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Birmingham
magazine

Volume 44, Number 9—September 2004

FEATURES
SEPTEMBER

history in prints

When you buy a print from J. Gilbert Johnston, Jr., you get more than just a pretty picture. Johnston, a Birmingham native who collects and sells 18th and 19th century natural history prints by artists such as James John Audubon, John Gould, Prideaux John Selby and Mark Catsby, provides his clients with rare, one-of-a-kind art that has historical significance.

Behind every print, there's a story—a story that, when Johnston tells it, reveals not only an extensive knowledge about his subject matter, but an unbridled passion for his work. Such stories include biographical accounts of the artists—like Catsby, an Englishman who stayed in America and developed his craft after he was sent here by his father in the early 1700s to check on his sister, who had, against her father's wishes, married an American doctor. Or narratives about actual prints—like Johnston's most recent purchase (a treasure that he'll keep for his personal collection)—an Audubon that survived World War II bombings in a cave in East Germany, was rescued by a librarian just two days before it was scheduled to board a train to Moscow after being commandeered by the Russians, and was eventually confiscated by the East German secret police before ending up in a museum.

Artists like Catsby and Audubon depicted birds, flowers, insects and

more during the Golden Age of Exploration and Natural History, when Europeans began discovering new lands and sought to learn more about the creatures that inhabited them. The wealthy would typically buy subscriptions to receive prints, which would later be bound in books for display.

After drawing their compositions, the artists usually hired someone else to do the engraving, lithography or hand coloring. The prints, then, took years to produce and were limited in number by the wearing away of the master image on the stone or the metal.

"Every aspect of this fascinates me," Johnston says. "The history, the lives, what went on to produce these things, all the effort and work and understanding the printing techniques."

Johnston, who became interested in birds at age 12 when his parents gave him a facsimile copy of *Audubon's Birds of America*, purchased his first Audubon print in the 1990s. It was then that he began reading seriously about Audubon, and ultimately countless others.

And so his knowledge, and his collection, grew. He moved from collector to dealer four years ago when he started his Birmingham business, Antique Nature Prints, and also gives lectures at various symposiums about the history behind the prints and those who created them. He will visit you with a selection of prints at a location of your choosing, or you can peruse his collection at Emmet O'Neal Library in Mountain Brook October 1-3. Call him at 251-7353. —KATIE HINES

