

OF BIRDS AND TEXAS, AUDUBON, AND US

I really cannot remember exactly when my twin brother Scott and I first began seriously to contemplate creating an elephant folio of Texas birds in the tradition of John James Audubon. We had never considered ourselves to be wildlife painters. And yet our careers as artists were truly born out of an early childhood love of birds and of drawing and painting, interests which became focused and fused with our discovery of John James Audubon's Birds of America. Our first serious efforts at painting, in fact, began with the copying of his famous bird prints, and though we did not know it at the time, we, especially Scott, had begun an apprenticeship of sorts in which valuable technical skills were acquired that would play an important part in our lives and set us on our own path to becoming professional artists. As our interest in Audubon's art grew we also became more curious about the man himself and the times in which he lived. In fact studying his life and how he brought his magnificent achievement into being became a kind of a hobby, even a mild obsession. It was certainly an interest that has remained with us on a very deep level over the many years that have passed since we first became acquainted with Audubon and his work.

In the 1970's when Scott and I first began to talk about the possibility of our establishing a small publishing company to produce a number of books about several of our interests, we thought somewhat naively that it would be a good idea to make a publishing debut with something spectacular, something big, something that would really catch the book world's attention. Naturally, JJA's monumental bird book sprang to mind, and thus the inspiration for our Of Birds and Texas was born. Not in our wildest fantasies could we have predicted that we were about to set out upon a publishing odyssey that would strangely parallel Audubon's own publishing experience. And more strangely still, that Audubon himself would enter our lives and the life of our project in the most profound and personal way. What I am about to tell you, then, is the story of that project to create Of Birds and Texas, its impact on us, and our unique and curious encounter with John James Audubon.

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that our own story literally begins in April of the year 1785 with the birth of a male child to a captain Jean Audubon and a woman named Jeanne Rabine who was not his wife. The place: Les Cayes, Saint Domingue, now known as Haiti. The boy was given his mother's last name and was called Jean Rabine. Within a year his mother was dead, possibly from complications following his birth, and by the time the child was three years old he was on his way to France, an evacuee from the growing slave rebellion that would soon sweep the island. The boy, received with love and kindness by the captain's wife, grew to young manhood in an atmosphere of indulgence. He also had been given a new name upon his official adoption at the age of nine.

Jean-Jacques-Fougere Audubon. John James Audubon to us. At the age of eighteen he made his first trip to the United States where he stayed at his father's estate, Millgrove, a few miles west of Philadelphia. He returned to France two years later, having fallen in love with America and determined to return to settle permanently.