

Prints by John James Audubon (1785–1851)

Edition: Havell

From: *Birds of America*

Published: 1827–1838

Publication city: London

Methods: copper plate engraving,¹ aquatint,² and watercolor

Description:

Two prints of drawings by John James Audubon that were colored by Robert Havell.



Plate 241
Black Backed Gull



Plate 257
Double-crested Cormorant

“... a beautiful male in its perfect spring plumage. This is probably the only representation of the bird yet presented to the public...”

—John J. Audubon³

The Artist and the Prints:

John James Audubon, sometimes referred to as a citizen scientist, observed and drew birds. His use of striking color, narrative elements, and drama in his depictions of birds set him apart from his contemporaries, ornithologists who focused on “the structure and classification of birds, their synonymies and technical descriptions”.⁴ Instead of drawing from stiff taxidermy models, Audubon used a wire-armature to prop up freshly shot specimens into realistic positions. He occasionally depicted action scenes, such as birds toppling over each other to catch a fly or defending their nest against a snake. In some prints, the natural setting is depicted in great detail.

This style proved popular during the Romantic period (in England, roughly between 1780 and 1850), an artistic and literary movement characterized by, among other qualities, its emphasis on emotion and reverence of nature. Audubon found a following in England and worked with a printer there named Robert Havell. The printing process involved hand-copying the lines and the shading of the drawing onto a smooth copper plate using a process known as aquatint. The engraved copper plate could produce many prints of black ink on white paper which were hand-colored by teams of colorists using watercolor paint.⁵ The prints were bound into four volumes featuring 435 North American birds in life-size (Havell edition), a publication titled *Birds of America*.^{6 7}

The Annenbergs:

The Annenbergs enjoyed watching birds with binoculars at Sunnylands. They carried a bird book with them and would mark off birds that they had seen.⁸ According to Ogden’s *Legacy*, “[Walter] enjoyed tramping the property with his binoculars well into his eighties and could rattle off the names of various winged creatures flitting about the property.”⁹ In 1966, Walter became a lifetime member of the National Audubon Society. The certificate is saved in the Sunnylands archive.¹⁰

¹ Rhodes, Richard. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 273.

² Rhodes, Richard. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 299.

³ Ridgway, Robert. “Introduction.” *The Birds of North and Middle America*. Washington. Print. 1901.

⁴ Sibley, David. “How James Audubon Captured the Romance of the New World.” *Smithsonian Magazine*. November 2013. Web.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-james-audubon-captured-the-romance-of-the-new-world-3596111/?no-ist>

⁵ A closer look at the man for which the National Audubon Society is named.” Audubon. Web. <http://johnjames.audubon.org/john-james-audubon-0>

⁶ “The American Woodsman: Our Namesake and Inspiration”. Audubon. Web. <http://www.audubon.org/content/john-james-audubon>

⁷ Comerford, Michael.

⁸ “Plate 257, Double-crested Cormorant” Audubon. Web. <http://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/double-crested-cormorant>.

⁹ Ogden, Christopher. “Dream World.” *Legacy: A Biography of Moses and Walter Annenberg*. Boston, 1999. 399. Print.

¹⁰ Walter Annenberg, Certificate of Life Membership, National Audubon Society, 1966. Sunnylands Collection, 2009.1.3922

Questions I need to answer to make improve this fact sheet

What set professionally trained ornithologists apart from Audubon? How was their style and approach different? Was theirs more scientific? What knowledge did they have that Audubon did not? How were their drawings more appropriate, scientifically speaking? What did their drawings look like? Did they title their drawings differently?