PREVIEWING UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS, EVENTS, SALES AND AUCTIONS OF HISTORIC FINE ART

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In 1831, ornithologist and painter John James Audubon (1785-1851) found himself lacking subjects. Having painted all the regional birds near his New York City home, and others brought to him by trappers and hunters, Audubon required a leave of his surroundings to complete the next phase of his magnum opus, the huge double-elephant folios of *The Birds of America*.

Those expeditions—first to Florida and then later to the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador—form the basis for the New-York Historical Society’s second part of its three-part series *Audubon’s Aviary*. The first exhibition, *The Complete Flock*, hung through May 2013 and focused on Audubon’s early watercolors. The second exhibition, *Parts Unknown*, runs March 21 through May 26 and will feature mostly waterbirds and waders that Audubon saw on his two prominent expeditions. The third and final installment, its title not yet announced, will open in 2015.

The New-York Historical Society owns all 435 Audubon watercolors that served as models for Robert Havell Jr.’s aquatint engravings for *The Birds of America*.

Roberta J.M. Olson, curator of drawings for the New-York Historical Society, says personal and professional growth can be seen in Audubon from expeditions north and south feature prominently in the second of three John James Audubon exhibitions at New-York Historical Society.

*John James Audubon (1785-1851), Great Blue Heron (Ardea Herodias), Havell pl. 211, 1821; 1834. Watercolor, oil, pastel, graphite, gouache, black ink and collage paper, laid on card, 36 3/16 x 25 5/8 in. Purchased for the Society by public subscriptions from Mrs. John J. Audubon, 1863.17.211.*

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“...because Audubon was a very different person at this point from his early works,” Olson says. “He wasn’t this callow young Frenchman who was trying to find his way through life. He had achieved some notoriety and, shall we say, celebrity. He was at the top of his game.”

It was during this phase of Audubon’s painting career that he first began to see how fragile bird habitats were, especially as industrialization began to spread in the Northeast. “Preservation was a new idea. It had begun to happen in the scientific world; it was not a public thing. Extinction was more or less speculation, but it saddened him immensely; remember this was before Darwin,” Olson says, adding that Audubon and Charles Darwin had met. “People in Europe had thought of America as boundless and endless, as if extinction couldn’t possibly happen. Audubon was starting to see that wasn’t true.”

Egg poachers, or “eggers,” were especially concerning to him. “He laments it continuously. These people went in and indiscriminately took all the eggs. Audubon was so appalled that he never hunted in the same way again,” Olson says, adding, “He didn’t kill birds wantonly; it was always for study.”
In one story from the New-York Historical Society records, Audubon had purchased an injured golden eagle as a subject. He struggled for weeks on how to euthanize the injured bird; eventually he—Audubon, not the bird—had a seizure from the stress. After a two-week recovery, he dedicated himself to the piece, *Golden Eagle*, which is in the exhibition. Later he would still hunt and kill birds, but always with care and concern for scientific truth, which is why he would measure the birds, record distinguishing characteristics and make detailed notations about plumages and eggs—he was a naturist at heart.

“He also tasted his birds, and he talks a great deal about this. He did it because he was curious, and he needed to eat them sometimes,” Olson elaborates. “We live in such a wasteful culture today; Audubon didn’t waste anything. In one instance he found a fresh perch in a heron’s stomach; he ate the perch. He refused to let anything go to waste.”

These stories, as well as many others in the show’s state-of-the-art installation, will complement the
watercolors in the exhibit, which will include images of a soaring golden eagle; burrowing puffins; a snowy egret on the muddy banks of a wetland; and an intricate arrangement with a Bachman’s Warbler, a bird Audubon named after its discoverer, friend John Bachman. Also in the show is Great Blue Heron, a bird so large that Audubon, who almost exclusively painted life-size subjects, had to paint with its head down to fit it all in the image.

“Artistically, Audubon is using oils more frequently and with more authority. He’s also doing more backgrounds, mostly because he has so many waterbirds so he wants to express the sea,” Olson says, adding that she is excited about Parts Unknown and what it represents in Audubon’s career. “Audubon is still teaching us. Ecclesiastes was wrong—there are new things under the sun. I can see an Audubon watercolor a hundred times and each time I see something new.”