

## The Library of America interviews volume editor Christoph Irmscher and filmmaker Larry Hott about John James Audubon

Prompted by the broadcast premiere of the American Masters documentary *John James Audubon: Drawn from Nature* on PBS on July 25, 2007, Rich Kelley conducted these exclusive interviews for The Library of America e-Newsletter with Larry Hott, producer and director of the film, and Christoph Irmscher, editor of the LOA volume *John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings* and also a consultant and onscreen participant in the documentary.

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*Professor Irmscher, last fall at an advance preview of the American Masters documentary, John James Audubon: Drawn from Nature, you gave a talk in which you said that Audubon is “one of America’s greatest nature writers. A great nature writer . . . is someone whose vision or handling of the language has the power of changing the way in which we are used to seeing nature and our own place in it. Audubon does exactly that, and then some, and he deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with writers more securely anchored in the canon of American nature writing such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson.” That’s quite a statement. How does Audubon’s writing change the way we see nature and our place in it?*

**Irmscher:** Well, I think the key is that Audubon encourages us not to think of ourselves as central to nature. While he keeps himself out of his paintings, except as a kind of implied observer, Audubon is always present in his texts, as a feeling, thinking individual. However, the final purpose of this self-representation in the texts is the same as in the paintings—to question the importance of the human observer to a natural world that seems to function perfectly well on its own.

Take Audubon’s biography of the hummingbird. It’s one of my favorite examples, because it’s so subtle. Audubon here describes the horror felt by the

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hummingbird parents when the human observer approaches the nest of a newly hatched pair of young birds, “little larger than humble-bees, naked, blind, and so feeble as scarcely to be able to raise their little bill to receive food from the parents.” He compares their pain to that experienced by a mother who has lost, or might lose, her child. But Audubon’s point is not to make us understand the birds better. It is, quite bluntly, to make us go away, to leave the birds alone. We are where we shouldn’t be.

*Larry, one of the things that immediately strikes viewers of your documentary is that Audubon speaks with a French accent, that he was actually an immigrant who came to America to reinvent himself.*

**Hott:** We know what he sounded like because he’s described by other people as having a thick French accent, yet trying to come across as American as possible. He’s often referred to as a Frenchie. In one famous scene he introduced himself as an Englishman and made everyone in the tavern laugh. He had a great sense of humor. Of course, it’s a very American thing to come to a new land and throw off your old identity and create a new one. Audubon is full of contradictions. He came to America as a rich kid, then becomes poor. America is usually a Horatio Alger story. Audubon turns that on its head. His is a riches to rags to riches story. He’s also a real fop. He comes to America and lives in a big estate his father bought. He marries the wealthy girl next door. He dances and plays music. He can write and has all the gentlemanly arts, but what does he do? He immediately lights out for the new territories.

*Most people know Audubon from his great work, Birds of America. John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings contains more than 300 pages from the five-volume companion set, Ornithological Biography, that he wrote in collaboration with the Scottish ornithologist William MacGillivray. Is there any way to distinguish who contributed what to this work? Do you consider this work to be his single greatest achievement as a writer?*

**Irmscher:** MacGillivray, with Audubon’s consent, edited, tightened but often also embellished Audubon’s prose. The extent of MacGillivray’s editing becomes evident when one compares Audubon’s drafts—prolix, effusive, verbose but wildly beautiful—with the published products. John Knott in Ann Arbor has done a systematic study of Audubon’s manuscript drafts for *Ornithological Biography*, and the stuff he has found is amazing. MacGillivray scrubbed Audubon clean, to be sure, but we also need to take care not to superimpose our own modern ideas of authorship on a time where collaboration was the rule rather than the exception. Audubon’s prints, of course, reflect the artis-

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tic vision of his printer, Robert Havell Jr., who added landscape and floral backgrounds where needed, repositioned birds, and in some cases eliminated elements from Audubon's original composition when they seemed to interfere with the dynamic appeal of the image. Even the original watercolors were often the product of fruitful collaboration: Joseph Mason, Audubon's assistant, supplied the dark green leaves and open blossoms in Audubon's wonderful representation of the Baltimore Oriole. I just recently saw the watercolor again in the "Audubon's Aviary" exhibit at the New-York Historical Society and was overwhelmed by the beauty of Mason's work. Other such collaborators included Maria Martin or George Lehman. Audubon's last great work, *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, was completed by his sons and the Reverend John Bachman in Charleston.

However, while I agree that *Ornithological Biography* is perhaps Audubon's single greatest achievement as a writer, I must also confess that I am even fonder of his journals where we get Audubon "raw" and not "cooked" (to use a wonderful distinction Scott Russell Sanders once made). The journals make fascinating reading. My favorite among these is the *Mississippi River Journal*. Since I re-transcribed that journal from the original manuscript for The Library of America edition, I also have the strange—and totally inappropriate—feeling of having been almost a co-author. I've copied every single word with my own hand, poring over the manuscript in Harvard's Houghton Library. When I re-read the *Mississippi River Journal* today, I can finish Audubon's sentences in my mind—though "finish" is perhaps not the right word, since so many of his sentences trail off into a void, as the direct transcripts of experiences that they are. In December 1820, near Natchez, Mississippi, Audubon beautifully described in his journal what his life in the field was like: "to go to Sleep with Wet Muddy Clothing on a Buffaloe Skin Strech in a Board, to hunt through Woods filled with fallen trees, Entengled with Vines, Briars, Canes, high Rushes, and at the same time giving under foot." Such a life, he said, produced "heavy Swets, Strong Appetite, & keeps the Imagination free." Try that, you eastern dandies, he added. Get rid of your high-heeled shoes but perhaps not your corsets. You might need them when there's no food, because then you might wish to "depress" your stomach "for the occasion."

The key phrase here is "keeping the Imagination free." Isn't that wonderful? I think it's so important not to "modernize" Audubon when we have the original manuscripts, as we do in the case of this journal. The biographers have been so concerned with re-inventing Audubon as the exemplary American that we have forgotten what he really was: America's first multinational, multilingual artist, and these pages, in all their ungrammatical, unconventional splendor, are there to prove it.

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*Many people will connect Audubon's name with the Audubon Society, which has as its mission conserving and restoring natural ecosystems, especially those sustaining important bird populations. Yet Audubon once famously said that "any day I don't kill at least 100 birds is a day wasted"—and he probably killed tens of thousands of birds in his lifetime. This is a bit puzzling because he also writes about being troubled about the wanton killing of some species, and speculates that the passion for collecting eggs will exterminate some of them. How do we square these two images of Audubon?*

**Hott:** Well, even today birds are being shot for research purposes. Photographs never tell you enough. Audubon shot birds mostly for research but he ate all the birds. He includes many bird recipes in *Ornithological Biography*. He would always talk about whether the birds tasted good or not and how to cook them. There's a nice description of once when they were on Cole's Island in South Carolina and they shot a lot of birds and brought meat with them but they forgot to bring salt. So they just used the saltpeter, the gunpowder, to salt the meat. That made the meal really tasty. Audubon's shooting was not the result of blood thirst. He wanted to be able to do his work. He saw himself as a combined artist/naturalist/scientist. As he says, you can't understand these birds just by watching them. You have to hold them in your hand, open them up and see what they've eaten. One of the things he really liked to do was to paint them while they were fresh. That's why he wanted to kill that golden eagle and paint it immediately. He claimed that the colors fade right away.

*One of the major turning points in Audubon's life was when he went bankrupt in 1819. He was 34. He had been married for 11 years or so, living in Louisville and was in jail until he agreed to forfeit all his possessions, which were mostly his wife's possessions because none of the creditors wanted his paintings. And it was after that time, as one of the experts in the documentary points out, that his painting changes and becomes less traditional, less static, more dynamic. Was this change in style because he had started getting better instruction or was something else going on?*

**Irmscher:** I don't think one can pinpoint a single event, a single cause that triggered this transformation. Audubon had been experimenting with some of the mixed-media techniques that would make his later work so unique long before 1819, and he had begun wiring his models, thus making them seem more lifelike, as early as 1804. As a storekeeper in Kentucky, he "drew and noted the

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habits of everything” he procured. But I think what really changed his artistic vision was seeing birds from his flatboat going down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in 1820. The scenes he describes are incredible—take the Bald Eagle (or White-headed Eagle, as Audubon would have said) he shoots, from a distance of about 150 yards, straight through the heart. It takes him four days to paint the bird, and the final image shows the bird standing, its ferocious beak open, over a dismembered Canada goose. He’s been watching, from his boat, how eagles capture these geese, the male and the female eagle diving alternately after them until they’re out of breath. A month later, Audubon captures another Bald Eagle, who looks at him “with a Contemptible Eye,” then jumps overboard and, to Audubon’s surprise, attempts to swim away. Audubon grabs him and kills the bird while the eagle’s mate hovers over them shrieking with, as Audubon says, “the *true Sorow* of the *Constant Mate*.” No wonder that such experiences jumpstarted what had lain dormant in him for some time; no wonder that the drawings Audubon produces from now on are unique.

*Larry, you have a great scene in your film in which Walton Ford, a contemporary artist known for his satiric, superrealistic takeoffs on Audubon, recreates how Audubon posed dead birds to get the lifelike effect he wanted. Was this something that Ford discovered?*

**Hott:** Ford claims that most descriptions of how Audubon modeled his birds are wrong. Most writers say Audubon created some kind of armature and hung the birds from it. Ford reads Audubon’s description literally. He uses a quote from Audubon in the film to describe how he mounted the birds on a plank of wood, drew a grid, then copied the grid onto the canvas. When you see him recreate the process, you can see that what Ford is saying really makes sense.

*In his journals Audubon is traversing terrain that few people had seen before. How does his travel and nature writing compare with other writers of that period?*

**Irmscher:** I think that the scope and intensity of his writing makes Audubon unlike any of his contemporaries. No one had traveled quite as extensively, no one had seen quite as much, and no one was equally talented as a writer and as a visual artist, with the possible exception of George Catlin, whose *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians* (1841) Audubon read in preparation for his own western trip two years later—and then found to be far from true: “Ah! Mr. Catlin.... How very different

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[the Indians] must have been from any that I have seen!” But there is really no other ornithologist in this period—certainly not George Ord, not Charles-Lucien Bonaparte—who has as much experience in the field as Audubon has. In terms of the wildness of Audubon’s visual and verbal imagination, a writer of the previous generation, William Bartram, comes to mind (Bartram was also a skilled draftsman).

*Larry, one of the most remarkable things that your documentary does—in part, I think, because it draws on Audubon’s long, detailed letters to his wife—is to tell a love story.*

**Hott:** It’s very much a love story. Anyone who tells Audubon’s story concentrates on the love story. That’s the narrative. That’s what gives you your tension. Will he and Lucy get back together? What kind of husband and lover is he who can stay away for three years and then when he gets back to America goes hunting for five months before he returns home? Can you imagine anyone doing that today? You’d say the marriage is over. Lucy would write to Audubon and tell him that “I’ve lost all my teeth, my hair has gone gray and I’m worried that you won’t love me.”

*Professor Irmscher, Audubon’s letters to his wife from his travels are quite long, detailed, and often moving. Are there a large collection of these? How did you decide which letters to choose for this volume?*

**Irmscher:** There is a two-volume collection of Audubon’s letters, edited by Howard Corning, which is now over 70 years old. It is not complete, however. After reading all the manuscripts at Houghton, the American Philosophical Society, and in Princeton’s Special Collections, I selected letters that I thought were both representative of important periods in Audubon’s life—his marketing of the *Birds of America*, his western trip in 1842—and that to me seemed to be good examples of Audubon’s idiosyncratic, truly wonderful prose style. Again, I was interested in the “raw” Audubon, the man who kills birds and later quadrupeds en masse but will then go on to compare himself to animals all the time. For example, in August 1834, when his collaborator John Bachman has been silent for a while, Audubon declares he won’t give up: if I receive no letters, he says, “I keep hammering at My Friends doors like a Woodpecker on the bark of Some Tough Tree, the inside which It longs to see ...” In 1843, after his return from the West, he calls himself “fat as a Grisley Bear in Good Season.” I also wanted the letters to show how funny Audubon is—I don’t think any of the recent biographies have made much of his sense of humor. Take that passage from a letter written in 1837 in which Audubon makes fun, as he often does, of

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the “crazed Naturalists of the closet” who want to arrange “our Fauna in Squares, Circles, and Triangles.”

*Professor Irmscher, there is one very memorable letter to Lucy Audubon (it appears in the LOA volume on pages 886–889) that you mention in your lecture and which is dramatized in the documentary. Audubon recounts to his wife how he was approached in a street in New Orleans by a veiled woman who wanted him to paint her naked. This is not exactly a reassuring letter to receive from a traveling husband. Are there many letters like this and what do you think it says about their relationship?*

**Irmscher:** While he is away in New Orleans or later in Europe in pursuit of his life’s dream to become America’s greatest bird artist, Audubon will on occasion let his wife know that he’s spending time with women who are beautiful or available or both. This happens in his letters as well as in his journals (even there he often imagines Lucy as his audience). He’ll tell her, for example, that Hannah Rathbone, the daughter of his host in Liverpool, has amazing eyes and that she blushes whenever Audubon looks at her or that his exhibition in Manchester is attended by “richly Beautifull Ladies.” Audubon was in a peculiar situation—he was in a weakened state, in fact, because he had, from a conventional perspective, failed to provide for his family. Lucy was forced to work as a schoolteacher! No wonder that he was extremely needy for affirmation. I suspect that teasing Lucy about his prospects elsewhere helped him bolster his own sense of masculinity.

But the Veiled Lady episode is really unique in his work; in other words, no, there aren’t any other letters like it. It’s quite intricately plotted in that Audubon stages his own disempowerment—he’s so shaken by the lady’s nudity that she has to finish the portrait for him—and, at the same time, combines it with a sly hint that he’s attractive enough, in the eyes of a beautiful New Orleans lady at least, to have gotten such a peculiar commission. There’s no doubt that the Veiled, or rather Not-So-Veiled Lady is playing with him, and he lets Lucy know about that part, too. If this encounter really happened—and I’m convinced it did—this might have been the first time that someone had attempted a full-scale study of a female nude in the history of American painting (John Vanderlyn’s *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos* was completed in Paris). Audubon’s letter is a helpful addition to an otherwise cryptic passage in the *Mississippi River Journal* (21 February 1821) in which he refers to having had a portrait spoken of “in very rude terms” by a Mrs. André, a name that also occurs in a passage from the suggestive letter to Lucy about the nude lady. Paxton’s *New-Orleans-Directory and Register* from 1822 indeed lists a “Madame

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André, widow,” who lived, appropriately, at 26 Amour Street. If readers would like to learn more about this extraordinary story—especially its literary value—they might wish to look at a short piece about it which I published in the summer 1999 issue of *The American Scholar*.

**Hott:** Many people have tried to track down who the veiled woman was. Some writers suspect she may have been a high-class prostitute. She did present him with a shotgun, which has some symbolism. In the film, Audubon biographer Richard Rhodes speculates that this letter shows Audubon and Lucy’s way of sharing everything. This was how he maintained some closeness with her and may have been his way, by writing something that might make her nervous, of making Lucy believe that he was staying celibate. You can see an odd psychology there.

*It took Audubon 13 years to publish the entire series of paintings in the Double Elephant Folio of Birds of America. How long did it take him to create a single painting? And how did that compare with the creation of a print, which as the documentary shows in such wonderful detail, involved the etching of the drawing on a copper plate, the printing of the image in black and then the coloring of the print by hand by a roomful of artists?*

**Irmscher:** Some images were sketched fast; others—such as the painting of the Golden Eagle—took weeks to complete (Audubon, who had taken the eagle’s life by piercing its heart with a pointed piece of steel, ironically says that portraying this bird nearly killed *him*). In some cases, Audubon went back to a drawing years later and finished it, as he did with the drawing of the Bald Eagle, which he redid completely in London in 1828, “in a better style.” Producing the prints for *Birds of America* was an excruciatingly time-consuming process that required a lot of attention to detail (if readers want to know more, the best source for this is Joseph Goddu’s excellent 2002 catalogue, *John James Audubon and Robert Havell, Jr.: Artist’s Proofs for The Birds of America*). But many of Audubon’s watercolors were also the result of meticulous and time-consuming collaboration between him, his sons, and his assistants.

**Hott:** One of the things we have in the film that few people have ever seen are the original paintings Audubon did in France when he was a teenager. We went into the Harvard Houghton Library, found the paintings and used slides to reproduce them. [You can view these images online at <http://oasis.harvard.edu:10080/oasis/deliver/~hou00007>]. These are what you see in the pages turnings on the table. We did some close-ups and you can see how he had to grow as an artist. The original art from that period was not that stunning.

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*That Regency desk you show is certainly stunning. It takes up an entire room and looks like it was created just to display the Audubon double elephant folio.*

**Hott:** It was. As Roberta Olson, the curator at The New-York Historical Society describes it, it's very birdlike in itself and it's meant to dominate a room. In its time, it was the equivalent of a plasma screen.

*Professor Irmscher, you have noted on several occasions that many previous editions of Audubon's writings have been bowdlerized either by a member of the family or an editor. Is the LOA volume the first to present Audubon writings as he wrote them?*

**Irmscher:** No, the credit for this belongs to Howard Corning, who, over 70 years ago, edited the letters and the *Mississippi River Journal* from the manuscripts. But Corning made quite a number of mistakes—though none of the intentional ones committed by Alice Ford, who in her edition of the 1826 *Journal* also claimed to have been “scrupulously” faithful to the original and in fact ended up rewriting Audubon. Three of the letters in my edition had never been published before, among them the wonderful 1843 letter I mentioned earlier in which Audubon, having just returned from the Missouri River, calls himself “fat as a Grisley Bear in Good Season” (he doesn't like the fact that he's put on so much weight!).

*In your chapter on Audubon in your book *The Poetics of Natural History*, you say that “the images and the text that make up *Birds of America* reflect a fairly consistent artistic vision, a coherent visual poetics unparalleled in either eighteenth or nineteenth century natural history.” Can you briefly describe what makes Audubon's visual poetics so distinctive?*

**Irmscher:** In Audubon's art, humans are what's least noteworthy about nature. Here, American birds emerge in their full otherness, taunting the human observer's limited understanding and commenting, if only indirectly, on the quixotic attempt to recreate them “as if they were alive.” For alive they are not, and, as if to bring home this point, Audubon, a kind of lethal father figure to the birds he can “conserve” only in his art, features many of them involved in complex re-enactments of scenes of slaughter. They're the victims as well as the perpetrators, a reflection of the very drama that brought them to the sheet that is now before us. Look at the static poses of birds in the drawings of Alexander Wilson, Audubon's predecessor, and you realize that Audubon reinvents the natural history drawing as a field of force. Any Audubon composition can teach us more than a Peterson field guide about the problems that derive from attempting to see nature “humanly.”

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The same applies to the prose. Take the biography of the Bald Eagle. Audubon knows very well that he is portraying “our national standard,” “which waves in the breeze of every clime, bearing to distant lands the remembrance of a great people living in a state of peaceful freedom.” But he conjures up an amazing scene, in which a majestic eagle and his mate, perched high on a tall tree on the banks of the Mississippi, silently and patiently survey “millions of waterfowl on whistling wings” until a trumpeter swan appears which the male fancies: “He glides through the air like a falling star, and, like a flash of lightning, comes upon the timorous quarry.” The swan soon gives up, and Audubon imagines the sensuous delight the eagle feels when sinking his claws into the defenseless body, as if Zeus were raping Leda all over again: “It is then, reader, that you may see the cruel spirit of this dreaded enemy of the feathered race, whilst, exulting over his prey, he for the first time breathes at ease. He presses down his powerful feet, and drives his sharp claws deeper than ever into the heart of the dying Swan. He shrieks with delight, as he feels the last convulsions of his prey, which has now sunk under his unceasing efforts to render death as painfully felt as it can possibly be.” The point of the passage is of course to alienate the reader, who knows better than to identify with such a malevolent force. For Audubon, here as elsewhere in his work, anthropomorphic language doesn’t bring birds any closer to the world of humans; rather, it distances them from us. Bald Eagles are no pets; they won’t let themselves be domesticated. What emerges from Audubon’s narratives is not so much that Americans made a mistake by choosing the Bald Eagle as their emblem, but that perhaps no bird would have made a good choice.

Here’s a final example: Audubon’s drawing of the Snowy Egret. Audubon’s composition shows the bird on a mound with vegetation and water in front. The background is a landscape that stretches across a marsh and some more water to a Carolina plantation in the distance. In the middle ground is the tiny figure of a hunter approaching, perhaps Audubon’s self-portrait. Though the gun seems to point at the egret’s white body, the bird, by sheer size and scale, overpowers the human, and Audubon’s drawing sets up an opposition between the bird’s amphibious habitat, including some flattened marsh plants, which the bird has just trodden down, and the civilized world, the world of houses with porches, the world of guns and fences, from which the hunter, an unwanted intruder, appears to have emerged. Audubon’s assistant George Lehman had added the plantation. “When seized,” writes Audubon in the text intended to accompany the plate, the Snowies “peck at you with great spirit, and are capable of inflicting a severe wound.” In a later version of the same image, a plate made for the reduced-size edition, the so-called Royal Octavo, or “the people’s

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*Birds of America*,” the hunter has been eliminated. I should add here that you can check out all these images—and many more!—in *John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings*. It has both drawings of the Bald Eagle, the earlier and the later one, and the original watercolor of the Snowy Egret, in beautiful reproductions contributed by Hirschl & Adler Galleries and The New-York Historical Society.