

Revisiting “The Birds of America” at the University of Michigan Library

Table of Contents

[Nationwide reckoning: Renaming and changing the language of influential works in our collections](#)

[John James Audubon](#)

[Making The Birds of America](#)

[The First Book](#)

[References](#)

Nationwide reckoning: Renaming and changing the language of influential works in our collections

Prepared by Caitlin Pollock, Digital Scholarship Specialist, U-M Library

Wall Text

Work to grapple and reckon with racist and sexist primary materials in libraries and museums has been ongoing since the 1950s. The movement around how to best describe these primary materials in a way that preserves or restores dignity to the subjects gained momentum in 2020–2021.

Many cultural heritage institutions have sought to better contextualize their holdings and reveal the realities of the conditions in which these cultural items were created, collected, or first recorded. Many institutions have remediated outdated and racist terms in metadata and discovery aids and sought to highlight collections that include a wider swatch of our shared cultures and histories.

The U-M Library contributes to this movement and joins our peers by looking more critically at our collections, from how they were collected to how we describe them to researchers and other visitors.

Projects in the library include updating subject headings and deleting outdated and inappropriate wording, remediating our digital collections metadata to remove harmful language, and developing guidelines for our online exhibits and digital collections to appropriately handle sensitive materials.

As the U-M Library continues to do this work and stays committed to its values of engagement, diversity, antiracism, and humanity, we provide deeper context and information about John James Audubon's "The Birds of America." We hope this label gives people a better understanding of the Indigenous and Black knowledge that went into creating "The Birds of America" and the complicated identity of Audubon, the recorded author.

This book represents many facets of the colonization of the land we now call North America, and we invite you to consider the complexities in how knowledge is created, shared, presented, and preserved at institutions like the U-M Library.

John James Audubon

Prepared by Prof. Jason Young, Associate Professor, History, U-M

Wall Text

John James Audubon was born Jean Rabine in 1785 in the French colony of St. Domingue (now Haiti).

His father, Jean Audubon, was a French sea captain, slave trader, and owner of a lucrative sugar plantation on the island. His mother, Jeanne Rabine, served as a domestic servant and chambermaid on Audubon's plantation. According

to some accounts, Rabine was a woman with ancestral roots extending back to France, and some recent studies suggest that she may have had at least some African ancestry as well. Indeed, Jean Audubon fathered several biracial children on his plantation, including a daughter, Muguet, whose mother, Catherine “Sanitte” Bouffard, worked for Audubon as a housekeeper.

Over the course of his life, John James Audubon traveled through several continents, assumed multiple names, and claimed several different identities. His own complicated history reflects the currents of race, slavery, and rebellion that marked the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which are inextricably bound to “The Birds of America.”

Expanded Text

Though Audubon has come to be widely known as a central figure in the field of American naturalism, he emerged from remarkably humble origins. Born Jean Rabine in Haiti in 1785, he was an illegitimate, and possibly bi-racial, child born in a far-away French colony; the young Audubon’s prospects for advancement in French social and political circles were severely limited.

His fortunes changed, however, when the first rumblings of what would become the Haitian revolution erupted on the island. His father, Jean Audubon — perhaps seeing the handwriting on the wall — sold some of his land holdings in 1789, and used the proceeds to purchase a 284-acre farm called Mill Grove, near Philadelphia. The elder Audubon sent his son along with his daughter Muguet to live in France with his wife, Anne Moynet Audubon. Jean and Anne formally adopted the children in 1794, thereby legitimizing them and solidifying their legal status in France. Jean Rabine was subsequently renamed Jean-Jacques Fougère Audubon; Muguet was renamed Rose.

In 1803, Jean Audubon secured a false passport for his son and sent him to the United States to avoid conscription into Napoleon’s army. Before departing, Audubon anglicized his name to the now familiar John James Audubon.

He settled first at Mill Grove farm, before traveling with his new wife, Lucy Blakewell, to Henderson, Kentucky, where he worked as a trader and operator of a successful flour mill. There, John and Lucy enslaved nine Black people, whom he later sold to clear debts.

Throughout his life, Audubon expressed antipathy toward Black people and a general support for slavery. He opposed the budding Abolitionist movement, insisting that the British government “acted imprudently and too precipitously” in 1834 when it called for a general emancipation of enslaved people in the West Indies. Later, Audubon recounted a fanciful tale of his encounter with a family of runaway slaves whom he returned to the plantation, certain that their owners would treat them kindly, rendering them “as happy as slaves generally are in that country.”

Questions surrounding Audubon’s personal heritage as well as his family’s reliance on enslaved labor have complicated not only Audubon’s own legacy, but also the lasting meaning and significance of “The Birds of America.”

Making “The Birds of America”

Prepared by Juli McLoone, Curator, Special Collections Research Center, U-M Library

Wall Text

John James Audubon’s name appears alone on the title page of the so-called double-elephant-folio plate volumes of “The Birds of America.” However, a multitude of people contributed their physical, mental, and creative exertion to bring these volumes into being.

Although rarely recorded by name, several Indigenous and Enslaved Black people assisted Audubon in collecting specimens and providing information on local bird species. As a young man, Audubon learned from Osage and Shawnee

hunting parties, a process facilitated by Audubon's 1810-1811 journey with French-Shawnee fur trader Louis Lorimier Jr. At later dates, Audubon traveled with Blackfoot guide Owen Mackenzi, as well as visiting members of the Florida Seminole and Indigenous residents of Labrador.

Audubon's student Joseph Mason, his sons Victor and John, and family friend Maria Martin, painted many of the botanical and scenic backgrounds situating Audubon's birds in their natural environment on the page, and in John's case, some of the birds themselves (almost all of these watercolor paintings are in the collection of the New-York Historical Society). Robert Havell, Jr., and other engravers translated those paintings into intaglio plates for printing, while colorists — many of them women — hand painted the rich plumage and backgrounds of the finished prints. Audubon's wife Lucy not only partnered on business aspects of the publication but spent years supporting the family (and Audubon's birding expeditions) as a governess and schoolteacher.

Expanded Text

Experts estimate that about a third of the paintings in "The Birds of America" were completed by others. While Audubon sometimes acknowledged gratitude privately, this rarely translated into public credit. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century naturalists frequently benefitted from anonymous assistants, but by pulling back this curtain, we enrich our understanding of how scientific knowledge and books were produced.

When John James and Lucy Audubon were bankrupted in 1819, they sold their Kentucky home, belongings, and several enslaved persons. With their lives at a crossroads, Audubon conceived a dream of publishing a definitive work about the birds of North America. Lucy raised their children and taught the daughters of wealthy plantation owners, while John James collected birds and painted them. Audubon's student Joseph Mason accompanied him down the Mississippi in 1820, completing at least fifty botanicals, but they parted acrimoniously, and Mason publicly expressed his resentment at not being credited.

In 1826, with cash Lucy had saved from her work as a governess, Audubon traveled to England in search of a printer to reproduce his life-size illustrations. He first engaged William H. Lizars of Edinburgh, who engraved the first five prints, while Audubon himself sought wealthy subscribers to support printing costs. When production was disrupted by Lizars' colorists striking, Audubon moved publication to London, under the supervision of Robert Havell, Sr. and Robert Havell, Jr. Prints were issued to subscribers in sets of five: one large, one medium, and three small bird figures, depicted among native flora or landscapes. Originally planned as 400 plates, ongoing identification of birds previously unrecognized by European zoologists resulted in 435 plates depicting 457 species.

Maria Martin, sister-in-law to Audubon's friend, John Bachman, is unusual as a woman artist who contributed to "The Birds of America." After a brief tutelage under Audubon, Martin prepared numerous botanical and entomological paintings for volumes 2 and 4 of "The Birds of America." Additionally, Martin and the numerous enslaved men and women in her household contributed to Audubon's efforts to collect and preserve specimens during his long stay. An enslaved man named Thomas, who was particularly skilled in this work, assisted Audubon in preparing over 300 specimens.

"The Birds of America" was accompanied by a companion work, "Ornithological Biography," that included scientific descriptions of each species and its habits, along with anecdotes of Audubon's adventures. While Audubon provided the rough draft and tales of his adventurous life, he hired Edinburgh ornithologist William MacGillivray to polish his prose and provide scientific details.

Looking beyond John James Audubon to the many people who supported and contributed to "The Birds of America" offers a deeper sense of the volumes' complexity and richness, including the sometimes difficult and uncomfortable ways in which the making of it was embedded within the historical and social context of early nineteenth-century America.

The First Book

Prepared by Marieka Kaye, Head, Conservation and Book Repair, U-M Library

Wall Text

Through the 1817 Treaty of Fort Meigs, a group of Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi ceded a small plot in Detroit to the federal government for use as a public university. The University of Michigan (U-M) was then established in Detroit in 1817 and relocated to Ann Arbor in 1837.

In 1838 the regents agreed to purchase “The Birds of America,” by John James Audubon, a foundational work in the history of science. In 1839 the set was delivered. The plates arrived in four bound volumes, along with the five text volumes, “Ornithological Biography” by Audubon. They were moved to Ann Arbor after the first campus buildings were completed in 1840.

U-M’s first library was in what was called the Main Building, which was later named Mason Hall, located where the north wing of Angell Hall is today. “The Birds of America,” the first book purchased for the university, was joined by 3,400 books collected by Professor Asa Gray, making up the foundation of the library.

Expanded Text

Regent Pitcher purchased the copy from a dealer in New York City named William Colman, rather than going through Audubon himself. It’s been suggested that this may have saved U-M some money but led to a long delay because Colman didn’t have a full set to sell. The copy he had was nine plates short of the full 435. He purchased the copy from a man named James E. Walker in Baltimore, whose subscription lapsed during the Panic of 1837.

Colman asked Audubon for the missing prints but was initially turned down because five of the plates were the largest and the most difficult to color. Despite this, Colman was eventually able to assemble the missing plates, possibly from Audubon or various dealers in his network.

For thirty-five years the university community had free access to the books and were permitted to page through the plates unrestricted, even after being moved to the library's art gallery. William W. Bishop, University Librarian from 1915 to 1941, recalled that, when he was a student in 1889, the volumes were "exposed to inspection and handling by every visitor to the art gallery in the library."

They were moved to the Rare Book Room in the General Library in 1910 and received greater care going forward. The Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library replaced the General Library building in 1920. The present rebinding was performed in 1933–1934 under the supervision of William C. Hollands, head of the U-M's printing and binding department. The volumes were disbound and individual prints were repaired. They were then rebound into eight volumes.

The exhibition room in Hatcher was built in 2009. When the library is open, we turn a page each week. It takes over eight years to display every plate.

Further information

[Birds of America webpage](#)

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