

INTRODUCTION

Like all other forms of artistic effort, paintings have to stand ultimately on their own merits and speak for themselves. However, the question of why individual painters choose to utilize certain kinds of subjects and to treat those subjects in certain ways does seem usually to be of interest, not only to other painters but to people who simply care about art. Here I want to glance at this question in terms of the paintings of Texas birds assembled in this publication — to explain why I and my brother, Scott, came to conceive and execute them, and to touch on the matter of style and approach.

We are not professional wildlife painters and have no intention of trying to build a career in that genre, nor have these watercolors been done in the spirit usually implicit in the phrase, "wildlife painting." Much of the mature work for which we are known has consisted of landscapes, still-lives, and portraits. Nevertheless, these bird paintings reflect a lifelong interest in their subject matter, and they are also a logical outgrowth of some of our earliest artistic efforts.

Being twins, Scott and I have shared many interests and have developed as persons and as artists along similar lines, but at various times we have been fascinated by different things. Both of us have loved art since the very beginning, and from kindergarten onward we were the "class artists," our works being often displayed on home-room bulletin boards and kept by our teachers as mementoes. In those early years, however, I had a good bit more interest in birds than Scott, and I often drew and painted them. Though he occasionally did a bird picture, he was more drawn to such subjects as architecture and old ships, and now and then undertook a still-life or a landscape. Two particular hobbies of his were building models of early sailing vessels from scratch, and making detailed replicas, carefully painted to look weathered and aged, of frontier towns and farms and bridges and even mountain ranges, for use with a

small HO gauge model railroad which he loved. From such work he acquired quite early a great amount of technical knowledge, both in draftsmanship and in the use of paints.

My interest, on the other hand, was concentrated chiefly on wildlife. I kept the usual small menagerie of lizards, turtles and snakes, collected butterflies and fossils, and even had an assortment of bird and animal skeletons which I was always trying to glue together in proper form but which were constantly falling apart. By the age of ten I was taking correspondence lessons in taxidermy from a firm that advertised in Field and Stream, and had secretly acquired an air rifle with which I began to collect specimens for mounting. This turned me into the scourge of the neighborhood song birds, for I hunted almost every day in the woods near our Fort Worth home, returning just before dinner to hide my trophies in the back yard, and retrieving them later in the evening when I had time to work at skinning and mounting them.

Taxidermy frequently required that I draw birds more accurately than I had drawn them when younger. I found it very hard to put onto paper the images that I was seeing in nature and in my mind, and my classroom daydreams and notebook doodles of that era often reflected my preoccupation with this problem. It was frustrating to find that I not only couldn't render birds right, but somehow couldn't bring to the effort the same interest and enthusiasm that I brought to taxidermy. Nor did the quite good illustrations in my small and hard-used collection of bird books, including some pictures by the famous Louis Agassiz Fuertes, inspire me or lead me into deeper study of the art of bird depiction, and consequently I was getting nowhere with it. Such real paintings of birds as I attempted from time to time, wood ducks, warblers and herons being the usual subjects, never turned out well and were always abandoned before being finished.

I can pinpoint the event which signaled an end to this period of frustration and ambivalence, and furthermore was one of those rare moments in life that can be identified later as pivotal in shaping one's career, or in this case the careers of two people. One autumn afternoon in 1956, at the age of fourteen, I discovered in a local library a one-volume edition of The Birds of America, by John James Audubon. Up to that time, I had seen only individual reproductions of some of Audubon's more famous pictures, which had aroused my admiration but no other special feeling that I remember. Now, however, what I held in my hands was a book with 435 of them in it, and the effect was overwhelming. It was a moment of such intense recognition that I was hardly able to contain my excitement while thumbing through the pages from one beautiful picture to the next. Nothing in my bird books at home, with their illustrations by Fuertes, Peterson, Singer and others, had prepared me in the least for the impact of first viewing the full scope of Audubon's achievement. The experience held a profundity of feeling that was new to me, and it was related to the inner essence of the paintings. Though many of them showed birds in slightly unnatural poses or forms, they all contained a vitality, a spiritual kind of energy, that I had not sensed before in any wildlife art.

I suspect now that much of the intensity of my reaction was based in the fact that at fourteen, with the interests that I had already developed, I was fully primed to respond to these pictures in a powerfully esthetic way. At any rate, I checked the book out of the library and took it home, hoping that it would excite Scott as much as it had me, and indeed it did. With his encouragement I undertook to make a copy of one of the book's plates which, in accordance with my early fascination with wood ducks, was number 206. I traced the picture, transferred the tracing to watercolor paper, and set about painting

it with a couple of frayed brushes and an old tin of paints. Ambition quickly collided with reality, for I entirely lacked the technical experience in painting detail that the job demanded. Now and then while I struggled, Scott would walk up behind me to look over my shoulder, and occasionally he offered some knowledgeable suggestion which I wasn't capable of putting to use. Finally out of frustration I asked him to sit down with the picture for a few minutes and demonstrate what he meant, and that was the last I had to do with the picture, for I never got to touch a brush to it again. Scott not only went on to finish the copy but loved doing so.

In the following weeks we obtained and read several biographies of Audubon, finding that his life and career coincided exactly with a period of American history that already intrigued us, the heroic early-nineteenth century when our continent still had frontiers to be explored and conquered and an abundance of wild natural beauty that it was never to know again. This immersion in thinking about Audubon and his times tempted me into trying another copy of his work in early 1957. It was to be a more ambitious effort than the first, for it involved an enlarged version of Plate Number 246, the American eiders, which I set out to render in full life size through the traditional process of squaring off a tracing of the book plate and then redrawing it over larger squares penciled on a sheet of watercolor paper.

We had a new set of paints and brushes by then, but merely drawing the enlargement and getting it ready for painting took me several weeks. When I did finally start to paint, I could sense that Scott was watching with keen interest, and ready to render aid. When I ran into obstacles that I could not surmount he was there to take over the job. He worked at it steadily for weeks with me standing behind him and looking over his shoulder nearly the whole time. Often he would wake at three in the morning and paint until time

for school, and in the afternoon would come back to it and work late into the evening hours. By the time he had completed the eiders, he was so thoroughly hooked on Audubon's work that he resolved to draw and paint all 435 of the book's plates in the order in which Robert Havell, the great British engraver and printer, had produced them in London between 1827 and 1838, and in this project I sometimes helped by doing the drawings and transferring them to watercolor paper. To attempt to paint all of Audubon's bird pictures required an ambition and a naivete that only a fifteen year old could possess. Though Scott did complete several dozen Audubon copies during the following months, both he and I began to be tempted by the idea of doing bird paintings of our own creation.

In that summer of 1957 while Scott was still occupied doing Audubon copies, I decided to attempt an original bird painting, a small watercolor of a yellow warbler perched on a branch of a Queen Anne rose in bloom. I spent several days arranging and re-arranging the dead warbler and the rose branch in a frustrating attempt to create an adequate pose and composition. Though I refrained from seeking Scott's advice or help, since he was deeply engaged in reproducing an Audubon picture, I could see that my labors were again beginning to distract him. As a painter, Scott has always been a problem solver. In spite of the fact that at that time he was just beginning to master the technical difficulties of watercolor, there were few new esthetic problems to be tackled by simply doing copies. As I look back on it now it was probably inevitable that Scott would grow fascinated by my new idea, take it over and finish it, which is exactly what he did. He continued to work on Audubon copies, but after completing the picture of the yellow warbler which I had started, he became less interested in copying bird pictures and more interested in collaborating with

me on our own paintings of birds or in creating works of art that were entirely his own. He was learning very fast, for each picture that he did was noticeably better than the ones that he had done before. From painting birds he eventually branched out to draw portraits of fellow students for our high-school annual and to paint landscapes and still-lives, so that by 1961, when we were freshmen at Tulane University, painting had become so central a part of his life that he decided to quit college to find a school where he could prepare himself for a career in art.

His chance came in the spring of 1962 during the Tarrant County Annual Art Show, held at what is now called The Fort Worth Art Museum. Scott had not entered any work in this exhibition, but Emily Guthrie Smith, a close family friend and a superb painter and pastelist, took some of his paintings to the museum for the purpose of getting a critical opinion from the show's distinguished judge, Walter Stuemfig, a well-known Philadelphia painter and a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Stuemfig was so impressed with this work that upon returning to Philadelphia he persuaded the Academy's board of directors to forego the usual application procedures and extend an open invitation to Scott to study there. Naturally he accepted the honor with great pleasure, and ever since that time he has been a dedicated and single-minded career artist.

Although I too loved art, I knew quite well that I lacked Scott's experience and developed skills, and I knew furthermore that art as a profession was a tough gamble. The early sixties offered scant prospects for earning a living through painting unsupplemented by proceeds from commercial art, college teaching, or the instruction of private students, none of which interested me. Trying to be practical, I stayed on at Tulane for a degree, though during the next three years, with Scott's help and encouragement, I did continue to paint

Here I come to the question of the esthetic values which Scott and I find important. Since these values are essentially different from those that govern the views of most wildlife artists nowadays, I first need to offer some personal criticism of the governing values and the effect they have had. Having great respect, as I have indicated, for much of the talent currently at work in this field, I don't want to overdo the criticism, and I feel that others have a right to paint as they wish. But I am convinced that in their pursuit of ^{an} ~~the~~ ideal of scientific accuracy they are sometimes not only carrying to an unjustified extreme principles derived from their American and European ~~present~~ ^{forebears} ~~tors~~, but are too frequently ignoring powerful artistic elements also used by those earlier artists — very especially by Liljeferers, with ^{his personal sense of the unity of both} the nearly-Oriental relationship between subject and ^{background} ~~background~~ ^{which} ~~that~~ the best of his pictures ^{proclaim} ~~attain~~.

Science is not art, but of course we do live in a rampantly scientific time, and much of the present preoccupation with scientific validity in bird painting — sometimes I think of it as feather-counting — must stem from an understandable desire for public acceptance and the approval of ornithologists and other bird people. But that does not make for good art either. The unfortunate effects of the whole complex of things, as I see them, are twofold. For one thing, science tends to bolster the magazine illustrator's dictum that the subject of a picture, in this case the bird, should be its sole point of focus, meaning that the background is often subordinated to the point of fading out completely at its edges, with results that become mere pictorial vignettes. Second, the scientific viewpoint looks with suspicion upon the expression of too much of the artist's own personality, believing it to be incompatible with the attainment of absolute factual truth. This

attitude has not only persuaded many gifted artists into making quite a sincere effort to let no natural detail escape their eye or brush; it has also nudged them toward a sameness of expression — a neutralized kind of illustrator's approach — wherein their individual personalities are buried and the work of one artist comes to resemble that of another. This is the result of trying to please others first, of attempting to mollify ornithologists and bird persons who may know little about art or the artistic experience, and it is reinforced by efforts to give the general public what it seems to want.

While such artists do often have a strong sense of individuality which inevitably shows up in their work, this tendency to overvalue an ideal that is imposed upon them by others works toward inhibiting their individual expression. I believe that in consequence what bothers them most about Audubon's painting is the very force of his personality so powerfully manifested in his work. Trained otherwise, they see this as an intrusion. Scott and I see it as one of the key elements of Audubon's greatness — which brings us back, by a somewhat roundabout route, to the matter of our own esthetic values.

In a sense these values of ours have only a little to do with science. Value theories are seldom something that artists work out ahead of times and then put into practice, but more often amount to justifications of the kind of work that their spirit impels them to undertake. Be that as it may, our view of the creative process is fundamentally mystical, and I make no apologies for this term. It includes three main elements, of which the artist's personality is one. The other two concern the artist's own perception of the structure and function of all the created elements of nature, and they are linked to the Chinese concept of "ch'i" and the similar but more Western and God-centered idea of "inscape" expressed by the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. To

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explore these mystic concepts fully would require many pages, but both postulate the existence of an overall meaningful pattern of spiritual force in nature. They see this force as flowing into natural objects in such a way as to give them unique individuality — "thing-ness" or "this-ness," or in our word, "structure" — but which nevertheless relates them to an overall, unifying and ruling spiritual pattern which defines their function.

A work of art, insofar as it has validity and power, captures and contains and expresses these essences of structure and function found in its subject, be that subject bird or branch or rock or cloud. And this takes place through the medium of the artist's own personality, the third part of our triad. Artistic truth may or may not conflict with scientific factual truth, but whether it does so or not is beside the point. The point is that artistic truth is spiritual truth as perceived by the artist, who has filtered his subject matter's essence through his own sensibilities and thus has attained a rightness, and with rightness, a style. For Scott and me, this whole process is supremely evident in Audubon's paintings of birds, and it is the ideal toward which we try to aim our work.

This, of course, is the reason our bird paintings are not "realistic" in the current sense of the word. In them we have combined our lifelong fascination with birds as subjects with a later interest in landscapes, the varying landscapes of Texas that have had so much to do with shaping our consciousness of nature. But if our intention has succeeded, these paintings will not add up to a scientifically impeccable catalogue of Texas birds looking and behaving exactly as one might expect in precisely rendered Texas habitats. Instead we hope that they will convey the essence of those birds in relation to the essence of their surroundings, in terms of the way that we as artists feel these essences. We are following our own path, not reacting against current trends. And if that

path was basically laid out for us on that long-age Saturday which first brought us to an awareness of the power of Audubon's work as expressed in his book, The Birds of America, we see this as having been a matter of fate and great good fortune. We hope that those who view our paintings will agree.

The End