Finding Painterly Drama In Life's Delicate Perch

If John James Audubon had been less avian in his ambitions, he might have made a career as a portrait painter, which is how, on occasion, he supported himself while longing to paint birds and "go in pursuit of those beautiful and happy creatures." Had he taken the human route, the galleries of the New-York Historical Society, which are now given over to an extraordinary assemblage of more than 200 watercolors of beautiful (if not happy) herons, owls, woodpeckers, ravens, rails, falcons, blue jays and their fellows, might instead be presenting portraits of early-19th-century Americans.

But maybe that is one way to approach this major new exhibition, "Audubon's Aviary: The Complete Flock," which is really the first part of three to be presented annually through 2015. It does not just unveil the work of a naturalist jettisoning the analytical still lifes of earlier ornithological catalogs but also the work of an artist who saw the human and the natural intertwined, who looked into the wild and discovered that birds, along with their wings and feathers, have what he called a "cast of countenance."

At times, when dealing with Audubon, boundaries between bird and human dissolve. Audubon's writings about his explorations, meant to accompany his landmark work, "The Birds of America" (1827-38), is called "Ornithological Biography" — and it isn't always clear if the biography is his or the birds'. In his pursuit of birds, he wrote triumphantly, "I would find myself furnished with large and powerful wings, and, cleaving the air like an eagle, I would fly off and by a

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A young, downy turkey vulture with its black flight feathers just beginning to emerge, painted by Audubon in 1820.

Life's Delicate Perch, Rendered in Paint

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few joyous bounds overtake the objects of my desire."
And in New Orleans in 1821, while trying to earn cash through mundane human portraiture, he was asked by a beautiful woman to paint her nude. Shy, tempted and embarrassed, he wrote to his wife that he backed away (albeit temporarily) and "felt like a bird that makes his escape from a strong cage filled with sweetmeats." Audubon (1785-1851) may have even felt a kinship in his migrations, flying, as a child in Haiti, from an imminent slave rebellion, then flying from the French Revolution to the United States when his father thought France was becoming unsafe. But if he thought of himself in birdlike terms, it is also possible to talk of many of the fantastically alluring birds arrayed in these galleries as if they were eerily human, citizens of a rustic new country in the midst of discovering itself. The impression becomes stronger because one of the achievements of this exhibition is to suggest just how relentless and enterprising Audubon was in his efforts to depict the "rare and beautiful" as "objects of the utmost interest and curiosity to the general public.

facts.
In a new, custom-made display case, a volume of the society's immaculate copy of "The Birds of America" sits open to a page that will be turned weekly. It is one of only about 120 surviving copies of the book, printed on large "double-elephant-folio" paper — nearly 40 inches high and 27 inches wide — that Audubon specifically selected for this purpose. It allows the birds in the book, like the birds seen on the walls, to be portrayed life size.

What an amazing ambition that was, too: to show birds not as specimens but as life-size creatures in their habitats. There would be no hint of an imposed system (they were not presented according to any categorical order), yet at the same time there would be encyclopedic compass. It is as if the birds of America were being put on display in a living diorama. (Audubon had actually worked for a time in the Western Museum in Cincinnati, one of the nation's first natural history museums.)

But the center of attention here is not the book, but Audubon's watercolors, the primary references used to prepare...
A Southern cassowary, rendered in pastel and graphite after 1810.

Audubon was in teaching himself his art, progressing from lifeless evocations of lifeless birds ("My pencil gave birth to a family of cripples," he complained) to capturing them in the midst of tearing prey, building nests, suffering traumas and displaying glints of flinty character.

Roberta M. Olson, the curator of drawings at the historical society, the creator of this show and the main author of the superb exhibition catalog, had been responsible for a series of earlier Audubon shows here, rotating some 40 or so watercolors a year out from the society's collection. Now Ms. Olson is dividing the society's immense collection of Auduboniana into three annual shows that will include the 435 watercolors Audubon created in preparation for engraving 433 of the plates in "The Birds of America" (two plates have no surviving models), along with other watercolor studies, documents and arti-

The works at the historical society now are the first part of a three-part show running through 2015. It will ultimately display more than 435 paintings.
Above, a great egret, painted by John James Audubon in 1821, is in "Audubon's Aviary," a show of more than 200 of his watercolors at the New-York Historical Society. Below, Carolina parakeets, around 1825.
out, Dutch still lifes of killed game. Audubon said the desire was "to shew their every position" and, he added wryly, "in this Manner I made some pretty fair sign Boards for Poulterers."

If that was Audubon's apprenticeship, what is seen in the following years is the discipline of exploration. While he sketched birds in the wild in his quest for the natural, Audubon also created a mounting board for the birds he shot, pinning them in varied positions for study. One observer recalled the 28-pound wild turkey Audubon drew for the first fascicle: "Audubon pinned it up beside the wall to sketch, he spent several days sketching it. The damned fellow kept it pinned up there till it rotted and stunk — I hated to lose so much good eating."

We have become so used to the idea of frozen images in time from photography that this enterprise of evoking a live animal in motion by posing it when it was dead seems almost bizarre. Sometimes the result really was a kind of precariousness, a sense of an animal on the brink, as if it were put in place to show it in life, but it hadn't yet come into full existence. The two examples of the tufted titmouse, for example, seem almost too artfully posed, but the white pine branch they grasp is exquisitely vibrant. (Ms. Olson believes in this case that Audubon did not rely on a colleague to execute the plant life, as he often did.) The contrast is moving, the conifer's strands of green making the birds seem more weighty and corporeal than they might have, possessing the substance, if not the movement, of life.

But his carefully constructed scenes also seem to relish a moment of instability, when everything is changing. Feathers are plucked from a great crested flycatcher by a rival; a Carolina wren uncannily balances atop the petals of a scarlet buckeye flower as it sings; a great egret poses on a thin branch broken off at its end, as moonlight, breaking through the clouds above, seems to announce the end of a storm that had scarcely ruffled the filaments of ethereal feathers.

There is something about the substance of life — its possibility and energy, its unpredictability and precariousness — that seems the subject in many pictures as much as the birds themselves, even when the artist is less than fully successful. These images are sometimes different from those of earlier naturalist catalogs, it is no wonder that Audubon's most fearsome nemesis, the naturalist George Ord, said, "No one of taste and knowledge can behold these monstrous engravings without feelings of dissatisfaction, if not of contempt."

But that was partly because they are monstrously, at their best, relishing the brute forces at work, not just the anatomical niceties of the subject. The Romantic spirit presses past the Enlightenment poise, like the rattlesnake with wide-open mouth that has wound itself around a nest of the Northern mockingbird, prepared to strike from a thicket of jasmine flowers. The image of two peregrine falcons over their prey, one with bloodied beak, actually shows the murdered duck's feather floating in the air: the image is too artificial to have a cinematic impact, but there again is that moment in which everything hangs still in time, delicacy and brutality intertwined.

Audubon, we know, traveled with a copy of La Fontaine's "Fables," and he constructed many of these images with the taste of a fabulist. The blue jays destroy the eggs of another bird? "Who could imagine," Audubon asks, "that selfishness, duplicity and malice should form the moral accompaniments of so much physical perfection!" There are also family tableaus like the one composed of pleated woodpeckers, personality studies like those of the great horned owl. There are birds of industry,

**Audubon's Aviary**

WHERE The New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, at 77th Street.

WHEN Part 1 of "Audubon's Aviary: The Complete Flock" runs through May 19. Parts 2 and 3 will be shown in 2014 and 2015.

MORE INFORMATION (212) 873-3400, nyhistory.org.

FOR HATCHLINGS "Bird Tales: Folk Telling From Around the World," with the storyteller Bill Gordin. Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 3:30 p.m., for children.