

W GOODWIN

Anhingan Ferocity, 2020
Digital photographic print, 12 x 16 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Audubon's Tiny Houses

A brief history of
John James Audubon

He could dance, sing, draw, shoot, ride, sew, fence, and play the flute. In London he wore buckskins; on the frontier, white linen. John Keats called him a fool. Harry Truman collected his art, as did Queen Victoria, Roger Tory Peterson, Mark Twain, and Charles Darwin's extended family. He admired Indians but owned nine slaves. He went bankrupt often. In 2010 a copy of his book sold at Sotheby's for 11.5 million dollars. Despite factual reality—which was that he had been born in Haiti and was the illegitimate son of a slave-owning pirate and a chambermaid who maybe was white, maybe was mixed race—at times he claimed he was the son of a hero from the American Revolution. When he had kissed the Blarney Stone especially hard, he upped the ante: he was none other than the lost dauphin, heir to the throne of France. He also claimed to have been taught art by the neoclassical master Jacques-Louis David. Nice try, Mr. Audubon, but all three stories are as false as George Washington's front teeth.

Art history does not waste much time on John James Audubon (1785–1851), though the critic Robert Hughes aligns him with Gilbert Stuart, Grant Wood, Mark Rothko, and Andy Warhol. Hughes is the exception; in the 1,100 pages of Gardner's *Art through the Ages*, Monsieur Audubon is mentioned a grand total of zero times. Yet a dozen towns are named after him, several historical parks, some bridges, a major nature society, one shearwater, a small rabbit, an extinct ram, a warbler, and an oriole. Audubon did not found the National Audubon Society (named *for* him, not *by* him); what he did do, though, is create *Birds of America*, and *Birds of America* is, let it be clear, just about the greatest nature book ever made.

Audubon was never not working, and even though he wrote ornithology handbooks and painted mammals and discovered new species like the Bell's vireo and the black-footed ferret, none of that matters, those things are twigs and pebbles compared to his stupendous idea, his stupendous folly, *Birds of America*. This book—more a serial edition of prints, really—weighs sixty pounds when all the elements are stacked in one pile. Inside it you can find every species of bird in the then United States and territories, plus a few that he got wrong, so *more* than every species. Six of them are extinct, gone forever except for his plates and tattered specimens. Each bird has been drawn

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lovingly, precisely, implausibly at true-to-life-size scale. To achieve this goal he had to use paper whose trim size, 39.5 by 28.5 inches, is usually called double elephant.

How about triple elephant? Quintuple? Nobody had seen a nature book like this before. *Life-size*—how utterly bonkers. Just to make it even more challenging, representative plants would often be included, or in the case of owls and raptors, samples of typical prey. From hummingbirds to the full-pouched white pelican, the ratio stayed the same, even if that meant sparrows had to be embedded in a tangle of botany surrounded by a sea of negative space. At the other end of the scale, Audubon had to fold the tallest things in half to get them to fit. If you didn’t know his plan, his flamingo looks like a zoo escapee that got splinched trying to fax itself to freedom.

Over the course of twenty years, Audubon crafted 435 finished plates. He was motivated by the same thing that drove Shakespeare and Courbet and Thomas Edison: he did it because he had to, it burned in him to do it, but he also did it to make a living. The book was a commercial enterprise; Audubon made art not for art’s sake, but for it-puts-food-on-the-table’s sake. Yet as a project, not a single day was easy. To get his editions engraved, printed, colored,

and distributed, he had to leave America and go to England, and even there it took several tries to find the right collaborators. The Havells, *père et fils*, ended up needing fifty assistants to help color all the finished plates. By the time the second edition was ready—smaller size, cheaper price—the plate count had grown to five hundred. Audubon also wrote a five-volume companion text, *Ornithological Biographies*, and at the end of his life he had started a series on mammals. He died before it was finished; his sons and a friend named John Bachman finished it for him.

Manufacture of the giant book was a multistep process. First he had to locate, identify, acquire, and compose the species in question. One art historian, rather than use the expression “life-size” (given that the birds were, at time of being drawn and painted, already dead), prefers to call his practice “actual-size drawing.” Once a painting was ready, it would be copied as a reversed image onto a copper plate, the plate dipped in acid, rinsed, inked, and turnscrewed to very big paper, and then that paper, once printed, would be hand colored. Finished pages were issued in sets and sold by subscription to people with good taste, large houses, and wheelbarrows of disposable income. Reviewing a modern edition, Alexander Nazaryan asks, “Is it the most beautiful book ever produced? I don’t know: Was Helen the most beautiful woman in ancient Greece? The Gutenberg Bible probably played a bigger role in the history of Western civilization, but Audubon’s work feels more alive.”

When he began *Birds of America*, nobody knew all the birds yet, not even his late rival, Alexander Wilson, and as a space, “America” was so new the paint was still wet. That is, white America, gringo America was new—Audubon lived through (but did not comment on) the Trail of Tears. When he started, the precise borders of the Louisiana Purchase still had not been negotiated. People hunted with old-style flintlock muskets—one reason bison and passenger pigeons lasted as long as they did. Signers of the Declaration of Independence were still alive; Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were his contemporaries.

Eighteen-year-old Audubon had come to America not to paint but to dodge the draft. Though he had been born in the Caribbean, he had been raised in France. With Napoleon needing every young man to do his duty and die for his country, conscription looked inevitable. In 1803 Audubon found himself on a ship for New York, traveling

with forged a passport. (Thanks, Papa.) Somewhere in that transformation he learned a Quaker-influenced English and his name changed from Jean-Jacques Fougère to the simple and direct John James. A long middle period arises in which he gets married, launches and fails at various businesses, has children, some of whom die, and finally ends up starting *Birds of America*. Who gave him permission even to try? Perhaps William Blake came to him in a vision. The great influx of Japanese woodblock prints into Western art had not yet happened, and so without direct models, Audubon had to invent *Chinoiserie* and *Japonisme* (and late Matisse and the graphic clarity of the *Saturday Evening Post*) all on his mad own. Yet just about every page of *Birds of America* works, and when it doesn’t—we’ll get to his hunchbacked, dolorous, infinitely black California condor in a moment—it often fails in interesting ways.

Did I mention he could dance? What a catch he was, so long as you didn’t mind dating men who got up at 3 a.m. and came home wearing coats smeared with cornmeal and blood. In the late portraits he looks aquiline and regal, with such gorgeous hair he could have starred in ads for shampoo. He was tall for the time, trim, somebody who had kept his good looks and knew it. He must have missed speaking French, and we know he treasured the Cajun names for birds. Thanks to him we remember that the snipe was called a *cache-cache*, while the indigo bunting was *petit papebleu*. What Audubon called the tell-tale godwit and sometimes yellowshanks (and we know now as the greater yellowlegs) was a *clou-clou* in Cajun, based on an onomatopoeic transcription of the alarm call. Nothing went to waste in early America, and if you shot birds to draw them, you ate them afterward, or at least tried to. While young *clou-clou* can be tasty, “in general, these birds are thin and have a fishy taste.”

He practiced lifelong sobriety, a virtuous path that made no difference because the arsenic he used for preserving bird skins was killing him daily, hourly. Everybody used it, was the thing; his name is one of many on a list of people who risked poison in the pursuit of science. One nineteenth-century manual of ornithology cheerfully explains that “arsenic is a good friend of ours; besides preserving birds, it keeps busybodies and meddling folks away from the scene of operations.” How should it be stored? “It may be kept in the tin pots in which it is usually sold; but

a shallower, broader receptacle is more convenient.” The directions for how to build a drawer into one’s work table are given next, so you can have your arsenic immediately at hand. You also will need a salt spoon borrowed from the kitchen (“or a little wooden shovel whittled like one”) and of course a selection of scalpels.

All of Audubon’s birds inhabit spatial ambivalence, since they are expected to be accurate demonstrations of literal species—DNA and syrinx, rectrix and appetite—and yet also graphic designs filling the page. The two tasks should repel each other like same-pole magnets. Somehow they don’t, and often one is treated to an intense vitality: an Audubon tern in flight looks so taut it could be an archer’s loaded bow. When the release snaps, the bird won’t merely zoom off the page, it is going to end up in the next county. Variety of pose, variety of color and style mean finding a favorite plate is not hard. Most top-ten lists will include one of the egrets or herons, one of the moments of tender domesticity (doves are always popular), and one of the scenes of high drama—maybe rattlesnake versus mockingbird, maybe the moths against the whip-poor-wills, or maybe Plate 241, *Black Backed Gull*, who, wing up, dying, manages to embody all the pathos of a first-rate pieta. One art critic sees that plate as being echoed, slash for slash, by a particularly intense Franz Kline abstract.

Fine as these examples are, I prefer the queer, unsuccessful plates, especially Plate 426, the one showing a bird Audubon called the California vulture; accurate enough name, though today we call it the California condor. (The word *condor* came into English in Shakespeare’s time, transferred via Spanish, which had borrowed it from Quechua.) Lewis and Clark knew condors and John Muir saw them over Pasadena, but as the twentieth century rolled on, they ate lead shot and flew into electrical wires and drank radiator fluid and became ready to queue up for the greased slide to extinction. In a Hail Mary pass, in 1987 the last twenty-two free-flying California condors were captured, put in pens, shown some vulturine porn, and encouraged to multiply like fruit flies. A bit to everybody’s surprise, they did just that, and reintroduced condors are now back in the sky in California, Utah, Arizona, and Baja. They show up near Gorman sometimes, and by the east side of Pinnacles National Park. You can see them in Big Sur and Zion and Sequoia and the Grand Canyon. Good

job, team. By the time this goes to press, the wild population will have passed five hundred.

To make his sketches, Audubon didn't use a camera—nobody did, they were just being invented—and so to draw a bird he had to hold a bird, or at least have it hanging from wires in front of him. For this condor plate, Audubon's specimen came from a man named Townsend, for whom a warbler and a solitaire are named. (Townsend died at forty-one of arsenic poisoning.) Audubon had not seen it alive, despite the folio's caption "drawn from life," and that may explain why he struggled to give it a defined posture. Looking at it now, it is hard to tell if it is sad or just has a stiff neck. The white wing flash is painted in with great precision but makes the middle of the wing look like a sideways piano. If you were painting condors today, you probably would have to include the plastic wing tags, since most condors have color-coded badges to help researchers track them in flight. If you spot a wild condor, grab a picture and you can look up who's who. Red sixty-seven for example identifies Kingpin, born in 1997 and the boss of the Big Sur condor flock. At a kill, he claims first dibs. According to his bio on the Ventana Wildlife Society web page, "Kingpin paired with condor #190 in 2006 and they established a breeding territory that spring. In 2007, the pair started nesting in the cavity of a coast redwood tree." Condors in a redwood: two Pleistocene survivors in one view.

Wing disks remind us that even the sublime has to accommodate the semiotics of allegiance and order. At the track, a jockey's silks are keyed to his sponsor's stable; during a marathon, runners' bibs confer identity. Some people don't like to see nature overwritten by the reality of human intervention, but from radio collars on pumas to a highway sign warning to watch out for desert tortoises, what we value most outdoors often first had to be studied or managed before it could be preserved. In doing their jobs, sometimes the puppeteers can't completely hide the strings.

Audubon did not have to ignore plastic number tags or aluminum leg bands, but he did have trouble with the condor's neck ruff, which looks bedraggled and askew—Phyllis Diller has a costume bathrobe with a boa like that. He did a better job with the head, which on a condor is bare (as it is on most vultures), since they have to stick their heads deep into putrid carcasses and matted feathers would attract lice. Mostly though this is a study of black on black;

not only is the immense slab of the bird entirely dark, but so is the cross branch it perches on.

With this plate, size matters. Almost all good art looks more interesting in person. If you look the condor plate up on a phone or tablet, it won't seem like much, but at the Huntington Library in San Marino or the University of Pittsburgh or the Beinecke Library at Yale—places where you can linger over original editions—once you experience the condor plate at full folio size, hang on to the railing, because it sucks the air out of you all the way down to your ankles. The condor is a good example. Black bird, black branch, huge page, clean white background: I will see your Franz Kline and raise you two Rothko Chapels and a Black Flag poster. At home, leafing through my much-smaller trade edition, pages like the condor's provide necessary pause after a swirl of overamped parakeets or the maudlin drama of an eagle capping a hare.

Some people think the condor looks glum, even menacing. It's all the black, I suppose. If this were a three-foot-tall blue jay, nobody would mind. Kassia St. Clair, in her book *The Secret Lives of Color*, says that "a whiff of death has clung to black as far back as records reach, and humans are fascinated and repelled by it. Most of the gods associated with death and the underworld . . . are depicted with truly black skin, and the color has long been associated with both mourning and witchcraft." And of course she could have mentioned the Puritans in that list, who were nobody's idea of cheerful.

Values evolve, and during Audubon's lifetime, black became more fashionable. Cultural historian Michel Pastoureau talks about changes in theatrical performances and costuming that started in the 1820s. "Hamlet, especially, became a Romantic hero, and his famous black costume, a veritable uniform, was more in keeping with the sensibility and style of the era than [Goethe's] Werther's sensible blue suit, henceforth totally obsolete." Black soon spread to the sartorial expectations of the average man. "The phenomenon began in the last years of the eighteenth century, grew during the French Revolution—an honest citizen had to wear a black suit—triumphed in the Romantic period, lasted throughout the nineteenth century, and only exhausted itself in the 1920s."

In some grids, black is not even a real color (since it is all the colors). Novice painters learn that the least

convincing way to paint something black is to use black paint right out of the tube—better to mix blue into orange, try that way. At the end of his life, Francisco Goya made his Black Paintings, fourteen bleak visions muraled directly onto the walls of a house. Audubon and Goya were contemporaries separated by an ocean of circumstance. The atrocities and crimes of the Napoleonic Wars had worn Goya out, and these are dark works—dark in hue, dark in theme. The grim *Saturn Devouring His Son* would have been painted in blood, except blood isn't black enough.

Audubon has his own sharp edges. Why do his quadrupeds look so mean—even his beavers snarl like rabid wolves—and in plate after plate, why are there so many examples of life-and-death struggles? His art reflected the times but also his own hopes, dreams, traumas, and inspirations. Audubon was born on a sugar plantation in the Caribbean. His father was a privateer turned slave dealer and plantation owner. After Audubon's mother died, his next mother was another of his father's mixed-race mistresses. His father then left Haiti and went back to France, where he reconciled with his back-at-the-farm original wife. On the eve of the Haitian slave revolt, he brought Audubon and a half sister to live with him in France. During these dislocations and relocations, Audubon lived through successive layers of loss and doubt. He may have been too young to have heard much about the uprising in Haiti, but he would have seen firsthand the horror show of the French Revolution. His father legally adopted him and then sent him to join the dreamers in America. He never saw his French family again.

In America, was Audubon a person of color passing as white in a slave-owning country? His racial status seems relevant, even urgent, but we cannot be certain. Some scholars think they have traced his biological mother back to a white woman born in France, but on the other hand, when he was born, twenty thousand slaves a year were being imported to Haiti, some of them by his own father. It seems unlikely that a white French woman would have been needed as a servant on an island with such a casual abundance of mistreated Afro-Caribbean humanity, but she may have followed a man (or woman) there out of love or become indentured through no fault of her own or maybe she just wanted to see what it was that waited past the edge of the known world. Hold a mirror up to

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the nineteenth century and you can see reflected back any reading that you hope to find. Hyphenate as needed: Audubon was a Haitian-American artist, or no, he was more of a French-American, or he was a Failed-at-Business American, or he was a vain, handsome man trying to P. T. Barnum his way into the salons of royalty. We do know he was a naturalist who had not gone to a university and who was not part of the landed gentry. His first mother died of infection and the next mother got left behind in Haiti, perhaps resold, perhaps set free, perhaps left to die in the slave uprising. All of this had to have touched him; experience leaves its dirty fingerprints on our collars no matter how successful our lives may seem from a distance. Artists make art for many reasons: to document the world and to repudiate the world, to praise color and to violate color, to heal wounds and to inflict them. Audubon the person—not Audubon the coffee mug, Audubon the postage stamp—was a blend of many parts of the palette, not all of them complementary.

Further complicating this, we have the stark reality that each and every page required a small act of deletion from the tree of life. It would be accurate (but unfair) to create a headstone that reads, "John James Audubon—he

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sure shot a lot of birds.” First, everybody did; second, he put them to such good use, he has a free pass, even for the passenger pigeons. Part of Audubon’s genius was how unrestrainedly he worked, freestyling each picture with whatever he had on hand. Audubon wanted his birds to look like birds and did whatever it took to get there, moving back and forth between watercolor, gouache, graphite, pastel, chalk, ink, oil paint, overglazing, metal leaf, and collage. He should have been making illustrations and instead, by luck or quirk or because he didn’t know he wasn’t supposed to, he made art.

He also invented a miniature world uncomplicated by race or dead mothers or the sound of the mob shouting the tumbrel up the hill. In and around the birds, behind them and under them and despite them, Audubon’s plates reveal hidden farms, distant steeples, raging oceans, vertical cliffs. On one page he might linger to create a detailed study of a gull’s foot, a small visual detour floating free of the narrative frame; another scene will lavish adoring attention on weeds and thistles, more so than botanical necessity requires. Not all of this started with his own pencil, and for

portions of the background over the years he worked with four assistants (one of them a woman who later became his best friend’s wife). Collectively Team Audubon invented a magical and separate reality. I especially love Plate 207, *Booby Gannet*, since it is a strong vertical composition—the tall brown bird with a blazing white belly balances on brown snag, the arch of its neck and beak matched by the outward swoop of the stiff tail.

Yet beneath the solid presence of the dark bird on the dark stick, pushed down in the bottom ten percent of the frame, there is a calm strip of coastal Florida, where a dozen white houses and outbuildings doze next to a slim pier, a scattering of ships at anchor, all beneath pastel bands of summer clouds. The bird’s webbed feet end in exquisite toenails (no detail is too small to notice), and then all of the foreground image drops away, revealing an alternate universe in the distant background. Who lives in the nice large house? Who first planted the sabal palm barely visible between the farthest buildings on the left? Is it somebody’s birthday today? The shed on the dock must be full of crab pots and coiled sisal line. The background details become a world within a world. Look closer, pilgrim, and closer still. In the final print, the village palmetto is so small you need a jeweler’s loupe to find it.

Audubon’s tiny worlds—partly real, partly an idealized bucolia that existed only in his own mind—are all the more convincing because he didn’t even know he was making them. He would probably be surprised to learn they have received notice at all, and he almost certainly would not be able to explain why he made them or where they came from, emotionally. Plate 347 shows a pair of black-and-white sea ducks from Europe. It is a moody arctic scene, one with foreground and background, no middle ground. (This is true for most Audubon tableaux.) The caption lets us know these are smews or white nuns. The main duck diagonals top right to bottom left, streaking toward the bottom in Stuka glory. We see him from above, eyes gleaming, black-and-white wings arched into a tight W. A black blaze between his shoulder blades looks like a jet pack or an emergency scuba tank. Already landed, his sorrel-headed mate bobs in a boreal lagoon below, unifying the composition with horizontal body and a head turning to look up and left.

The surface action is nominally required—this is a bird book, after all—but slowly the scene behind the

ducks emerges like a harbor coalescing out of the fog. We are in Labrador or Newfoundland or a small bay on a coast on Pluto, and the water, the sky, and the gelid coast all are equal layers of translucent gray, as if the sea cliffs happen to be some pieces of vertical water that got up and went for a walk. It doesn’t look fake; instead, it looks so real that one suddenly realizes how much translucence the regular geology books leave out. I have a copy of this plate on my computer and for fun, I tried inverting it. It works even better upside-down. Now the female is on top, clinging to the bottom of the crenulated sky like a bat, while the male sculls through an ocean of silt-gray silk to join her.

In drawing after strange drawing, it was as if Audubon had never seen a book before, or that what he most wanted to be was the first postmodernist at the party, knocking on the host’s door 150 years too early. In Plate 171 we learn that barn owls keep dead squirrels as pets and that on evenings with a good moon, they are lit from within, like the windows of all-night diners. Plate 125, *Brown-headed Nuthatch*, pretends it is an illustration of two passerines foraging on a branch, but really it wants to be about the bold vertical Y that dominates the page; the birds are minor afterthoughts, attractive but inconsequential. The true subject is the weathered wood and the way it extends out past the top and bottom of the frame, taking us to a lost world of peeling bark and eternal lichen. The branch owns the page utterly, and the page exists only to present the branch to us, like a velvet pillow indenting to accept the imperial gravitas of the queen’s scepter.

After *Birds of America*, at Audubon’s request, the copper plates were crated up and shipped back to America. Before they could be unloaded, the ship sank in New York Harbor. The plates sat in seawater for many months before being salvaged. Once they were on shore, the warehouse they were being stored in burned down. After Audubon’s death, his widow, burdened by debt, sold what remained for the value of the copper. Somehow—the hand of fate works in strange ways—a few plates survived the scrapper’s furnace and are still extant. Audubon State Park in Kentucky owns one: Plate 308, *Tell-tale Godwit, or Snipe* (the ones that don’t taste good).

In 2002 Friends of Audubon, hoping to raise money for conservation, issued what is called a restrike. Using archival paper, they reinked Plate 308 and for the first time

since 1836, new prints were pulled. Fifty were done with black ink and fifty with sepia, and the intent was not to color them, but to let them be clean, stark, and modern. (Modern except for the faux antiquity of the sepia ink, that is.)

It did not work out. Due to the corruption of the plate, the prints developed an eerie blur, the way one might expect to see the face of a ghost looking back at you from a clouded mirror. To protect the plate, no more restrikes will be issued.

I wish they had tried a bit harder, dared to do just a few more pulls, and then I wish the plate had cracked in two, exploded, detonated, become consumed by fire as thunder crashed out of the clouds and darkness fell upon the hills and fields of Kentucky. Some things should be left alone. Let there be no sequels to *The Great Gatsby* or *Beloved*, no remakes of *Casablanca* or *The Godfather*, no embellishments to Mahler’s Ninth, no new characters added to *Hamlet* or *Death of a Salesman*.

We can print anything we want now, at any size and in any color, and yet like the Pleiades rising blue and bright above the horizon, Audubon’s *Birds of America* remains a constellation whose exact origins we cannot explain—not merely a nature book but a star cluster whose light, after all these years, is still trying to reach us.

Charles Hood, a longtime *Catamaran Literary Reader* contributor, has published sixteen books, including *Wild LA* (Timber Press, 2019) and *A Californian’s Guide to the Mammals among Us* (Heyday, 2019). Future projects include a field guide to reptiles and amphibians, a book of essays that will include this piece, a guide to nocturnal wildlife in the Southwest, and an introduction to biodiversity.