

American MASTERS

thirteen
WNET NEW YORK

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press information



AMERICAN MASTERS
is produced for PBS
by Thirteen/WNET
New York

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK'S *AMERICAN MASTERS* REVEALS THE COMPLEX LIFE OF A DRIVEN ARTIST AND THE PIONEERING WORK THAT HELPED DEFINE A YOUNG NATION WITH *JOHN JAMES AUDUBON: DRAWN FROM NATURE*, PREMIERING THIS JULY ON PBS

John James Audubon – whose name became synonymous with American conservation – killed thousands of birds during his quest to create *Birds of America*, the largest and most beautiful book of the 19th century. Audubon was at once entrepreneur, artist, scientist, husband, father, legend – and walking contradiction. Born in what is now Haiti, the illegitimate son of a French plantation owner and his mistress, Audubon ultimately became the quintessential American pioneer. On the frontier, he played the debonair European. In the drawing rooms of Europe, he acted the part of wild woodsman. Although faithful to his long-suffering wife, he nonetheless wrote her lengthy letters bursting with details of his encounters with other women. Jailed once for bankruptcy, he went on to dine at the White House. The self-taught artist and self-made man was praised by royalty, shunned by his in-laws and blackballed by the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences. *AMERICAN MASTERS John James Audubon: Drawn from Nature* details Audubon's epic adventures while capturing the full-scale beauty of his definitive book.

Drawn from Nature premieres Wednesday, July 25 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). The one-hour film is produced by Thirteen/WNET New York and Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc. *Drawn from Nature* is written by Ken Chowder, directed by Lawrence Hott and produced by Hott and Diane Garey. Major funding for *AMERICAN MASTERS John James*

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Audubon: Drawn from Nature is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

“John James Audubon was a genuine American character. His life story reads like the stuff of great fiction – from his uncertain beginnings to the passionate pursuit of his dream,” said Susan Lacy, the creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*. “His seminal work, *Birds of America*, is a magnificent testament to art, to nature and to dogged determination.”

Said Lawrence Hott: “When most people hear the word Audubon they think of the Audubon Society, but they really know almost nothing about him. Audubon pulled off the most successful publishing coup of his time, leaving us with a stunning visual legacy that opens a window onto a time and place that would otherwise be lost to us. And while he lived most of his life before the age of photography, making filming a challenge, we knew when we were editing that there would always be something to show because Audubon had shown us so much.”

Birds of America includes 435 life-sized portraits of every bird then known in the United States. Although Audubon was not the first person to attempt to paint and describe all the birds of America, his book remains the standard by which all other bird artists are measured. In addition to following Audubon’s cue and traveling across the country to document birds in their natural habitat, the filmmakers were granted access to Audubon’s original watercolors at the New-York Historical Society. From that jumping point, they devised numerous ways to fully explore the enduring legacy of his paintings.

In *Drawn From Nature*, artist Walton Ford, who frequently parodies Audubon, shows how the artist posed birds in life-like positions in order to paint them. Master printer Michael Aakhus demonstrates the printing process for *Birds of America* using a rare, authentic copper plate from Audubon’s original collection. An animated sequence on 19th-century passenger pigeon hunts – which effectively wiped out the population – follows the pigeons from a sky blackened by never-ending waves of migrating birds to a drawer at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, where a few examples of the now-extinct bird remain.

The film traces Audubon's life from its unlikely beginning to its unfortunate end, and includes every triumph and tragedy the artist experienced along the way. Audubon not only illustrated *Birds of America*, he was the writer, publisher and promoter. The man who had failed at selling penny nails in the backwoods of Kentucky discovered that he could sell an unfinished folio for a thousand dollars in the finest homes in Edinburgh, Manchester, Leeds, London, and Paris.

A much-heralded four-volume set of *Birds of America* was published in London between 1827 and 1838. Early subscribers to the book included the kings of England and France, and the final list would boast more than 200 of the richest and most recognizable names on both sides of the Atlantic.

Drawn From Nature is also a love story that details the strong bond between Audubon and his wife, Lucy, who left a comfortable lifestyle to trek into the American frontier with her husband before settling in Louisiana and, later, New York. Narrated excerpts from Audubon's many letters to Lucy provide telling insight into a complicated relationship that survived despite long separations, bankruptcy and the death of two children.

After the success of *Birds*, Audubon continued to work, creating a smaller folio, and embarking on a major study of mammals. *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of America* was only half-finished in 1846, when he turned the work over to his son. His eyesight was failing, as was his mind. He passed the last two years of his life in silence, recognizing no one.

In 1863, his wife – by then destitute – sold some 800 original works of art to the New-York Historical Society for a total of \$4,000, paid in installments. In December 2005, a set of Audubon's original artwork and manuscripts fetched \$10.6 million at auction.

Nearly 50 years after Audubon's death, a small group of people banded together to protest the wholesale slaughter of birds for their plumes, which were then used to decorate women's hats. The group eventually dubbed themselves the Audubon Society. Today, the National Audubon

Society continues to build on the love of avian wonders to inspire and advance conservation for the benefit of birds, wildlife and people.

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To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site (www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

AMERICAN MASTERS is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to seven Peabodys, a duPont-Columbia, an Oscar and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 17 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

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