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For the Birds

Antique nature prints more popular than ever

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A few weeks ago, in the intimate Carriage House of Preservation Dallas on Swiss Avenue, a group of art enthusiasts packed themselves into the cozy space to listen to a presentation by an antique nature print collector and dealer named J. Gilbert Johnston Jr.

Johnston, who resembles a young Tom Wolfe, went over his allotted time as a speaker at the Summer Preservation Institute, but he had a lot to cover — about 300 years of the history of scientific art. In the world of antique prints, though, it seems like time is irrelevant.



Staff photo: Allison Slomowitz
Art collector and dealer J. Gilbert Johnston Jr. speaks during a lecture on 'Art Treasures of Natural History: Connoisseurship and Preservation.'

After the sale of iconic American nature artist John James Audubon's "The Birds of America" for \$8.8 million at Christie's in 2000, surpassing the Gutenberg Bible as the most expensive printed book sold at auction, there has been an increase in public interest for antique nature prints.

True enthusiasts like Johnston, however, aren't interested in the prints for mere monetary value.

"As a boy, my parents gave me for a Christmas present — I think I was 12 — a copy of Audubon's 'The Birds of America,'" said Johnston, who owns Antique Nature Prints in Birmingham, Ala.



"I began collecting contemporary nature artists in college ... At some point I was buying so many prints that I thought, I really can't keep all of these. I picked out the ones I wanted and sold the rest."

"I think you're holding a piece of history in your hand, a tangible piece of the history of science," Johnston said.

"Every year, there are fewer of them, and more people are interested in nature," he said. "Demand is increasing, and supply is down; you don't really own them; you are a custodian for a period of time. They're older than you."

Katherine Seale, interim director of Preservation Dallas, who co-sponsored Gilbert's lecture and print show with the Lee Park and Arlington Hall Conservancy, sees antique prints as a suitable match for members of her organization.

"Our membership consists of a lot of historic home owners, which accommodate antique prints beautifully. Preservation Dallas is a resource for owners of historic houses and buildings, and this includes elements that go in and around architecture such as the decorative arts," Seale said. "Beyond enjoying the visual delight, antique nature prints convey interesting information about history, nature, science, art, and technology. One can only help but be excited by their richness."



Although beautiful, nature prints can present a challenge to the novice collector. Johnston said modern technology has enabled counterfeiters to create passable forgeries that are difficult to detect with an untrained eye. With prices for Audubon original prints ranging from \$500 to \$300,000 each, it could be a costly mistake.

Even if a print is authentic, it's important for collectors to buy things they genuinely enjoy. Johnston recommended beginning a collection with small Audubon birds or mammals, then building up to the artists' larger pieces. For botanicals, Johnston suggested pieces from 18th century artist William Curtis.

"Look for things that you identify with. If you put it on your wall, you'll be looking at it a long time," Johnston said. "Don't think about the monetary value to start with."