A nyone who has a rudimentary acquaintance with
birds knows something about John James Audubon
and has seen reproductions of his bird art in books
and as posters. Perhaps this familiarity has bred
a dullness of response. But try taking a look at
Audubon’s paintings—from which copperplates were made—at the
“Audubon’s Aviary” exhibition at the New-York Historical Society,
which begins in spring 2013. You’ll be stunned.

Now Roberta J.M. Olson, who has overseen the “Aviary”
exhibits and is curator of drawings for the Society, has brought
something of this excitement to a book.

One of the greatest treasures held by the New-York Historical
Society is its collection of Audubon’s watercolors, the basis for his
monumental work, The Birds of America. Most were purchased from
his widow, and the Society continued to add to its collection, which
also includes one of the magnificent double-elephant folios engraved
by Robert Havell, Jr. Today the Society holds the most impressive
collection of Audubon material anywhere.

Olson’s book includes a biographical sketch, two essays, and
highlights from The Birds of America paintings. One hundred and
fourteen works of art are culled from the total of 435, and there are
miniature versions of “the rest of the flock.”

Besides reminding us of important events and relationships in
his life, Olson presents Audubon as a complex figure; unraveling
his story, she states, “beg[s] for several lifetimes and multiple
volumes.” In recent years there have been some significant Audubon
biographies and a great number of articles. In a small space, Olson’s
sketch fits well beside them and adds new insights.

In the first of the two scholarly essays, Olson illuminates
Audubon amid his contemporaries and predecessors. He is a pioneer,
she shows, with unparalleled field experience and relentless curiosity.
Here and in other parts of the book, illustrations are enormously
helpful in making points, comparing Audubon’s paintings to those
of other artists or showing blow-ups for detail. The second essay, by
Marjorie Shelley, teases out Audubon’s technique, about which he
himself was notably silent. It’s a masterly exposition of the artist’s
“endless inventiveness.” Her discussion would turn anyone into an
Audubon fan.

The next section, a selection of the paintings, is a treasure. It
includes Audubon’s comments taken from the text that accompanied
his plates for The Birds of America, analysis of technique, biographical
or contextual information, current information about the bird
displayed, and one or more additional small illustrations that shed
light. But it is the paintings, so beautifully and vividly reproduced,
that are the main show.

With impressive scholarship, delicacy, and respect Olson
brings us close to the paintings and to the man. At one point,
she evokes how Audubon’s brown ink fingerprints on the back
of some paintings make her feel that she is in his presence. This
extraordinary book makes me feel the same way.

“Audubon’s Aviary: Part 1 of the Complete Flock,” the first of
three annual exhibitions at the New-York Historical Society, will
take place March 8-May 19, 2013.