

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON AND EDGAR ALLAN POE
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One of the ways in which the library traditionally celebrates Union's Homecoming and Family Weekend each October is by putting on display selected plates from one of the College's great treasures, the "double elephant folio" edition of John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*. This monumental achievement in ornithology was published by the author in an eleven year stretch from 1827 to 1838. Union's copy, one of the approximately 200 completed, was ordered for the College by long time President Eliphalet Nott directly from Audubon himself. It is always an occasion when the College's recently-conserved Audubon plates are put on display. But selecting the images that currently appear in conjunction with the library's nearby *Poe and His Progeny* exhibit also created an unexpected opportunity to look at both Audubon's plates and Poe's literary work in fresh ways.

Although Audubon's life span (1785-1851) encompassed in its entirety Poe's considerably shorter one (1809-1849), to date we have found no evidence that either man ever mentioned the other or indeed even gave him a thought. Nonetheless, their separate enterprises comment upon each other in thought-provoking ways. Both men produced their major works at a time when the American Romantic Movement was emerging in a multitude of ways and establishing new perspectives on natural, social, and personal worlds. And both worked simultaneously—albeit to very different degrees—in two fields of passionate interest in their day, natural history and what one may loosely call "storytelling".

Their approaches to the first of these two fields could not have been more different. Audubon's dedication to natural history involved, among other things, spending years in the American wilderness searching for material for his *Birds*. He depicted each of the over 400 species represented in his collection in its natural habitat and subsequently labored carefully over the accurate reproduction of his original works of art in their published form. Poe, on the other hand, was essentially an urban personality, although he too spent time in rural settings. His own attempt at natural history—his 1840 textbook on shells, displayed in a nearby exhibit case—was undertaken strictly for money and is generally considered a fiasco. Completed just a few years before Audubon paid his visit to Eliphalet Nott, Poe's *Conchologist's First Book* was plagiarized in a surreptitious deal with one of its original authors. Poe claimed that his was common practice among textbook authors at the time—and so it often was. But Poe's actions only added to the growing controversy surrounding his literary output and personal behavior.

Storytelling was another matter. Audubon's stories appeared in his drawings and in his published commentary on his work, such as his *Ornithological Biography* (1832-1839), rather than in the kind of literary journals to which Poe contributed his fiction and poetry. The two men also usually chose very different tales to tell even when they had an identical object in view. But that each man was carefully composing a story as he composed his work becomes even more apparent when one contemplates some of the avian "objects" that they had in common. We hope that you will find the overlapping stories that we have found in their works at least entertaining and, at best, suggestive of the complex habits of thought that characterized American Romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century.

AUDUBON CASE ONE: *Raven*

The choice of this plate for display with the *Poe and His Progeny* exhibit is obvious, given the persistent imagery in the surrounding cases. Surely no bird was ever more closely associated with an author than the portentous figure of Poe's *The Raven* (1845). Audubon's own image of a raven is equally magnificent. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that in his *Philosophy of Composition*

(1846) Poe reported that as he began writing his poem he was simply looking for “a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech, and very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself” [Poe’s italics]. It rapidly occurred to Poe, however, that a raven was “infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone.”

AUDUBON CASE TWO: *Passenger Pigeon*

Audubon’s tender portrayal of the passenger pigeon constitutes an implicit criticism of the attitude towards this species that prevailed among his contemporaries and that contributed to its eventual extinction. Ironically, Audubon killed the birds that he drew so that he could observe them more closely and pose them as he saw fit. But the mass slaughter of the huge migratory flocks that once covered American skies was killing of a different order. Audubon and others of his contemporaries deplored it. James Fenimore Cooper famously depicted—and his protagonist lamented—one such slaughter at the beginning of his novel *The Pioneers* (1823). Poe, on the other hand, found Cooper’s fiction sentimental and tedious, and in his spoof oriental tale, *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade* (1845), he mocked the breathless style in which the vast migrating pigeon flocks were also described by other writers of the period. But there is perhaps an ironic echo of Cooper’s lament in the equally breathless way that Poe’s *Scheherazade* concludes her account of the enormous pigeon flock that flies overhead: “No sooner had we got rid of these birds, which occasioned us great annoyance, than we were terrified by the appearance of a fowl of another kind.” It turns out to be a balloon.

AUDUBON CASE THREE: *Black Backed Gull*

Audubon’s gull appears to be suffering the fate of one of the passenger pigeons noted above. Violent imagery of this kind is somewhat common in Audubon’s work, but here the absence of an obvious antagonist and the contrast between the bird’s agony and the forensic depiction of its foot and remaining wing are perhaps particularly unsettling. Poe gave *his* gull the upper hand in his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1836-1837), which was based on the popular and lurid travelers’ tales of the time. Poe’s hapless narrator and his equally unfortunate companions encounter a “ghost ship” at sea and are horrified to find a gull feeding avidly on a dead crew member. Poe’s scene is gruesome enough in itself, but it is undoubtedly made even more disturbing—like Audubon’s portrait of the gull—by the combined detail and the lack of information about what caused the disaster in the first place.

AUDUBON CASE FOUR: *Mocking Bird*

The structural balance and consistent hues of this plate require a closer look, for within them a war is being waged between a snake who is preying on a mockingbird nest and the assembled birds who are fighting him off. Audubon’s narrative choice serves his scientific purposes, for the drama allows him to depict mockingbird anatomy from many different angles. But drama it is nonetheless, one perhaps representing Audubon’s version of the Garden of Eden story. Thus it always pays to take a second look at works by artists and authors from this—or indeed any—period. For just as the “pastoral” Audubon of the passenger pigeon plate could create scenes of enormous drama, so could the ever-dramatic Poe create works in which pastoral longing dominates all. In *Landor’s Cottage* (1849), the last of Poe’s tales published in his lifetime, Poe’s own mockingbird sits apparently contentedly in a wicker cage near an idyllic residence wherein the narrator finds “the perfection of natural, in contradistinction from *artificial* grace” [Poe’s italics]. Still, the looking must continue. Is Poe’s caged bird perhaps more of a theatrical device than an instance of natural grace? Is Audubon’s theatrical portrayal of the mockingbird war indeed closer to nature itself?