

THE BIRDS OF AMERICA

Double-elephant folio, produced in Edinburgh & London, 1826 – 1839

by John James Audubon

Audubon's most famous work, *The Birds of America*, double-elephant folio, features 435 images of birds drawn true to life, accurate in size, detail, and action. A complete folio consists of 435 prints (called plates) with a total of 1,065 life-size figures of birds portraying 489 supposedly distinct species of birds (not all of Audubon's discoveries turned out to be new species). The term double-elephant comes from the size of the paper, the largest available at that time, which Audubon used in order to show each bird life-size. Every plate (page) measures approximately 27 by 39 inches. Each volume weighs 50 pounds or more. It takes four volumes to hold the complete set of 435 images.

Unable to find support in the United States for his massive project, Audubon went to England where he engaged the firm of Robert Havell Sr. and Jr. as engravers & colorists. Robert Havell, Jr., was a master craftsman in his own right. He traced the outline of Audubon's detailed drawings in reverse onto a thinly waxed copper plate. Painstakingly removing portions of the wax with a fine, sharp instrument, he then exposed the copper plate to an acid bath that "etched" the metal, creating the image and fine details. Then the plate was inked and the image "pulled" (printed) in black & white. The print was then hand-colored by Havell's staff, following Audubon's original watercolors. (See examples in the next room of original uncolored & colored Audubon prints.)

Audubon sold the folio by subscription for \$1,000, a fortune in the 1820s – 30s, and only the very wealthy, such as royalty, governments, and universities, could afford to purchase it. Subscribers received the individual plates over time, as Audubon & Havell were able to produce them. Each subscriber was responsible for binding their set of the 435 plates.

From 1827 until June of 1838 Havell and his staff labored without a day's production lost. The last prints were colored in 1839 and the operation closed down. About 200 folios were made, of which about 110 exist today. (435 images/folio x 200 folios means that over 87,000 individual prints were produced!) Audubon and his family left London and returned to the United States where they built a home on 32 forested acres alongside the Hudson River, near what is now Washington Heights in New York City.

In 1840, Audubon and his family began production of a smaller-sized version of *The Birds of America* called the Octavo Edition. He also began his next big project, a work showing all the mammals of America (see the "Quadruped" folio in the next room.)

☞ **The Birds of America** volume shown here is bound in full morocco leather. It is part of a complete four-volume set presented to Mill Grove in 1961 by the estate of Mrs. Charles T. Church of New York, in memory of her husband.

AUDUBON FAMILY NOTES

☞ Audubon died in 1851 at age 65 and is buried in the Trinity Church cemetery, located near his former home. The house no longer exists; it was demolished ca. 1930 to make way for construction of an apartment building, which still stands. (The Bakewell home, called Fatlands or Vaux Hill, still stands near Mill Grove; it is privately owned. There is a photograph of it on the 3rd floor.)

☞ Lucy (Bakewell) Audubon outlived her husband and her sons. In order to have money to live on, she sold her home, her land, and ultimately, she parted with the original watercolors (*sold in 1863, to the New-York Historical Society in New York City*) and the engraved copper plates (*as scrap, since no one would purchase them for their artistic & historic merit*). Lucy's efforts after her husband's death kept his name alive. Ultimately destitute, she lived with friends & relatives, dying in 1874 at age 87.

☞ While Audubon as a family name has all but disappeared, Lucy & John James still do have descendents. While none live near Mill Grove, descendents do occasionally visit Mill Grove.