

**BOOK REVIEW: *Masterpieces of Bird Art: 700 Years  
of Ornithological Illustration***

by William E. Davis, Jr.

*Masterpieces of Bird Art: 700 Years of Ornithological Illustration* by Roger F. Pasquier and John Farrand, Jr., Foreword by Roger Tory Peterson; Abbeville Press, New York, 1991; 261 pages; \$85.

In the past fifteen years, a number of books on bird art and bird illustrators have been produced, such as *The Bird Illustrated: 1550-1900*, by Joseph Kastner (1988, New York: Harry N. Abrams) and *The Great Bird Illustrators and Their Art 1730-1930*, by Peyton Skipwith (1979, New York: A&W Publishers). No recent book, however, can compare to the elegant treatise by Pasquier and Farrand, *Masterpieces of Bird Art: 700 Years of Ornithological Illustration*. The book is comprehensive, tracing the history of bird illustration back to ancient times, large (11.125 x 13.25 inches) and lavishly illustrated, with about 250 illustrations, mostly in color and some occupying a two-page spread.

The book is divided into an introduction and four chapters. The introduction and first chapter (by Farrand) deal with bird representations from antiquity. They begin with frescoes from Egyptian tombs and trace the development of bird art through the handmade illustrations of the Psalters and illuminated manuscripts of the thirteenth century, where bird art was mostly symbolic or decorative. Thereafter, printing was introduced, followed by woodcut prints that made illustrations available to a broader audience and that showed more realistic and informative representations of the birds. To those familiar with the history of ornithology, the names of Pierre Belon, Konrad von Gesner, and Ulises Aldrovandi, who used woodcuts in their ornithological books, will be familiar. For others this will be a fascinating first glimpse into the origins of ornithology and bird art. The wood engraving of Thomas Bewick in the early nineteenth century represented the culmination of techniques using wood as a medium for producing bird illustrations.

Chapters 2 and 3 (by Pasquier) feature the ages of engraving and lithography, respectively, and Chapter 4 (also by Pasquier), titled "Feel of the Feathers," features the modern age of bird illustration and art. Chapters 2 and 3 feature artists known to most of us, such as Catesby, Edwards, Wilson, Audubon, Lear, and Gould, but also some who may not be as familiar, such as Reinhold, Knip, and Levaillant, who fabricated birds by drawing composites from other birds. Jacques Barraband, whose cosmopolitan efforts included motmots and parrots from the New World, hornbills from Africa, and birds-of-paradise from New Guinea, receives extensive attention. The authors were very selective in their choice of subjects for the twentieth century, and many readers will no doubt be offended by their omission of a favorite artist, such as Robert

Bateman. But they generally use several illustrations for each artist discussed, and their choice of Robert Verity Clem, who lives on Cape Cod, ". . . where the light reflecting off the sand and water has a distinct intensity," should add a touch of warmth for New England readers.

Throughout this scholarly treatise the authors provide a wealth of historical and biographical information. Both authors are ornithologists as well as art experts, and thus provide an unusually broad perspective and insight in their analysis and historical treatment. The book is thus an important contribution to the history of ornithology as well as to the evolution of bird art. They even provide some interesting etymology. For instance, do you know where the bird names, "jacamar," "tanager," "jabiru," and "toucan" come from?

The artwork is accompanied by captions that contain interesting information about the bird subjects, including behavioral notes, historical anecdotes, and charming critique: ". . . his 'albatross'—more like a goose with wings that only a pterodactyl could have managed—showed how little scientific material he had to work with." The text is analytical and insightful and draws the reader into the analysis: "Their powerful impact [Francis Lee Jaques's work] comes from a viewer's recognition of the skies, atmosphere, and land so vividly like one's own experience and memories." The analysis is often subtle, such as when the authors discuss the impact of Bruno Liljefors, ". . . Liljefors' style reflects the differences between nineteenth-century ornithological illustration, which attempted to portray birds as they are, and a goal of many twentieth-century artists, to show birds as they appear."

Did you ever wonder, when thumbing through a book dealer's catalogue, what the words "folio," "quarto," "Octavo," or even "thirty-twomos" meant? These terms, reflecting how many times a sheet of paper was folded to form equal-size pages, are explained as well as the various processes for making prints. Woodcut, wood engraving, the difference between engraving, etching, and aquatint processes, and lithography are all explained and put into a historical framework that suggests the impact each process had on bird art and illustration. For example, the fact that copperplate engraving necessitates printing the page separately from the text led to the use of full-page illustrations.

I found little to fault in this superb book. The selection of artwork, the layout, and the design are all excellent. It is well written throughout and editorially clean. I was bothered a little by not knowing the size of many paintings, although I could usually get an approximation by looking up the book size, and I would have appreciated a clearer description of when hand coloring of plates was replaced by color printing.

The bottom line, however, is the elegance and general excellence of this book. It is not your typical coffee-table book. Although it is large, heavy, and profusely illustrated with magnificent artwork, all coffee-table desirables, it is much more. It contains a wealth of information, loaded with history and

tradition, and should be read and savored as well as admired. If you have room for only one oversized book for your shelves or table, I strongly recommend that you consider this one. It is truly a masterpiece of bird art literature.

**WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR.** is president of Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts, Inc. Ted is a professor at Boston University and a frequent contributor to *Bird Observer*.

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