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8405 GERMANTOWN AVENUE
CHESTNUT HILL
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19118
(215) 242-4750

DONALD H. CRESSWELL
RES. (215) 649-2354

CHRISTOPHER W. LAINE
RES. (215) 233-3291

"Marsh Wren" a pencil and watercolor drawing by John James Audubon.
A long billed marsh wren is perched on a beebalm and pecks at a spider.
15 x 10 inches (full sheet).

This watercolor drawing is an Audubon "gift drawing," which the great naturalist made occasionally for friends and relatives during his travels. Audubon often stayed with families while doing research on birds and animals in an area, and he is known to have given lovely drawings such as this to young ladies who must have marveled at his art with great delight. Numerous incidents are recorded in which the artist gave away or sold many such drawings. This watercolor is a gift drawing, and is a delight. The bird is characterized by one of Audubon's outstanding talents, that of capturing motion, the bird thrusting his body out from the branch to snare a spider. The well done feet clasp the stem of the flower with an immediacy that has the realism of life, and the long thrusting bill not only accentuates the action but also defines the name of the species that in Audubon's later publications was to be the "Long Billed Marsh Wren."

The drawing is not signed, but it is definitely an original Audubon. This claim is based on several strands of argument, which combined prove the authorship. First, the drawing is clearly done in Audubon's style and is of a recognizable Audubon genre, the gift drawing. Known examples of this genre, such as those in the Paul Mellon collection and at Princeton University, all exhibit the same characteristics as this drawing, including style, size, and composition. While these prints were not intended for publication, and therefore are not as precise as other of his work, they do show Audubon's love and care in making these gifts, here evidenced by the beauty of the flower and the intensity of the bird. A comparison of this drawing with the other known Audubon gift drawings is almost conclusive in itself.

Next, the handwriting of the title, "Marsh Wren," is his. This penciled title is typical of the way he did his field notes. On the original watercolor drawings for The Birds of America, the elephant folio sheets in the New York Historical Society, these field notes were erased and numbers and nomenclature were substituted by the engravers, but the Audubon handwriting is still visible. A researcher would find other examples of this kind of penciled handwriting on drawings and sketches that were not used for publication, such as on the other examples of his gift drawings.



OLD PRINTS, MAPS AND BOOKS

Finally, a comparison of this drawing with the prints from and the original drawing for The Birds of America clinches the case. While the composition and many of the ornithological details of the "Long-Billed Marsh Wren" (plate 98) differ from the drawing, the bird is essentially the same. And then, the beebalm flower and the descending spider of the drawing appear in plate 394, in exactly the same sort of composition. While the style, genre, and handwriting establish the argument, the beebalm and spider would have come only from the hand of Audubon.

By no means is this Audubon's finest work, for the wren's back is somewhat stiffened and the arrangement of dark stripes on the wings were later run with a different slant when the published work was issued. However, this is an original Audubon drawing with its own quality and interest. With the same beebalm and spider image appearing in the Birds of America, it is interesting to speculate whether this drawing was first time Audubon drew this composition, one he liked enough to use later in his published work. Whatever its history, this is a wonderful Audubon, a fine addition to the corpus of Audubon's known work and one he obviously drew with care to give as a token of his friendship. The exactness, the quick plot of the wren after the spider, and the loving depiction of the flower all conspire to proclaim one more triumph for John James Audubon.

Provenance: This drawing was once in the possession of the family of James Curtis Booth (1810-1888) who is best known as the director of the U. S. Mint in Philadelphia starting in 1849. He was also a reknown metallurgist who was very active in the Philadelphia scientific circle that thrived around The Academy of Natural Sciences and The American Philosophical Society. He knew Audubon personally and never joined the ranks of detractors such as George Ord and Titian R. Peale. A friendship might have existed that was never publicized since Booth was not in a position to buck the established powers for the sake of a daring innovator like John James Audubon. Nevertheless, this watercolor has been passed down to us from Booth's daughter, Miss Laurette Booth of Haverford, Pennsylvania, who sold it in the early 1940s.

Price \$88,500

¹ Alice Ford. John James Audubon. (Norman, 1964), plate opp. pp. 178 and 221.

² Ibid., pp. 147, 177.

Further notes. A first-hand examination of the permanent exhibition of original watercolor drawings by J.J. Audubon in the New-York Historical Society is useful to fully appreciate this work. Similar works with the artist's fieldnotes can be found in the Firestone Library at Princeton University and in the private collection of Paul Mellon.

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April 12, 1985

Stuart Gentling
4801 Harley St.
Fort Worth, TX
76107

INVOICE:

John James Audubon. "Marsh Wren." Pencil and Watercolor drawing. 15 x
10 (full sheet).

\$88,500

Shipping waived.

Thank you.



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