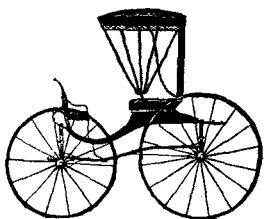


pay a price for their doctrines. Their no-tech pacifism made it impossible to protect themselves or the frontier with lethal force. And, as anthropologist Mary Douglas and political scientist Aaron Wildavsky remind us in *Risk and Culture* (University of California Press, 1982), the Amish are forever accusing one another of sinister alliances with the outside world and then expelling those judged guilty (as almost happens to Rachel in *Witness*).



Still, researchers have found that, through time, the Amish and kindred communities (Mennonites and Hutterites) do eventually make accommodations to the surrounding society. Although they do not normally proselytize, converts are reluctantly accepted. John Book declines that option, as will most viewers, but *Witness* is an exciting picture with superb acting. Though the depiction of the Amish seems to be sympathetic, the press has reported complaints from some Amish. How would they know? They are not supposed to watch movies. Will they now threaten boycott of the theaters?

Actually "based on a true story," *Alamo Bay* dramatizes the inter-ethnic conflicts that arise when Vietnamese immigrants settle in a Gulf Texas fishing town. Director Louis Malle, a French "enfant terrible," told *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (April 7, 1985) that the movie shows us the "outsider's need to belong." But it is not clear just who the real "outsiders" are, nor is it clear—at least until the very end—who has been cast as the film's hero.

At the center of the action is Glory (Amy Madigan), a pretty blond who runs a shrimp fishery with her recently widowed father, who does business with a local Vietnam veteran named Shang (Ed Harris). He is having an affair with Glory while trying to support his family through fishing. The pair become estranged when Glory defends the Vietnamese and Shang joins forces with the local Ku Klux

Klan in trying to drive the refugees out of town. The leader of the Vietnamese, Dinh, tries to explain to the native Texans that his countrymen want only the right to work and enjoy their earnings, a right denied them in their native land by the invading communists.

The explanations fall on deaf ears, though, and the Asians are forced to leave town. When Dinh and a few friends later return to help Glory after her sick father dies, hostilities erupt, bringing the movie to a violent climax, typical of the old Western. Indeed, Dinh wears a cowboy hat and boots and is dubbed "the last cowboy left in Texas" by Glory when she hears how as a child he had survived for days alone in the jungle, eating grass, while hiding from the Vietcong who raided his village and killed relatives and neighbors. But in the end, "the last cowboy" needs to be rescued by a woman: Glory saves Dinh's life by shooting Shang.

The difficulties of the Vietnamese refugees depicted in *Alamo Bay* are not atypical. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, about a quarter-of-a-million Vietnamese have come to the U.S. The largest communities are still found in California's cities, but some Indochinese have moved into coastal fishing areas and elsewhere. It is ironic that antitotalitarian exiles who flee their sovietized lands to find freedom are sometimes regarded with almost as much suspicion and distrust as the foes they left behind. The experiences of Eastern Europeans after World War II and more recently of the Cuban boat people have often paralleled that of the Vietnamese.

This country has gained strength from the successive waves of immigrants escaping political and religious persecution. After all, that is why the Amish—and the Pilgrims—came here, too. But one also needs to understand the uneasiness faced by isolated communities when outsiders with unfamiliar physical features, peculiar customs, and a strange tongue suddenly arrive en masse. The film handles these issues without really taking sides. It deals with the human anguish inherent in the mutual adaptation processes—a pain that may not be avoidable, paradoxically, in a pluralistic, open society such as ours.

Despite innumerable barriers, the Vietnamese—like other new Americans (especially of Asian extraction)—seem to be doing well here by most standards. As the film depicts, their success is largely due to their resiliency and drive, qualities which are, in the long run, compatible with American culture, even though these characteristics may cause frictions initially. "We thought the Vietnamese only wanted to work . . . for us," says a redneck in *Alamo Bay*, "but now they want to buy their own boats!" Entrepreneurship, that quintessentially American characteristic, turns refugees into competitors and fosters new social animosities. And while *Witness* concludes happily, with good people—metropolitan and Amish—prevailing over evil, the ending of *Alamo Bay* is ambivalent and anguished, reminiscent of a Greek tragedy: after killing her former lover, Glory must go to jail. Perhaps one message is that while America has developed a kind of nostalgic affection for its Amish, the difficulties of adjusting to the presence of newcomers is not yet over. cc

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## ART

### The Man Who Loved Birds

by Shehbaz H. Safrani

"I drew, I looked upon nature only; my days were happy beyond human conception." John James Audubon, who wrote these words, was born 200 years ago in Les Cayes, Haiti. To this day, he remains unrivaled as the greatest painter of birds, with the possible exception of Edward Lear (1812-1888). Unlike Audubon, though, Lear painted birds only for a short part of his career and soon moved on to painting topographical views and to writing some of the best limericks and nonsense rhymes in English literature.

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Audubon's birth, The New

York Historical Society recently exhibited all of Audubon's 433 known original watercolors, painted for his monumental volume, *The Birds of America*. "Audubon's Birds of North America: The Original Watercolors," on view from mid-April to mid-September, also included in its displays other objects and artifacts illuminating Audubon's life and work.

"John James Audubon: Science Into Art," another special exhibition examining the scientific and artistic achievements of Audubon, opened on April 18 and closed on July 21 at the American Museum of Natural History. This exhibition of paintings, prints, documents, and memorabilia, chosen from the American Museum's collections, included two new, hand-colored *Birds of America* prints pressed from their original, restored copperplates. This will be the first hand-colored and restored issue of these particular plates since 1838, when the original edition of the *Birds of America* was completed. Both of these shows enhanced our knowledge and understanding of Audubon's stupendous lifelong devotion to painting the birds and beasts of North America.

The New York Historical Society may well be "New York's best kept secret." Located on Central Park West, it is adjacent to the American Museum of Natural History. Architecturally, these two venerable landmarks are the Castor and Pollux of New York's art world. The crowds—approximately two and a half million persons annually—converge on the American Museum. Visiting the Historical Society, on the other hand, is like being an honored guest at the home of the most civilized, cultivated, and well-heeled New Yorker. Once, not too long ago, two eminent Australian decorators told me that they had exactly a day to spend in Manhattan. Without batting an eye, I said, "The New York Historical Society." This museum has to be visited to be believed.

Founded in 1804, The New York Historical Society is the second oldest institution of its kind in the United States. It houses a distinguished research library and the city's oldest museum. In an extraordinary exchange, the Society many years ago gave the Brooklyn Museum some of its finest Egyptian, Assyrian, and Ancient

Near-Eastern antiquities. The Society, in return, received material pertinent to New York's history. Over the past 180 years, the Society has acquired thousands of books, manuscripts, maps, newspapers, portraits, and other paintings, prints, photographs, and artworks of historical significance for



Original painting of red squirrels from *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*.

New York. Among the national treasures owned by the Society is the Audubon collection. That Audubon's works are in their keeping is understandable: when Audubon returned to the United States in 1839 from England, he settled in New York City and was buried in Manhattan in 1851.

Audubon was as demanding of others as he was of himself. To print his monumental series of plates, the great naturalist chose the paper of one of the most distinguished and innovative papermakers in Europe, James Whatman. Whatman not only produced a sheet of exceptional size, ideally suited to Audubon's purpose, but was probably the first manufacturer in Europe to produce a handmade wove paper. Wove paper provides a smooth surface pattern, while the distinctive surface pattern of traditional laid paper might have been aesthetically intrusive. Established in 1731, the Whatman paper mills eventually were dubbed "Turkey Mills," because of the richly colored "Turkey Red" fabric

once produced there. By coincidence, one of Audubon's most famous birds is the turkey, long a favorite of Americans, especially Benjamin Franklin who felt, after all, that this beloved bird, rather than the bald eagle, should become the national bird.

Despite Audubon's claim to happiness "beyond human conception," his private affairs were miserable. In fact, both his fame and fortune are posthumous. In 1862, nearly 12 years after Audubon's death, his widow, Lucy Bakewell Audubon, offered to sell the Society 432 of the original 435 watercolors her husband had painted for the double "elephant folio" and later editions of his famous *The Birds of America*. The original edition of Audubon's works is called the elephant folio because of its physical dimensions, measuring over three feet in length and more than two feet in width. The plate size virtually fills the page.

The New York Historical Society raised the \$4,000 purchase price for the 432 paintings and in June of 1863 acquired what is today a priceless treasure and one of the greatest works of natural history ever produced. The 433rd watercolor in this series was presented to the Society in 1966 by Mrs. Gratia R. Waters; the remaining two are presumed lost.

This exhibition marked only the third time that the entire collection has been open to public view, and the first time ever that the material was organized in taxonomic order—arranged as a modern field guide would be, to show the evolutionary relationship among the birds themselves. The presentation of the paintings in this way underscored Audubon's stature as a naturalist as well as an artist, worthy of the respect of the serious ornithologist as well as the casual bird-watcher.

Audubon was the first American artist to depict America's birds, both life-size and in their natural habitats. The significance of this groundbreaking accomplishment is often obscured for the contemporary observer accustomed to the close and detailed views of wildlife afforded by today's sophisticated optical equipment. Audubon's pioneering renderings of birds in the wild are the exclusive products of his keen capacity for observation, coupled with his extraordinary ability to cap-



ture on the page what he saw in the wild. At a time when many of his colleagues worked in museums, drawing stuffed birds (against plain backdrops) whose poses were unnatural and whose plumage had been dulled by taxidermy, Audubon worked in the field, making sketches on the spot after long hours of walking and hunting. Incidentally, Edward Lear also sketched and drew from real life the birds he found in the menagerie at Knowsley Hall, property of the Earl of Derby, for whom he worked for four years.

My favorite portrait of Audubon hangs in the Green Room of the White House. It is a romantic portrait, depicting Audubon clad in a wolfskin coat, painted in Edinburgh in 1826 by the noted Scottish artist John Syme. Viewing this portrait, Audubon commented, "The eyes to me are more those of an enraged eagle than mine." Bird imagery filled Audubon's thinking even about himself.

Until lately, critics tended to regard Audubon's paintings of birds as romantic rather than scientific. This assessment has changed. At The New York Historical Society exhibition, Audubon's drawings were a reminder that they were a departure from earlier ornithological illustrations in that they were rich and vivid representations of

the birds' characteristic behavior. As a result, they contributed to the scientific study of birds and the identification of new species. Roger Tory Peterson, the renowned ornithologist and author of *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies* (now in its fourth edition), has written that Audubon's "eyes must have been almost as sharp as those of a red-tailed hawk. Not merely 20/20 vision, but perhaps 20/5."

Small wonder that over the past century and a half, Audubon's paintings have endured as works of art. While depicting his subjects with accuracy, Audubon combined his images and colors with a keenly aesthetic sense of composition. True, Audubon did receive some art instruction, but he was largely self-trained. Techniques can be taught, but not so creativity. In one way or another, Audubon may indeed provide the best American example of how creativity in the visual arts triumphs eventually, if pursued long enough and sincerely.

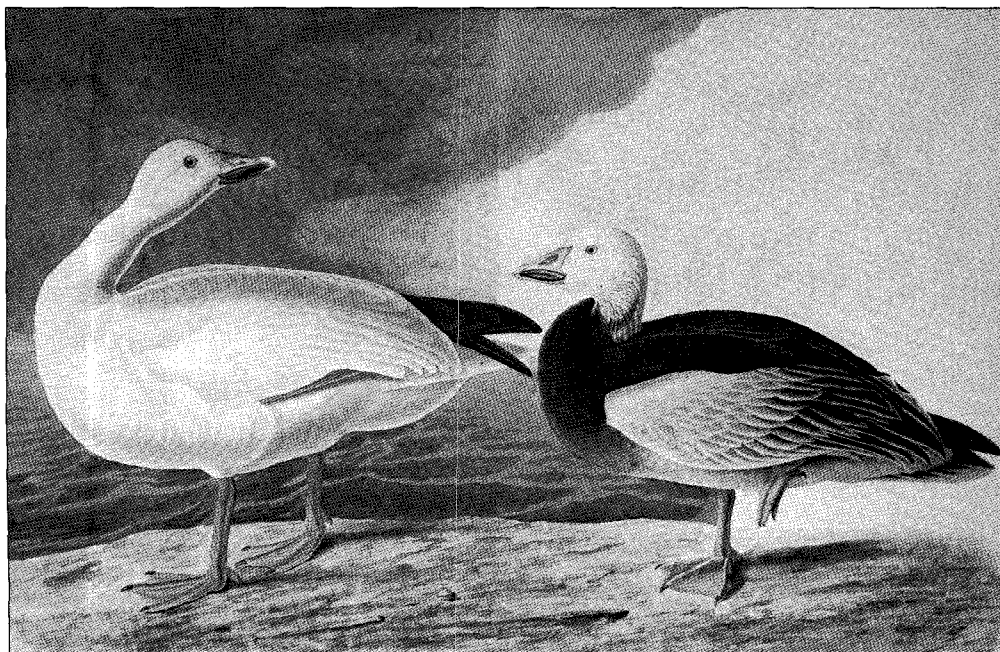
The original watercolors displayed at the Society imparted a fresher and more immediate sense of Audubon's distinctive artistry than do the more widely known engravings executed by the English artist-engraver Robert Havell Jr. and hand-colored by colorists. While Audubon and his two sons, Victor Guifford and John Woodhouse,

oversaw the actual processes of engraving and hand-coloring for the monumental original volume of *The Birds of America*, the actual engravings do differ in detail, style, vitality, and sensitivity from the paintings that inspired them. In the exhibition, these discrepancies were brilliantly illustrated by placing some of Havell's plates side by side with the corresponding watercolors.

Besides the paintings, the exhibition included previously unpublished drawings, preliminary sketches for the watercolors, a number of personal letters to and from Audubon, several portraits of Audubon, and sections of the original manuscript from Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, the seven-volume narrative that accompanied the original double elephant folio. Also on display were the lap desk which Audubon used while sketching in the field, his personal portfolio in which he carried his sketches, other memorabilia, and the rare first volumes of the double elephant folio.

Because the American Museum of Natural History's "John James Audubon: Science Into Art" exhibition was planned in cooperation with the organizers of The New York Historical Society's Audubon show, the two exhibitions proved mutually complementary. The American Museum display was particularly rich in Audubon's mammal paintings. Executed in oil or watercolor, many of these works were painted as illustrations for *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. Among the paintings from this period included in the exhibition were the *American Porcupine*, *Swift Fox*, and a painting of rats and mice inside a partially opened wooden case.

Ordinarily, rodents are not among the creatures we consider beautiful. Yet when viewing them, I acquired leaden feet: consumed by the beauty of the artistry, I stood immobilized in front of Audubon's work, gazing. Audubon's painting of rats and mice devouring the contents of a small crate of eggs convinced me that any creature, even a rodent, can be appealing when depicted by a master. Equally compelling were the works of several collaborators of Audubon: Joseph Mason, George Lehman, Maria Martin, and Audubon's sons, John and Victor. In



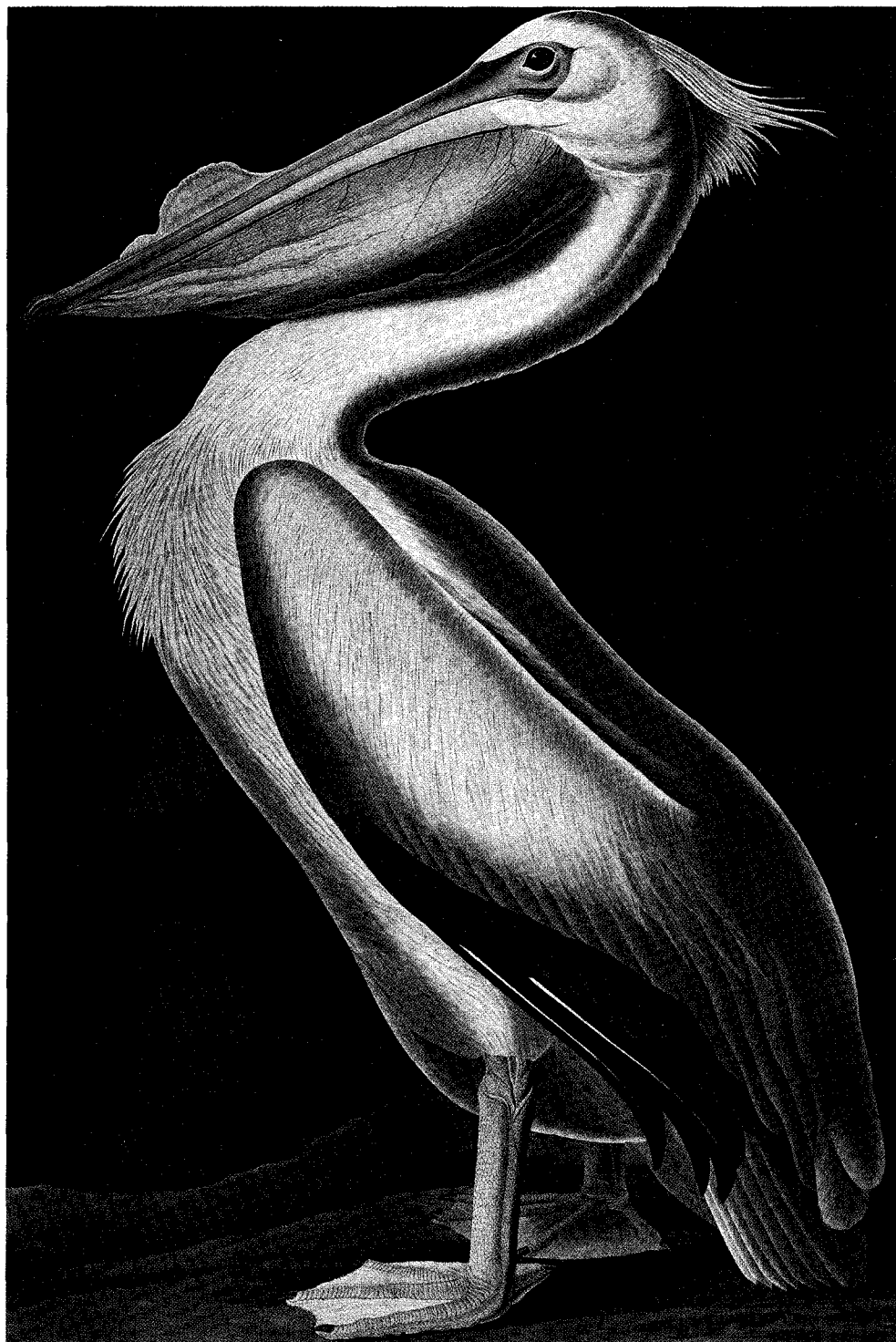
"Blue and Snow Goose." Original watercolor for Havell plate 381. From the exhibition "Audubon's Birds of North America: The Original Watercolors." Collection of the New-York Historical Society.



keeping with the practices of contemporary painters, Audubon often allowed his colleagues to complete the backgrounds of his paintings. Their landscapes and botanical specimens enriched and enlarged Audubon's oeuvre. (One must remember that Franz Synder painted some of the best animals in the canvases of Peter Paul Rubens.) To better locate Audubon in his milieu, the American Museum's show included handsome books illustrated by Mark Catesby, William Bartram, Alexander Wilson, Thomas Nuttall, John Kirk Townsend, and Titian Peale.

One of the most impressive areas in the American Museum—the *Audubon Hall*—is open only by special arrangement with its Ornithology Department. It was a rare delight that items housed here, rarely viewed by the public, were included in this show. Especially known for his lifelike watercolors of birds, Audubon devised a method of wiring specimens in lifelike positions and mounting them on a gridded board. The exhibition included such a model compared with a finished painting of the same bird. Equally intriguing was a display that contrasted the original *Birds of America* prints with copies painted by Joseph Bartholomew Kidd, the artist employed by Audubon to duplicate portions of his work in oil.

Together, these two shows enabled visitors to reflect upon Audubon and his achievements. His life itself is full of contradictions. At 18, he emigrated to the United States, probably to avoid conscription into Napoleon's army. After his marriage to Lucy Bakewell, an English neighbor of Audubon's in America, he moved to Kentucky and later to Ohio, where a series of commercial ventures resulted in bankruptcy. It was at the age of 40 that Audubon first conceived *Birds of America*, secured a publisher in London, and began marketing his project to the widest possible audience. His emphasis on behavior and habitat signaled a changing approach to the natural world. Animals were finally perceived as living, breathing creatures with life histories of their own, rather than as the isolated, one-dimensional creatures seen in most art before 1827. Although eminent in his twilight years, Audubon died an impoverished



"American White Pelican." Havell engraving for *Birds of America*. Photo courtesy Sotheby's, New York.

man. He would have found it incredible that 130 years after his death a single set of his engravings (sold individually) would auction for \$1,716,660, with the single engraving *The Great Blue Heron* bringing \$30,800. Audubon spent the last years of his life on an estate overlooking the

Hudson River in upper Manhattan, what is now Washington Heights. He is buried at 155th Street and Broadway, where a memorial, carved with the images of birds, marks his grave. cc

Shehbaz Safrani is a writer and painter based in New York City.



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