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## Antique Prints Illustrate Nature, History

BY LUCY MERRILL  
JOURNAL FEATURES WRITER

Antiques are the artifacts of history. For some antique collectibles, that connection with the past represents most of their charm. An 18th century quill pen has a certain interest because old, but show it to have been the implement used to sign the Declaration of Independence and it becomes a great deal more interesting. Other objects are beautiful in themselves, but may have no nexus with significant events in history. Most antique furniture falls in that category.

An object from the past that combines intrinsic beauty and historical significance is a true treasure. J. Gilbert Johnston Jr. has assembled a collection that meets those criteria. He collects 18th and 19th century natural history prints, including a large collection of original prints by John James Audubon for his master work, "Birds of America."

"Soon after college I began collecting bird prints," Gilbert said. "The genesis of it is when I was a boy, my parents gave me a facsimile copy of Audubon's 'Birds of America.' I was interested in birds, I built bird feeders and houses, and that grew into a general love of nature."

An outdoorsman, Johnston says



J. Gilbert Johnston Jr. developed an interest in natural history prints from the 18th and 19th century. He has amassed a collection of the works of John James Audubon's birds.

Journal photo by Lucy Merrill

he canoed and backpacked "all over the U.S. and Canada," as well as trekking to Africa and Antarctica to experience the varieties of the natural world.

Johnston came from a family that included artists, and he combined a love of natural beauty with an appreciation of artistic beauty.

"I lived in Europe for three years and went to the museums and galleries," he said. "I had an artistic eye, but there was a disconnect between eye and hand."

Collecting antique nature prints was a natural progression for Johnston. The prints have artistic merit, and have as their subjects the

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flora and fauna of the world. They also appeal to the historian in Johnston. The prints not only detail birds, flowers and insects, they reflect the culture that produced the artists who produced them.

The 18th and early 19th centuries were times of exploding technological progress and rapid expansion of scientific knowledge.

"It was an era of tremendous momentum of learning about natural history because of the British expanding trade over the world," Johnston said. "There were exciting new discoveries. For instance, there are no hummingbirds in Europe."

The more Europeans learned of other lands, the more they wanted to learn about these new creatures.

"If you visited wealthy, educated people, they had large natural history collections and botanical gardens," Johnston said. "Those private collections were the foundation of the British Museum."

When he began collecting prints, Johnston became interested in the people who created them. He read about Audubon, then he read about the people who influenced him. That led to collecting the works of those men, which led to more reading, which led to more collecting. Johnston has acquired expertise on the subject of antique nature prints, their production and their producers to rival his collection of their works.

Audubon's life story is as fascinating as his drawings. Born in France, Audubon was sent by his father to an estate he held in Pennsylvania to avoid conscription into Napoleon's army. There, he married the daughter of a neighbor and together they moved to the frontier of western Kentucky where Audubon set up as a merchant on the Ohio River. Then he lost his money in one of the panics that afflicted the financial world of that time.

"During that dark period Audubon decided to pursue his passion," Johnston said. "He wanted to paint all the birds of America life-size."

As much of an endeavor as that project was, painting birds was only half of the dream. The other half, getting his work printed, posed perhaps a greater challenge.

"Audubon taught painting, fencing and dancing and painted portraits," Johnston said. "He was raising money to travel to England where there were printers who do the work."

In order to print life-size drawings, Audubon had to have his work printed on large sheets known as double elephant folio paper. His work was sold by subscription and sent individually to subscribers over a period of years.

"When (the subscriber) got 100 or so prints, he called a binder to have them bound," Johnston said.

It took 11 years to complete "Birds of America." Not only were these folios cumbersome to handle—the double elephant folio is 26 inches by 39 inches—they were expensive. A complete folio sold for \$1,000 in 1827, a fortune at the time.

"In March 2000, a set came on auction at Christie's and sold for \$8.8 million," Johnston said. "It was the most valuable book ever sold at auction."

Audubon's double elephant folio was printed on copper plates that were etched after tracing the original watercolor. Colorists working for the printer applied watercolor to the prints.

"Audubon's double elephant prints are considered the pinnacle of copperplate printing," Johnston said. "The original prints were limited in number because the plates would wear out. Around 200 sets of 'Birds of America' were produced and 119 sets are known to exist."

Not only was "Birds" an artistic and scientific success, it was immensely popular.

"Ultimately it was a triumph," Johnston said. "He became famous in his lifetime, and it brought him enough money to live comfortably."

Ironically, few of the people of America could afford a set of "Birds of America." That situation bothered Audubon, who was proud to be a naturalized American citizen.

"Audubon's personal seal had a turkey on it and it said 'America, My Country,'" Johnston said.

To make his work more affordable, in the 1840s Audubon had "Birds" printed in octavo size, which is seven inches by 10 inches.

"It proved so popular that the government gave those (octavo) volumes to visiting dignitaries," Johnston said.

Also in the 1840s, Audubon produced another major work, this time printed from engraved limestone. The set of lithographs, "The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America," documented American mammals.

Johnston has acquired a large

collection of Audubon prints, as well as prints of other famous natural historians, such as Prideaux John Selby, the premier English naturalist who introduced Audubon to his first printer; Alexander Wilson, a Scot whose book on American birds predates Audubon's; and Mark Catesby, an Englishman who arrived in colonial Virginia in 1712 and has been called the founder of American ornithology.

With such a large collection, and an expanding expertise, Johnston has naturally become interested in sharing his love of the artistry and history of nature prints. He recently held an exhibition and sale of

antique prints at Emmet O'Neal Library. He also does private showings for interested collectors and art lovers.

For information on Johnston's collection, see the Web site at

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