

observation during extensive travels across America.

Audubon began drawing as a child in France and continued in America during his leisure time. A series of business failures culminating in personal bankruptcy convinced him to turn his longtime passion into a profession -- to find and faithfully record the complete variety of North American birds. Leaving his wife and two sons in Cincinnati, Audubon set off in 1820 on one of many journeys that would take him down the Mississippi, from Maine to the Florida keys, from the seacoast of New Jersey through the woodlands of Kentucky, and as far west as Texas.

Rebuffed by the American scientific establishment, Audubon sailed to England in 1826 to secure an engraver and the patronage needed to publish his work. He settled on the London artist and printer Robert Havell, Jr., who followed The Birds of America to completion in 1838. Among approximately two hundred subscribers to the four-volume series were King George IV of England; Lord Stanley, president of the Zoological Society; Charles X of France and the duke of Orleans, later King Louis Philippe; and in America Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and the Library of Congress.

Between trips to England to promote and sell subscriptions, Audubon returned to the wilderness, frequently spending seventeen-hour days in the field. He enlisted his family and assistants, such as Joseph Mason and Maria Martin, accomplished botanical artists. His printers handcolored and sometimes finished the prints according to Audubon's instructions. In its final form, The Birds of America contained nearly 1,000 illustrations of birds. The images were printed on "double elephant" folio sheets, measuring 19 1/2 X 39 1/2 inches, the largest available at the time.

Only someone with Audubon's enormous energy and vision could have seen

such a project through to the end. Remarkably, when he died at the age of sixty-six, Audubon had also completed a series on American mammals. The Birds of America, however, remains his greatest triumph -- a document of meticulously observed natural history that is also a work of art.

The exhibition was directed by Holly Hotchner, director of the museum at The New-York Historical Society, and curated by Annette Blaugrund, Andrew W. Mellon senior curator of paintings, drawings, and sculpture at The New-York Historical Society, and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., John Moors Cabot curator of American painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., curator of American and British paintings, coordinated the exhibition at the National Gallery.

Following its opening at the National Gallery, John James Audubon: The Watercolors for "The Birds of America" will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (February 9 - April 10, 1994); the Art Institute of Chicago (May 7 - July 17, 1994); the Detroit Institute of Arts (August 13 - October 23, 1994); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (November 17, 1994 - January 29, 1995); Memphis Brooks Museum of Art (February 19 - April 17, 1995); The New-York Historical Society (May 3 - August 6, 1995); Seattle Art Museum (October 12, 1995 - January 7, 1996); and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (February 4 - April 14, 1996). For their preservation, the selection of watercolors will be rotated during the tour.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with ninety-five color illustrations of The New-York Historical Society's watercolors and essays on Audubon's artistic development, entrepreneurial skills, and working methods. A hardbound version, also published by Villard Books, contains the first complete collection of reproductions of The New-York Historical Society's 470 Audubon watercolors.