



James Ford Bell  
Museum of Natural History

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## The Bell Museum's Double Elephant Folio

by Tom English

John James Audubon's double-elephant folio *Birds of America* (1827-38) is arguably America's most valuable book. It contains 435 life-size, scientifically accurate, hand-colored portraits of every species of bird known to Audubon at the time. A single print has brought almost \$50,000 at auction, and in June, 1989, a full set allegedly sold for \$3,960,000—double the previous record price paid for the work.

But today's prodigious cost of the set still can't compare with the great personal sacrifice Audubon paid to complete this work. Indeed, his journals and letters show that there were many times, over a span of 25 years, when he felt utterly alone with what had been labeled his obsession, alienated from family and friends, and the target of ridicule and even persecution. His many business ventures inevitably ended in failure (he once served briefly in debtor's prison) largely because, by his own admission, he could put little heart into the practical necessities of commerce. Instead, he willfully neglected his everyday responsibilities in order to pursue his cherished dream. Yet, by almost any measure, Audubon was a remarkable individual: handsome, charismatic, exceptionally gifted both intellectually and artistically, and possessing great strength of body, mind, and spirit. And he believed in his own genius. How else could he have persevered,



Little Terns by John James Audubon.

often beyond reasonable hope, at times penniless and near starvation, to complete his great enterprise.

What began as a hobby—Audubon had painted birds since childhood—became an inspired mission when, at age 35, Audubon resolved to publish his own collection of paintings of all the North American birds in natural settings. His plan now was to publish these as life-size engravings, hand colored "in the most



careful manner." Printed on paper so large that printers dubbed it "double elephant," these engravings were to be issued in parts and sold by subscription. Each issue contained five plates: one large format, one medium, and three smaller subjects. To encourage subscribers from dropping out, each issue promised to portray one previously undescribed species.

In 1826, following a six-year period of travel and painting, the 41-year old Audubon packed up his now-bulging portfolio and sailed for England. His quest for an engraver took him to Scotland, where William Lizars of Edinburgh agreed to take on the formidable task of engraving the drawings. But in early 1827, when only ten plates had been completed, Lizars's colorists went on strike, and Audubon felt compelled to seek another engraver.

Through a remarkable stroke of good fortune, Audubon fell into the capable hands of Robert Havell, Jr. of London. In contrast to the inherently volatile Audubon, Havell possessed a naturally calm and soothing disposition, a quality which helped sustain their long and fruitful partnership. Furthermore, he was an outstanding craftsman and artist, and, as Roger Tory Peterson observed, "Havell's accomplishments in etching the copper plates were as much a tour de force as the original paintings."

From 1826 until 1839, when the last of the enormous plates was completed, a grand total of 435 plates had been produced depicting 489 different species in 1,065 figures. In turn, it is believed that as many as 200 prints were struck from each of the plates, so it is probably safe to say that the final tally of prints numbered well over 80,000. Small wonder that this remarkable enterprise took more than 12 years to complete, and employed as many as 50 colorists at a time.

The celebrated French naturalist, Baron Cuvier, was moved to describe the work as the "most magnificent monument which has yet been raised to ornithology." The English critic, Sacheverell Sitwell, added "the Birds of America is a heroic

undertaking; and that one man should have endured the hardships and arduous of so many long and lonely journeys, painted the pictures, written the text, and contrived the publication upon so gigantic a scale, puts his name among the immortals."

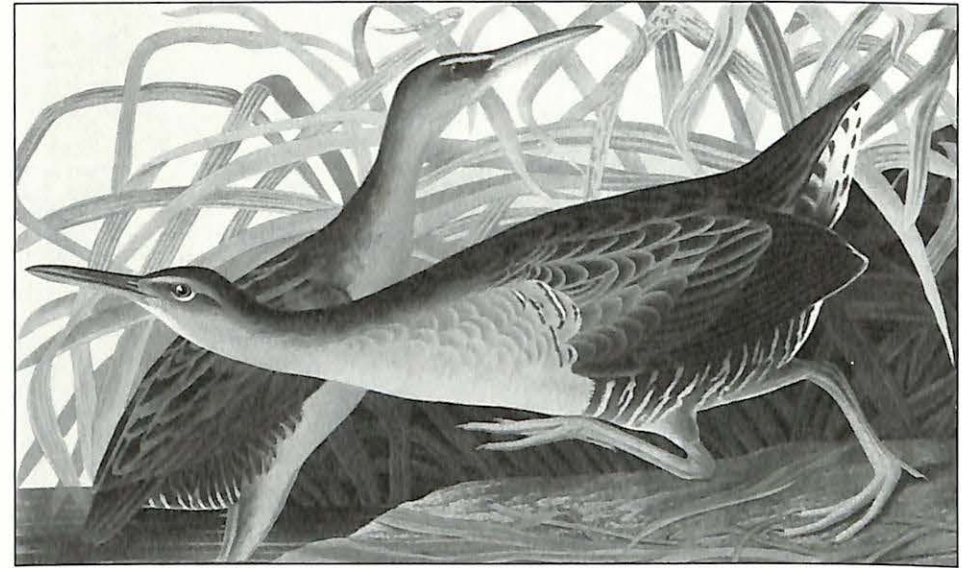
Until very recently, the Twin Cities were blessed with not one but three sets of the Audubon folio. Considering that a 15-year search by the Audubon historian, Waldemar Fries, turned up only 134 complete sets worldwide—94 in the United States, 5 in Canada, and 35 abroad—the Twin Cities were truly fortunate.

The first Twin Cities set was purchased in 1891 by railroad baron James Jerome Hill for \$2,000. This set, which is beautifully bound in full red morocco, eventually found a home in the James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul. However, according to the executive director of the Hill Library, the set was sold "somewhere in Japan" on June 1, 1989. Neither the price paid nor the identity of the buyer was disclosed.

The second set was purchased in 1909 by the Athenaeum Library of Minneapolis for \$2,725. At one time, the Athenaeum, located in the Minneapolis Public Library, kept a volume on continuous display, turning a page each day. But this practice has been discontinued for the present.

The third Twin Cities' set of the Audubon was acquired from a now-forgotten Chicago bookseller in the early 1920s. It was purchased by William Overton Winston (1853-1927), a prosperous Minneapolis railroad contractor, for a sum variously reported to have been as low as \$5,000 and as high as \$10,000. Dr. Gustav A. Swanson, Professor Emeritus of Wildlife Biology, Colorado State University, and now actively retired in his native Minneapolis, has furnished this account of the event:

"I learned about the background of the University's Birds from Dr. Thomas S. Roberts, Minnesota's noted ornithologist. He told me that one day in the early 1920s, he answered the phone and was surprised to hear the voice of his friend,



**King Rails by John James Audubon.**

Ruthven Deane, from Chicago. In those days, long-distance calls were rare and reserved for emergencies. Deane exclaimed "What business does a William O. Winston of Minneapolis have buying a set of the original Audubon's Birds of America?"

"Ruthven Dean was a respected and beloved Chicago ornithologist. One of his hobbies was keeping track of the locations of the original Audubons. He had often perused a set offered for sale at \$5,000 by a Chicago bookseller, and now it was missing, sold to the unknown Winston. Deane's phone call was Dr. Roberts' first notice that his friend Winston, whose family Roberts served as physician, had purchased the Audubon. 'Yes,' said Winston, when Roberts asked him whether the rumor of the purchase was true. 'You talk so much about birds when you visit us that we ought to have a bird book, and this is it. Is it all right? It looked good to me.'"

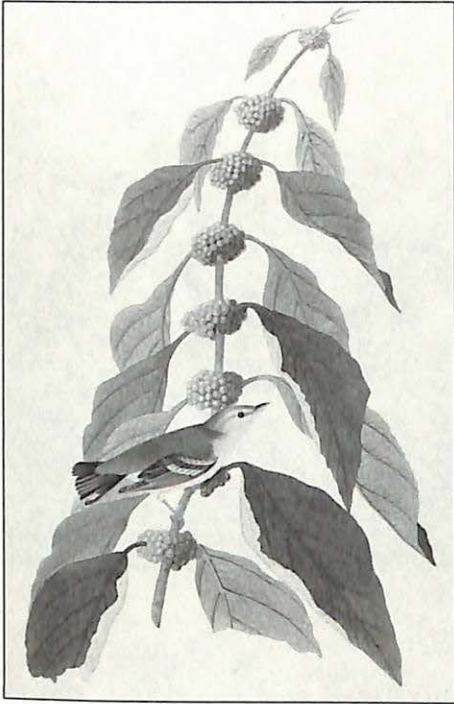
According to Dr. Swanson, "the Winston family 'bird book' was transported to their summer home at Lake Minnetonka each spring, then back to their Minneapolis home each fall, in a beautifully hand-

crafted case with a lid that formed an easel for the volume being examined. Each of the four massive volumes rested on a shelf consisting of numerous small brass rollers which slid the volumes smoothly and silently when they were removed or replaced."

Winston died in 1927, and in early 1928 his family donated the Audubon to the Bell Museum of Natural History, then known as the Zoological Museum. The Winston family's letter of transmittal stated "Because of the special interest of William Overton Winston in the Zoological Museum of the University of Minnesota, as well as because of his lifelong friendship for its Director, Dr. Thomas S. Roberts, we, the family of Mr. Winston, in his memory, present to the Zoological Museum of the University of Minnesota, this set of the Double Elephant Folio Edition of the works of John James Audubon, with the request that it be retained in the Museum as a special exhibit."

But from the very beginning, the sheer weight and awkwardness of the massive folios discouraged any thought of putting them on display. The first three volumes of the museum set, each containing 100






**Cerulean Warbler by John James Audubon.**

prints, weighed nearly fifty pounds each. The fourth volume, with its extra 35 prints, weighed 57 pounds, so that the total weight of the four volumes amounted to more than 200 pounds. Furthermore, the extraordinary dimensions of the folios tended to frustrate any desire to exhibit them, each of the volumes measuring nearly two-and-a-half by three-and-a-half feet.

The folios were initially installed in the Zoology Building. In 1939, the volumes, still contained in their special cabinet, were relocated to the newly constructed James Ford Bell Museum of Natural History. The set was housed in the museum office until 1955. When concern arose for its safekeeping, the set was transferred to a vault within the James Ford Bell Library. Because of the extremely cramped condition of the vault, the cabinet was left behind, and has since disappeared. In 1968, the James Ford Bell Library and all its collections were relocated to new and larger quarters in the

O. Meredith Wilson Library. There the folios remained, in their original bindings, until September 13, 1989 when the set was disbound. The bindings were saved for their historical interest, and the prints were stored flat in eight slender corrugated cardboard boxes, each print separated from its neighbor by an interleaving of buffered (acid neutralizing) paper.

The possibility of disbinding the folios was first considered in early 1989, after discovering the poor condition of the bindings. The leather was disintegrating with age, and several prints had come detached. Don Luce, curator of natural history art, solicited the advice of specialists in rare book binding and paper conservation, both local and national. They were virtually unanimous in recommending that the folios be disbound, to better preserve the prints, and to permit their safe display.

Once the prints were freed from their bindings, plans for their exhibition proceeded rapidly. Twenty-five of the finest paintings were selected for the new exhibition, *Pioneers of Bird Illustration*, which opened in the Bell Museum on December 2, 1989. Unquestionably, the flamboyant Audubon was the feature attraction of this premiere event. But Audubon, 1785-1851, graciously condescended to share the limelight with the remarkable trio of artist-naturalists, who were his predecessors: Mark Catesby, 1683-1749, Thomas Bewick, 1753-1828, and Alexander Wilson, 1766-1813. 

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