

# United Feathers of America

On a cold April morning in 1824 a stylishly dressed man with shoulder-length hair approached the marble steps of Philadelphia's venerable Academy of Natural Sciences. Under his arm was a portfolio of drawings he believed to be the best ever made of North American birds. He was accompanied by Charles Lucien Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon and a prominent member of Philadelphia's scientific community who had offered to introduce the newcomer to America's leading institute of science. Aside from their common language and interest in birds, the two men could not have been more different. Bonaparte, whose family connections and genial personality made him a popular figure in Philadelphia's stratified society, was widely regarded as one of the most knowledgeable ornithologists in North America. His election to membership in the Academy of Natural Sciences two months earlier had formalized his acceptance into the exclusive inner circle of American natural history. Bonaparte was twenty-one at the time. His taller, older, and more flamboyant companion was neither wealthy nor socially prominent. His credentials in ornithology were yet to be established. John James Audubon, born in Santo Domingo in 1785, was the bastard son of a French sea captain. At the age of eight, Audubon was formally adopted by his father's forgiving wife, who had cared for the boy and his illegitimate half-sister at the family home in France since 1789. In 1803 (the year of Bonaparte's birth) Audubon emigrated to the United States. He settled at Mill Grove, a Pennsylvania estate owned by his father. Except for a few years there and a trip to France in 1805, Audubon spent the next twenty years

John James Audubon

by

Robert McCracken Peck

John James Audubon's first attempts to publish his drawings of North American birds met with decided failure. "I think your work extraordinary for one self-taught," Philadelphia's foremost printmaker told him patronizingly, "but we in Philadelphia are used to seeing very correct drawing."

Despite his cold reception from American engravers and ornithologists, Audubon went on to create the greatest illustrated book of birds ever published. On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Audubon's birth, Robert McCracken Peck tells the very American story of the rise to fame of the bastard son of a French sea captain.

traveling throughout the United States trying to manage a series of ill-conceived business ventures. While in the first two decades in America were financially unsuccessful (his business failures culminated in bankruptcy and a stint in debtors' prison in 1819) they afforded Audubon an opportunity to indulge his lifelong passion for birds. Since childhood he had loved paint, and shortly after his arrival in the United States he had determined to record with pencil and brush the many bird species of his adopted land. After years of travel, observation, and painting he had a collection he was proud to display; he was thrilled at the thought of showing his work to the most knowledgeable – and so, presumably, most appreciative – audience in America. As he would soon learn, however, his audience's knowledge did not translate into the appreciation he expected. Ironically, the greatest obstacle to his acceptance in Philadelphia was the legacy of the very person who had inspired his mission there. Fourteen years earlier while operating a small general store in Louisville, Kentucky, Audubon had met the enterprising Scottish immigrant Alexander Wilson. Wilson was writing and illustrating an ambitious treatise on North American birds, *American Ornithology*; the work eventually would comprise nine volumes. At the time Audubon met him, Wilson was en route from Philadelphia to New Orleans to solicit subscribers for his publication. Audubon was impressed by the sample volumes Wilson displayed, and was on the verge of subscribing when his business partner, Ferdinand Rozier, discouraged him, pointing out that Audubon could hardly afford the one hundred-dollar outlay and, more tactfully, that Audubon's own bird paintings were as good or better than Wilson's. Audubon realized that Rozier was right, and refrained from

# United Feathers of America

buying Wilson's book, an action that later caused the moody Scot to observe that in Louisville he "neither received one act of civility . . . , one subscriber, nor one new bird. . . . Science or literature has not one friend in this place," he complained in his journal.<sup>1</sup> Audubon recalled their meeting somewhat differently, explaining in his *Ornithological Biography* that he had shown Wilson every hospitality and even lent him some of his own paintings during the course of Wilson's stay.

What actually transpired between the two men in Louisville may never be known, but the meeting undoubtedly gave Audubon the idea that a book of his own paintings could far exceed Wilson's in drama, importance, and scope. This idea became an obsession. Demoralizing financial reverses strengthened Audubon's resolve to make a success of his bird painting: for five years he devoted himself entirely to that end; he had studied the birds and made the paintings; what he needed was an engraver and financial backing to launch his book. On his debut at the Academy, Audubon found himself surrounded by Wilson's friends and colleagues.

Wilson had died in 1813, more than a decade before, but the members still revered his memory and considered his publication definitive. Chairing the meeting at which Audubon was to display his work was George Ord, Wilson's executor, biographer, editor, and the ghostwriter of the posthumously published ninth volume of Wilson's *American Ornithology*. There is no record of what took place at the Academy on that April day,<sup>2</sup> but it is evident from the reactions of persons present that Audubon's presentation was little short of disastrous. Had he been willing to let the quality of his work speak for itself he might have carried the day, but, unnerved by the quiet reserve of the assembled group, Audubon began to



Pileated woodpecker (*Drycopus pileatus*)

praise his own creations even before he had pulled them from their case. To make matters worse, he bluntly criticized Wilson's work, describing the paintings as lifeless and dismissing much of the ornithological information as incomplete or faulty. This was more than George Ord could tolerate. Short-tempered and vitriolic by nature, Ord was more than a match for Audubon in open debate. Incensed by the newcomer's brash and tactless remarks, he rose to Wilson's defense, challenging Audubon's scientific credentials and integrity. As other members began to side with Ord in his criticism of Audubon's paintings, Audubon grew more and more outspoken. Disagreement turned to animosity; debate eroded into bitter exchange of insults. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that any possibility of Academy support for Audubon's project had vanished. Despite the unfortunate tenor of the meeting many Academy members recognized the importance of Audubon's work and befriended the artist. Bonaparte demonstrated his continuing support by offering to buy

Audubon's paintings if Alexander Lawson, Philadelphia's most accomplished printmaker, could be induced to engrave them. But here again, Audubon encountered the enduring influence of Alexander Wilson, for Lawson counted among his credits the engraved plates for Wilson's book. When Audubon visited his studio to explore the possibility of having his own paintings engraved, his reception was cool. Lawson had heard about Audubon's unflattering opinion of Wilson's work and relished the opportunity to return the favor. "I think your work extraordinary for one self-taught," he told Audubon after a patronizing survey of his paintings, "but we in Philadelphia are used to seeing very correct drawing."<sup>3</sup> When Bonaparte explained his interest in buying the paintings, Lawson closed the discussion: "You may buy them," he snapped, "but I will not engrave them . . . Ornithology requires truth and correct lines — here are neither!"<sup>4</sup> Audubon was devastated by the double rejection he had received in Philadelphia. "The world owes to me the adoption of the plan of drawing from animated nature," he wrote.<sup>5</sup> But in many ways, Lawson's petty refusal to engrave his paintings and the Academy's criticism of his sometimes excessive artistic license would serve Audubon well in the end. The first forced him to look elsewhere for an engraver (resulting in prints far superior to any Lawson could have created); the second induced caution and increased care in his work. From Philadelphia, Audubon went briefly to New York where he received a somewhat warmer welcome but no further advance on his ambitious publishing project. From there he traveled to Niagara Falls, then returned to Bayou Sara, near New Orleans, where his wife, Lucy, and his two sons had awaited him for more than a year. In the spring of 1826, the indomitable artist set sail

# United Feathers of America

for England. There he hoped to find support for his great work. Audubon's striking backwoods appearance and fondness for tall tales, while offensive in Philadelphia where they were not novel, proved irresistibly intriguing overseas. One English acquaintance compared Audubon to a Greek god, then described the artist's long and odoriferous hair. Audubon's wavy locks, wrote Sir Walter Besant, "flow over the ears and over the coat collars; you can smell the bear's grease across the street; and if these amaranthine locks were to be raised you would see the shiny coating of bear's grease on the velvet collar below."<sup>6</sup> As Benjamin Franklin had captured the imagination of Paris with his colorful American dress and personality a half-century earlier, so Audubon was drawing the attention of English society.

More importantly, his paintings were beginning to garner as much attention as their creator. In Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, and later in London, the reception of his paintings was overwhelmingly positive. On seeing a public exhibition of his watercolors at the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Philarette Chasles, a well-known French critic of the period, praised Audubon's work as "a real and palpable vision of the New World, with its atmosphere, its imposing vegetation, and its tribes which know not the yoke of man . . . . On twigs, branches, bits of shore, copied by the brush with the strictest fidelity, sport the feathered races of the New World, in size of life, each in its particular attitude, its individuality and peculiarities. Their plumages sparkle with nature's own tints; you see them in motion or at rest, in their plays and combats, in their anger fits and their caresses, singing, running, asleep, just awakened, beating the air, skimming the waves. . . . This realization of an



Northern oriole (*Icterus galbula*)

entire hemisphere," the critic concluded, "this picture of a nature so lusty and strong, is due to the brush of a single man; such an unheard of triumph of patience and genius! — the result . . . of a thousand triumphs won in the face of innumerable obstacles."<sup>7</sup>

And so it was. At last, removed from the provincial limits of American taste and the souring effects of local politics, Audubon's inspired creations were recognized as masterworks. After almost thirty years of frustration and failure, Audubon had begun to achieve the recognition he so desperately wanted. "My situation in Edinburgh borders almost on the miraculous," he wrote in his journal on 10 December 1826. "I am positively looked on by all the professors and many of the principal persons here as a very extraordinary man . . . . I am to deliver lectures of Natural History at the Wernerian Society at each of the meetings while I am here, and Professor Jameson told me I should soon be made a member of all other societies here, and that would give my work a good standing

throughout Europe."<sup>8</sup>

Audubon's work, *The Birds of America*, would eventually comprise 435 hand-colored plates with life-size depictions of 1,065 individual birds. It is a "double-elephant" size (approximately 39½ by 26½ inches), the largest that nineteenth-century technology would permit, but its conceptual scale exceeded even its physical dimensions. Never before had such an undertaking been attempted. Never again would a project of its kind be carried off with such brilliant success.

*The Birds of America* took Audubon eleven years and the assistance of two engraving firms to complete. During that time, the artist traveled extensively in Europe and twice journeyed to the United States to seek subscribers and to improve and augment his collection of American bird paintings. Some he dashed off quickly and sent to his London engraver, Robert Havell Jr., to work into final form for publication. Others he prepared more carefully, employing younger artists to assist with the landscape backgrounds and floral details, as had been his practice in the past.

George Ord and several like-minded confederates abroad continued to snipe at Audubon. They pointed out minor errors of interpretation in the published plates and accused him of copying several of Wilson's compositions — which he had. But as *The Birds of America* took shape in volume after volume, Audubon's stature increased. By 1831 his contribution to ornithology was so secure that Charles Bonaparte and his other friends in Philadelphia were able to overcome Ord's objections and elect the once-spurned naturalist to the coveted "corresponding member" status in Philadelphia's Academy of

# United Feathers of America

*Natural Sciences. In editions of The Birds of America published after that date, Audubon proudly listed his membership in the Academy among the growing number of credits on the title pages of his books.*

Today *The Birds of America* is recognized as the greatest illustrated book of birds ever published. Its lively, romantic style, a jarring departure from the stiff, clinical approach to scientific illustration practiced by Wilson and his contemporaries, redefined the boundaries of art and science in nineteenth-century America. Finding subscribers able and willing to afford the staggering one-thousand-dollar price tag for the four-volume set was no easy task. The final issue was small – less than two hundred – yet despite its limited distribution, the importance of its subscribers and the power inherent in the book itself made *The Birds of America* one of the most influential publications of all time.

Robert McCracken Peck

Robert McCracken Peck, a fellow of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the author of *A Celebration of Birds: The Life and Art of Louis Agassiz Fuertes* (1982).

## Notes

1. Alexander Wilson, *American Ornithology* (9 vols.), Philadelphia, 1808-1825, vol. 9, p. 39.
2. Although minutes for all Academy meetings exist for this period, there is no mention of Audubon's visit. This would suggest that either Audubon made his presentation during an informal meeting of the Academy or that George Ord was so upset by what transpired that he excised all references to Audubon from the official records of the Academy.
3. Alice Ford, *John James Audubon*. Norman, Oklahoma, 1964, p. 145.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Alexander B. Adams, *John James Audubon*. New York, 1966, p. 267.
6. Francis Hobart Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist* (2 vols.), New York, 1917, vol. 1, p. 355.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
8. Maria R. Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals* (2 vols.), New York, 1897, vol. 1, pp. 179-180.

## An odd bird

by Vincent Nolte

When Vincent Nolte met John James Audubon at an inn in the mountains of Pennsylvania in 1811, the future artist was a businessman whose ill-conceived ventures would lead him to financial ruin within a decade. Nolte – a young European merchant, world traveler, and adventurer – was fascinated by the strange man who wore a red madras handkerchief; the two became traveling companions as far as Ohio. Nolte went on to fight in the Battle of New Orleans, watch the rise and fall of Napoleon, and establish mercantile houses in America for European firms; his memoirs, from which the following excerpt is taken, were first published in 1854.

**I**n Liverpool I found the same Captain Stirling who had brought me, in the month of July, 1805, in the good ship *Flora*, from Amsterdam to New York, for the first time. Of course I willingly gave him and his new vessel, which he called the *Aristomenes*, the preference over all the rest then lading for New York, and embarked with my travelling companion, in September, 1811. It was exactly the season of the equinoctial storms, and also the famous year of the great comet, which remained visible for such a length of time, and whose influence, as was afterwards affirmed, beneficially affected the vintage on the Rhine, and the banks of the Garonne. We lost but two masts on that perilous voyage, but safely reached New York after a passage of forty-eight days. I was anxious to acquire some knowledge of the far western regions, whose rich and manifold productions, of all kinds, were carried down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, destined to be the sources of the prosperity of New Orleans, although their banks were then but thinly populated, and were almost entirely wild and unreclaimed. In pursuance of this desire, I resolved to cross the Alleghany mountains to Pittsburgh, in the State of Pennsylvania, and there purchase a couple of flat-boats, in which I and

my companion would quietly float down the rapid stream to New Orleans, about 2,000 miles. . . .

I sent my friend Hollander a fortnight in advance of me, to Pittsburgh, to purchase two such flat-boats, one for our own use, and the other to accommodate my horse with a stall. Moreover, we could thus take along with us some four hundred barrels of flour, which could always be disposed of to advantage at New Orleans, and would suffice to pay the expenses of our journey. I managed to procure an excellent horse in Philadelphia, and, with my saddle-bags strapped to his back, I started in December alone, on my way to Pittsburgh. It was very cold. I rode, early one morning, entirely alone, over the loftiest summit of the Alleghany ridge, called Laurel Hill, and about ten o'clock arrived at a small inn, close by the Falls of the Juniata river. Here I ordered a substantial breakfast. The landlady showed me into a room, and said, I perhaps would not object to taking my meal at the same table with a strange gentleman, who was already there. As I entered I found the latter personage, who at once struck me as being, what, in common parlance, is called an odd fish. He was sitting at a table, before the fire, with a Madras handkerchief wound around his head, exactly in the style of the French mariners, or laborers, in a seaport town. I stepped up to him, and accosted him politely with the words, "I hope I don't incommode you, by coming to take my breakfast with you." "Oh no, sir," he replied, with a strong French accent, that made it sound like "No, sare." "Ah," I continued, "you are a Frenchman, sir?" "No, sare," he answered, "hi emm an Heenglishman." "Why," I asked, in return, "how do you make that out? You look like a Frenchman, and you speak like one." "Hi emm an Eenglishman, becas hi got a Heenglish wife," he answered.