

*Ornithology and Enterprise:  
Making and Marketing  
John James Audubon's  
The Birds of America*

GREGORY H. NOBLES

ONE OF THE STRENGTHS of a great institution is that it can admit its mistakes and even do so publicly and in print. So it is that the American Antiquarian Society tells a story about a big one that got away, when John James Audubon came to Worcester one day in December 1840, to sell his monumental work, the massive, four-volume, double elephant folio

I want to thank several colleagues and friends at the American Antiquarian Society, especially Ellen Dunlap, John Hench, Joanne Chaison, and Caroline Sloat, for the kind invitation to deliver the 2003 James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture, and I appreciated the comments and questions of members of the audience at the lecture itself. I was also fortunate to deliver a slightly modified version of the lecture to an equally insightful audience, the Pittsburgh Bibliophiles, at the University of Pittsburgh's University Art Gallery in January 2004, just as the Gallery's wonderful exhibit of Audubon prints, 'Taking Flight,' was coming to a close.

In the time since this lecture was submitted for publication, three new Audubon biographies have appeared in print—too late, unfortunately, for consideration here. See Duff Hart-Davis, *Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist and the Making of The Birds of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004); Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); and William Souder, *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America* (New York: North Point Press, 2004).

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edition of *The Birds of America* (1827–38). The story has become part of the AAS legend, but since it sets the stage for a more thorough exploration of Audubon and his remarkable book, it bears retelling here.

AAS, in the person of Marcus McCorison (director and president, 1960–92), writing in *Under Its Generous Dome*, recounts the incident this way: ‘Audubon called at the library for the purpose of selling to AAS a set of his *Birds of America*. On Audubon’s first visit, [Librarian Samuel Foster] Haven was busy, and the artist was instructed to return later in the afternoon, which he did. The librarian had departed and Antiquarian Hall was locked up.’ McCorison goes on to note that the failure to purchase Audubon’s major work ‘causes pangs of regret to this very day,’ because AAS has ‘not yet obtained a set of that great book,’ and ‘despairs of ever again having the opportunity of doing so.’ ‘Pangs of regret,’ ‘despair’—that’s a lot of emotion for AAS, and we can only take McCorison seriously about the Society’s sense of opportunity lost.<sup>1</sup>

But there’s another version of the Audubon-at-AAS story, this one told by Audubon himself. On Saturday morning, December 12, 1840, he went out ‘in good spirits’ to walk around Worcester, see the sights, and, as always, solicit sales for *The Birds of America*. On the whole, he judged the town a ‘very handsome place’ which ‘in summer must be quite beautiful.’ He and his local agent, Clarendon Harris, ‘The Bookseller,’ visited the town’s lunatic asylum ‘and found it kept in the very best of order.’ Next, perhaps logically, they ‘went to the Antiquarian Library, and saw its curious old Books and paintings, etc., etc.’ In Audubon’s account, the librarian,

1. Marcus McCorison, ‘A Brief History of the Society,’ in *Under Its Generous Dome: The Collections and Programs of the American Antiquarian Society*, ed. Nancy H. Burkett and John B. Hench. (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1992), 23. On a happier note, I will point out that the Society does have a copy of Audubon’s other two famous publications, the five-volume *Ornithological Biography* (Edinburgh: Carey and Hart, 1832–39) and the seven-volume, royal octavo version of *The Birds of America* (New York: J. J. Audubon, 1840–44). Moreover, in Antiquarian Hall, thirsty researchers can also find over the water fountain a print of Audubon’s ‘Blue Jays,’ in which three raucous jays raid another bird’s nest and suck the life out of the absent owner’s eggs. It once occurred to me that some staff member might have put this print there as a mischievous metaphor for the scholarly enterprise that takes place daily here (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), 1825, by J. J. Audubon, watercolor, graphite, pastel,  $2\frac{3}{4} \times 18\frac{7}{8}$  inches accession number 1863.17.102. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Mr. Haven, told him that a local notable—Elihu Burritt, ‘the famous learned Black Smith’ who would become one of the town’s most renowned reformers—wanted to subscribe to his bird book, so off Audubon and his agent went to see him. After making friendly conversation and, more important, a deal with blacksmith Burritt, Audubon went to do the same with Isaac Davis, a prominent lawyer. Audubon stayed at the Davis mansion long enough to enjoy a sociable drink (‘2 glasses of good wine’), admire Mrs.

Davis ('an interesting Lady'), and try to entice Davis to buy the big version of *The Birds of America* rather than the smaller one ('I hope it may be the first'). After the second glass of wine with the Davises, Audubon and Harris hurried back to see Mr. Haven—but too late: 'He was gone, we not having been punctual with him, and thereby have lost a subscriber.'<sup>2</sup>

Poor Audubon. By 1840 he had already given essentially his whole adult life to making and marketing *The Birds of America*, painting new bird pictures, overseeing the engraving and coloring of the plates, keeping an eye on lazy agents and booksellers, making sure the completed plates actually got to their purchasers, making trips across Great Britain, France, and the United States seeking new subscribers—that is, people who would be willing to pay in installments and up front for the promise of future delivery—and, almost as often, dunning old subscribers who had become slow or forgetful in making payment. After all that, here he was in Worcester, fifty-five years old, a well-connected, well-reviewed artist, a member of several honorary organizations on both sides of the Atlantic, still having to get introductions and go door-to-door as a salesman in a mid-sized Massachusetts town, hoping he could find just another handful of subscribers who would promise to put down a thousand dollars for his 'Great Work.' How he felt 'in good spirits' in Worcester is a wonder indeed.

This two-sided story of Audubon at AAS and the book deal gone wrong ends on a note of regret on both sides—Audubon's at the time, and the Society's now. But that unhappy ending to

2. *Journal of John James Audubon: Made While Obtaining Subscriptions to His 'Birds of America,' 1840-1843*, ed. Howard Corning (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1929), 55. A more readily accessible source for Audubon's Worcester visit is *Audubon's America: The Narratives and Experiences of John James Audubon*, ed. Donald Culross Peattie (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), 267-68. Audubon's hopes about getting Burritt and Davis to subscribe to the larger version of *The Birds of America* were not to be fulfilled: both men appear on a list of nineteen Worcester residents who subscribed to the smaller, royal octavo edition; see 'List of Subscribers Since the Publication of the First Volume,' in John James Audubon, *The Birds of America: From Drawings Made In The United States And Their Territories*, 7 vols. (New York: J. J. Audubon, 1840-44), 2:205.

one story offers a good starting place for another, a longer story that raises larger questions, inviting us to think about the nature of the transaction in question and, above all, about the nature of the book in question. Audubon's experience in Worcester represents only one episode in his unceasing struggle to produce and sell *The Birds of America*, and his situation as an itinerant salesman for his own work brings into focus the role of artist (or author) not just as creator, but as producer, promoter, and entrepreneur. In that sense, it also raises the issue of the relationship between the artist and his audience—or, put differently if more crudely, his customer or consumer. Both the world of art and the world of the book always reflect economic as well as aesthetic considerations, and the interplay between those two areas tells us a great deal about the artist's role in making paintings and marketing to the public. And this particular book in question was such a big book—big in price and big in dimensions, an expensive, ungainly, in some ways almost unusable work—that it stretched the common understanding of what a book should be. Indeed, one could argue that Audubon's *Birds of America* was not—or, as some people would assert later, should not be—a book at all.

Audubon always called it his 'Great Work,' and it certainly was—great in ambition, great in execution, and certainly great in size and price. In its grandest form, the double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America* was a huge, heavy, four-volume set of 435 plates, with each plate measuring 29½ by 39½ inches, each volume weighing more than forty pounds, and requiring, as Audubon put it, 'two stout arms to raise it from the ground.' It also required a total commitment of around one thousand dollars to make it one's possession.<sup>3</sup> But great as it may be, *The Birds of America* still

3. The best basic works about *The Birds of America* as a book are Waldemar H. Fries, *The Double Elephant Folio: The Story of Audubon's 'Birds of America'* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), and Suzanne Low, *An Index and Guide to Audubon's 'Birds of America'* (New York: Abbeville Press and the American Museum of Natural History, 1988). The quotation from Audubon about the weight of his work is in *Ornithological Biography*, 5:291.

invites several basic, perhaps obvious, questions: What was Audubon thinking? Why would anyone ever make such a big book about birds? And in the end, we could just as easily ask the question that might well have occurred to Mr. Haven: Why would anyone ever spend so much money on such a big book about birds?

Let me begin with the most basic question about this book—why? That is, why, how, and when did Audubon decide to make *The Birds of America* a book? The ‘when’ is easy—1826. It may be hard to say exactly when Audubon decided to devote his life to drawing birds—maybe as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century, probably by 1810, certainly by 1820—but it’s clear that 1826, the year Audubon left the United States to go to Great Britain, proved to be pivotal in his career. It was the year Audubon fully decided on his life’s work, defined its nature and scope, and determined how to get it done.

During his voyage to England, Audubon sometimes amused himself by drinking a bit too much and then writing journal entries addressed to his wife, Lucy, and their sons, Victor and John, who stayed behind in America. In one of his more sober-sounding notes, though, he told them of his big ideas about his birds: ‘The purpose of this voyage is to visit not only England but all Europe, with the intention of publishing my work of the Birds of America. If not sadly disappointed, my return to these happy shores will be the brightest birth day I shall have ever enjoyed: Oh America, Wife, Children and acquaintances, Farewell!’<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Audubon had already considered his course of action—publication—and he apparently already had the working title for his work. All he had to do was to reach terra firma and get down to business.

He fared quite well at first. He had been in Liverpool only a few weeks when he had the good fortune to receive an invitation to put up his paintings in the city’s Royal Institution in late July. And within a month, the popular response seemed so positive

4. *The 1826 Journal of John James Audubon*, ed. Alice Ford (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 16.

that Audubon could write his son Victor that 'it seems that I am considered unrivaled in the art of Drawing even by the most learned of this country. The newspapers have given so many flattering accounts of my productions and of my being a superior ornithologist that I dare no longer look into any of *them*.'<sup>5</sup>

Still, Audubon at first felt an uneasy conflict between his new status as a celebrity artist and his preferred status as a 'superior ornithologist.' Having an audience was fine, but the prospect of having a paying audience proved a bit of a professional problem—at least for a while. When some members of the Royal Institution suggested that he charge admission to the show, Audubon recoiled with a sense of injured honor: 'My heart revolted at the thought,' he wrote, 'and although I am poor enough, God knows, I could not think of doing such a thing consistently. . . . I could not, I repeat, think it consistent to become a mere *show man* and give up the title of *J. J. Audubon, Naturalist*.'<sup>6</sup> Gradually, though, Audubon began to soften his ethical stance, and then he got over it completely. A few months later, while exhibiting his pictures in Edinburgh, Audubon wrote his wife that 'it is not the naturalist that I wish to please altogether, I assure thee. It is the wealthy part of the community. The first can only speak well or ill of me but the latter will fill my pockets.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, the marketing of *The Birds of America* began almost as soon as the making. *J. J. Audubon*, 'show man' it would be, then.

Yet even as Audubon hoped to watch his pockets fill, he remained uneasy with the exhibition process. Like any showman, he always counted the crowd and tried to tote up the daily take, but while some days were better than others, many were quite bad. One day, two men approached him, suggesting that they could help by providing music to accompany his exhibition. He thanked

5. Audubon to Victor G. Audubon, September 1, 1826, in *Letters of John James Audubon, 1826-1840*, ed. Howard Corning, 2 vols. (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1930), 1:3.

6. Ford, *1826 Journal*, 75.

7. Audubon to Lucy Bakewell Audubon, December 10, 1826, in Ford, *1826 Journal*, 346-47; a slightly different version of the letter, dated December 21, 1826, is in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:8-9.

them but declined their services: he was showing birds, after all, not 'Egyptian mummies or deathly-looking wax figures,' and if 'my songsters will not sing or be agreeable by themselves, other music would only diminish their worth.'<sup>8</sup> Two days later, another man suggested that Audubon ought to paint a sign to hang outside his exhibition, and again, he declined. Not quite grasping the maxim that it pays to advertise, he later explained to Lucy that if he painted a sign showing birds for free outside, people might 'gaze at it so long that they would forget that 200 drawings are waiting to be examined for the mere trifle of one shilling.'<sup>9</sup> But, above all, the most difficult part of exhibiting his work in public was listening to the private conversations of his viewers, especially those that were still critical of the quality of his work.

Having overheard enough negative comments, he began to work on a different way of exhibiting his bird paintings—in book form. Although he still had to exhibit his works to make ends meet, he supplemented his income by painting individual pictures of birds and animals and selling them as quickly as he could. But increasingly, his thoughts turned to publication. On a day when only twenty people had come to see his exhibit—'Sad work, this,' Audubon muttered in his journal—the American consul in Manchester, F. S. Brookes of Boston, came to visit and 'advised me to have a subscription book for my work, &c., &c.' In Audubon's journals, the '&c., &c.' usually stood for boredom or frustration, and at first he seemed dubious about Brooke's suggestion: 'It is easy to have advice, but to strike a good one is very difficult indeed.' Within a day, though, he had warmed to the idea and had become committed to the new venture, even excited by it: 'I concluded today to have a book of subscriptions, open to receive the names of all persons inclined to have the *best American illustrations of birds of that country ever yet transmitted to posterity*.'<sup>10</sup> The underscored emphasis Audubon gave to the second half of the sentence

8. Ford, *1826 Journal*, 138.

9. Ford, *1826 Journal*, 143–44.

10. Ford, *1826 Journal*, 158, 161.



apparently revived and clarified his original sense of mission, something that had seemed clear enough when he left America but that had been repeatedly undermined by the discouragements of the exhibition business in Britain.

One good thing about publishing a book, of course, is that the author never has to watch the readers read, or listen to them mumble stupid or unflattering comments about it. The hard thing, though, is producing the book in the first place. Audubon never doubted his ability with a paintbrush, but he struggled with the pen, especially if it meant writing in English, his second language. 'I will now proceed with a firm resolution to attempt *being an author*,' he wrote Lucy in October 1826. 'It is a terrible thing for me, far better fitted to study and delineate in the forests than to arrange phrases with sensible grammarian skill.' Still, if he could arrange enough phrases to go along with his paintings, he would find a way to avoid the overheard insults of British philistines: 'Then, my dear friend, my exhibiting my work publicly will be laid aside for a while at least, and *I hope forever*.'<sup>11</sup>

#### *A Great Book at a Great Price*

But the decision to publish *The Birds of America* as a book immediately raises another question: what were the artistic and commercial implications of publishing such a big book? To be sure, Audubon was not the first artist/naturalist to publish a large book about nature. But Audubon's proposed book would be, certainly in terms of its physical dimensions, the largest book ever published. (Until very recently, in fact, it remained so, but the title now goes to a five-by-seven foot, 133-pound volume on Bhutan, published in late 2003.)<sup>12</sup> At the outset, Audubon had already decided to depict his birds 'size of life,' as he put it, 'presenting to

11. Audubon to Lucy Bakewell Audubon, October 1, 1826, in Ford, *1826 Journal*, 335.

12. Michael Hawley, *Bhutan: A Visual Odyssey Across the Kingdom* (Charlestown, Mass.: Acme Bookbinding, 2003).

the world those my favourite objects in nature, of the size which nature has given to them.'<sup>13</sup> This particular sort of publication, however, would be especially risky business. He admitted as much in the first month of his stay in Liverpool in a letter to his brother-in-law, Nicholas Berthoud. Audubon wrote that he understood the difficulties he faced, not to mention the price of failure: 'Should I, through the stupendousness of the enterprise and publication of so large a work, be forced to abandon its being engraved, I will follow a general round of remunerating exhibitions and take the proceeds home.'<sup>14</sup> Some of his friends tried to dissuade him from trying to publish such oversized images, arguing that a collection of such plates could never be affordable, maybe not even possible. Richard Harlan, one of Audubon's few Philadelphia allies, warned him that 'I know of no society here likely to subscribe to so costly a work, [because] they have been too accustomed to enlarge their libraries by presents, and begging.—besides Men of Nat. Science are scarce here, and those not able to purchase many expensive books on their own account.'<sup>15</sup> But Audubon was determined that drawing the birds 'size of life' would be his defining contribution to both art and ornithology, and he never wavered from that position. In 1834, when he was midway through the production of *The Birds of America*, he railed about the 'Ludicrous outcry' that seemed evident in Great Britain. 'The fashionable size of books just now is in inches 4 by 2 1/2 so modest, so empty of novelty and devoid of facts that it is enough to sicken one to look at their pompous coverings.'<sup>16</sup> No one could ever accuse Audubon of making a modest book.

Some have suggested, both at that time and since, that the scale of Audubon's art makes for awkward ornithology, forcing Audubon to put some of the bigger birds into poses that are not

13. Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, 1:xvi-xvii.

14. Audubon to Nicholas Berthoud, August 7, 1826, in Ford, *1826 Journal*, 329-30.

15. Richard Harlan to Audubon, November 19, 1828, in Audubon Box, New-York Historical Society.

16. Audubon to John Bachman, December 10, 1834, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 2:59.

normally seen in the field. (The image of the American Flamingo is a striking case in point.) One nineteenth-century design critic wondered 'how much science gains by increasing the picture of a bird beyond that size necessary to display all the parts distinctly,' and concluded that the verdict seemed, at best, 'questionable.' Still, this observer gave Audubon his due and judged the work 'honorable to his skill, perseverance, and energy.'<sup>17</sup> More recently, it has been noted that if America had ostriches and emus, Audubon's book would have been bigger still.<sup>18</sup>

Consider the most obvious consequence of the size of Audubon's work—the cost. Even before he published it, Audubon knew that the eventual product would be extremely expensive, probably more than the American market could bear. He wrote Lucy that 'I would greatly prefer having my Subscriptions confined to public institutions in America than to see added to it a number of names of Men whose transient habits would only give us much trouble if not turn out to be bankrupts.' If he had to seek subscriptions from individuals, he wanted only those who 'are all of good Standing and Wealthy—no Yankees here in Such matters.'<sup>19</sup> But even though he tried to solicit sales among the most prominent figures in the United States, Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson among them, he admitted to his son Victor that 'I expect nothing in America in the way of encouragement. 700 Dollars is rather high for a Book on Birds in our Country.'<sup>20</sup> At the time of its publication, in fact, the full, four-volume, double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America* cost an American subscriber not seven hundred dollars, but about one thousand—an enormous amount for a book of any sort, roughly equivalent to the annual

17. William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, 3 vols. (New York, 1834; reprint, Boston: C. E. Goodspeed and Co., 1918), 3:202.

18. Satcherverell Sitwell, Handasyde Buchanan, and James Fisher, *Fine Bird Books, 1700–1900* (London and New York: Colliers and Van Nostrand, 1953), 15–16.

19. Audubon to Lucy Bakewell Audubon, December 21, 1827, Audubon Collection, Princeton University Library Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Box 2: Letters, Folder 9.

20. Audubon to Victor G. Audubon, December 22, 1828, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:76.

income of a middle-class household, and about double what a skilled male artisan could make in a year.<sup>21</sup> To put the matter more into the local context, at the time Audubon came calling at AAS, the total annual budget for the Society—salaries, acquisitions, and all—was just barely over nine hundred dollars.<sup>22</sup> That being the case, we can easily understand Librarian Haven's reluctance to make a commitment of so much money to a travelling book salesman, no matter how beautiful the book and no matter how celebrated the seller. We might even go so far as to imagine that Mr. Haven absented himself from his second meeting with Audubon on purpose, preferring to hide rather than decide on the spot about incurring such a great cost to the Society. In light of the financial challenges this book posed to a learned society or a learned individual, the point was clear: *The Birds of America* would not be a book for the common people or even for the middle-class reading (or consuming) public. It was, almost by definition, a rare book from the beginning.

Indeed, Audubon never intended to produce a bestseller for a mass market. Soon after he engaged his original engraver, William Lizars of Edinburgh, he wrote Lucy that Lizars estimated 'that 500 subscribers will make me and him Independent for the rest of our Days.'<sup>23</sup> A little later he lowered the bar a bit: 'If I can procure three hundred good substantial names of persons, or bodies, or institutions,' he wrote, 'I cannot fail to do well for my family, although I must abandon my life to its success, and undergo many sad perplexities and perhaps never see again my own beloved America.'<sup>24</sup> Whatever the case, all he had to do was sell a few hundred, he figured, and he would be financially set for life.

21. For estimates of annual incomes of the middle and working classes in the 1840s, see Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 56–61.

22. I am grateful to Thomas Knoles of the AAS staff for providing me with this historical information via e-mail, February 21, 2003.

23. Audubon to Lucy Bakewell Audubon, May 15, 1827, Audubon Collection, Princeton University Library, Box 2: Letters, Folder 6.

24. Audubon to William Rathbone, November 24, 1826, in Ford, *1826 Journal*, 369.

But could he do that? Could he actually create such a big book and sell it for such a price? Here I want to turn for a few moments to its making and marketing, as I promised in my title, to what we would now call the production and distribution processes in this remarkable business venture. And I think we need to understand *The Birds of America* as just that: a business venture—not just an extensive work of art, not just an example of the sole genius of the lone, struggling artist—but an enterprise in which the artist became overseer to dozens of people.

Throughout the twelve-year period of producing *The Birds of America*, the one constant in the story is Audubon's intense, even obsessive, personal involvement in every part of the process: 'I shall superintend it myself,' he declared at the outset, 'both engraving and colouring and bringing up, and I hope my industry will be kept in good repair thereby.'<sup>25</sup> But the superintending involved working closely with his engravers—first, William Lizars of Edinburgh and then, when Lizars's workers went on strike after doing only a few plates, Robert Havell, Jr., of London. Indeed, Audubon's long and remarkable artistic and business relationship with Robert Havell is crucial to the story, even the legend, of making Audubon's *Birds of America*. One student of Audubon's art has declared that Havell 'was much more than the engraver of *Birds of America*. He was a genius . . . a fine artist in his own right, with a discerning eye for composition' that contributed enormously to the final look of Audubon's finished work.<sup>26</sup> Audubon, of course, initiated the work, producing the water-color paintings of the birds, sometimes cutting and pasting together several paintings that he had done at different times, and then taking the painted image to Havell's shop. There the dozens of engravers and colorists made the final image look right, reversing Audubon's image onto copper plates from which the final impressions were made, and then hand-painting the birds

25. Audubon to William Rathbone, November 24, 1826, in Ford, *1826 Journal*, 369.

26. Low, *Index and Guide*, 31.

and the backgrounds, an extremely labor-intensive—and skill-intensive—job. (The copper plates are stunning in their detail, in some ways as visually striking and artistically impressive as the finished engravings themselves.) Audubon generally admired the skill of the engravers as they worked at the bird images, but he never fully trusted them or anyone else engaged in the work to do it according to his very exacting standards. He always maintained extremely close supervision over all parts of the production process and became an almost constant (and, to the workers, probably annoying) presence in the engraver's shop, personally inspecting almost every plate for accuracy and color before it went out. Even when he had to be away from London, Audubon supervised from a distance (fig. 2). Once he wrote from the far side of the Atlantic to his son Victor, who was filling in as supervisor in his father's absence from London, and complained mightily about the lettering on the plates: '*The letter engraver* is a miserable one. The horrible Mistakes which I have discovered in the plates of the 2d Volume are quite disgraceful to our Work—Mention this to Friend Havell and see that no errors of the same sort happen again.'<sup>27</sup> To Havell he was a bit less blunt: 'Do not think for a moment that I am *lecturing* you . . . [but] merely wish to enjoin you to keep a Masters eye over the Work in each of its departments.' To make his point even more palatable, yet important, to Havell, he suggested that 'Who Knows but that your name if not your fortune is now connected with Mine and with my family[sic]?'<sup>28</sup> Still, Audubon never forgot that the success of the work ultimately depended on his taking care of his own main role: 'While I am not a colorist and Havell is a very superior one,' he said, 'I *know* the birds.'<sup>29</sup>

And know the birds he did. Audubon often fussed, sometimes even agonized, over his paintings, trying to make sure of every

27. Audubon to Victor G. Audubon, October 18, 1834, Audubon Collection, Princeton University Library, Box 2: Letters, Folder 29.

28. Audubon to Robert Havell, Jr., April 20, 1833, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:213.

29. Fries, *Double Elephant Folio*, 29.

ornithological detail, so that his critics in the scientific community (of whom there were more than a few) would not have additional ammunition. In April 1833, he wrote rather diplomatically to Havell about some water birds he had drawn: 'Allow me to ask you that the *Bills, legs & feet* are *carefully* copied from my Drawings—to Naturalists, these points are of the greatest importance.'<sup>30</sup> A few months later he wrote his son Victor to praise the work he and Havell were doing, noting that a recent batch of ten plates were 'the best I ever saw of birds and that they do *Havell* and *yourself* my beloved Son great credit,' and that he was therefore 'delighted.' Still, he took care to note a small but important detail on the black-capped titmouse (now more commonly known as the chickadee): 'There must be *a white spot at the lower end of the black cap* next [to] the shoulders,' he wrote, '—this white spot distinguishes our bird from the European of the same name, *which* is a different Species—See to that at once.'<sup>31</sup> Lucy Audubon well understood the importance of her husband's personal attention. 'This work of my husband,' she wrote to a cousin, 'is of such magnitude and such expense that it harasses him at times almost beyond his physical powers . . . and what with engravers, printers, and colourers (all a disagreeable race), his mind and hands are full.'<sup>32</sup>

In fact, *The Birds of America* had become more than 'this work of my husband.' By the early 1830s, it was truly the family business. Audubon had enlisted both of his sons in various capacities: while Victor was handling the inspection of the work in Audubon's absence, John was actually doing some of the paintings in the later stages (fig. 2). But it was Lucy who came to play a critical role, which went far beyond that of wife. During Audubon's first few

30. Audubon to Robert Havell, Jr., April 20, 1833, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:212.

31. Audubon to Victor G. Audubon, September 15, 1833, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:249.

32. Lucy Bakewell Audubon to Euphemia Gifford, June 10, 1831, Audubon-Bakewell and Gifford Correspondence, Stark Museum of Art, SMA ABGC 0011.103.011; I am grateful to Richard Rhodes who has deposited a typescript transcription of the Audubon-Bakewell and Gifford Correspondence in the Stark Museum of Art; the original letters are also in the museum.

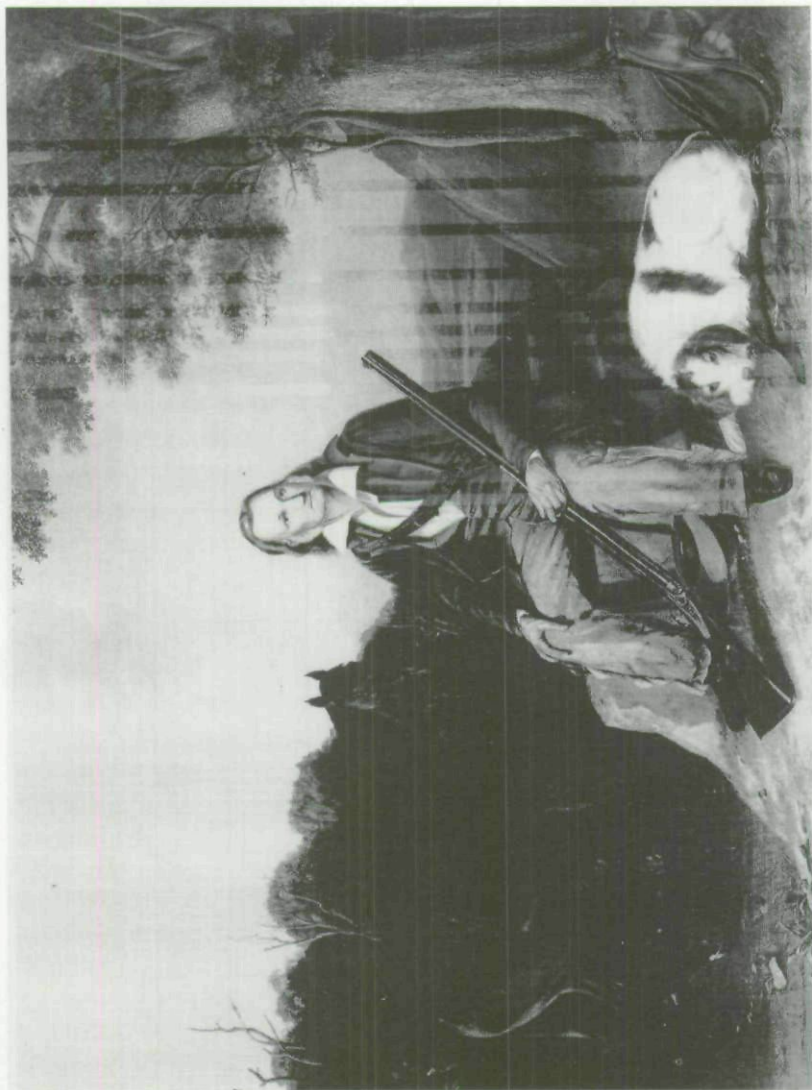


Fig. 2. John James Audubon (1785-1851) by John Woodhouse Audubon, c. 1840. American Museum of Natural History Library.



years in Great Britain, she worked as a tutor on a Louisiana plantation to support their children and make ends meet. Reading the couple's correspondence during that period seems almost to be a painful invasion of their privacy, as their sparring back and forth about Audubon's coming home or Lucy's going to England reveals all the misunderstandings and frustrations of a failing marriage.<sup>33</sup> In the end, though, Audubon set his hurt feelings aside in favor of his simple business sense: 'I think with my Industry and thy carefull good management we might do well,' he wrote her in 1828. 'Two heads are better than one.'<sup>34</sup> And indeed Lucy Bakewell Audubon did put her head as well as her heart into his work—so much so that it became her own. In the summer of 1831, she wrote her cousin again about the rigors of the work: 'I am sure you will believe me when I tell you that our great Book demands all our funds, time, and attention, and since I came to England we have not indulged in any thing that did not appertain to the advancement and publication of "Birds of America."<sup>35</sup> The 'our' and 'we' in that sentence almost leap out of the letter. Like Abigail Adams, who began to refer to the family homestead in Quincy as 'our' farm (and herself as 'farmeress') while her husband, John, was away serving as a member of the Continental Congress during the Revolution, Lucy Audubon had also come to adopt the first person plural possessive in speaking about their 'great Book.'<sup>36</sup> Like it or not, Lucy Audubon became involved in the production of *The Birds of America* for essentially all of her adult life, from the time of their marriage in 1808 until the day

33. For a sympathetic treatment of Lucy Audubon's side of the marriage, see Carolyn DeLatte, *Lucy Audubon: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). DeLatte's narrative goes only to 1830, with the last twenty years of the Audubons' married life covered in only a fifteen-page epilogue; still, her coverage of the period of John James Audubon's separation from Lucy while he was in Great Britain recounts the many difficulties of an estranged, and therefore strained, relationship.

34. Audubon to Lucy Bakewell Audubon, August 8, 1828, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:69.

35. Lucy Bakewell Audubon to Euphemia Gifford, July 19, 1831, Stark Museum of Art, SMA ABGC 0011.103.003.

36. On the wartime transformation of Abigail Adams, see, for instance, Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 82, 89–90.

she died in 1874. To a large degree, she helped make it possible for him to expand and eventually complete the enterprise.

Completing the enterprise, though, meant more than dealing with all the other troubling problems already facing Audubon—drawing his birds, overseeing their engraving and coloring, and enlisting and keeping track of subscribers. Two additional issues that loomed over the future of *The Birds of America*—one legal, one ornithological—affected the very nature of the ‘great work’ as a book.

To the legal obstacle, Audubon found a creative and surprisingly simple solution. According to a British copyright law of 1709, any book published in Great Britain had to be deposited, without cost, in nine of the nation’s libraries.<sup>37</sup> Given the significant expense of *The Birds of America*, Audubon had no intention of giving so many copies of his work away, and to avoid doing so, he took a very strict-constructionist view of the definition of ‘book’ in British law. Quite simply, any publication that contained printed text qualified as a book. Audubon, then, decided not to include any text in *The Birds of America* itself, but to publish the plates with just a title page for each volume. Even that caused him some concern: in 1831 he wrote to Havell, asking, ‘Are you quite sure that the Tytle Page *Engraved as it will be* may not render the Work liable?’ He instructed Havell to be careful *not* to include a table of contents, which would most certainly make *The Birds of America* begin to look awfully much like a book. After all, concluded Audubon, ‘I am far from having the wish to defraud the English Government.’<sup>38</sup> But defraud the government or not, the point is that Audubon understood that according to the letter of the law, words could be dangerous, or certainly expensive; any written descriptions of his birds, which he knew he would need to satisfy his subscribers, would have to come later. In the mean-

37. Fries, *Double Elephant Folio*, 47.

38. Audubon to Robert Havell, Jr., March 23, 1831, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 1:132.

time, Audubon hoped to package *The Birds of America* so that this collection should not be considered a book at all.

Having thus covered himself on the copyright front, he began work on a separate and much less expensive publication of text only, which in time came to be the three-thousand-plus pages of *Ornithological Biography*, published in Edinburgh in five volumes between 1831 and 1839. Together, *The Birds of America* and *Ornithological Biography* form a remarkable, matched pair, companion books that in partnership make, as we shall see, a bibliographically innovative work. In fact, *Ornithological Biography* could quite well stand on its own as another contribution to the long list of nineteenth-century travel narratives, one of the most popular literary genres of the antebellum era.

But *Ornithological Biography*, not to mention *The Birds of America*, could not come to completion until Audubon could solve the ornithological problem holding up the work: he simply needed more birds. In the original, printed 'Prospectus' of 1827, Audubon had boldly (and perhaps foolishly) told his potential subscribers that *The Birds of America* would eventually contain upwards of four hundred drawings, which was about twice the number he had at the time.<sup>39</sup> To make good on that promise, he would have to see and draw more birds, which ultimately meant going back and forth between Great Britain and the United States three times in a matter of only a few years: to New Jersey and Pennsylvania in 1829-30; to New York, South Carolina, Florida, Massachusetts, Maine, and Labrador, then back to New York and South Carolina between 1831 and 1833; then southward again to South Carolina, Florida and the Keys, Louisiana, and Texas in 1836-37.<sup>40</sup> He was also fortunate to get a collection of bird specimens from two naturalist colleagues, John Kirk Townsend and Thomas Nuttall, who

39. For Audubon's original prospectus, see Francis Hobart Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1917) 1:373-74, and 2:386-88.

40. Edward Dwight notes that Audubon completed forty-two paintings during his trip to New Jersey and Pennsylvania in 1829 and 'fully half of all the paintings for *The Birds of America*' between 1831 and 1838; see Dwight, *The Original Watercolor Paintings for 'The Birds of America'*, 2 vols. (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1966), 2:xxxv.

went out west between 1834 and 1837 and collected hundreds of bird skins, which they had promised to share freely with Audubon and other ornithologists back east. While he was impatiently awaiting the arrival of the western specimens, he knew that gaining access to the Townsend/Nuttall collections would prove to be absolutely essential for the success of his work, giving him a close look at the skins of birds he had not personally seen (or shot) on the wing. 'Should the birds come in time,' he wrote his friend John Bachman, 'I will of course publish the whole of the new species, and my Work will be *the* Work indeed!'<sup>41</sup> To publish 'the' book about birds would set him, an American, apart from the naturalists in Great Britain, where 'about one thousand niny [*sic*] tiny Works are in progress to assist in the mass of confusion already scattered over the world.'<sup>42</sup>

The larger point is that Audubon began selling his book long before he had finished it, long before he knew how to finish it—or that he even could—and certainly long before he had time to

41. Audubon to John Bachman, December 28, 1837, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 2:195. On the significance to Audubon of the Nuttall/Townsend expedition, see Jeannette E. Graustein, *Thomas Nuttall, Naturalist: Explorations in America, 1808-1841* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 318-19. The western birds also provided Audubon with another benefit that gave him considerable pleasure—the ability to name several new species for a handful of old friends. According to the standards of scientific nomenclature, it was unseemly for the discoverer of a new species to give the bird, animal, or flower one's own name; naming something for a friend, though, was fine and, indeed, a mark of great respect. Even though Audubon always professed disinterest in the race to name, he was honored to have had one warbler and two woodpeckers named after him by fellow ornithologists. (The woodpecker names have fallen from use, but Audubon's warbler still appears on modern checklists of birds in the American West.) Audubon was also happy that John Townsend had given him the right to name the new birds discovered on the Nuttall/Townsend expedition, and he made the most of the opportunity. In one of the later plates in *The Birds of America* (Plate 417), Audubon depicts ten views of six allegedly different western woodpeckers, one of which is labeled as Audubon's Woodpecker, and three others for friends of Audubon: Maria's Woodpecker (for Maria Martin, his occasional background and plant painter), Phillips's Woodpecker (for Benjamin Phillips, a British patron and friend of the Audubon family), and Harris's Woodpecker (for Edward Harris, Audubon's first real benefactor and longtime friend and travelling companion). Ornithologists now consider all the woodpeckers in the plate to be various forms of the hairy woodpecker, and the names have not stuck. Even if their names no longer appear in modern guidebooks, Audubon's friends can still take posthumous satisfaction that they were painted into posterity in *The Birds of America* and thanked profusely in *Ornithological Biography*.

42. Audubon to John Bachman, August 14, 1837, in Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon*, 2:176.

go back and make sure he had everything exactly right. That he did get it so right; that in 1838 he did deliver on the promise he had made in 1826 and 1827; that he did finally produce not just 400 plates of birds, but 435—and 435 plates of such outstanding detail and beauty—all that makes him much more than an artist-as-superintendent. It's almost the artist-as-superhero—a title Audubon would no doubt have liked.

Briefly, I'd like to look at these transactions from the consumers' point of view rather than the perspective of Audubon the artist/entrepreneur. If the meeting between Audubon and Haven had gone differently, and Audubon had actually made a sale to AAS, what would the Society have added to its collections of 'curious old Books and paintings,' as Audubon put it? In a word, both—that is, both books and paintings: paintings (or, technically, hand-colored engravings) to be sure, and maybe a book, or set of books.

I noted a bit earlier that when Audubon first put out the prospectus for *The Birds of America*, he didn't yet have all the birds he needed. Still, that didn't stop him from selling subscriptions and, to keep his customers satisfied, delivering the plates as they were printed. In fact, I think we can describe *The Birds of America* as a piecemeal publication, a book done in installments, rather like the ornithological equivalent of an extended Dickens novel. An early subscriber, for instance, would typically get five plates at a time, and five plates constituted what Audubon called a 'number.' Twenty numbers—or one hundred plates—made a volume, and then the same process began again until finally the faithful subscriber would have all four volumes—again, 435 plates in all.

But as the plates were coming in, number by number, this process of piecemeal publication had some interesting implications for the overall product. First, Audubon established a kind of internal 'rhythm' for each number of plates. In the prospectus for his work, he advertised that each 'number' of five plates would contain 'one Plate from one of the largest Drawings, one

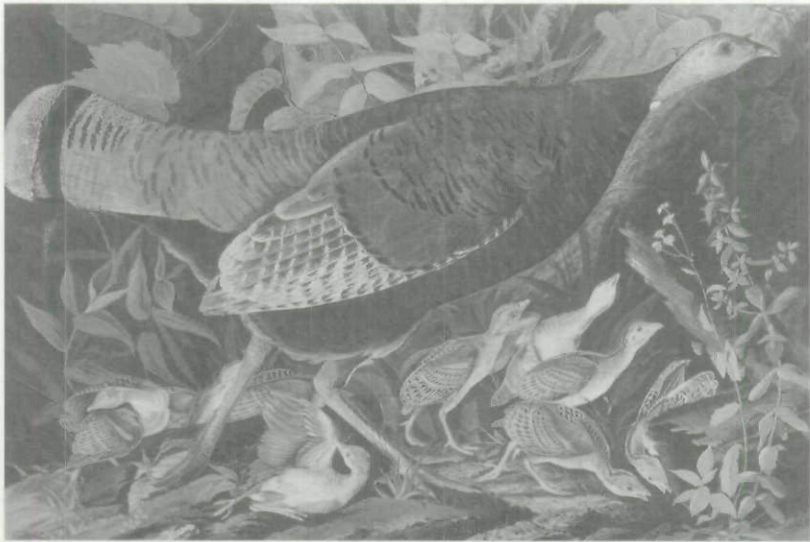


Fig. 3. Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), 1820 by J. J. Audubon, water-color, pastel, oil paint, graphite,  $25 \frac{7}{16} \times 38 \frac{1}{16}$  inches, accession number 1863.17.6. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

from the second size, and three from the smaller Drawings.<sup>43</sup> This rhythm—big bird, middle-sized bird, three small birds—would then repeat in the next number, and so on. The reason for this rhythm is more commercial than ornithological. Audubon understood that the big birds were the big sell. People generally put a higher value on the ‘Great American Cock, or Wild Turkey’ (Plate 1) or maybe the ‘Ivory-Billed Woodpecker’ (Plate 66) than they did, say, on a ‘Yellow-Throat Warbler’ (Plate 85). Audubon, then, was careful not to use up the big birds too soon, so he doled them out slowly, keeping his customers waiting for the next number. This sequence didn’t make for good science—it certainly had nothing to do with the ornithological classification of birds—but it was very smart marketing (figs. 3–7).

Sometimes, however, Audubon’s subscribers weren’t willing to wait for all the numbers to be delivered, or they weren’t interested

43. Quoted in Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist*, 2:387.



Fig. 4. Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*), 1825, by J. J. Audubon, watercolor, graphite, selective glazing.  $23 \frac{3}{4} \times 18 \frac{1}{2}$  inches, accession number 1863.17.7. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.



Fig. 5. White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*), 1822, by J. J. Audubon, watercolor, graphite, pastel, gouache,  $18\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{1}{8}$  inches, accession number 1863.17.8. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.





Fig. 6. Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*), by J. J. Audubon, watercolor, graphite, pastel,  $18\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{1}{16}$  inches, accession number 1863.17.9. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

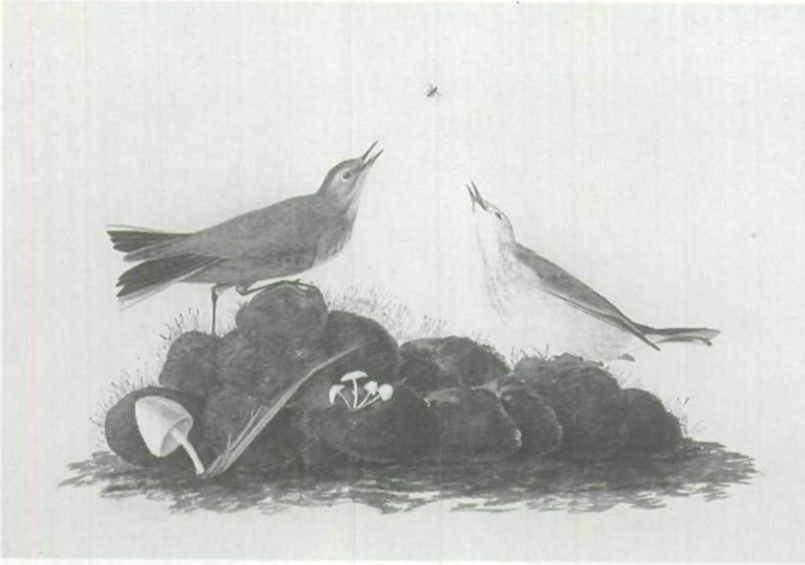


Fig. 7. Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*), 1818, by J. J. Audubon, pastel, watercolor, graphite, gouache, traces of charcoal,  $11\frac{1}{2} \times 16\frac{1}{4}$  inches, accession number 1863.17.10. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

in binding the whole set into a volume. Some of Audubon's early subscribers received their delivery of plates and used them in a way that they, not Audubon, chose. A few of Audubon's fellow naturalists, for instance, cut up his big images to a size more manageable for illustrating their own scientific notebooks instead of keeping them intact and together until they could have all the plates bound together in the eventual four volumes.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, although Audubon did bind his own copies of the plates into four volumes, he nonetheless rearranged the order of the plates in his own personal copy, as did two of his close friends, Edward Harris and Dr. Benjamin Phillips. In these three copies of *The Birds of America*, the plates do not follow the standard order in which Audubon produced them; rather, they have been bound in accordance

44. Robert McCracken Peck, 'Cutting Up Audubon for Science and Art,' *The Magazine Antiques* 144(October 2003): 106-9. I am grateful to Caroline Sloat and Georgia Barnhill of AAS, both of whom brought this article to my attention.

with the ornithological classification scheme that Audubon later developed in *A Synopsis of the Birds of America* (1839). Thus, in Audubon's own copy of *The Birds of America* (which is now in the H. J. Lutchter Stark Museum in Orange, Texas), the first volume begins not with the famous image of the 'Great American Cock, or Wild Turkey,' which was the original Plate 1, but with the 'Turkey Vulture' (Plate 426), which came toward the very end of the standard order in *The Birds of America*.<sup>45</sup> In a sense, Audubon ultimately chose to impose his authority as a scientist over his own authority as an artist.

Science aside, some people displayed Audubon's birds on their walls as individual works of art. In fact, one subscriber, the Marchioness of Hertford, the mistress to King George IV of England, even embedded them into her walls, cutting up the plates and making particular images part of her wallpaper.<sup>46</sup> Audubon became a bit annoyed when he discovered that another purchaser had allowed her plates to become 'quite abused and tumbled.' He tried to tell himself that it was 'not my concern,' though, and that he 'regretted it only on her account, that so little care should be taken of a book that in fifty years will be sold at immense prices because of its rarity.'<sup>47</sup> Audubon proved to be right, of course, about the future value of his work that he clearly saw as a book, a rare and increasingly costly book.

At the time, however, the piecemeal publication of *The Birds of America* allowed, even invited, purchasers in the 1830s (and even beyond) to appropriate Audubon's images for their own purposes, to display them according to their own understanding, and to exercise their own authority over that of the author. In the end, because Audubon didn't want *The Birds of America* to look like a

45. Benjamin Williams, 'Audubon's "The Birds of America" and the Remarkable History of the Field Museum's Copy,' *Field Museum of Natural History Bulletin* 57 (June 1986): 7-22. I am grateful to Ben Williams for giving me a copy of this article, not to mention his remarkable hospitality in the Field Museum's Special Collections Library. I am also grateful to the staff of the Stark Museum for giving me a listing of the contents of Audubon's own four volumes.

46. Peck, 'Cutting Up Audubon,' 112-13.

47. Quoted in Fries, *Double Elephant Folio*, 13.

book to the British government, because he didn't issue it as a complete, coherent, bound book to his subscribers, some of those subscribers didn't treat it or perhaps even consider it as a book. As we will see, they have their twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterparts—and advocates.

*A Book in the Hand—or On the Stand*

What if a patient subscriber waited until all the plates had been delivered to make four volumes and then had all the volumes bound according to Audubon's original order? What would the owner of such a rare and expensive treasure have? A book in the hand, finally, but also a very interesting, perhaps even innovative, reading experience. To say the least, *The Birds of America* is not a book for casual use or, as one Audubon admirer has put it, 'hardly a book that one can—or would want to—pick up and leaf through lightly as he lounges after luncheon in a favorite chair.'<sup>48</sup> At thirty by forty inches and forty or more pounds each, the volumes can't rest easily on the lap, nor can the viewer even turn the pages without the risk of tearing them. How would anyone use—how would anyone 'read'—the double elephant folio edition? Most owners had special stands and storage furniture made for their volumes of *The Birds of America*.<sup>49</sup> To read one of the volumes, one would presumably sit several feet away, have a corresponding volume of *Ornithological Biography* at hand, and shift one's gaze from book to book, from text to image. Indeed, Audubon occasionally made a specific connection between text and image in his *Ornithological Biography*, directing the reader to look at the image in a way the author/painter wanted it to be seen. In the section on the 'Wood Wren' (Plate 83), for instance, Audubon described the little bird

48. Henry Lyttleton Savage, 'John James Audubon: A Backwoodsman in the Salon,' *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 5 (June 1944): 129.

49. For an example of the special furniture built to house and display the double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America*, see Williams, 'Audubon's "The Birds of America,"' 10–11.

'in such an old hat as you see represented in the plate, which, if not already before you, I hope you will procure.' He went on to tell the reader to 'look at the little creatures anxiously peeping out of and hanging to the side of the hat, to meet their mother, which has just arrived with a spider, whilst the male is on the lookout, ready to interpose should any intruder come near.'<sup>50</sup> If the reader could not fully appreciate the family scene illustrated in the picture, Audubon supplied the words to make the point—and the plate—clear. So it is in his description of the Ruddy Duck (Plate 343), where he says, 'Look at this plate, Reader, and tell me whether you ever saw a greater difference between young and old, or between male and female, than is apparent here.'<sup>51</sup> This sort of direct address to the reader was nothing new in nineteenth-century literature, of course, but in this case it was intended to explain not only ideas, but visual images. As such, this sometimes didactic direction to go back and forth between book and plate represents, I think, what we would now call an interactive reading experience, an early version of a multimedia melding of word and image. Innovative? Arguably so. Awkward? No doubt.

But 'reading' *The Birds of America* may not have been the point for most people. Given its bulk and its beauty, *The Birds of America* was clearly a trophy book, and the custom-built bookstands and storage furniture underscored its status—and perhaps the owner's status, as well. Several decades before Thorstein Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption,' Audubon's buyers had an item to be displayed more than read. As a Princeton professor observed in the middle of the twentieth century: 'The proud possessor of a copy of the 1827-38 folio edition . . . oft finds himself a bit embarrassed by the treasure he owns. . . . His nose tilts a little higher in the air as he walks the street, thinking of the men and institutions who would have an *elephanticus* if they could.'<sup>52</sup> Again, it was a rare book, almost by definition. But it was also a complete

50. Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, 1:428.

51. Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, 4:326.

52. Savage, 'Backwoodsman in the Salon,' 129-30.

art collection, or a set of ornithological specimens more numerous and impressive than any room full of stuffed birds.

Beyond being a mere collection, though, *The Birds of America* could also represent a form of preservation of nature itself. For some owners, perhaps, the value of Audubon's birds stemmed from an appreciation of nature—a romantic appreciation of nature's beauty, to be sure, but perhaps also an increasing appreciation of nature's fragility and vulnerability. In either case, this form of pictorial preservation allowed the owner to possess a representation of nature that seemed bigger, closer, more accessible, more exotic, and, in a way, maybe even more real than nature itself. Much like the images of Indians painted by George Catlin or the landscapes of the Hudson River School in Audubon's time, or even the real-but-idealized landscape photographs of Ansel Adams today, Audubon's art isolated and froze the exotic, evanescent, and even 'vanishing' images of nature in place. Audubon's 'size of life' images, in fact, gave the viewer a better and closer look at more species of birds than anyone could ever expect to see as clearly or as completely in a lifetime.

#### *Audubon Unbound*

*The Birds of America* has had a lifetime of its own far beyond Audubon's era. It was from the beginning—or certainly has become—a rare, even endangered, species. Today, Audubon collectors and scholars offer varying estimates of the number of complete sets Audubon eventually delivered to his subscribers—perhaps as few as 175, maybe as many as 199—but now, at last count, apparently only 119 exist; some have been lost, destroyed, or, more commonly, broken up and sold off as individual plates.<sup>53</sup>

53. *Catalogue of the New 'Birds of America' Section of the Audubon Archives*, comp. Suzanne M. Low (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991), 3. Writing almost two decades earlier, Waldemar Fries counted 134 complete copies of the double elephant folio edition, all but six of which he said he had examined personally; see Fries,

Between 1931 and 1935, for instance, Macy's New York department store put four, perhaps five, full sets of the double elephant folio on sale, plate by plate, and took in about \$120,000.<sup>54</sup> Since then, other book and print dealers have been breaking up sets of *The Birds of America*, quite often without apology, and even with a sense of moral superiority. In 1947, for instance, the Old Print Shop in New York announced the sale of two hundred plates from a bound set of *The Birds of America*, and the prospectus for the sale made a preemptive strike against any criticism from book preservationists: 'As is usual when we break up a bound volume of the Elephant Folio, the cry of "Vandal, Vandal!" is heard, but we believe that every set should be broken up, the plates matted and kept, as prints are, in cases. Anyone who has attempted to look at Audubon's great work knows that each volume weighs all of its fifty pounds, and even turning the leaves is a difficult, not to say, a dangerous, undertaking, with considerable hazard to the invaluable work.' The Old Print Shop prospectus went on to argue that keeping such a book in 'the reserve departments of public libraries,' where it could be seen 'only by a few so-called "serious scholars,"' was almost the equivalent of subjecting it to a 'public burning.' Better to cut the volumes up and sell the individual prints, the Old Print Shop said, because 'we feel sure that the actual presence of single impressions in individual homes is what has made Audubon the living force he is today.' More to the point, the Old Print Shop continued, Audubon himself would want the volumes cut up: 'It is not to be reconciled with the character of Audubon, his love of country, his love of birds, and his love of people, to think that he would have wanted to limit the circulation of the approximately 175 sets of his work' to wealthy institutions or individuals. 'There are enough of the complete sets in our great public collections, secure for all time, where they will continue to be preserved

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*Double Elephant Folio*, 196. The difference may be simply a discrepancy of counting, but it more likely stems from the continuing destruction of folio volumes for the sake of selling individual plates.

54. Fries, *Double Elephant Folio*, 203-4.

as evidence for the bibliographer of one hundred, or a thousand, years from now, but it is our conviction that by far the greatest number of volumes should be broken up and the plates given the widest possible circulation.' To facilitate this 'widest possible circulation' to the 'individual homes' of postwar America, the Old Print Shop offered individual plates of, say, the 'Ruffed Grouse' (Plate 41) at \$375, or the 'Great Blue Heron' (Plate 211) for \$325, or, for the more economy-minded, the 'Golden Plover' (Plate 300) for fifteen dollars, and the 'Dusky Petrel' (Plate 299) for ten.<sup>55</sup>

This allegedly democratic destruction of *The Birds of America* did not stop with the double elephant folio volumes. In 1955 Goodspeed's of Boston announced the sale of prints from the smaller, royal octavo edition of *The Birds of America* (which AAS has): 'Since a complete set of the folio edition recently sold at auction for more than \$25,000,' Goodspeed's noted, 'and since the individual folio prints are becoming more expensive and less attainable, perhaps you will agree that a little bird in the hand is worth two big ones in the bush, and will settle for an original miniature.'<sup>56</sup> The little bird in the hand, as opposed to two big ones in the bush, or in the book, as it were, seemed to be the postwar approach among art dealers, who put a higher value (and thus a higher price) on the contents of the book, the individual plates, than on the book itself as a complete volume or set of volumes. In a sense, these modern dealers brought *The Birds of America* full circle, unbinding it—unbooking it, one might say—taking it back to a collection of individual images to be exhibited on the walls of museums or galleries or even private homes. Modern marketers of *The Birds of America* treated the plates as some of Audubon's own nineteenth-century subscribers did, displaying them as individual works of art and not keeping them bound together in something that looked very much like a book—very much like a very big book.

55. *The Old Print Shop Portfolio*, 6 (January 1947): 100–101, John James Audubon Collection, Princeton University Library, Box 3, Folder 6.

56. *The Month at Goodspeed's* 26 (June 1955): 211.



But what about the big book—or set of books? It may well be, as the Old Print Shop put it, that the ‘so-called “serious scholar”’ and ‘bibliographer’ can be content with the complete copies that still exist, most of them in reserve collections of great libraries, some in private hands. But again, the number of complete sets of the folio edition is now apparently down to 119, and Audubon’s *Birds of America* is undeniably an endangered species. And as has often been the case with actual endangered species of birds, the closer they get to extinction, the more collectors scramble to get their hands on the last few specimens.<sup>57</sup> We can see that trend in the modern marketing of complete editions of *The Birds of America* in the past fifty years, as prices have soared higher than any bird ever dreamed of flying. Again, as Goodspeed’s noted in 1955, a complete set of the folio edition of *The Birds of America* had recently sold for \$25,000. Then, fewer than fifteen years later, in 1969, another complete set sold at auction for \$216,000, and in 1989, the price for another set jumped to a little over \$3.9 million, an increase of almost 2,000 percent in twenty years. More recently, the big money for the double elephant folio came in March 2000, when a day of intense bidding at Christie’s New York auction house ended with a purchase price of just a shade over \$8.8 million, setting a new world auction record for a printed book. (The previous record-holder had been a copy of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which fetched \$7.5 million and change at Christie’s in London in 1998.) The winning bid for *The Birds of America* came in over the phone from Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, ruler of the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar, who at the time had already spent more than a quarter-billion dollars acquiring collections for a natural history museum he was building in his homeland.<sup>58</sup> He now has his

57. On the race to collect specimens of near-extinct birds, see Scott Weidensaul, *The Ghost with Trembling Wings: Science, Wishful Thinking, and the Search for Lost Species* (New York: North Point Books/Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2002), 50; and Christopher Cokinos, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 35.

58. Fries, *Double Elephant Folio*, xxii; ‘*Birds of America* Takes Off,’ *Maine Antiques Digest* (May 2000).

Audubon, and we now have yet another reason to hope for peace in the Middle East.

But there is little hope for the American Antiquarian Society. Unless someone proves to be very generous to the 'generous dome,' it seems unlikely, as Marcus McCorison lamented, that AAS will ever get an original, double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America*. If someone were suddenly to come forward with \$8.8 million, of course, Ellen Dunlap would no doubt find some way to accept it. If, however, she found \$8.8 million thrust into her hand, would she want to spend it on *The Birds of America*, or would she, like her antebellum predecessor, Samuel Foster Haven, have second thoughts about buying the big bird book? And if she did buy such a valuable, but, as some would argue, unusable book, would AAS keep it or try to sell it to supplement the endowment or perhaps build yet another new storage area for the thousands of other books in the Society's possession?

In that regard, AAS could perhaps benefit from the unhappy experience of another institution in the region that does (so far) have a copy of the double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America*. In early 2003, the directors of the Providence Athenaeum announced just before the organization's annual meeting that they had decided to sell their copy of *The Birds of America* to help shore up the institution's dwindling endowment—not to mention its sagging ceiling. If the auction at Christie's in 2000 had brought a price of \$8.8 million, then a similar sale, they figured, could put the Athenaeum back into sound fiscal condition. The Athenaeum's leadership did not anticipate, however, the fury of some of the institution's dues-paying members, who formed a protest organization called Save the Athenaeum Association and filed suit to stop the sale. The dissident defenders of the double elephant folio attacked the Athenaeum's leadership, charging them with financial incompetence and bibliophilic indifference toward Audubon's great book—'They're treating this thing like a used car,' said one outraged SAA member. Eventually, the executive director of the Athenaeum, fed up with the attacks and what he called

the 'lingering elitism among a small, but active, group of individuals,' submitted his resignation and left in disgust. As of this writing, the case is still tied up in the courts.<sup>59</sup> As Oscar Wilde famously said, 'A cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.' The price of *The Birds of America* now seems astronomical, but its value remains another question: better a book in the hand, or on the auction block?

The rest of us may ourselves ponder, as previous buyers and sellers have, whether this big book is really worth preserving as a rare book, or whether it ought to be considered, much less kept intact, as a book at all. Here the recent case—and certainly a much happier case—of the University of Pittsburgh provides an instructive lesson in book preservation. The university has owned a double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America* since 1918, when the family of William McCullough Darlington, a Pittsburgh lawyer and rare book collector, donated his collection, including the Audubon volumes, to the university's Hillman Library. (Darlington had apparently bought his Audubon at a bargain price of \$400 in 1852, well below market even then and a good deal less than the thousand dollars Audubon would have charged Mr. Haven in 1840.) Several years ago, in 2000, the Hillman Library's special collections staff opened the four bound volumes for the first time in years, only to find a number of disturbing tears and stains, some of the latter apparently caused by the cigar ashes dropped by Mr. Darlington and his friends as they admired Audubon's birds. The university sent the four volumes away to be cleaned, which required undoing the original bindings so that each plate could be individually treated. When the process had been completed, though, the conservators decided not to rebind the plates into four huge volumes again, but to keep each plate in an individual presentation folder with a polyester cover sheet. As the university librarian explained, 'This plan vastly improves access to the original plates for researchers, safeguards the

59. 'Bookish Contretemps in Providence,' *New York Times*, December 15, 2003.

plates for exhibition purposes, and eliminates nearly all physical stress to the individual plates when the plates are viewed for research or exhibition purposes.<sup>60</sup> In that regard, the University of Pittsburgh's decision reflects both an interest in public access and a concern that, as the Old Print Shop had put it a half-century earlier, 'turning the leaves is a difficult, not to say, a dangerous, undertaking.' Unlike the postwar proprietors of the Old Print Shop and Goodspeed's, however, who had argued for breaking up the bound volumes and distributing them to the public by sale, the University of Pittsburgh has apparently made a commitment to keeping the Darlington copy of *The Birds of America* intact as a collection, but not in bound volumes. Given the ongoing tension between proper preservation and accessible use, the university may have hit upon a wise compromise that affords Audubon aficionados the opportunity to see *The Birds of America* and save it at the same time.

At AAS, though, we can only reflect on that missed opportunity on the day in December 1840 when Audubon visited Worcester. If nothing else, it could now be AAS, not the Providence Athenaeum, fighting about the small fortune to be made in the market for this very big book about birds or, one might hope, finding better ways, as the University of Pittsburgh has, to make this remarkable book more accessible for future users. In the meantime, we can gaze at the blue jays over the water fountain and wonder what might have happened if Audubon had been just a little more punctual in getting back to see Mr. Haven at the 'Antiquarian Library.' A thousand dollars then still seems quite a bit better than \$8.8 million now.

60. 'Fabulous Audubon Illustrations Take Flight,' PittsburghLIVE.com, December 9, 2003; Rush Miller, 'Foreword,' and Michael Lee, 'The Conservation of the Darlington Library's Double Elephant Folio *Birds of America*,' in *Taking Flight: Selected Prints from John James Audubon's 'Birds of America'* ed. Josienne N. Piller (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2003), 3, 19.

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