

Pass It On®...

The Life and Influence of John James Audubon

Before photography, the natural world was captured in paintings and sketches by artists like John Audubon, whose remarkable illustrations of birds have endured for 200 years. One of his contemporaries remarked that Audubon's work "represented the passions and feelings of the birds," something photography could not do.

As a boy growing up in France, John James Audubon loved the woods and spent hours roaming in the wild, collecting avian curiosities—bird nests and eggs—and made crude drawings. After a failed stint in the Navy, his father sent him to America, where he immediately caught Yellow Fever and was placed in a boardinghouse run by Quakers, who nursed him back to health and taught him English.

While his father hoped his curious son would make something of himself in mining or some other enterprise, John Audubon was consumed with the natural world. "Hunting, fishing, drawing, and music occupied my every moment," he writes. His other main interest was young Lucy Bakewell. The natural world held her interest as well, and the two were married.

Awakened by the need to provide for his family, John tried his hand as a storeowner yet failed. His next business also failed. He provided for his family by hunting and fishing but was soon thrown into jail for debt. Lucy began teaching school, and when John was released, he went off into the wilderness in buckskins, carrying little more than a musket, hatchet and drawing materials. There, at last, he found his calling.

The natural composition, details and color of a hand-colored Audubon engraving are remarkable. The artist is a keen observer of detail and captures the romanticism of an American wilderness worth preserving. Audubon sojourned for months at a time in the wilderness, rising long before dawn to observe and returning in full light to paint all afternoon. The careful and precise pen strokes belie Audubon's determined character. At one point, he lost over 200 drawings, his entire

collection, when rats found their way into his cabin and chewed them up. Undaunted, he started over.

After 14 years of tramping in the wilderness with pen and ink, he had his collection. But the popularity of avian drawings was slow to catch on in America. Still, he refused to give up. He earned enough to pay for passage to Europe to take his chances there.

To his good fortune, he was well received in England. His 435 original works were engraved, hand-painted and sewn into books that came to be known as the greatest picture book ever created: *Birds of America*. A contemporary French critic wrote, "A magic power transported us into the forests which for so many years this man of genius has trod. Learned and ignorant alike were astonished...."

Ultimately, John Audubon opened our minds not only to the beauty around us but also to the beauty of possibilities—if we just keep trying.

Perseverance... PassItOn.com

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