ABBOT, AUDUBON, CATESBY, AND WILSON

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Abbot, Audubon, Catesby, and Wilson: Naturalists in the South features prints and paintings by some of the most important naturalists to have worked in our region: Mark Catesby (1683–1749), John Abbot (1751–1840), Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), and John James Audubon (1785–1851). The work of these naturalist-artists was more than art to these men; it was a response to "[their] obligations to explore and comprehend the grand effect of creation."[1]

The tradition of the naturalist-artist is rooted in the period known as the Enlightenment, when Britain's Royal Society was founded (1660). According to the society, knowledge should be tested by individuals using their senses, making observations in the field. When Europeans first encountered the natural world of the Southeast, they found an array of fascinating fauna and flora to investigate, from rattlesnakes to magnolia blossoms to mockingbirds. Members of the Royal Society and, later, the American Philosophical Society, sponsored studies of nature across the Southeast. Descriptive accounts such as *A New Voyage to Carolina*, by John Lawson (1709), and *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida . . .*, by William Bartram (1791), stimulated public and scholarly interest in the South.

During this period of scientific inquiry, Mark Catesby came to America soon after his sister, who had disobeyed her father by marrying a young British doctor bound for the New World. Knowing his interest in nature, Catesby's brother-in-law introduced him to William Byrd of Virginia, an amateur naturalist. Byrd put Catesby in touch with other colonists interested in science who encouraged his study of Southern flora and fauna. This led him to write and illustrate *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (1731–1743). Catesby was the first naturalist in the South to produce scientific illustrations that could be considered fine art.

Sixty years after Catesby illustrated local fauna on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River, John Abbot produced skillfully drawn and accurately colored illustrations of Georgia insects and birdlife. Having emigrated to Virginia from England on the eve of the Revolutionary War, Abbot selected Georgia as his permanent home and base, where he remained until his death. Credited with more than five thousand watercolor sketches, he anticipated some of Audubon's studies of Georgia and South Carolina bird species by a quarter of a century.

Alexander Wilson produced his magnum opus in eight volumes, *American Ornithology*, over the course of several years toward the end of his very active life. Wilson drew birds as he traveled across America, having visited interior states such as Kentucky—where he met Audubon—and Tennessee, as well as every town within a hundred miles of the Atlantic between Maine and Georgia. In addition to his direct observations, Wilson gathered information from the Peale Museum in Baltimore and William Bartram's gardens and library.

John Abbot, *Great Brown Hawk*, 1790. Watercolor on paper, 11⅛ x 8¾ inches.

The most famous of the early naturalist-artists, John James Audubon, decided around 1820 to make the painting of American birds his lifework. The son of a French naval officer who served in the American Revolution, Audubon had hoped to become a successful businessman. After his business ventures failed, he was struck with the idea of publishing a complete collection of prints of American birds. "I have finally determined to break through all bonds and pursue my ornithological pursuits."[2] Teaching dancing, drawing, and French to earn his living, Audu-

John James Audubon, *Carolina Parrot*, 1832. Hand-colored engraving, 33 x 24 inches.

Mark Catesby, *The Purple Finch*, 1754. Hand-colored etching, 20⅝ x 14 inches. Gift of Marie J. Hulbert.

bon traveled throughout the Southeast while creating his *Birds of America* (published as 435 hand-colored folio plates between 1827 and 1838). These were subsequently reproduced in other editions. His bird paintings revolutionized natural history illustration with their realism and drama. Earlier illustrators' birds seemed stiff by comparison and sometimes out of proportion to the plants depicted. While visiting Charleston, he met the Reverend John Bachman, an amateur naturalist, and his sister-in-law Maria Martin. Martin painted some of the flowers and insects that filled the backgrounds of Audubon's bird illustrations.

The work of Abbot, Audubon, Catesby, and Wilson is here complemented by a selection of original watercolors by Robin Hill, one of the most distinguished contemporary bird painters. Born in Australia and educated in England, Hill had become Australia's most successful naturalist-artist, before emigrating to the United States in 1971. During the 1970s and 1980s he executed an ongoing commission to paint a complete survey of American birds, including the Endangered Species; the Ducks, Geese, and Swans; the Upland Game Birds; the Birds of Prey; and the Marsh Birds—totaling more than two hundred paintings, all a part of the Morris Museum's permanent collection.

Seen as a whole, this exhibition addresses the tension between our regional culture, which often has treated plants and animals subjectively, or sentimentally, and scientists, who have taken a more descriptive or taxonomic approach. Mediating these opposing impulses, the naturalist-artists in this exhibition have endeavored to depict birds and plants with visual accuracy and, to varying degrees, dramatic effect.

As a supplement to *Abbot, Audubon, Catesby, and Wilson*, the museum offers Suzanne Stryk's *Genomes and Daily Observations* in its gallery usually devoted to works on paper. A graduate of East Tennessee State University who resides in Southwest Virginia, Stryk has continually focused on ecological issues in her more than twenty solo exhibitions. The *Genomes and Daily Observations* installation consists of her drawings (reminiscent of those of Catesby or Abbot), a naturalist's desk piled with biological specimens, and a mirror imprinted with a section of the human genome. Stepping into the middle of these elements, viewers can explore "the duality between intimate experience of the natural world and high tech science." Her work continues the dialogue that has occupied naturalist-artists since the Age of Enlightenment: how to balance the irrational with the rational, the mystery of life with the quest for knowledge.

Alexander Wilson, *Mocking Bird Egg, Male and Female Hummingbird,* 1829. Hand-colored engraving, 14⅝ x 11½ inches. Gift of Marie J. Hulbert.

Endnotes

1. John P. Barratt, "An Address, Delivered before the Erskine Lyceum of Erskine College, Abbeville District, S.C. on the Evening of September 16th, 1846" (second page of an unpaginated typescript of the book printed by Walker & Burke, Charleston, 1847), in the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

2. John James Audubon, *The Life of John James Audubon, the Naturalist, ed. by his widow, with an Introduction by Jas. Grant Wilson* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1869), 94, quoted in Waldemar H. Fries, *The Double Elephant Folio: The Story of Audubon's "Birds of America"* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), 3.

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