MARI KLOEPPEL

Ojhab (Peregrine Falcon), 2005
Oil on Linen, 20 x 20 in

courtesy: Winfield Gallery, Carmel

CHARLES HOOD

Condors of Los Angeles

His version of the bird that personified California can sometimes be seen at the Huntington Library in San Marino. Like the bird, he was a remarkable specimen. He could dance, sing, draw, shoot, ride, sew, play the flute, and fence. In London, he wore fringed buckskins; on the frontier, he wore white linen. John Keats called him a fool. Charles Darwin quoted him in his books and may have had taxidermy lessons from him. Harry Truman collected his art, as did Queen Victoria, Roger Tory Peterson, the king of France, Mark Twain. The illegitimate Haitian offspring of a slave-owning French pirate and a mixed-race servant, John James Audubon convinced half of Louisiana and portions of northern England that he was the lost dauphin of the French royal family.

He claimed to have been taught painting by Jacques David. He admired Indians but owned slaves. He went bankrupt often. A dozen towns are named after him, several historical parks, some bridges, an ecological society, one shearwater, a small rabbit, an extinct ram, and an oriole. Amazon displays six thousand hits for his name, but only one title really matters: an intact copy of his greatest book is worth whatever the market will pay—most recently, $11 million and change.

Birds of America: what a grand project. A book that would include every species of bird in America (and a few that he got wrong, so *more* than every species), each drawn life size—even if that meant folding the flamingo in half like a dead body in a suitcase. Those plates in turn would be etched in copper, dipped in acid, hand colored, bound in sets, sold by subscription to the 1 percent who bought nice things, then and now. But why? Does art history have much room for John James Audubon? Robert Hughes lists him in the same breath as Rothko, Grant Wood, Gilbert Stuart, and Andy Warhol. Probably because he was from Oz, Hughes was the nutty exception who proves the rule; in the 1,100 pages of the most recent edition of *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, Monsieur Audubon the rustic genius is mentioned a grand total of zero times.

So here is the great bird itself, plate CCCCXVI, on view at the Huntington. Standing there in the dim library and looking at Audubon's condor, one thinks of some kind of queer, wet vulture, seemingly still hoping to be an extra in *Waiting for Godot*. There's money to be made there, too. Single pages, cut loose from the original edition, go

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for $200,000 on the high end, down to a paltry $8,000, depending on the species, on the state of the page, and on our current romance for one thing over another. Passenger Pigeons, Carolina parakeets, a flamingo, the Labrador duck: Part of the aquatint charm of an Audubon plate is to reach back to antebellum America, a time of hoop skirts and log cabins, an Andy Jackson time when now-gone Bachman's warblers and ivory-billed woodpeckers were duking it out with condors and grizzly bears. Audubon called the condor a "California vulture," accurate enough in its own way, and he probably did not know about the other kind, the Andean condor, bigger still and, like California's, a relic of the megafaunal Pleistocene.

The condor is one of those beasts that famously edged up to the crevasse of extinction but didn't fall in. Down to the last two dozen in the wild, in the mid eighties they were rodeo'd up, put in cages, and encouraged to multiply to raise them back, first to Big Sur and then to the Grand Canyon. Why not bring the condors back to Wilshire Boulevard as we recently did the peregrine falcon, a species now thriving as it feasts on one city pigeon after another. Peregrines dive (the correct verb is *stoop*) at fighter-jet speeds, smashing into their victims with clenched-fist talons; then they flip midair to catch the now-dead bodies in the same feet, then flip right-side around and fly back to an office-tower ledge to pluck and eat—and do all of this faster than you can clap three times. The pigeons never know what hit them. But what do you feed a necrophiliac like a condor, something evolved to tear open dead ground sloths and putrid slabs of maggoty mastodon? Answer, stillborn goats, or at least that's what the San Diego Zoo and U.S. Fish and Wildlife try. Condors used to be thick as thieves in California, give or take a few larcenies, and the archetypal scene would have been a dead humpback whale on the beach at Monterey, grizzly bears and condors swarming over it, with a blazing hill of poppies in the background.

Of course they were found up and down the plains and hills of Hollywood too, these condors of L.A., once upon a rancherita. Malibu, Newport, Sepulveda, Catalina, San Simeon—all the canyons, all the beaches, all the saints. The Hollywood Sign should read, "Welcome to Condorland." Up to the mid-seventies, one could still see them from I-5 in Gorman. Native American tradition is that they got rowdy some days, swallowed the moon, caused eclipses. An everywhere bird, common as blister rust and scrub oak. Urban legend has condors nesting even on Eagle Rock, upper side of Los Angeles, where the eastbound 134 hurries past the Figueroa offramp. That may have been über back-in-the-day, but we do know that they lingered into the twentieth century along what later became the 210 freeway near the Jet Propulsion Laboratory; John Muir would have seen them in Altadena on the way to visit one of his daughters who lived on a ranch in the Mojave Desert.

They're still here, the L.A. condors, just mothballed. The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has three lockers of specimens, a fleet of dead condors each with a sepia ink label granny-knotted to its scrawny leg. They weigh not much at all, about the same as a Ziploc bag of popcorn, and their stiff heads stick up out of their ruffle-shawled shoulders like desiccated umbrella handles. Audubon's condor he got in trade from a man named Townsend, for whom a warbler and a solitaire are named; but the 1838 double elephant folio's hand-tinted plate says "drawn from life."

The Los Angeles condors in the museum come from a mix of sources but mostly fell to earth like very old men with enormous wings, which is to say they were plugged by science the old-fashioned way: some ornithologist in brown serge and knee-high lace-up leather boots went out and shot one or three or five, to salt up for posterity. Other folks were involved, too; one of the condors, specimen 20963, bought the farm near Fillmore in 1916, having been "shot by a boy with a .22 rifle." Another comes from a bird taken alive on October, 23, 1923, captured for the Selig Zoo in Lincoln Heights. They rented out a lot of animals to the nascent *Tarzan* franchises; it would take a deeper cinephiliac than I am to remember whether or not this same condor made any appearances as, say, a dollar-a-day dinosaur from Africa. That bird died five years later and now is catalog number 15885. There is a condor tongue from 1920. Another tongue, 1947. Some have no dates at all, while others are from the 1880s, but how or why they got there we can't now guess. In 1933 Caltech got one, yet from which mountaintop nobody could later remember. Pomona's from 1901, though, had a wingspan of 8 feet, 6.5 inches—somebody wrote down at least that much.

In their drawers the condors stink strongly of mothballs, and their bodies, vulturine and stiff, remain hard to romanticize. One or two I might have known personally; either a specimen from 1984 or a second one, from 1985, could have been among those final, free-flying condors I studied with my Zeiss before they were all brought to zoos for captive breeding.

With a condor, it's the blockbuster theory of design. Bigger the prey, bigger the vulture, since you need a mighty hefty crowbar to pry open the dead hide of the monsters that used to live and die in La Brea. What the museum specimens tell us—and what Audubon's dreamy, hunchbacked plate CCCCXVI verifies—is that California was once, probably will be again, the Book of Revelation. Great beasts once filled the sky, will do so again. Here are the seven trumpets, the seven seals, the seven bowls, the seven condor lords who will preside over the burning as the chaparral hills roar with red fire from San Clemente to the swimming pools of Calabasas.

And the condor will answer, *Yes. It is time and I am coming home.*

Charles Hood teaches photography and writing at Antelope Valley College, California. He has been the recipient of a Fulbright fellowship, an Artist in Residency with the Center for Land Use Interpretation, and an Artists and Writers grant from the National Science Foundation His journeys have taken him from the high Arctic to Patagonia, Easter Island, and the South Pole. His books include *Bombing Ploesti*, *Río de Dios*, *Xopilote Cantos*, and *The Half-Life of Salt: Voices from the Enola Gay*. His *South x South:* Poems *from Antarctica* is forthcoming in April from Ohio University Press.