The Complete Flock

The New-York Historical Society opens the first in a three-part exhibition featuring the original watercolors for John James Audubon’s The Birds of America.

March 8-May 19
New-York Historical Society
170 Central Park West at Richard Gilder Way
New York, NY 10024
(t: (212) 873-3400
www.nyhistory.org

In celebration of the sesquicentennial of the acquisition of its collection of John James Audubon’s preparatory watercolors for the double-elephant-folio print edition of The Birds of America (1827–1838), the New-York Historical Society will launch the first of three exhibitions March 8 with the opening of Audubon’s Aviary: The Complete Flock, Part I. The collection of original preparatory watercolors numbers 435 and this first part of the exhibition will feature 175.

“Audubon and his wife were New Yorkers,” says Roberta J.M. Olson, curator of Drawings for the New-York Historical Society. “They moved back here in 1839 and had an estate on 155th street. They built a house there in 1841, moved in 1842 and also built two other houses for their sons on the property. It was quite a wonderful place. But, after the Civil War and after Audubon died, his wife Lucy was quite destitute and started shopping the original watercolors around.”

While the British museum was interested in the original works, Lucy eventually sat down with the New-York Historical Society and showed the committee the original watercolors. The committee decided they would raise the money by subscription from individual members and after every member contributed money, the Society bought the entire works in 1863.

The three exhibitions will be a marvel for not only fans of Audubon, but watercolor and American art.

John James Audubon (1785–1851), Northern Bobwhite (Colinus virginianus) and Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus), Havell pl. no. 76, ca. 1825. Watercolor, pastel, graphite, black ink, oil, gouache, black chalk, collage, and outlining with a stylus on paper, with selective glazing on paper, laid on card, 25 7/16 x 39 3/8 in. New-York Historical Society, purchased for the society by public subscription from Mrs. John J. Audubon, 1863.17.76.
**John James Audubon**  
(1785–1851),  
*Tee Swallow*  
(*Tachycineta bicolor*), Havell pl. no. 98 (variably numbered pl. 100 as in N-YHS copy), sketches of an egg and a feather, 1824.  
Watercolor, graphite, gouache, pastel, black chalk, and black ink with selective glazing on paper, laid on card, 18 3/8 x 11 3/4 in.  
enthusiasts as well. Unlike other museum shows, this one will focus on the artist's process and development and will include everything from these original watercolors to drawings to copper plates and folios. State-of-the-art media installations will also be part of the exhibition in order
to provide a deeper understanding of the connections between art and nature and Audubon's contributions to American art and history.

The beauty of these early watercolors is that they include much more than people expect from the artist. More than ornithological prints, these original watercolors show the artist's influence from the great European painters, they show Audubon's mind at work—written notes on some of the sheets detail the process, the artist's thoughts at the time and his commentary on some of the species—and they also show Audubon's wonderful mastery of the medium.

"In both his written and painted works, including his greatest triumph, The Birds of America (1827–1838), he combined a naturalist's curiosity with an artist's eye and a poet's expressiveness to ensure his unique place in the pantheon of natural history," writes Olson. "Also a gifted storyteller and a prodigious writer, Audubon wrote vivid, picaresque, often diverting accounts in letters, journals, articles and books."

Part one of The Complete Flock will focus on the artist's working methods and his ornithological and artistic influences as well as highlighting


John James Audubon (1785-1851).  
*Head of a Southern Cassowary*, after 1810.  
Pastel and graphite on paper, 21 3/8 x 16 3/8 in.  
John James Audubon Letters and Drawings,  
Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 21, no. 95.

Audubon's "unique role in the history of American art, science and exploration of this ever-expanding nation." Another important aspect of this early portion of Audubon's career is his work in pastel. For this, the New-York Historical Society will supplement its own holdings (dating back to 1808) with a selection of the artist's rare earliest pastels, borrowed from Houghton Library of Harvard University and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle in France. According to the New-York Historical Society, the La Rochelle pastels were discovered in 1995 and have never been seen outside that city.

"The early pastels capture Audubon's youthful excitement about drawing birds while in France and during his first years in America, illuminating the renowned artist-naturalist's methods and his early career," says Olson. "All the early ornithological illustrators used watercolor but Audubon used pastel to give the work more texture. And, like everything, he taught himself. One of the things this exhibition will show is what a major innovator Audubon really was. In fact, he was the first person who showed all of his birds life-sized, others wanted to, but folio paper was just invented and he was the first person to do this. He was also the first ornithological illustrator who responded intellectually to naturalism."

After the installation documenting the early years of his career, part one of *The Complete Flock* will feature more than 200 Audubon avian watercolors, including the first 175 models that were engraved for *The Birds of America*. Two of the more controversial pieces in this first 175 are the *Northern Mockingbird* and *Snowy Owl*.

The disagreement about the Northern Mockingbird came not from the bird but from what it is pictured with. "It is one of Audubon's..."
more controversial works due to disagreement about the anatomical accuracy of the venomous rattlesnake and whether a rattler could climb a tree to invade the birds’ nest."

The exhibition is also a celebration of the elegantly illustrated book *Audubon’s Aviary: The Original Watercolors for The Birds of America* by Robert J.M. Olson. Published by the New-York Historical Society and Skira Rizzoli Publishing, *Audubon’s Aviary* won the 2013 New York Book Show Award in the category of Fine Art.

“What people will realize about Audubon is that he was a great role model because he truly believed in his vision and also because his story is that of an immigrant who was born illegitimately at a time when that was a very bad thing,” says Olson. “He couldn’t inherit money and did all of this on his own. Early on, Audubon was also very upset that there was no natural history museum and he wrote Daniel Webster, the Secretary of State at the time, and said he was worried about the wilderness and saw the need to preserve it. He was the writing on the wall of the coming industrialism and this all led to the founding of a natural history museum in New York City in 1939.”