

Masterpieces of Bird Art: 700 Years of Ornithological Illustration

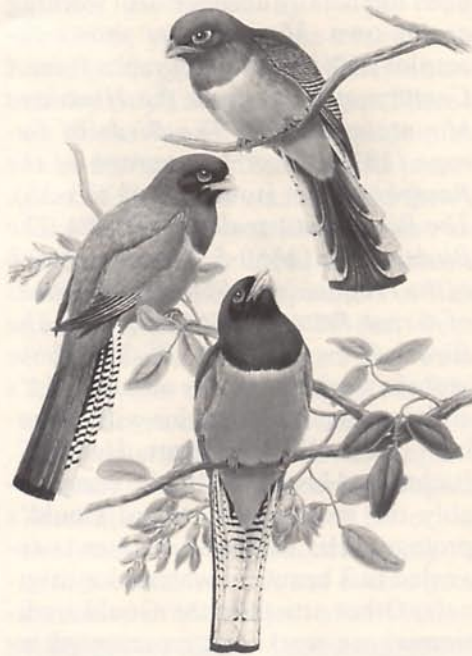
by Roger F. Pasquier and John Farrand, Jr. • Foreword by Roger Tory Peterson • Abbeville, 1991 • 13½" x 11¼" • 261 pages, hardcover, 200 color illustrations • Price \$74.50 Code C341

Guest Review by H. Douglas Pratt

The term "coffee-table book" brings to mind an oversized, lavishly illustrated tome displayed to impress visitors or to give them something to leaf through when the conversation lags. Few such books are ever *read* in the usual sense of the word because the text often is just a vehicle for the color plates. Every now and then a coffee-table book appears that actually deserves to be read as well as perused. *Masterpieces of Bird Art* is one such volume, filled with well-reproduced, large format illustrations enlivening an informative and well-researched historical account.

The plates are true to their heritage as *illustrations*, not mere decorations. Great care obviously was taken to find the best-preserved copies of older illustrations. Many of the antique, hand-colored engravings and lithographs look as fresh as when they were published. Importantly, Pasquier and Farrand have sought out original paintings by many earlier artists for comparison with the more familiar published reproductions. I well remember the new respect I gained for Audubon when I first saw his original watercolors. *Masterpieces* displays long-hidden original paintings by such other pre-twentieth-century artists as Jacques Barraband, Edward Lear, the Goulds, Joseph Wolf and Gerard Keulemans. Barraband's 1801-05 painting of a male Eclectus Parrot displays a surprising sophistication. I also appreciated the comparison of the original watercolor with the published lithograph of a Keulemans painting of Rufous Hornbills. Each is beautiful, but the original has an un-

expected freshness that shows that the basic techniques of bird painting have changed little over the centuries, and that our predecessors were every bit as skilled as any modern practitioner. The plate captions give the common and scientific name of the species depicted, the artist, the publication for which the work was done, and usually the medium of originals or the reproduction process for published plates. The captions also discuss the particular work as it relates to others of the same or contemporary artists, point out noticeable artifacts of reproduction processes, or give natural history information about the birds to explain what the artist was trying to show.



John Gould and William Hart, stone lithograph

The main text is supposedly a history of bird illustration from the earliest Egyptian murals to modern times. Farrand's introduction deals with the earliest beginnings of bird illustration in Egypt, Europe, India and pre-Columbian America. Surprisingly, some of the earliest surviving bird paintings are more ornithologically accurate than those done thousands of years later. The wild geese shown in an Egyptian mural from 3000 B.C. would serve perfectly well in a modern field guide! By Roman times, bird paintings

in western tradition had become very stylized.

Farrand wrote the first chapter, "Wrought in the Margin," an allusion to the use of drawings surrounding the text in hand-lettered manuscripts. The first significant European ornithological work discussed is *De arte venandi cum avibus* by Frederick II (1194-1250), of which only one of two copies survives. The birds, hand painted on parchment, have a primitive look but are all easily identifiable. After Frederick II birds often appeared in the illuminations of manuscripts, but true ornithological illustrations had to await the invention of movable type and mechanical reproduction. The earliest technology was the woodcut, a type of engraving on wooden blocks. Woodcuts were used with ever-increasing refinement into the 19th century. Farrand discusses the process in some detail and traces its development as a medium for bird illustration through the 16th and 17th centuries to the exquisite late 18th-century woodcuts of Thomas Bewick. The latter were a great advance over previously published bird art and set the stage for Audubon's more lifelike approach. *Masterpieces* includes some rather sophisticated hand-colored woodcuts from as late as 1850, but eventually this medium fell into disuse.

Pasquier takes up the account in the remaining chapters. In the second, "Colored After Nature," he begins with the 17th-century development of copperplate engraving, the major medium for bird illustration until the mid-19th century. With this technique, an artist's original painting is copied onto the metal plate either by direct engraving or etching with acid. The incised lines hold the ink for printing. The result resembles a very finely wrought pen-and-ink drawing which is then hand colored. No matter how skillfully done, a colored engraving is only a reasonable approximation of the original painting. The earliest rather primitive engravings illustrated the most significant ornithological works of their time. Examples are shown from 17th-century works by Joannes Johnstonus, Willughby and Ray, and others. The earliest colored

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Robert Gillmor, watercolor

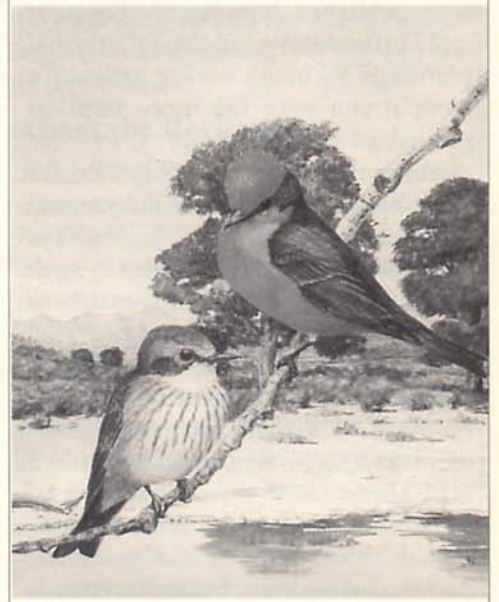
engravings, by Eleazar Albin and his daughter Elizabeth, as well as examples of the first widely published plates of American birds by Mark Catesby and a generous worldwide selection of works by his pupil George Edwards, are included. The clear standout of the pre-Audubon era was Barraband. At a time when better-known artists such as Alexander Wilson and Prideaux John Selby were still painting birds in rather stiff and unlikelike poses, Barraband was doing paintings that could hold their own in a modern bird art exhibit. A generous selection of his works, both originals and reproductions, are shown. The last major bird artist to use colored engravings was also the unquestioned master of the technique, John James Audubon. Pasquier devotes a full 10 pages to the most famous bird artist of all time, who was the first to show birds as integral parts of the natural world rather than as isolated objects.

The third chapter, "Drawn on Stone," covers the next great innovation in bird illustration, colored lithography. In this technique, the drawing is etched into a stone slab. Lithographs when printed look more like pencil rather than pen-and-ink drawings and reproduce delicate shadings much more convincingly than engravings, but like them had to be colored

by hand. William Swainson, a contemporary of Audubon, was the first practitioner of the new medium, but the name most identified with its development was another 19th-century giant, John Gould. Gould's greatest strength was in bringing together the skills of many collaborators; often we do not know who did what in a given "Gould" lithograph. Nevertheless, Gould himself was a major contributor to the effort as an artist, publisher, technician and ornithological explorer. His success in selling his works to wealthy subscribers enabled him to provide work for many skilled artists whose talents might not otherwise be known to us. He was the first to appreciate the bird paintings of Edward Lear (of *The Owl and the Pussycat* fame) who had been financially unsuccessful working on his own. *Masterpieces* shows examples of "Gould" lithographs from *A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains* (1831), *The Birds of Europe* (1832-37), *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae* [toucans] (1833-35), *The Birds of Australia* (1840-48), *The Birds of Asia* (1850-53), *A Monograph of the Trogonidae* (1858-75), *The Birds of Great Britain* (1862-73), and *The Birds of New Guinea* (1875-88). These include works by nearly all of Gould's collaborators including his wife, Elizabeth, Lear, William Hart, Henry C. Richter and Joseph Wolf, who was probably the most significant of Gould's proteges. His skill as a painter is revealed in 3 beautiful watercolor originals. Other artists in the Gould tradition whose works are represented include Keulemans, Joseph Smit, Daniel Giraud Elliott, George Lodge, Archibald Thorburn, and Henrik Grønwald. Contemporary with Gould but independent of his school were Jean T. Descourtilz, a Frenchman living in Brazil who produced Audubonesque plates of Neotropical birds, and Martin Johnson Heade, whose striking oil paintings of hummingbirds were never published in his time largely because of limitations of the printing media. Now we can finally appreciate his dramatic landscapes. Also included here are works by Andrew Jackson Grayson (d. 1869), also unpublished in his time, and two paintings of nests and eggs from an obscure 1880s book, *Illustrations of the Nests*

and Eggs of the Birds of Ohio. Painted by a team of four women who are otherwise unknown, the illustrations are almost photographically realistic and deserve to be better known. I was disappointed that F. W. Frohawk, who illustrated one of only two major 19th-century monographs on Hawaiian birds, was overlooked.

Up to this point, Pasquier and Farrand discuss printing techniques in some detail and show how they profoundly influenced the way bird artists worked. In the final chapter, "Feel of the Feathers," this theme is abandoned entirely except for comments that because modern printing methods can accurately reproduce virtually anything, artists are now free to experiment with the full range of media. A discussion of four-color offset printing equivalent to that given for woodcuts, engravings and lithography would have given the text more balance. This lapse is one of many in this, the weakest chapter of the book. Pasquier begins with a long discussion of the oil paintings of Bruno Liljefors (1860-1939). Liljefors was by no means an illustrator, but he did influence many who are. Abbott Thayer (1849-1921) and his son Gerald (1883-1939), best known for the concept of concealing coloration, are represented by two excellent illustrations of their principles. Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927) perhaps came closer to "painting from life" than anyone else before or since. Virtually every American illustrator of



Louis Agassiz Fuertes, watercolor

the 20th century can trace influences back to Fuertes. The seven examples of his work are good illustrations of his watercolor technique, but fail to show the full range of his artistic skill. His contemporary Allan Brooks (1869-1946) is represented by only a single painting. A younger member of the "Fuertes school" was George



J.F. Lansdowne, watercolor

Miksch Sutton (1898-1982), whose work is shown in four lovely watercolors that, again, reveal only a small part of his talent. Fuertes' influence also shows in a watercolor by Robert M. Mengel (1921-1990) and in the several works by Don Eckelberry. The Liljefors influence appears most obviously in the work of Francis Lee Jaques (1887-1969), one of the few bird illustrators to use oils successfully, as shown in two particularly striking examples. The Liljefors tradition is also reflected in an exquisite modern painting by Robert Verity Clem, stated incorrectly to be an oil (it is an opaque watercolor). Like Liljefors, Clem is more of a landscape artist, and I wonder why he was included in *700 Years of Ornithological Illustration* when such influential bird artists as Robert Bateman, Don Malick, Axel Amuchastegui, Raymond Harris-Ching, Keith Shackleton and Guy Coheleach were not.

The book's dust jacket states that artists are included "whose work is most original and who have made the greatest contribution to ornithology,"

but the omission of such artistic innovators as Manfred Schatz and Charles Harper and such contributors to ornithology as Charles F. Tunnicliffe, Paul Barruel and D. M. Reid-Henry shows a capricious inconsistency. Deserved attention is given to William T. Cooper's beautiful studies in the Gould tradition and Albert Earl Gilbert's singular and striking painting style, but only single examples are presented of the work of J. F. Lansdowne, Robert Gillmor and Richard Weatherley. Modern black-and-white illustration is given scant attention, with only Jaques and Mengel represented (overlooking one of the best in this medium, John Henry Dick). Probably the most important 20th-century development in the field of bird illustration is the field guide, pioneered by Roger Tory Peterson, yet only three examples of field guide plates, two by Peterson and one by Guy Tudor, are shown. There is no discussion of the field guide plate as an art form, and other artists prominent in this genre such as Eckelberry, John P. O'Neill and Lars Jonsson are featured more as artists than illustrators. Other important painters of field guide plates (Arthur Singer, Peter Slater, Dale Zimmerman and Peter Scott, to list a few) are ignored. With such uneven coverage, I cannot say by what criteria the authors distinguish between bird art and ornithological illustration. As a supposed history of the latter, this book succeeds only for earlier centuries; it is not even a good summary of the subject after 1900.



John P. O'Neill, acrylic and gouache

Masterpieces of Bird Art is a beautifully illustrated history of pre-20th-century bird art coupled with a limited and more or less random sample of modern works. The inclusion of original paintings by earlier artists is a valuable contribution. The text goes well beyond the insipid filler often found in similar publications. I personally learned much from the first three chapters despite my disappointment with the last. Even in its idiosyncratic coverage of contemporary artists, it insightfully describes the historical influences on today's illustrators. If your library lacks a reference on the history of ornithological art, this volume would fill that gap better than most, and will certainly look nice on your coffee table.

About the Reviewer:

Guest reviewer H. Douglas Pratt is well known throughout North America as a professional ornithologist, artist and illustrator. A Research Associate of the Louisiana State University Museum of Biology in Baton Rouge and an expert on Pacific island avifauna, Doug is senior author and illustrator of the widely acclaimed *A Field Guide to the Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific* (Princeton, 1987). He was a prominent contributing artist to *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (National Geographic, 1983), and his work is regularly featured in bird art exhibitions. His comprehensive locality guide, *Enjoying Birds in Hawaii*, will be published this year.

William MacGillivray

by Robert Ralph • HMSO Books, 1993 • 7" x 9 1/2" • 160 pages, hardcover, 23 color plates • Price \$49.95 Code A484

Guest Review by Barbara C. Mearns

If William MacGillivray's name is recognized by birders in North America, it is usually in connection with MacGillivray's Warbler, or perhaps because of his collaboration with John James Audubon on the *Ornithological Biography*, the text for *The Birds of America*. Even in his native Scotland he is little known, despite

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