

Audubon in Philadelphia

In April of 1824 John James Audubon arrived in Philadelphia and rented some modest rooms at the corner of Fifth and Minor Streets. It was the end of a long and tedious journey by riverboat and shank's mare all the way from Louisiana. The city of brotherly love at that time was still the leading center of science and learning as well as the most important publishing city in the country. It was here that he hoped to find patronage and a possible publisher who might present his work to the world. He had no clear plan about how to do either. He would improvise, introduce himself around town and show his work to the local worthies as he had done in Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Natchez and New Orleans and a hundred little towns along the way.

The large tin boxes protecting his precious portfolios crammed with bird paintings were already waiting for him. As he opened them to see if they had made the journey in good condition, he must have been wondering just how he would be received in this cold northern city, once the home of America's most famous ornithologist, the late Alexander Wilson (1767 - 1813). Wilson's great achievement, his nine volume "American Ornithology", had been published there between 1808 and 1814. They were the finest books on American birds yet produced surpassing Mark Catesby's charming but primitive work printed in London almost a century earlier.

Audubon was thirty nine years old and practically penniless. By most standards measuring success at the time, he was an avbject failure, and he knew it. But as an artist he was no failure, for he knew that his paintings of birds were the finest yet produced in this country or probably anywhere. And he was certain that he had gained in the field by direct observation a world of new knowledge and fresh insights about the birds of America that would render much of Wilson's work obsolete. In the presence of great or learned men he tended to feel shy and diffident. He was self-conscious about his lack of formal education, his thick french accent and difficulties with the english language. Unfortunately he often tried to mask these deficiencies with a behavior that others thought arrogant and uncompromising.

So instead of assuming a humble demeanor as he faced the big city he immediately made it known to all who would listen that he had come from the frontier with a new ornithological project that would surpass all the work done by Alexander Wilson and his armchair naturalist supporters. So certain was he of the value and obvious beauty of his work, that he just knew the paintings alone would be his best arguement. He was being naive, however, if he thought that the very men whose reputations and personal fortunes were bound up with the legacy of the late Scottish naturalist would be open-minded or eager to embrace

an expensive new project that might overshadow the "American Ornithology."

Philadelphia was a conservative city whose social and cultural life was controlled by a quiet, firmly established oligarchy. It did not take long for him to be made painfully aware that the scientific and literary leaders of the city, with few exemptions, were firmly committed to Alexander Wilson and that any newcomer, regardless of the merits of his work, would be greeted with indifference or outright hostility.

Three of the most important of these men whose favor he had most wanted to cultivate would decide to oppose him. The head of this anti Audubon faction was none other than George Ord, the close friend and biographer of Wilson and also one of the executors of his estate. (Remember? Scott found Ord's tombstone right next to Wilson's in the Old Swede's Churchyard) He was a gifted naturalist in his own right, armchair or no, and he was exceedingly proud of the role he had played as editor of the eighth and ninth volumes of the "Ornithology." Ord's close ally was Alexander Lawson, the finest engraver and printer in Philadelphia. He had worked closely with Wilson to produce the etched and handcolored plates for all the Wilson books. His interest in the "American Ornithology" was more than an artistic one. Like Ord he owned a percentage of all royalties from sale of that publication.

Titian Peale was the third member of this establishment. He was the son of the celebrated Charles Wilson Peale whose museum, housed on the second floor of the old Independence Hall, was the most famous institution of its kind in America. Though he considered himself to be primarily a naturalist, and no armchair naturalist at that, the Twenty-four year old Peale was already making a name for himself as a painter of natural history subjects. Infact he was presently engaged as the primary artist for the four-volume supplement to Wilson's "Ornithology" being published by Ord and Lawson at that time. Apart from being a part of the famous Peale family, the young Titian had another genuine claim to fame. He had been overland to the far west all the way to the Rocky Mountains as a participant of the celebrated Long Expedition of 1820.

There was another man who was also in the Wilson camp but would become an admirer of Audubon's pictures and would try in his own way to befriend the artist. He was Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino and Musignano and nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte was only twenty-one years old when he met JJA but he was well respected in scientific circles here and in Europe as a gifted ornithological taxonomist. It was the prince who was sponsoring the new publication of the four-volume Wilson Supplement and underwriting its cost. Most of the biographies dealing with this important period of Audubon's life have sympathetically portrayed the young Bonaparte as a man caught between what would become the Wilson and Audubon

camps.

As soon as he could find a public venue to rent JJA with the support of a few friends to whom he had letters of introduction set up a small exhibit of his best paintings for Philadelphians to see. He was buoyed by the generally warm reception of his work by the general publi so much so that he began to make critical statements about Alexander Wilson"s birds. Unfortunately, George Ord made his hostility to Audubon and his work clear from the moment of their first meeting. Ord considered him to be no more than an undisciplined amateur. He was especially critical of the artist-naturalist's singular approach to the painting of birds amidst botanical arrangements drawn from their natural habitats. To Ord the addition of flower and botanical drawings and even full landcape views were nothing more than romanticized distractions which violated the scientific purity of direct bird illustrations. Lawson and Peale were of the same mind. In fact Lawson went a step further to tell Audubon that his work was too soft and painterly to be translated through etching and engraving. He suggested that he should look to the examples of Wilson and Peale and follow the practice of depicting his birds in more or less strict profile, preferably on a single branch uncluttered by superfluous floral decoration. If Audubon had seen Titian Peale's work by now, he must had found it almost impossible to keep from laughing out loud. Peale was primitive. He wasn't even as good as Wilson!

Charles Bonaparte wanted to be more sympathetic to his fellow emigre Frenchman, but he needed the goodwill of Ord, Lawson, and Peale in order to accomplish his aim of publishing the Wilson Supplement. How could he encourage the bird artist without threatening his collaboration with his Philadelphia friends? Audubon's paintings might not display the scientific purity demanded by Ord and Lawson, but they did exhibit an undeniable skill and sophistication not seen before. Besides, Audubon, unlike poor Wilson who was lying in the Old Swede's Churchyard, was still very much alive to be of use for future projects. In spite of Lawson's flat refusal to print Audubon's work, the prince believed that he would defer to the wishes of his royal benefactor if Audubon could be persuaded to compromise somewhat and submit an illustration basically conforming to the printer's demands. With this in mind Bonaparte paid a visit to Audubon's lodgings one afternoon in May.

The prince's visit was well timed. In the month that Audubon had spent in Philadelphia his fortunes had sunk to their lowest ebb. He was not just penniless now but in substantial debt. The small exhibition he had held to raise funds to pay his expenses had not been financially helpful inspite of the praise he received from some quarters. Neither had he been able to attract a sufficient number of paying students to satisfy his growing list of creditors. It is true that he had made some sincere friends among the art and science community in the city.

The prominent painter Thomas Sully and the naturalist Charles Alexander LeSeur became staunch allies. And there were others as well, but the warmth of these friendships was scarcely an antidote for the venom of those self-anointed philosophers Ord and Lawson. As Bonaparte inspected the paintings in Audubon's portfolios that May afternoon the bird artist must have been ready to accept any proposal that might get one of his bird drawings in the Supplement and the name of Audubon out to a wider public.

A painting of a pair of Boat-tailed Grackles perched in a Live Oak tree festooned with Spanish Moss caught Bonaparte's eye. It was a picture JJA had painted more than three years earlier on a flatboat moored at Bonnet Carre Church a few miles above New Orleans. Wilson had not illustrated this distinctly southern species. Would Monsieur Audubon be interested in redrawing these birds on a smaller sheet of paper conforming to the plate size of the Supplement? Would he place them on a single bare branch in accordance with the other birds in the Wilson books? For once Audubon's fierce pride did not get the better of him. He knew he had little choice if he were to show anything for the long trip east. He answered that he would repaint the picture if Lawson or others would make no changes in the new work. The prince agreed and offered the artist \$25.00 for the picture, a substantial sum for such a small commission which the prince hoped that the artist would regard as a sign of respect and not charity.

Taking his time over the next few days JJA put all his skill and refinement into the new grackle painting even though it was smaller and more austere than the picture he had done in Louisiana. He followed strictly the measurement of the plate size provided by Bonaparte, and he eliminated any background elements that might offend Lawson or Ord. In the lower right hand corner he added a new element, a facsimile-sized, brown speckled white grackle egg to make the picture scientifically harmonize with the Wilson plates, several of which had illustrations of eggs. He accepted the fact that what was about to be his first published bird painting, his publishing debut, was in essence a compromise of the very qualities by which he had hoped to establish his own reputation. He had hopes, besides getting his name before the public in an important scientific publication, that he just might placate Lawson and perhaps even Ord. As far as Titian Peale was concerned these elegant little grackles, compromise or not, were beyond anything the marginally talented young Philadelphian had done or ever was likely to do. And the public would see the difference.

Lawson certainly noticed the difference. So did George Ord. Because Bonaparte who was paying the bills for printing the Supplement gently insisted on the inclusion of the Audubon in the book, they had to do it. From the outset they were determined that the public would never get a chance to appreciate

Audubon's stylish refinements or be able to compare the grackles with the rest of the Supplement. More than a year later when Audubon, then back with his wife Lucy and his two sons in Louisiana, received his copy of the new Wilson Supplement he was outraged. The basic image in the book could be recognized as his by anyone who had seen the painting he presented to Bonaparte, but his simple, elegant three-quarter view of the male bird had been replaced by a stiffly posed, thick legged bird whose body, now in strict profile, was pointed in the opposite direction with its head looking over its shoulder. The female was clearly based on his original drawing but it too lacked any of his customary subtlety and looked like it was done by a different hand. (See illustration____) The plate was insulting enough, but to add further injury, a phrase was engraved in the lower left corner which read "Drawn from Nature by John J. Audubon and A. Rider." Another artist had reworked his painting and was sharing credit for it! But that was not its real message. This was an obvious effort by Lawson and Ord to embarrass him before the scientific community. Readers would be forced to assume that Audubon's painting had to be "corrected" by another hand to make it scientifically suitable for publication. The insult was deliberate and public and aimed to minimize his contribution to the Wilson Supplement small as that was.

Audubon immediately wrote to Bonaparte to express his outrage, and the prince responded by offering a rather lame excuse. Lawson had informed him that JJA had not correctly followed the plate dimensions that Bonaparte had dictated so that the grackle painting was an inch too long to be engraved in its original format. Since Audubon had already left Philadelphia and was not available to make revisions, and the prince knew that he would have resented it if Titian Peale had been asked to make the needed changes, Bonaparte went out of his way to bring in a new artist, Alexander Rider, to do the work. It was either this or Audubon would have to be excluded from the book, and the prince certainly did not want to deprive him of this important opportunity. Audubon immediately saw through this excuse. Alexander Lawson, a master printer, could easily have made the few adjustments that would have preserved the basic shapes of the birds and the elegance of Audubon's superior drawing style. (see illustration____).

Audubon had learned some hard lessons in Philadelphia that were to have a profound impact on the way he was to conduct himself with fellow scientists. Getting proper credit was the name of the game in the small world science and publishing. And having control over one's work was just as important. He would never let others dictate his fate again. The ill treatment he received at the hands of the Wilsonites convinced him that there was not room enough in America for two major ornithological publishing projects. If he were to make a name for himself and

get his work before the public, he would have to go to Europe where there were enlightened minds, established patronage and engravers and craftsmen of great skill capable of bringing to the world the kind of book that he was now formulating in his mind, a book that would surpass every ornithological publication yet produced. But how? He was utterly without means. Oddly enough, it was Bonaparte and a Philadelphia printer named Fairman who first suggested that he could get his glorious bird compositions published only in Europe. When Audubon asked the prince if he would consider underwriting the cost of a trip to Europe to find a publisher, Charles Lucien Bonapart, Prince of Canino and Musignano, politely declined.

From where he now stood, back in Louisiana, his horizons must have appeared bleak indeed. He had returned to his beloved Feliciana woods as a failure. He had no money and no prospects. He could barely think of his past bankruptcy and the jail time he served for debt without breaking into tears. His sense of manhood had been sorely tested, because he often was unable to support Lucy and their two sons and infact frequently had to live off his wife's earnings as a tutor and nanny to the children of the nearby plantation owners. He earned what he could by doing portrait drawings, teaching the violin and flageolet, and serving as a dancing master. But when the pressures became too great or when the woods beckoned he would drop everything and disappear for hours or even days into the cane breaks and Loblolly thickets in search of adventure and new birds, often earning the undesguised contempt of the local gentry.

Still, one thing remained constant, his faith in his own abilities. He knew that his paintings of birds were unrivalled and that his firsthand knowledge of the lives and habits of American birds was not shared by any living artist naturalist inspite of his limited scientific training. But how could he earn the respect or even the attention of men of science and letters in the old world when he could not do so in his own adopted country? He and Lucy would get the money for Europe somehow, and he would go forth armed only with his beautiful paintings, some precious letters of introduction, and a granitic determination to face whatever fortune had in store for him. He was determined to overwhelm all existing bird books, not just now but forever, with a monumental creation which would include all the known birds of America. And what is more, each bird would be depicted life-size from the largest crane to the smallest hummingbird. Such a work would have to be printed on Double Elephant Folio pages measuring 26½" X 39½" an awesome format never before contemplated, and there would have to be more than 400 such handcolored plates! The sheer audacity of it it might get him the attention he needed.

It would be almost two years before he and Lucy would have enough money for him to make the trip to Europe and eventual

fame. After a false start with a printer in Edinburgh he settled on a London printer who was to handle the entire folio project, establishing his own fame in the bargain. His name was Robert Havell Jr. There in his London shop between 1827 and 1838 Audubon's great "Birds of America" was born. Havell and his team of printers and colorists employed a special combination of engraving, etching, aquatint and hand coloring to produce prints with an incredible range of light and dark values, textures and softnesses, the very painterly qualities that Alexander Lawson had pompously proclaimed impossible to reproduce. Havell's work and the resulting "Birds of America" would be universally recognized as the highest printing achievement of the nineteenth century and one of the greatest books ever. JJA could not have prayed for a better answer to the snub he got in Philadelphia.

Although he achieved fame and acceptance far beyond his highest hopes, John James Audubon was rarely far from controversy. For example he was never able to settle his differences with George Ord and company, and these seemed to become more bitter with the passing years. Ord even went to the trouble of denouncing the bird artist to his scientist friends in England and on the continent. As far as Charles Bonaparte was concerned, Audubon remained cautious and occasionally obsequious in his correspondence with the prince while in private he never forgot the injury by Ord and Lawson that Bonaparte had silently permitted. His treatment in Philadelphia had given him an unforgettable initiation into the dog-eat-dog world of science and publishing where achieving proper credit was paramount. For the rest of his life he would fiercely promote and guard his professional reputation, often becoming quite niggardly about sharing credit with deserving collaborators.

More projects lay ahead for JJA until his death perhaps from the ravages of alzheimer's disease in 1851. His commentaries to his bird paintings, the famous "Ornithological Biography" were published in London between 1831 and 1839. In the United States with the help of sons Victor and John Woodhouse Audubon, he published the small octavo-sized edition of his birds with text (1840 - 1844) as well as the famous "Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America" (1845 - 1848). Both these later works were produced in Philadelphia and to great critical acclaim, a fact that must have brought much satisfaction to Audubon as time went by and more than a little revenge for 1824. He would never forget how he and his art had been treated, though in the wake of all the adulation of his later years down to the present day his little grackle painting and its curious story passed from the scene and was all but forgotten.

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