“I Belong to Every Country”
John James Audubon and the Multivalence of National Identity

by

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INTRODUCTION

Audubon, the American Woodsman (Figure 1)

In October of 1851, less than eight months after the death of John James Audubon, a reporter for The National Era recalled a popular anecdote about Audubon’s visit to Niagara Falls. “A strange being,” the author posited, “seemingly half civilized and half savage,” Audubon appeared quite out of place at this “celebrated resort.” His dress, “which was made of leather, stood dreadfully in need of repair, apparently not having felt the touch of either laundress or needle-woman for many a month.” Many among the “crowds of well-dressed and polished figures” were taken aback. Once again, John James Audubon, the American Woodsman, had left an impression.

Audubon’s iconic frontier persona endures. In her 1864 biography John James Audubon, Alice Ford describes “a romantic, free spirit, [and] child of nature.” In 1985, on the bicentennial of Audubon’s birth, Robert Owen Petty portrayed “the figure of a man crouching in a wolf-skin coat, his auburn hair dark with bear grease, his boots firmly placed in the alluvium.” In Ron Tyler’s 1993 A Great National Work, Audubon “personified the American hunter-naturalist, heir to Daniel Boone and interpreter of America’s natural paradise.”

Tyler also articulated the distinctive American aesthetic with which Audubon is popularly associated. Unlike other American artists of his generation, who adapted “European artistic traditions to American situations and styles,” Audubon singularly “brought out of the American wilderness, using American birds and their natural habitats, a completely new expression of American Romanticism.” Underlying Tyler’s
text is a common assumption: the frontiersman is American by virtue of his self-reliance in both life and art—his divergence from a larger Western culture. Audubon was distinctly American precisely because he did not adhere to European conventions.

This untutored American individualism has come to define Audubon’s life story and to shape the received interpretation of his masterpiece, *The Birds of America*. It is a narrative in which Audubon, the untrained enthusiast, overcomes the prejudices of established taste in order to publish drawings that were truly his own—works of an individual mind, drawn from nature.

The difference between this legend and the real Audubon is striking. In reality, Audubon was born in the Caribbean and spent his adolescence in France, immigrating to the United States as a young adult. As I will show, Audubon’s art was shaped by his self-conscious adaptation of the French artistic canon. Furthermore, Audubon did not originally have a strong American audience. *The Birds of America* was produced and distributed in England, under Audubon’s supervision. Audubon’s publication, I argue, was thus tailored to a European clientele. Only the mythic version of Audubon, however, sustains his continued iconic presence in American culture. In order to render this icon stable, it is necessary to abridge Audubon’s identity and discard other, transnational factors.

**Lack of Critical Analysis**

Scholars have done little to test the legend of Audubon as the American Woodsman. Indeed, he has been the object of remarkably limited scholarly analysis. Contemporaneous historians of American art ignored him, because his illustrations appeared to fall outside the parameters of “fine art.” In his landmark 1834 multi-volume
treatise, *History of the Rise and Progress of Arts of Design in the United States*, William Dunlap asserted that in the work of Audubon there “was little in the way of art or design that should be considered.”

C. E. Lester, Henry Tuckerman, and James Jackson Jarvis, “the major critics of midcentury,” also gave his work little attention. One hundred years later, Audubon remains under-examined. In 1932, Herman Wechsler argued that Audubon had been “neglected as an artist” though he expressed hope that through new exhibitions and sales “the public will have an opportunity to judge to what extent *The Birds of America* is a genuine contribution to the story of XIXth century art.”

As late as 1990, however, scholars like Gloria Fiero and Annette Blaugrund lamented that Audubon was “celebrated as a collector, a naturalist and an American legend, but far less frequently… as an artist.”

His legacy has been left in the hands of biographers who are largely uncritical of the mythic Audubon and, in many cases, reinforce it. Even during his lifetime, Audubon’s successes were “generally at the hands of the public rather than from naturalists or critics.” His wife Lucy and granddaughter Maria were responsible for two early biographies, which did little to challenge the emergent popular conception of Audubon as a frontiersman. Similar biographies continue to proliferate through the present. These works adhere to what David Lubin calls “the nineteenth-century cult of genius, the romantic belief that certain privileged figures otherwise known as Great Men…transcended local time and space and spoke to the ages.”

This “monographic” historiography privileges popular memory. Instead of carrying currency within academic circles, Audubon’s biographies speak “to the way present-day Americans like to see their past.” A pattern thus defines more than one hundred and fifty years of Audubon study: “Audubon was written about a great deal, but was rarely given serious consideration by
historians of American art and culture."15 His bird illustrations, in turn, resist analysis and instead become “icons of popular culture.”16 The figure of Audubon looms in our cultural memory, left to ossify in all of its inflated American hyperbole—an “expression of an untamed American spirit.”17

A New Approach

In the discussion that follows, I do not challenge the historical authenticity of Audubon the American Woodsman. Indeed, in some ways I will reinforce it. But I will challenge its one-dimensionality. Audubon and his work express a multiplicity of identities, which emerged, receded, reemerged, overlapped and conflicted—a complex mix that evolved as Audubon passed between countries, localities, and social milieux. Some of these identity changes were spontaneous, slow processes of cultural exposure. Others, like the American Woodsman, Audubon deliberately borrowed from popular culture.

By using Audubon’s illustrations to trace the interplay of these cultural identities, my analysis contributes to a discourse concerning issues of representation in natural history. In this emergent field of scholarship, the significance of Audubon’s work has finally become visible. Scholars such as Amy Meyers, Linda Dugan Partridge, and Ann Shelby Blum have all found Audubon central to the evolution of scientific illustration. They offer compelling, critical interpretations of Audubon’s work and situate it within historical contexts. My analysis draws on their research, particularly Partridge’s doctoral dissertation, “From Nature: John James Audubon’s Drawings and Watercolors 1805-1826.” Partridge offers an in-depth investigation into the visual sources of Audubon’s illustrations. I use many of her connections to draw broader conclusions about the
cultural forces at play. This realm of Audubon literature is still in its infancy, overshadowed by the Audubon of our popular consciousness. In conjunction with these efforts, however, I hope to establish a new and powerful way to recover the significance of Audubon and *The Birds of America.*

**Outline**

My goal is to delineate the various cultural identities assumed by John James Audubon, their permutations, and their interplay. In the first chapter, I investigate the roots of Audubon’s French cultural identity—a subject rarely taken up by scholars. As I will show, *The Birds of America* was in dialogue with forms of national representation Audubon observed in France. Audubon lived in Revolutionary France until he turned eighteen. Under the guidance of his father, a member of the Revolutionary forces, the young Audubon was exposed to the practice of fine art and the study of natural history. The painter Jacques-Louis David and the naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon were touchstones of Audubon’s nascent interest in ornithological illustration. Their work assumed new national significance during this period of political ferment, as Revolutionary forces harnessed science and art to assert French national supremacy. Audubon picked up on the representational motifs used by David and Buffon and later deployed them in his own illustrations.

In the second chapter, I trace Audubon’s first years in America, where his French identity conflicted and blended with an emergent American persona. I follow Audubon’s movements through three primary locations where he and his illustrations underwent significant developments: Philadelphia, the American frontier, and New Orleans. Although Audubon began to adopt the lifestyle and appearance of an American
frontiersman during these years, his artistic developments were shaped by the presence of French émigrés, a fact that belies the myth of the solitary artist. I will put his work into context with the artistic productions of other recent French settlers. Many of them were, like Audubon, French Revolutionaries who embraced the natural history of Buffon, the painting of David, and, in some cases, a Eurocentric imperial logic. These were Audubon’s most formative years, and scholars give this period ample attention. However, few consider Audubon’s American years in relation to the persistence of French traditions. In so doing, I hope to reveal the multicultural complexity of “American” art.

In the third chapter, I provide a visual analysis of *The Birds of America*, published between 1827 and 1838. *The Birds of America* is not only Audubon’s most famous work, but also a critical example of the artist’s representational multivalence. Unlike previous scholars, who interpret these illustrations as direct observations of nature or early examples of American Romanticism, I argue that Audubon maintains his adherence to the scientific principles of Buffon and the stylistic principles of David. I will demonstrate how Audubon used French forms of representation to celebrate America’s wildlife, synthesizing elements of French and American nationalism.

I delineate the revision and reification of Audubon’s American identity in Chapter Four. Here, I trace the production and initial reception of *The Birds of America* in England and continental Europe. Audubon continued to develop the persona of the American Woodsman while in England, adopting the dress and behavior of an untutored frontiersman to help publicize his work. As I show, this self-presentation found an audience among his genteel British and French patrons, who were eager for exotic visions of America that resonated with their conception of New World ferity. Audubon,
however, simultaneously reinvented himself as an English gentleman—a binary role that offset the novelty of the American Woodsman and validated his accomplishments to a high-minded European elite.

As I will argue, Audubon did not just represent what he saw in nature; his representations were informed by conventions and long-standing traditions, which carried specific cultural references and resonated for specific audiences. Analyzing Audubon’s life and work reveals the transnational complex of stylistic and ideological themes that he marshaled in his effort to appear simply American. Although I offer analyses of Audubon’s written work, his illustrations are the most important device for establishing these transnational connections. In them, we can see Audubon negotiating different ways of seeing, which were informed by his accumulated experience and his immediate surroundings.

**The Multivalence of National Identity**

My analysis is informed by Benedict Anderson’s conception of nationality as “socio-cultural.” A nation is an “imagined political community,” defined by a collection of social and cultural conventions. Far from naïve or unaffected, Audubon’s art was deeply shaped by French cultural conventions, and then progressively reshaped in dialogue with established British and emergent American conventions. Audubon was able to navigate between national identities by tapping into their respective traditions. My study shows the heterogeneity of America’s emergent imagined community, the way this community’s artistic conventions emerged through borrowings and dialogues with older European conventions.
Audubon actively, and to some extent self-consciously, participated in this dynamic. Just as the “character of nationalism” was “protean, polyphonic, and shapeshifting,” so too were the individuals that moved between different nationalisms. Like James H. Sweet’s *Mistaken Identities*, I follow one individual through different cultural terrains and mark the ways he grasps “for self-understanding through social belonging.” Although this phenomenon is not limited to Audubon, there were specific circumstances during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that made this cultural flexibility imperative. The beginning of the modern period ushered in two contradictory forces: a growing awareness of national identities, sparked by political and economic revolution, and a growing network of migration and commercial trade, where such self-created identities were forged, mobilized, but also blurred. Audubon’s active years, from the 1790s through the 1840s, saw the emergence of “national” signifiers on both sides of the Atlantic—in post-Revolutionary America and France, and in industrializing Britain. Audubon, like many of his time, was a trans-Atlantic subject, whose opportunities and obligations lay in all three regions. From an early age, Audubon was thus compelled to continuously reintegrate himself into new national environments by harnessing local forms of self-representation.

The present study reads Audubon’s trajectory as one small strand in the complex historical-cultural evolution of American national identity. By the late 19th century, Audubon’s work had assumed iconic status in this identity; but at the outset, few could have predicted such an outcome, so heterogeneous and decidedly foreign were Audubon’s inspirations. My analysis of this trajectory aims to bring together the material, economic, and geographic dimensions of social structure, and to synthesize the
objective-structural and subjective-agentic sides of historical change, which remains a critical issue in the post-Andersonian discourse of nationalism.22

I present Audubon’s multiple cultural personae in a state of continual change. Over the course of his lifetime, Audubon crossed the Atlantic eight times and lived in settlements, villages, towns, and cities of every variety. A chronological structure of analysis, adopted frequently by Audubon’s biographers, remains useful in helping me trace when and how identities emerged in accordance with these localities. In Audubon, I argue, we see not a homogenous “melting pot” or “unified totality,” but rather a palimpsest on which new identities are encoded as others are erased, residual codes resurface while others fade permanently.23 Audubon’s French, American, and British identities were never finalized. As we shall see, his ever-changing environment induced Audubon to both create new identities and continuously revise older ones. Although my primary goal is to demythologize John James Audubon and better understand his complexity, I hope that my discussion offers broader insights into identity formation.
1. EARLY LIFE: ART, SCIENCE, AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY FORMATION

Origins

“The New World gave me birth and liberty,” wrote John James Audubon in 1827. Audubon’s words underscore the rugged frontier individualism for which he has become iconic. It was not America where Audubon received this liberty, but a “New World”—a land of untouched natural purity, resistant to the inroads of civilization and free of its cumbersome traditions. More importantly, however, the “New World” is expressly ambiguous, obscuring the specific circumstances surrounding Audubon’s birth and allowing him to root himself in “the woods of the New World.”

Audubon was consistently vague in accounts of his early life. In many documents he failed to include any birthplace or date, once explicitly evading such information: “The precise period of my birth is yet an enigma to me.” Most of Audubon’s contemporaries were led to believe that he grew up on the American frontier. Some thought he came from humble backwoods fisherman stock. Others were certain that he was born on a Louisiana plantation. Audubon also invented stories about his European origins. At different times he declared himself the son of a French noble, an admiral, and even the lost dauphine. The diversity of these self-created myths reveals the extent to which Audubon strategically manipulated his public image. He evaded information, hyperbolized details, and told lies in accordance with his audience. Such revisions, however, were not exclusive to Audubon. In his discussion of Olaudah Equiano and the African Diaspora, James H. Sweet reveals how patterns of migration during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries lead many to manipulate their names and
These were not ethical lapses, but strategies for survival and for economic opportunity.

Audubon’s evasions bred more than one hundred years of scholarly uncertainty and misinterpretation. A short biographical text published three years after Audubon’s death in the *Illustrated Magazine of Art* maintained that Audubon was of “French descent,” born “in Louisiana about the year 1782.” The bulk of scholarship between 1850 and the turn of the century propagate this or similar falsehoods. In 1917, Francis Hobart Herrick, a professor of biology at Western Reserve University, unearthed critical documents regarding Audubon’s father Jean. These papers revealed—to the surprise of many—that Audubon grew up in France, under the supervision of his father and stepmother, Anne Moynet. Herrick’s work, however, found limited circulation and his findings remained within small circles of scholars and enthusiasts. Alice Ford’s seminal 1964 biography *John James Audubon* offered the first widely read account of Audubon’s childhood. Ford discussed Audubon’s birth in the French colony Saint-Domingue and the subsequent years he spent in Revolutionary-era France.

Today, these facts are in wider circulation: no Audubon scholar would now argue that he was born in America. Yet scholarship continues to investigate Audubon as a prototypically American subject. Recent biographies, including Richard Rhodes’s *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* and William Sounder’s *Under a Wild Sky*, both published in 2004, elide Audubon’s early years. They begin their narratives when Audubon reached America in early adulthood and follow him through the publication of *The Birds of America*. For these authors, among others, Audubon and his work can be interpreted without reference to his colonial and European upbringing.
How does the obscurity of Audubon’s adolescence affect our understanding of him? One of his earliest critics said it best. Writing in 1835 for the New England Galaxy, John Neal, an art and literary critic, described his frustration over Audubon’s omission: “[Due to] the strange fact, that while he does not say where he was born, or when, he is perpetually insinuating both, so as not to commit himself… we are driven to the conclusion that he is one of those extraordinary men who are erected, never born at all.”30 Neal’s words evoke the “monographic” historiography discussed in my introduction, wherein a historical figure’s “genius” supersedes the conditions in which his work is embedded.31 Instead of being a product of his own experiences, Audubon becomes a fixed character—a timeless and immutable icon.

The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate the cultural forces at play in Audubon’s early life, before he reached America. As I will show, during this period Audubon cultivated two forms of social skill, which he would deploy later in life. First, Audubon’s exposure to cosmopolitan colonial life and his relocation from Saint-Domingue to France compelled him to develop social flexibility, with which he navigated between national and cultural groups. Second, I argue that the rigid social hierarchies of Saint-Domingue and the elite cultural milieu of France endowed Audubon with sensitivity to the demands of polite society, which he reencountered in America and then England. In sum, Audubon learned the importance of self-representation and social distinction, and developed the ability to maneuver between representations in order to accommodate different social environments.

Audubon’s interest in birds, which emerged during this period, was contingent on these forms of cultural and national representation. His introduction to French natural history and French art provided the conceptual groundwork for The Birds of
America. Specifically, the natural history writings of the Comte de Buffon and the paintings of Jacques-Louis David facilitated Audubon’s emergence as an ornithological illustrator. As I will demonstrate, their work acquired a broad following and national significance during Audubon’s time in France. Audubon learned here how to represent a “nation” and how to negotiate these representations in art and life.

**Saint-Domingue**

John James Audubon was born Jean Rabin in 1785 in the colony of Saint-Domingue.¹ His father Jean Audubon was a mercantile sea captain (Fig. 2). Jean had moved to Saint-Domingue from Nantes, France after acting as the naval commander of the *Queen Charlotte* corvette during the American Revolutionary War.² He established a plantation, sugar refinery, and a store in the town of Les Cayes, a provincial seaport in the southwest. His lucrative trade in coffee, sugar, and slaves was financed with the help of his wife, Anne Moynet, who stayed in Nantes.³ Rabin’s mother, a French chambermaid, was one of Jean Audubon’s mistresses. Very little is known about her, as she died soon after Rabin’s birth.

Jean Rabin’s illegitimacy is one of several reasons for his reluctance to speak about his past. Although Jean Audubon raised Rabin caringly, many of his other French family members were “infected with hostility towards the son born out of wedlock.”³⁴ Further, under French law, illegitimate children were prohibited from receiving inheritance. As Jean Audubon’s only male progeny, this inheritance was critical to longevity of the Audubon dynasty. Rabin was determined “to carry my extraordinary

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¹ Audubon underwent several name changes before he became John James Audubon. As we will see, these changes function as an index for his cultural transformations. It is unclear, however, why the young Audubon was not originally given his father’s last name. In order to better understand Audubon’s personal evolution, I will refer to him by the name appropriate to his time and place.
secret to the grave,” for fear of political and familial consequences.\textsuperscript{35} This, as we will see, is only one of the several reasons for his biographical evasions.

\textbf{Social Custom and Multiformity}

Two aspects of Jean Rabin’s years in Saint-Domingue contradict the legend of the American Woodsman: the presence of social hierarchies and a cosmopolitan milieu.

Les Cayes adhered to a rigid social hierarchy, in which merchants, professionals, and officials occupied different echelons.\textsuperscript{36} Jean Audubon played a significant role in the local menagerie of political pomp and social distinction. As both a naval officer and a merchant, Jean could pivot opportunistically through this social pecking order. He was also a farmer, which had its own social system, in which “wealth and enterprise from cotton, sugar cane, and coffee could be estimated by the number of slave huts, horned cattle, mules, and horses on the land.”\textsuperscript{37} David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering’s \textit{The World of the Haitian Revolution} details the “elaborate but sometimes uncertain hierarchies” by which local settlers were ranked.\textsuperscript{38} They write that the “longest and most persistent political struggles that took place in the colony were specifically over symbolic markers of status and power.”\textsuperscript{39} The New World was not without Old World systems of distinction, and the Audubons knew how to navigate these systems deftly.

In Les Cayes, French, American, and British commercial and bureaucratic operations converged. Much of the local economy hinged on trade with Britain and especially French Louisiana, where ships delivered sugar, tobacco, indigo and coffee in exchange for furs, meats, and slaves.\textsuperscript{40} As with many colonial port towns, international and inter-ethnic communication was remarkably high. Interactions between British, French, and colonial American merchants were ubiquitous. Many European merchants also developed relationships with black farm workers, including Jean Audubon who
fathered a daughter with a creole woman of mixed descent. From birth, Jean Rabin was thus witness to the slipperiness of national and cultural distinctions within a colonial society.

A continual dialogue between colonial subjects and the French imperial capital extended this local cosmopolitanism. Jean Audubon was a trans-Atlantic citizen whose New World opportunities were intertwined with Old World obligations. His colonial reserves were expansive; apart from his operation in Les Cayes, he invested in a plantation at Mill Grove, Pennsylvania and sought out other commercial endeavors in continental America. His business, however, relied on an Atlantic network of trade, which many times called him back to France. As captain of the *Annette* and partial owner of its tobacco shipments, Jean Audubon frequently voyaged to Nantes, providing him with occasions to visit his mother and his wife.41

During the last thirty years of the Old Regime, important changes in French imperial politics and culture complicated these New and Old World allegiances.42 Before this period, colonial operations like Jean Audubon’s business owed direct allegiance to the French monarch. The global repercussions of the Seven Years’ War and the increasing influence of the Enlightenment loosened these national-cultural loyalties.** There emerged “two interlocking public spheres, the first of which was imperial in scope and the second more rooted in the colony.”43 The contemporary French critic, Guillaume Thomas François Raynal expressed the apprehensions shared by many French people towards colonial merchants: “A major disadvantage for traders is that

41 Jean Audubon also raised Rabin’s half-sister, Rosa.

** I will expand on Jean Audubon’s relationship to Enlightenment and French Revolutionary thought later in this chapter.
they become rootless. Those who spend so much time at sea do not have the
certainty to develop loyalty to one nation, and that is the immediate loss of the
nation’s industrious citizens.” Colonial subjects like Jean Audubon thus appeared to
defy patterns of allegiance. Whether Jean Audubon directly endowed his son with a
template for a multivalent identity we cannot know; however, as we will see, Rabin also
became an agent of dynamic trans-Atlanticism.

Before Audubon could mature as a colonial citizen, however, he was thrust into
the life of the Old World. In 1789, Saint-Domingue was on the brink of a total slave
rebellion, and bloody conflict loomed ominously. As a wealthy French slave owner, Jean
was an immediate target for revolutionaries. Before violence mounted, it was necessary
to extricate his children from their colonial estate and return to their homeland.

France

After fleeing Saint-Domingue in 1789, Jean Audubon moved his family back to
Nantes, France. Within three years, Jean Audubon and Anne Moynet had legally adopted
Audubon and changed his name to Jean Jacques Fougère Audubon. He would keep this
name until his departure for America in 1803, at the age of eighteen. The young
Audubon split his time between Nantes and Coüeron, a country village on the river
between Nantes and Paimboeuf, where the Audubons owned a summer home. The

* It is unclear what prompted the complete revision to Audubon’s name. “Fougère” had
particular political connotations, which I will discuss later in this chapter. It is likely that the rest
of Audubon’s name was changed to conceal his birth out of wedlock. This, however, is
contingent on the initial use of the name Jean Rabin, which remains a mystery. Following this
name change, I will now refer to our protagonist as “Jean Jacques Audubon,” or merely
“Audubon.”
Coüeron house (Fig. 3), a large villa with a “formal” French garden, eventually became Audubon’s primary residence.\textsuperscript{45}

In later years, Audubon occasionally mentioned his birth in Saint-Domingue, but he remained steadfastly silent about his early life in France. In many official documents, including his naturalization papers for the United States, Audubon gave his birthplace as Saint-Domingue. No official records, however, identify Audubon’s childhood in Nantes and Coüeron.\textsuperscript{46} As late as 1932, scholars such as Herman Wechsler believed that Audubon was brought directly to the United States after Saint-Domingue, only visiting France shortly to study art.\textsuperscript{47} This oversight has undoubtedly contributed to the conception of Audubon as a native of the New World and an original American.

\textit{Education}

Confusion regarding Audubon’s adolescence in France, compounded by a lack of scholarly investigation, has effectively discounted the significance of this period in Audubon’s life and work. Audubon’s insistence on his lack of education also encouraged this omission. In the few instances where he discusses his childhood, Audubon recalls going “with my friends in search of birds’ nests, or to fish and shoot…instead of applying closely to my studies.”\textsuperscript{48} Subsequent scholarship supports this biographical detail. James Dormon romanticizes it: “He assiduously avoided school wherever possible, pursuing instead the pleasures of carefree, unstructured existence.”\textsuperscript{49} This interpretation reinforces the belief that France left no long-standing impression on the young Audubon—that only upon reaching America did he and his interests flower.

It may be true that Audubon shunned academics. It is definitely true, as Richard Rhodes has noted, that France’s civil unrest led to the closure of many academies, leaving adolescents like Audubon with deficient formal education.\textsuperscript{50} Formal education,
however, was only one facet of Audubon’s upbringing—a single dimension of his introduction to the world of social and cultural dynamics. As I will show in this section, Audubon was inducted into many spheres of French cultural life: he learned the conventions of cultural propriety prevalent within his elite milieu, he received a well-rounded introduction to the arts and sciences, and he was imbued with the nationalist politics of French Revolutionary thought.

Social Status

Audubon’s family had long been a part of the cultural elite in southwestern France. The Audubons were one of many French families who capitalized on expanding nautical trade during the eighteenth century. Between Louis XV’s royal appointment and the French Revolution, mercantile trade had quadrupled in volume. Though much of France remained agrarian, select families like the Audubons took advantage of this mercantile explosion and rose to prominence. Several generations of well-to-do marine merchants succeeded one another. Audubon’s grandfather, Pierre Audubon, was married to another marine captain’s daughter, Marie-Anne Martin. Their marriage contract reveals that, far from the “very humble fisherman” who Audubon later claimed as his ancestral lot, his parents and grandparents were intimately involved with local town officials—doctors, lawyers and merchants.

Jean Audubon had married further into the commercial elite, fortifying the family name. His wife, Anne Moynet, was the widow of a wealthy merchant and ship builder. Their marriage had clear financial benefits—Jean Audubon oversaw Moynet’s property investments, and Moynet enhanced Jean Audubon’s fortune through her international holdings. Moynet also played a critical role in the upbringing of Audubon, ushering the
young man into the bourgeois elite of Nantes, among whom she had spent her entire life.\textsuperscript{55}

Growing up, Audubon engaged in the cultural practices expected from boys of his class. He attended the selective Académie Polysophique, an institution known by the local gentry as simply “the School.”\textsuperscript{56} The precise curriculum of the Académie is unclear, as is the duration of Audubon’s attendance. However, under the guidance of the headmaster Trioche, we can be certain that Audubon cultivated interests that would reflect his educated status. Most likely, he received lessons in Latin, history, geography, and perhaps English, as well as a strong foundation in the arts. He learned how to play the violin and flute, and became an expert dancer and fencer.\textsuperscript{57} Constantly indulged by his stepmother, Audubon also fostered the appearance of a genteel Frenchman. He received any finery that suited his fancy, and later admitted to being “ridiculously fond of dress.”\textsuperscript{58} In this respect, Audubon also took after his father. In Jean Audubon’s portrait (Fig. 2), he sports a stylish wig, a silken cravat, and a decorated coat. Thus, even as a young teenager, Audubon understood the importance attributed to representations of status such as clothing. He did not just abide by these standards of propriety; he enthusiastically embraced them.

\textit{Art and Science}

Jean Jacques Fougère Audubon received a strong education in the arts and sciences. Jean Audubon encouraged his son’s artistic and scientific pursuits and sought out local instructors.\textsuperscript{59} He, and the prevailing institutions of art in Nantes, initiated the young Audubon’s interest in ornithological illustration.
Jean Audubon introduced his son to the study of birds. Audubon recounts how his father “would point out the elegant movement of the birds, and the beauty and softness of their plumage. He called my attention to their show of pleasure or sense of danger, their perfect forms and splendid attire.”60 Jean noted “the departure and return of birds with the season, their haunts, and, more wonderful than all, their change of livery; thus exciting me to study them.”61 He also presented Audubon with ornithological publications. These were generally illustrated works on the natural history of the New World, including Louis-Jean-Pierre Vieillot’s *Histoire Naturelle De Calibris et Des Oiseaux-Mouches*, published in 1802. Vieillot, the “true father of American ornithology,” was also born in Saint-Domingue and fled to the United States during the Haitian Revolution.62 There, he finished his paintings of American birds and returned to France in 1800 to publish them. It is thus evident that Audubon was acquainted with the most contemporary works of French natural history.

The extent and nature of Audubon’s exposure to art is more ambiguous. The life-like vitality of Audubon’s bird drawings stands in stark contrast with the stiffer, less animated illustrations of Vieillot and his contemporaries. Audubon thus appears to have no stylistic precedents. Some scholars argue that “there was really no one working on birds who could have contributed much in a positive way to shaping the artist he became,” and therefore Audubon must have developed his approach independently.63

In order to identify Audubon’s artistic precedents, however, we must look beyond the field of natural history illustration. Audubon received lessons in drawing and was exposed to a wide cross-section of European painting and sculpture, which, more so than other bird illustrations, informed his work. Nantes was a flourishing artistic center during the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary period, and Audubon was keenly aware
of the academic painting tradition prevalent among local artists. At the Académie Polysophique, Audubon received private drawing lessons from one Monsieur Hussard.\textsuperscript{64} It is likely that Audubon received other instruction as well. Years later, Audubon published an article entitled “My Style of Drawing Birds,” in which he makes reference to studying art “for a short while in my youth under good masters.”\textsuperscript{65}

Nantes was home to a considerable number of artists and art institutions. It is likely that Audubon saw the work of landscapist René Chancourtois and the history painter André Claude Boissier. Both artists were active in Nantes during this period, working as instructors of small ateliers and exhibiting their work locally. Chancourtois and Boissier, like most of their contemporaries, adhered to the academic principles of painting and composition that held sway in Paris.\textsuperscript{66} Nantes was also home to François Cacault, the French ambassador to Rome and a famous art collector.\textsuperscript{67} In Rome, Cacault accumulated “an exceptionally rich fund of works of the Italian school and a number of Primitives.”\textsuperscript{68} When he moved back to Nantes at the turn of the century, he established a museum in the neighboring town of Clisson.\textsuperscript{59} Before that time, his pieces circulated between various public buildings in Nantes.\textsuperscript{70} Audubon would therefore have had plenty of opportunities to view these works. In Cacault’s collection, the whole history of Western art was available to the young Audubon. It spanned over six hundred years and included hundreds of sculptures, 1,155 paintings, and approximately 10,500 prints.\textsuperscript{71} Nantes, and especially Cacault’s collection, provided Audubon with access to the canon of Western art.

Instead of investigating Audubon’s exposure to local art and science, however, scholars generally dramatize Audubon’s personal interest in the outdoors. For many, including Alice Ford, Audubon’s excursions through Coüeron’s wilderness—that
“infallible teacher”— sparked his interest in bird illustration.\textsuperscript{32} The romantic narrative of Audubon’s failure to meet academic expectations has contributed to this interpretation. Audubon was thus construed as “a self-taught naturalist and artist.”\textsuperscript{33} Upon considering the resources available to Audubon in Nantes, this explanation appears inadequate; it is yet another oversight that contributes to the mythic Audubon.

The most striking oversight in Audubon scholarship, however, concerns his relationship to French Revolutionary politics and ideology. In discussions of Audubon’s childhood, few scholars even mention the Revolution. The fact that Audubon lived in France from 1791 until 1803—almost the entire Revolutionary period—is given little significance.\textsuperscript{*} Some scholars, such as Richard Rhodes, suggest that perhaps the trauma of the Jacobin Terror affected the young Audubon; but they fail to take into account the wider political forces at play.\textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{Revolutionary Politics and Thought}

For Audubon, the repercussions of the Revolution were inescapable. Nantes was an epicenter of struggle between Revolutionary and Counter-revolutionary forces, which proliferated political messages with increasing tenacity. By the winter of 1794, Nantes was “gripped in a siege” of Revolutionary conflict.\textsuperscript{35} The War of Vendée, which lasted from 1793 until 1796, was a continuous battle between royalist and Revolutionary forces. Following the execution of Louis XVI, thousands of loyalist peasants descended on Nantes with whatever weapons lay at their disposal. The Committee of Public Safety

\textsuperscript{*} This omission falls into the pattern of Audubon scholarship, in which events during his time in America overshadow other, transnational influences. It is an artifact of monographic historiography, which focuses on individualiazed national histories, and not transnational or comparative histories.
ordered General Jean-Baptiste Carrier, a notoriously reckless Revolutionary leader, to “pacify” the region. This included the destruction of crops, farms, and whole villages. By the end of the struggle, more than one hundred thousand French citizens had perished. Thousands more fled, and many Nantes institutions closed. Even Audubon’s studies at the Académie were interrupted when the schoolmaster was called to the Tribunal. The French Revolution thus affected Audubon directly.

Further, Audubon’s father was increasingly involved in the Revolutionary movement. A loyal Republican, “Citizen Audubon” joined the National Guard of the Nantes commune in 1792. In less than a year, he became the commissioner for the “civil, moral, and political state” of the Nantes commune, eventually joining the Committee of Public Safety. As a servant of the new regime, Jean Audubon inducted his son into a Revolutionary code of civil conduct. At Audubon’s formal baptism, he received his official French name: Jean-Jacques Fougère Audubon. Fougère, which translates to “fern,” was symptomatic of the young Audubon’s emergence as a Revolutionary citizen. By adopting a secular surname, Audubon was embracing the politics of civic and Revolutionary identity, which scorned the French Catholic tradition of using only saints’ names.

Audubon’s exposure to Revolutionary thought was more than a process of cultural osmosis; Jean Audubon actively molded his son into a Revolutionary citizen. When Audubon turned twelve, his father enrolled him in a training program at Rochefort-sur-Mer, a distinguished naval base where Jean Audubon commanded a corvette. There, Audubon was subject to the Directory’s militaristic codes of conduct and initiated into the life of a young Revolutionary soldier. Little is known about Audubon’s time at Rochefort-sur-Mer, other than a couple anecdotes concerning his
attempts to pursue birds while on duty. By the time Audubon left Rochefort-sur-Mer in 1799, however, he had lived under the strict guidance of Revolutionary forces for more than three years. He was instructed in the military practices of geography, engineering, and mathematics, followed news of victories abroad, and sang *La Marseillaise.* By the time Audubon returned to Nantes, he was a refined model of French citizenship, responsive to what Eric Hobsbawm calls the “revolutionary-democratic point of view,” in which the republic, “the sovereign citizen-people…constituted a ‘nation.’” At the naval academy it was precisely the republican nation that Audubon learned to defend. As we shall see, references to French republicanism permeate Audubon’s artistic and literary oeuvre.

**Napoleon Bonaparte: The Nationalization of Art and Science**

For the young Audubon, Napoleon Bonaparte was the envoy of French nationalism. Jean Audubon, a moderate Girondin, was a “fervent…supporter of Napoleon,” who he hoped would arbitrate Revolutionary instability and perhaps rebuild the systems of social prestige that the Audubons had navigated so skillfully. Following the clashes of loyalists and Jacobins that plagued Nantes during the early 1790s, the Audubons found security in Napoleon’s broad, conciliatory popularity.

Napoleon won the bulk of his military victories while Audubon was in France. Appointed by the Directory as general commander of the Army during the Italian campaign of 1796 and 1797, Napoleon gained widely publicized victories at Catiglione, Lodi, Rivoli, and Arcola and successfully oversaw the signing of the Treaty of Camp Formio, in which Belgium was formally ceded to the new Empire. By Napoleon’s return to Paris in 1797, he was nothing short of a national hero. Audubon witnessed the

**I discuss how the French National Anthem resurfaced in Audubon’s work in Chapter Four.**
propagandistic celebrations of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign of 1798, as well as his coup and official rise to power as the First Consule in 1799. On the eve of Audubon’s departure, Napoleon signed the Treaty of Amiens, successfully ending international hostilities and effectively silencing all domestic opposition. Audubon thus revered Napoleon as a war hero and a statesman.

When Audubon left for America in 1803, Napoleon was at the height of his popularity: the rescuer of France from radicalism at home, the protector of the Republic from powers abroad, and, most importantly, a vital force in the imperial spread of French republican values. Audubon would invoke Napoleon periodically as an exemplar of international and entrepreneurial success. In late 1826, when publishing *The Birds of America* proved difficult, Audubon reminded himself: “Since Napoleon became, from the ranks, an emperor, why should Audubon not be able to leave the woods of America a while and publish and sell a book?”84 The figure of Napoleon loomed large for Audubon, who he continued to draw on throughout his life.

Most importantly, Napoleon demonstrated how art and science could serve the French nation. His rise to power fortified academic art and natural history as key elements of a national—and an imperial—enterprise. Napoleon’s utilization of academic art to propagandize his political and military efforts fortified this connection. His monarchical precedents had always commissioned art, but Napoleon exploited its political dimensions more strategically.85 Consequently, the Consulate and Empire were a “boom-time for artists.”86 Along with the exploits of his conquests, which included the Apollo Belvedere, Laocoön, and other works of antiquity, Napoleon opened up new arts institutions. Nantes benefited from the foundation of a new museum of Fine Arts in 1801, which received from Paris a portion of the “Napoleonic redistribution of master
Under Napoleon, art production became an operation of the nation, and artworks served as reflections of the State and its power.

So too did works of natural history. Napoleon began to sponsor the publication of “luxury monographs” on birds from imperial regions, glorifying the extent of his conquests. Jules-César Savigny’s colorful illustrations of Egyptian birds, drawn in the manner of a traditional illustrated ornithology, ushered the birds of Empire into European “centers of calculation.” Mathurin-Jacques Brisson’s *Ornithologie* and François Levaillant’s *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* were “large, costly, and well-respected” works published under the auspices of the emperor. Audubon was familiar with these publications. In at least one later drawing he cites Brisson, and he mentions owning several volumes of Levaillant.

Audubon was exposed to the productive power of Napoleon’s French empire through the massive oil paintings and lavish ornithologies that functioned as its propaganda. The question is thus not *if* Audubon “fell under the influence of French Revolutionary thought,” as James Dormon ponders, but in what way this influence manifested itself. To understand this, it is necessary to turn next to the painter Jacques-Louis David and the naturalist the Comte de Buffon, whose work offered particular forms of representation that buttressed the French state.

**The Comte de Buffon and Jacques-Louis David**

These two French cultural luminaries informed Audubon’s approach to art and science and reinforced their role as forms of national representation. Napoleon and his predecessors enlisted David as the unofficial Revolutionary painter. Similarly,
Revolutionary forces used the Comte de Buffon’s theories to promote the civic functions of the republican state.

**The Comte de Buffon**

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon was the best-known scientist in France. As “naturalist to the king of France” and “keeper of the royal collections” Buffon was the figurehead of the French school of natural history. His *Histoire naturelle*, an encyclopedic thirty-six volume study of the natural world, was “the single most popular work on natural history and the third of all best-selling French literature of its era.” Despite Buffon’s relative obsolescence today, his influence in the late eighteenth century cannot be overstated.

The Comte de Buffon popularized the study of natural history. His celebrity among peers, patrons, and the pre-Revolutionary monarchs helped define it “as a scientific enterprise in its own right” independent of other scientific disciplines like medicine. With his help, the study of the natural world began to foster its own experts and circles of enthusiasts. Naturalists increasingly became members of the royal court, finding permanent positions under the auspices of Louis XVI. And while the governing forces developed an interest in the natural sciences, so too did the emerging class of bourgeois gentleman and the independently wealthy. Buffon thus fostered a broad audience for natural history—one that included people like Audubon.

There was hardly an educated European who did not know Buffon’s name. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, “every literate child at the time knew Buffon’s *Natural History* as well as Esop’s Fables.” Audubon, however, was better acquainted then most. Jean Audubon introduced his son to Buffon’s published works, as did the family physician Charles-Marie d’Orbigny. Moreover, Jean’s close friend and neighbor,
François Lorry, was a relative of Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, Buffon’s collaborator, editor, and overseer of all illustrations for *Histoire naturelle*. Monsieur Daubenton’s “legendary” vacations to the chateau Le Buron put him in the immediate vicinity—both geographically and socially—of the Audubon family in Couëron. As I will show, Buffon and Daubenton’s pioneering approach to natural history, especially as it applied to birds, shaped Audubon’s methodology.

**Buffon and Revolutionary France**

Buffon’s natural history was foundational for the Revolutionary conception of Nature and its relationship to society. The French republic, which denied the role of divine providence in the creation of the state, sought examples of social harmony in the natural world to legitimate secularism and civic duty. Buffon set the stage for a method of scientific analysis that challenged the Divine order and revealed how human beings, like other natural phenomena, could be studied, characterized, and, for the purposes of the Revolutionary forces, ultimately controlled.

Carl Linnaeus had previously constructed a universal system of binomial nomenclature, which aligned with the prevailing belief that the earth constituted God’s eternal organization. Linnaeus’s hierarchical system appeared to reflect His clockwork. Buffon and Daubenton, however, denied Linnaeus’s model of “the Great Chain of Being” and were skeptical of the practice of classification. “It is impossible,” argued Buffon, “to establish one general system, one perfect method,” because “species are constantly being discovered which it is not possible to assimilate to any of the genera posited by such systems.” Nature was for Buffon a “web,” not a chain, in which no universal order could be established. Animal species, especially insects and birds, were so varied and prone to hybridization that no original form could be recovered.
Buffon thus replaced the “static world view” of creationism with a form of unpredictable developmentalism. Following Kant, Buffon made the distinction between the empirical description of nature, as pursued by Carl Linnaeus and Francis Bacon, and the “genuine historical understanding of nature in its temporal development.” As John Lyon has noted, this “new blend of Enlightenment philosophy, empirical inquiry, philosophical naturalism and materialism, and historical thinking, provided a great rational alternative to the physical sciences.” By denying any correlation between the history of nature and the chronology of revealed religion, Buffon put forward a form of “romantic materialism,” that was consistent with secular, civic thought.

Buffon’s approach did more than just reorient scientific methodology; it implicated humans as a part of this episteme. Mankind, according to Buffon, “ought to classify himself with the animals, to whom his whole material being connects him.” As a densely interrelated web, linking “the most perfect of creatures to the most formless matter,” nature could thus reveal continuities between human praxis and the natural world. Once Buffon’s theory of nature extended to human development, “the consequences for a larger set of critical issues in ethics and politics necessarily became the subject of profound reflection.” Revolutionary forces, constantly seeking connections between Humankind and Nature, harnessed Buffon’s parallels to support the Liberalist ideology of “natural” rights and obligations.

Animal characteristics could now offer new ways of understanding human life. While Linnaeus focused on morphological traits, Buffon insisted on developing “a full portrait of each animal, its anatomy, appearance, habits, life cycle, diet, and habitat, and its social uses.” Through such an investigation, “the instincts of animals will perhaps
appear to the man even more certain than his own reason, and their industry more admirable than his arts.” Animals thus became “symbolic surrogates for human behavior,” woven into “the fabric of social meanings.” These meanings found official recognition as animal mores or moeurs—a term denoting a mixture of behavior, character, moral disposition, and habit. The Revolutionary State increasingly supported the study of animal moeurs in the hope that it would reveal the natural operations of human customs and interaction. Under its auspices, naturalists “daily experimented with the relations between the natural and the social.” Such studies served to reinforce a patriotic endorsement of republicanism.

With the arrival of the Revolution, Buffon’s natural history acquired a new dominance in academic circles. 1793 saw the creation of official positions for the study of zoology. Whereas before 1760, few positions of any kind existed for scholars of natural history, by the turn of the century salaried posts existed at almost every major academic institution. As natural history “moved from being the pursuit of a leisured elite to being an integral part of the centralizing policies of revolutionary regimes,” scientific institutions such as the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, where Buffon worked, were increasingly viewed as enterprises of “national utility” and tools for the creation of a Revolutionary “social harmony.”

Buffon died in 1798, only a breath before the Revolution begun, but revolutionary legislators sought out Buffonian experts on the natural world to establish links “between the physical and moral natures [of] man and animals” and seek methods for ensuring “the success of further social operations.” Naturalists, many of whom became politically active during this period, sought broader implications for their research—as a way of establishing “social organization…and the legitimacy of authority
in the new regime.” Natural history thus offered a way of "ordering society" within the context of “natural” obligations to an organically unified “nation.”

**Buffon, Climate, and National Representation**

As we shall see, Audubon adopted many of Buffon’s methods, including his inquiry into animal *moeurs*. Buffon also supplied Audubon with specific environmental motifs, which would figure prominently in Audubon’s illustrations. These were derived from Buffon’s theory of comparative climates, which privileged particular animal and environmental attributes associated with continental Europe.

According to Buffon, the presence of civilization in continental Europe had altered the disposition of its wildlife. Over time, the “milder” and more graceful animals were “tamed and subdued,” while the most diminutive and the most feral were “repressed and extirpated.” Thus animals in Europe—and especially France, where, of course, civilization had reached its apogee—took on the qualities of their corresponding human population. Neither small species, nor untamed ones could survive. Only the large, able-bodied, and dignified species endured. For Buffon, a similar equation held true for the European landscape. Inroads made by civilization, including the felling of trees and the erection of buildings, transformed the environment into a well-ordered, picturesque dominion.

Revolutionary forces exploited Buffon’s climatic theories. France’s temperate climate and ordered nature was celebrated as evidence of the nation’s advanced civilization and its leading-edge politics. Louis Reynier, for example, conducted a comparative analysis of the climates of Ancient Rome and contemporary France, concluding that they were almost identical, “thus giving the climatic seal of approval to Paris as a seat of republican government.”
This climatic discourse would prove particularly important for Audubon, because it hinged on a comparative analysis between New and Old world environments. According to Buffon, America had emerged much more recently than Europe “from the waters of the Great Noachian Deluge.” As a new landmass, the Americas were still cold, damp and overgrown. The “soil appears in a rude state…the rivers are full of cataracts, the earth is either overflowed, or parched up with drought, and…every spot on which a tree will grow, is covered in uncultivated woods.” Whereas the European landscape was tempered by centuries of human civilization, the American landscape had no such was pressures. It was therefore crude and overgrown. Likewise, American animals exhibited none of the grandeur of their French counterparts. As Thomas Jefferson noted in his \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}: \footnote{125}

\begin{quote}
The opinion advanced by the Count de Buffon is 1. That the animals common both to the old and new world, are smaller in the latter. 2. That those peculiar to the new, are on a smaller scale. 3. That those which have been domesticated in both, have degenerated in America: and 4. That on the whole it exhibits fewer species. And the reason he thinks is, that the heats of America are less; that more waters are spread over its surface by nature, and fewer of these drained off by the hand of man.\end{quote}

Only the passage of time would allow nature in the New World to regulate itself and accommodate enlightened society. In the present, however, humans and animals living in America were vulnerable to the forces of degeneration. This negative appraisal had wide-reaching implications for a Frenchman-turned-American like Audubon. A passage from Audubon’s 1826 journal reveals the extent to which he both admired the work of Buffon and labored to rebut it:

\begin{quote}
The Influence of the climate on vegetables and animals so much adhered to by that great French naturalist who puzzled his brains to discover impossibilities, who often repeated that American productions were \textit{all} objects
\end{quote}
degenerated from the European original. I wish I had known the Count de Buffon—*What an original he was*, and is yet. What a model to copy from! What lights!! Yes, what lights!—and what shades he has cast over Nature’s grand tableau.\textsuperscript{127}

As we shall see, Audubon, like many naturalists in the New World, used his illustrations to “prove Buffon wrong on every account.”\textsuperscript{128}

**Jacques-Louis David**

Jacques Louis David was France’s most celebrated painter before, during, and after the Revolution, and master of the austere and heroic style retrospectively dubbed “neoclassicism.” By Audubon’s own account, he learned how to draw directly from David. In several of his published writings, as well as six entries in his journals, Audubon claims David as his instructor. As late as 1963, many scholars still accepted this declaration as fact.\textsuperscript{129}

Beginning with Alice Ford’s 1964 biography, however, conflicting pieces of evidence have emerged. In a letter to the American naturalist George Ord, Charles Waterton, an associate of Audubon, relayed a story in which David said he had no recollection of a student named Audubon. Audubon also failed to mention David in a short autobiography written for his sons and in his early diary entries, which, as unpublished and personal documents, appear trustworthy.\textsuperscript{130} It also seems unlikely that Audubon went to Paris to study with David, as no record exists for such a journey. Alice Ford and Michael Harwood, among others, have thus concluded that Audubon never studied under David.

More recently, Gloria K. Fiero has reopened the possibility that Audubon studied in David’s atelier. In her essay “Audubon the Artist,” published in *Audubon: A Retrospective* (1990), Fiero argues that Audubon may have spent a few months in Paris
between 1802 and 1803. Citing Waterton and Ord’s unsavory relationship with Audubon as a competitor in circles of American naturalists, Fiero calls into question the validity of Waterton’s testament and points to several instances in which Audubon demonstrates his knowledge of David’s studio. According to Fiero, if Audubon did not study directly under David, he was likely “affiliated with one of David’s many assistants and protégés.” Theodore Stebbins offers a similar explanation, finding it “more likely that the boy worked briefly with a student or admirer of the master, perhaps at the Free Academy of Drawing in Nantes.” This alternative appears likely. By the time Audubon reached France, there were more than thirty-five provincial art academies based on the Parisian school. If Audubon attended any of these ateliers, he would have received Davidian instruction.

Whether or not Audubon knew David personally, the artist’s wide popularity and influential style made him a household name in France. Hugely ambitious and adept in the art of self-aggrandizement, David became the leading painter in Paris’s annual Salon during the last decade of the eighteenth century. If Audubon ever visited Paris, he would have likely attended the Salon, one of the few places where “a labourer might rube shoulders with a nobleman, and a fishwife with a lady of quality.” If Audubon did not visit Paris, he could have been present during David’s visit to Nantes in 1790. Soon after the Audubons resettled in Nantes, David was called to the city to produce a painting commemorating its role in the Revolution. Although the ambitious project was later called off, the visit from “France’s leading painter” had an enduring effect.

Jacques-Louis David and Jean Audubon occupied similar Revolutionary circles. After the election of the Convention, David became increasingly active in politics. Both he and Jean were members of the Committee of Public Safety, where David delivered
numerous animated addresses (despite his worsening speech impediment). Although Jean was more moderate in his political orientation (David would later serve as head of the Jacobin Club), he, like his son, would have known David's work and his celebrity intimately.

Whether or not Audubon trained under David, the evidence suggests that Audubon cultivated an interest in French academic painting and a particular proclivity for David. Moreover, if Audubon invented his relationship with David, it only reveals the extent to which he actively sought this connection. After all, actually studying under David is circumstantial; pretending to study under David suggests intent. Audubon was not only “familiar with the imposing canvases of Napoleon’s favorite painter,”139 but likely “saw himself as David's follower, as carrying on his teachings.”140

David and Revolutionary France

Over the course of the Revolutionary period, David’s art, like Buffon’s natural history, became a Revolutionary trademark and a national enterprise. By glorifying elements of antiquity, David’s painting supported republicanism as a secular source of morality and civic duty. As the Revolutionary effort mounted, his “neoclassical” style took on new, politicized meaning.

In several of David’s pre-Revolutionary canvases, he appeared to promote civic equality and the virtues of ancient Roman republicanism. David painted The Oath of the Horatii (Fig. 6) four years before the Revolution, but its message of patriotism and its celebration of republican camaraderie were later adopted as symbols of the French Revolution.141 The Horatii brothers, who fought on behalf of Rome, became potent emblems of civic duty. The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons (Fig. 5), painted
on the eve of the Revolution, makes the connection between neoclassicism and republican patriotism fully explicit. The painting depicts Lucius Junius Brutus, who destroyed Rome’s last tyrant, Tarquin the Proud, and helped establish the first Roman Republic in 508 BC (with himself as the newly elected consul). In the painting, Brutus laments the deaths of his sons, whom he sacrificed to the Roman war effort. A “potent symbol of unflinching devotion to the state,” Brutus had been a favored subject in France long before the Revolution. David, who had considered painting Brutus as early as 1786, did not perceive of his subject as a prophetic symbol of the Revolutionary events to come. Nonetheless, in such a volatile political atmosphere, David was aware of the controversial nature of his work, as was the Academic institution Direction des Bâtiments du Roi, which tried to stop its exhibition in the annual Salon. When, in 1790, David began work on Oath of the Tennis Court (Fig. 7), the connection between classical republicanism and Revolutionary politics found full expression. David considered his Tennis Court “as a modern and greatly expanded version of the Horatii,” whereby the Revolutionaries “became the equivalents of the heroes of antiquity.” In the “moral and patriotic climate of the Revolution,” David therefore offered a way for his audience to “see themselves as equals of the noble and patriotic Romans.”

Audubon developed his appreciation of David under the guidance of his father’s Revolutionary patriotism. He was also present in France when Napoleon commissioned David for several self-portraits to commemorate his victories and solidify his celebrity. Audubon thus interpreted David’s painting in light of the artist’s allegiance to the political forces at large. Academic painting, and David’s neoclassicism in particular, spoke directly to issues of national identity.
Porticos, togas, and political figures served as direct visual references to republicanism; however, the *stylistic* qualities of David’s work also operated as reflections of republican identity. David’s neoclassical rubric of sober coloring, simplified compositions, and monumental canvases contrasted with the extravagantly ornate style and small-scale painting of the *ancien régime*. As a rejection of the past, these stylistic devices were emblematic of a new, Revolutionary art.

David, like many French artists, believed that a sober style would regenerate French painting. Emerging from a period of High Rococo, where bright colors and garish, cluttered compositions dominated court painting, David looked further back to predecessors with a more restrained approach. Nicholas Poussin, a seventeenth century classicist, became “the prime example of the noble, severe and intellectual qualities of painting,” which many felt had shriveled under the patronage of the Louis Dynasty. David adopted Poussin’s emphasis on clarity of expression. Unlike other artists, such as Benjamin West, whose neoclassicism only found expression in “superficial attributes” like the columns and togas mentioned above, David’s Poussinian neoclassicism entailed an entire compositional program. Barbara Novak discusses how “David practiced a kind of classicism that…[was] the perfect blend of classical heroic subject with classic style: order, measure, logical restriction of each object to its own sequential location in space, both on the surface and three-dimensionally.” Thus, David’s compositional techniques became intertwined with notions of classical and Revolutionary republicanism. For one enthusiastic contemporary, David’s compositions were synonymous with Revolutionary values. When comparing David’s *Oath of the Horatii* with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, this anonymous critic declared: “not a comma to change in the latter, and in the former not a fold of cloth without its reason for being.”
On comparing David’s classical schematics with Buffon’s depictions of French nature, several parallels emerge. David’s insistence on well-ordered, simplified compositions mirrors Buffon’s characterization of the European landscape. Similarly, both dignify their subjects as reflections of civilized French society: David celebrates his figures’ heroism and republican virtues, while Buffon glorifies European species for their refinement. Size, too, figures in: David insisted on painting his figures life-size, if not larger, in order to convey his moral message with greater purpose, while Buffon set the monumentality of European animals in opposition with undersized American species. In both, we can even locate an emphasis on regional history. David looked to the ancients for visual and moral exemplars, while Buffon’s theories were contingent on the relative antiqueness of the European continent. Audubon, we shall see, responded directly to these motifs.

**Conclusion**

The profound political significance of art and natural history during the Revolution destabilizes our conception of Audubon as a “child of nature.” Audubon absorbed principles of observation and design that were tailored to perform a political, and even a pedagogical service. The distinction between the “government of society” and the “government of nature” was inextricably blurred, such that virtually any element of the natural world could reflect on the state of its corresponding civilization. France’s temperate climate, the moral rectitude and monumentality of its wildlife, and its regular and orderly landscape all carried profound political meanings. These qualities were made possible by Europe’s unsurpassed evolutionary legacy, proof of which could be found in its environmental, artistic, and political continuities with the “Ancients.”
Antiquity, orderliness, grandeur—these were the qualities that made the French nation
great; qualities, according to Buffon, that America seemed to lack.
2. THE UNITED STATES: AMERICANNESS & THE MODULATION OF FRENCH IDENTITY

Introduction

From his arrival in America in 1803 until his first expedition to England in 1826, John James Audubon travelled widely, making his home successively in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and New York. In these places, he encountered settlements of every American variety, from cosmopolitan centers of commerce to rural Puritan enclaves. Yet Audubon represented himself as a frontiersman. As James Dormon explains, Audubon “considered himself wholly representative of the frontier spirit; the self-styled ‘American woodsman’: the self-reliant trapper, hunter, fisherman; the man of nature; something out of a James Fenimore Cooper novel…or in the tradition of the immortal Daniel Boone.”

Dormon’s references to Cooper and Boone are apt—Audubon essentially adopted a character that he observed in American popular culture; a character he internalized as profoundly *American*. Since the publication of John Filson’s “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon [sic]” in 1784, the figure of Daniel Boone had taken on mythical proportions. In the work of Filson, Boone symbolized a distinctly American spirit. He was a “man of the wilderness;” the type that “Europe could never produce.” Audubon attempted to embody this mythical figure—“nature’s nobleman as epic hero.”

In light of Audubon’s urbane upbringing, such a persona seems peculiar, if not misleading. Scholarship, however, has perpetuated Audubon’s frontier persona as if it were his fundamental disposition. Dormon himself pits Audubon’s rugged
frontiersmanship against the decorum of the civilized world. Audubon “sought the wilderness and its charms: hunting, fishing, freedom to roam unencumbered by the strictures of civilization.”¹⁵² For Dormon, Audubon’s frontier lifestyle made him “a prime exemplar” of the Romanticism that swept through America in the nineteenth century and glorified “the man of nature, uncontaminated by social decadence.”¹⁵³ It was thus “despite [my emphasis] his French accent and cultivated manners” that Audubon became the “archetypal frontier American; the defining American; the quintessential American of the early nineteenth century.”¹⁵⁴

Attempting to define the “quintessential American” during this period, however, is problematic, since it was in a considerable state of flux. As transnational immigration proliferated, patterns of assimilation into American life became less definite. Audubon exemplifies both this flux and the urge to replace it with a more stable identity. During his years in America, Audubon began to identify as an American: he learned American English, modified his dress, and eventually offered declarations of patriotism. *The Birds of America*, as we will see in Chapter 3, was for Audubon a monument in honor of this country and the values it represented.

Audubon’s ties to the Old World, however, lingered. His transatlantic mercantile operation and the presence of French expatriates reinforced the social and cultural practices of home. Indeed, many of Audubon’s experiences in America functioned as a re-initiation into modes of Frenchness. Instead of taking cues directly from nature—per the Romantic myth—or even from American naturalists, Audubon retained his commitment to Buffon’s science and David’s painting. As I will show in this chapter, Audubon’s continued contact with Europe informed his American way of life, his illustrations, and even his expressions of American identity. Audubon did not assimilate
directly, nor did he merely retain his former allegiances. Instead, his newfound Americanness was, from the start, intertwined with a persistent Frenchness.

Pennsylvania: Cultural Dimorphism

For many New World émigrés in the early nineteenth century, America was a place of unlimited opportunity. According to historian Peter Hill, French people of all varieties could find “escape and refuge in a land that welcomed newcomers, eagerly offered them citizenship, and put its laws and protections at their disposal.” They could restore their proverbial tabula rasa and find swift assimilation into American life. Such appeared to be the case when Audubon left France in 1803 to oversee his father’s holdings at Mill Grove, Pennsylvania and avoid the Napoleonic conscription. Jean-Jacques Frougère Audubon became John James Audubon, and his passport declared Louisiana his place of birth. Audubon was embarking on another personal transformation, quickly adopted the nominal characteristics of an American in anticipation of a socio-cultural overhaul. At Mill Grove, however, Audubon’s absorption into the American way of life was obstructed. As I will show, his Frenchness conflicted with local allegiances and denied him access into the scientific community of Philadelphia.

Near the intersection of the Perkiomen Creek and the Schuykill River, Mill Grove (Fig. 7) sat just 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia. The property included 248 acres of pastures, farmland, and forests. Jean Audubon had purchased it in 1789 with the help of local Quaker banker Miers Fisher. Hoping for the investment to eventually pay for itself, Jean speculated daringly: Fisher negotiated the acquisition for 2,300 English pounds in silver and gold, roughly equivalent to $200,000 today. The investment
proved profitable. The property was replete with mineral deposits, and it didn’t take long for the Audubons to locate a colossal vein of lead. As Richard Rhodes has noted, lead’s low melting point and high density made it a valuable substance “when hunting with muzzle-loaded flintlocks was nearly universal.” The investment secured, Audubon was free to roam relatively aimlessly. “Hunting, fishing, drawing, and music occupied my every moment,” recounted Audubon, “cause I knew not, and cared naught.” He entertained guests in his two-story fieldstone mansion, drew birds, and visited Philadelphia to purchase new supplies and other personal wares, generally of the extravagantly expensive variety.

**Philadelphia and its Environs**

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Philadelphia was America’s “most populous and civilized city.” With over seventy thousand residents, the city supported more wealth, industry, art and science than New York or Boston. As home of the Declaration of Independence and the Bank of the United States, Philadelphia operated as a hub of federal operations and American patriotism. Audubon would have had little trouble reaching the city once the Perkiomen Turnpike was completed in 1804 and the Schuykill bridge in 1805.

Over the previous forty years, Philadelphia had established a strong network of professional scientists and artist-naturalists, who clustered around the Peale Museum (Figure 8). Situated in the upper floors of the Pennsylvania State House, which would later become Independence Hall, the Peale Museum opened to the public in 1786. The museum’s founder, Charles Willson Peale (Fig. 10), and his host of progeny—Raphaelle, Rembrandt, and Rubens Peale, who also trained as artist-naturalists—had amassed an impressive natural history collection. This included hundreds of animal, botanical, and
archeological specimens, as well as seven hundred stuffed birds, which decorated the museum corridors.\textsuperscript{163}

The Peale Museum was a valuable resource for young nature lovers like Audubon. It functioned as a repository for many of America’s leading scientific figures and societies, including Thomas Jefferson and the American Philosophical Society. Its main attraction, the colossal skeleton of a mastodon exhumed by Peale in 1801, was the first of its kind. Most importantly, the museum housed the world’s most comprehensive collection of American birds.

One might imagine that Audubon responded enthusiastically to Philadelphia’s cultural and scientific vitality. As the seat of American Independence, Philadelphia and its various institutions could have ushered Audubon into American public life. Despite his proximity to Philadelphia, however, Audubon never acquainted himself with the city’s scientific resources. There is no account of Audubon visiting the Peale Museum or Bartram’s Gardens, the most famous establishments of American natural science during this period.\textsuperscript{164} And not until years later would Audubon encounter any of Philadelphia’s acclaimed naturalists—including the ornithologist Alexander Wilson, author of \textit{American Ornithology}.

The evidence suggests that Audubon did not pass over Philadelphia by happenstance. Although there were several occasions for Audubon to visit the Peale Museum and meet its practitioners, he eluded them consistently. Miers Fisher, Jean Audubon’s agent, and caretaker of the young Audubon during his first few months in America, was a member of the Peale Museum’s “Board of Visitors”—essentially, a trustee.\textsuperscript{165} Further, the museum’s collections included lead ore samples from the Mill Grove estate; but Audubon was not responsible for the transaction. It was Francis
Dacosta, a local speculator hired by Jean Audubon to oversee Mill Grove’s mineral deposits, who donated the samples “to alert potential investors” about the Mill Grove operation. In light of these facts, Audubon’s ignorance of the Peale museum appears conspicuous. There are, however, several potential explanations for this disconnect.

**Cultural Nationalism & Francophobia**

Contrary to received assumptions about Philadelphia’s cosmopolitanism, the turn of the century was a period of mounting nationalism, and, in turn, xenophobia. Over the course of the 1790s a series of American political events fueled an anti-French sentiment, which was felt most strongly in Pennsylvania due to the presence of Federalists and high levels of French immigration. During the late eighteenth century, unusually large numbers of French people settled in Pennsylvania, many of them Huguenots, opening schools and integrating themselves into local politics. When the French Revolution erupted, a new flood of immigration ensued.

The increasing radicalization of the Revolution aggravated local tensions between Americans and French émigrés. The execution of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, among other reports of the Revolution’s “increasing excesses,” diminished “the widespread initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution and its ideals.” Anti-Revolutionary federalists, who had a strong presence in Philadelphia, “were able to portray the pro-French sentiments of their liberal opponents as inspired by foreign, i.e. Jacobin, influence bent on destroying American independence, institutions, and mores.” New magazines, such as *North American Review*, the *Analectic*, the *Portfolio*, and the *Atheneum* took up this “cultural nationalism,” and propagated messages of political unease. Audubon’s background quite clearly set him against this wave of popular opinion.
Domestic politics turned this social criticism into a blanket anti-French reaction. As historian Ines Murat discusses, Edmond Charles Genêt, the Minister of the French Republic in America, embarked on an “extraordinarily rash policy of interference” in American domestic affairs beginning in 1793.\textsuperscript{170} Public denouncements of president Washington, among other maladroit political maneuvers by Genêt, “provided the anti-republican and conservative elements of Washington’s administration and American society with the means to discredit the intentions of the French Republic towards the United States.”\textsuperscript{171} Genêt, with the help of the aggressive French tactics during the XYZ affair, led to a de facto naval war that lasted from 1798 until 1800. The “Quasi-war,” as it was called, fused “diplomatic, political, and moral oppositions” into a movement of Francophobia, by which the Alien and Sedition acts of 1798 were passed.\textsuperscript{172} Philadelphian Federalists unanimously denounced the French Republic, and declared their hatred of Napoleon, whom they called the “Imperial Jacobin.”\textsuperscript{173} Exacerbating these animosities, French creoles fleeing the Haitian revolution in the early 1790s brought with them an epidemic of yellow fever, which took the lives of almost five thousand people in the city of Philadelphia alone.\textsuperscript{174} By the turn of the century, America was readying itself for another trans-Atlantic war, and the American public had “reawakened old prejudices.”\textsuperscript{175}

Audubon arrived in America just after political tensions had reached their peak and local Frenchmen were withdrawing from public life. Many immigrants had only planned to stay in America temporarily, and took this crisis as a signal to go back to Saint-Domingue or France. The exodus gained widespread momentum: French public events, operas, ballets, and other performances gradually diminished, the French settlement of Asylum was abandoned, and French trade was “greatly curtailed.”\textsuperscript{176}
Between 1794 and 1798, forty ships delivered French people of all varieties to Saint-Domingue. A final wave of departures marked the end of 1802, just months before Audubon arrived at his father’s estate.

**The Rejection of French Natural History**

Philadelphia’s scientific community was not immune to this wave of Francophobia. On the one hand, Michael Kraus argues that international warfare “was held to be no bar to an exchange of scientific communications between citizens of opposing countries.” On the other hand, Ann Shelby Blum argues that despite the assumption that the study of natural history rose “above political divisions, some American naturalists believed that it was intrinsically patriotic to study and publish the natural productions of their national territory.”

Associates of the Peale Museum exhibited this nationalist bias. Peale advertised the museum as a patriotic establishment, and intended for it to eventually become a federal institution. Along its halls hung portraits of the founding fathers, painted by Peale, which he hoped “would keep alive the thrilling story of the birth of the Republic and inspire their viewers with fervent patriotism.” The specimen collections also revealed a nationalist agenda. Peale’s mastodon was received as a testament to the long and formidable natural history of the New World. Aware of the belittling remarks directed against American wildlife by the Comte de Buffon, Peale and his cohorts celebrated the mastodon skeleton as proof of their country’s antiquity and monumentality. Thomas Jefferson too championed the discovery of a massive fossil. The “Great Claw of Megalonyx” a fossilized toenail of a giant sloth—“nearly six times larger than that of the largest lion”—was evidence, according to Jefferson, of the inherent enormity of American species. For Peale, as for the other American
naturalists, natural science was “a patriotic endeavor, offering testimony to the greatness of his country and its inherent superiority over all others.”

Pennsylvania’s national-cultural schism thus took a toll on scientific relations. A previously large French book market, which catered to American scientists, collapsed in 1798, and many French members of the American Philosophical Society stopped participating. However much Peale respected the work of the Comte de Buffon, the French naturalist’s negative appraisal of the American wilderness, coupled with this popular anti-French sentiment in Philadelphia, led to a rejection of French natural history. Most American naturalists interpreted Buffon’s theory of continental growth as a direct attack on American life, leading them to denounce his work (or at least this part of it) as groundless and in violation of the scientific method. The “Buffonian error” became a widespread “catch-all category for mistakes perpetuated about American nature from the distance of Europe.”

Patriotic declarations against Buffon were common. In many of his public addresses at both the Academy of Natural Sciences and the University of Pennsylvania, Peale spoke out against Buffon, albeit with a semblance of diplomacy:

> Although he is so much celebrated, yet, I think it my duty to say, however dazzling and captivating the stile [sic] of Buffon, such theoretical writers should be read with caution: we ought always to suspect an author, when he suffers his thirst for variety of language to lead him into unjust comparisons of the operations of nature; or to use irreverend [sic] expressions of the Creator, when through shortsightedness things appear strange, or unaccountable.

Peale’s son Rembrandt, another naturalist, would later articulate the same criticism with more piquancy: “Had the celebrated Buffon attended better [to the truth] he would have saved himself some needless observations and theoretic fancies, with respect to the old and the new world; but we should likewise have lost the able reply of Jefferson.”
It follows that Philadelphian naturalists disregarded Buffon’s anti-systemization. Peale himself was a “devoted Linnaean, scrupulously using the Linnaean system in arranging the sequence and juxtaposition of his exhibitions.” While Philadelphian scientists were at pains to establish an independent natural history and noted differences between American and European methods, they took more liberally from English eighteenth-century natural historians, who too had emphasized Linneaus’s morphology. As Audubon began to identify as an American, he would offer refutations of Buffon. At Mill Grove, however, fresh from France and in a Francophile context, Audubon was unable to access this “cultural nationalism.”

**Mill Grove & the Preservation of European Lifestyle**

Had Audubon penetrated the Philadelphian scientific circle, perhaps he would have absorbed their brand of patriotic natural history and their emphasis on Linnaean morphology. Instead, his early explorations of the American wilderness were far less scrupulous than the scientific experiments of his Philadelphian counterparts. Audubon’s study of birds was resolute, but he did not have the resources or the connections to make it systematic. He cultivated a peculiar kind of amateurism—one that smacked of Old World conventions.

This amateurism was not that of a backwoodsman. Audubon, we recall, was educated as a gentleman, and did not learn the survival skills of a hinterlander. Audubon himself recalls his unease as a French transplant in rural America:

> A Young Man of Seventeen sent to America to Make Money (for such was my Father’s Wish) brought up in France in easy Circumstance who had never thought on the Want of an article I had had at Discretion, was but ill fitted for it.
Indeed, among the local farmers that dotted the Pennsylvania countryside, Audubon’s leisurely outdoor pursuits were received as altogether eccentric. Robert Owen Petty has noted how the “leisure of detailed observations and for writing them up, indeed the degree of literacy needed to do so, were possessed by few, only those rich enough or, if they were not rich, determined enough, to make time for such things.”\textsuperscript{191} Untrained and unemployed, Audubon appeared as an aristocratic expatriate and a wasteful dreamer, at odds with the “virtues most highly prized” in rural America: practicality, frugality, and hard work.\textsuperscript{192} Audubon presented a “fascinating spectacle of a curiously interesting but wasted life,” pursuing art and science, which were hardly considered vocations, with less-than-rigorous determination.

Audubon’s amateurism was a vestige of his French lifestyle. He drew birds at his own leisure, “shooting in black satin smallclothes, or breaches, with silk stockings, and the finest ruffled shirt Philadelphia could afford.”\textsuperscript{193} While the Philadelphian naturalists doggedly advanced their profession through increasing methodological sophistication, Audubon adopted the casual investigatory practices expressed in the stereotype of the French Creole, for whom, according to Lilian Crètè, “idleness was by no means synonymous with inactivity. The idle Creole was always busy—hunting, riding, playing cards, putting in long hours with his mistress or at the cafés.”\textsuperscript{194} The fact that the Mill Grove operation payed for itself only gave Audubon further license to romp through the wilderness with his “expensive and richly ornamented” gun and fish tackle.\textsuperscript{195}

Audubon’s experience of the American wilderness was thus colored by the social expectations of his life in France. His adoption of the nickname “Laforest” in late 1804 speaks to this continuity. The name seems to indicate Audubon’s growing identification with nature—\textit{un homme de la forêt} is how he began to see himself. Some scholars have
suggested that the adoption of “Laforest” marks an early stage of Audubon’s transformation into the “American Woodsman”—and indication of his flowering appreciation for American wildlife. The moniker, however, belonged to a prominent aristocratic family in Les Touches, France. If, through this adoption, Audubon was embracing the backwoods, the he was also reinforcing his wealthy French lineage. John James LaForest Audubon marks the third permutation of our protagonist’s nominal identity. An Americanized name that carried references to both nature and French culture, it simultaneously reinforced Audubon’s connection to the American wilderness and his Old World social status.

Whom, exactly, did Audubon’s new name attract? For one, it appealed to Lucy Green Bakewell, a member of a prominent British family who lived at nearby Fatland Ford (Fig. 9). Like Audubon, Lucy had grown up in a cultured European household, where she was “surrounded by leisurely affluence enjoyed by the English country gentry.” Her father William Bakewell was, like Jean Audubon, a “disciple of the Enlightenment.” A young genteel lady, Lucy fancied Audubon’s nickname, which carried with it allusions to “a royal equerry and castle.”

Indeed, during Audubon’s early years at Mill Grove, he molded his public identity as a former French aristocrat, offering “elaborate hints” of his “royal descent.” In his more believable yarns, Audubon portrayed himself as a fallen French aristocrat, imprisoned temporarily during the Jacobin Terror. At his most fanciful, Audubon claimed to be the son of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI—the lost dauphin of France. If such details offer “firsthand testimony of Audubon’s compulsion to re-invent himself,” they also reveal how Audubon could harbor a multiplicity of simultaneous identities. He had adopted an American name, and now considered himself
an American citizen, but he also maintained a strong connection to European standards of propriety. Audubon hoped to appeal to the Bakewells according to their own, imported conventions, and his efforts were successful. Within two years, John James Audubon and Lucy Bakewell had made plans for marriage. Before the nuptials could be arranged, however, Audubon had to gain the permission of his father. A voyage back to France was in order.

**Back to Nantes: Ornithological Development**

In 1805, Audubon returned to Nantes to ask his father’s permission to marry. Despite his distance from home, Audubon’s choice of partner was still subject to the scrutiny of his family. After all, a man of Audubon’s background could not marry just anybody. There were many important factors: a dowry, the consolidation of their property, and the preservation of their social status. Jean Audubon expressed these concerns in a letter to one of his American agents:

> My son speaks to me about his marriage. If you would have the kindness to inform me about his intended, as well as about her parents, their manners, their conduct, their means, and why they are in that country, whether it was in consequence of misfortune that they left Europe, you will be doing me a signal service.

Wealth, status, and, of course, national-political circumstances figured prominently in the decision. Audubon’s trip to France, however, proved to be much more than a settlement of matrimonial details. In fact, during his year in France, Audubon’s bird drawing reached a level of professionalism unseen at Mill Grove.

Audubon set out to draw the birds of the Loire Valley, hoping to collect enough bird portraits to present as a gift to Lucy on his return. The project was undertaken with the help of the family physician, Charles-Marie d’Orbigny, a “naturalist whose
enthusiasm for birds constantly lured him away from his practice.” The physician’s role in shaping Audubon’s ornithological practice cannot be understated. In a letter to Lucy, Audubon called d’Orbigny “the most intimate friend I have ever had, except thee, my Lucy, and my father.” According to Linda Partridge, d’Orbigny “is probably responsible for inspiring the young naturalist, sharing his library with him, instilling a sense of exactitude and method—and perhaps even overseeing some of Audubon’s earliest artistic experiments.”

D’Orbigny encouraged Audubon to rigorously employ Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*. Audubon used the book’s bird illustrations, rendered by François-Nicolas Martinet, to identify each species, and recorded Buffon’s nomenclature on the margins of his paper. *Histoire naturelle* also served as a “visual model,” from which Audubon adopted bird poses. He emulated the rather stiff, inanimate postures of Martinet’s birds, as well as their meticulously detailed feathers—a feature that would persist in Audubon’s work. Birds like *le rossignol de murailles de Buffon* were rendered in the profile, and floated on anonymous tree branches in the middle of the page, as was the ornithological tradition.

Audubon began to demonstrate a wider, transnational, knowledge of ornithology. In a drawing dated June 7th 1805, and inscribed “Near Nantes” in English, Audubon made use of two nomenclatures: *Le Grimperan*, taken from Buffon, and *The Creeper of Willughby*, taken from the English systematist Francis Willughby. In light of this detail, Theodore Stebbins argues that as early as 1805 Audubon “was thinking of himself as an ornithologist.” Audubon’s knowledge of contemporary ornithology was expanding, and he was beginning to incorporate a wider range of scientific information—a practice that distinguishes this new phase from Audubon’s artistic
meanderings at Mill Grove. Indeed, Audubon’s drawings during this period include references to a variety of sources, from Buffon to Brisson, Willughby, and Bewick.

Audubon’s trip to Nantes underscores his independence from the American naturalists in Philadelphia. Only on his return to France, under the guidance of D’Orbigny and other local enthusiasts, did Audubon fortify his ornithological interest. Naturalists of equal, if not greater merit than D’Orbigny were available in Philadelphia, and yet the young Audubon had made no attempt to seek their guidance. He went back to Buffon for stimulus. A drawing made on June 6th, 1805, reveals Audubon’s continual disregard for the Linnaean system upheld by American naturalists in favor of Buffon’s behavioral and descriptive approach. The painting depicted a “fat, furry marmot complete with two pellets of scat dropped behind it.” Instead of delineating the marmot’s morphological characteristics, Audubon highlighted its modes of behavior. Audubon’s emergence as a naturalist, and his “most varied and fertile learning period” was thus initiated by, and in dialogue with, the French practice of natural history.

Continuities with French Ornithology

When Audubon returned to America, his dependence on French ornithology persisted. A sketch of a kingfisher made soon after he reached Mill Grove (Fig. 11) includes the nomenclatures given by both Buffon and Alexander Wilson, but the illustration itself was reminiscent of Martinet and other French ornithologists. Audubon gave special attention to the kingfisher’s feathers, a practice “commoner in European, especially French, illustrations of more modern origin.” As Audubon became more

† Richard Rhodes has also suggested that Audubon received support from François René André Dubuisson, a local herbalist and mineralist who would go on to direct Nantes’s first museum of natural history in 1806.
concerned with the identification of his birds, a duality emerged in which Audubon acknowledged the work of his American contemporaries but retained his dependence on Buffon’s analyses and French stylistic techniques.

Audubon’s disregard for Philadelphian naturalists now began to border on antagonism. He condemned these “closet naturalists” for spending their time in the institutions of urban areas like Philadelphia, examining “the skins of birds, constructing mathematically and philosophically tidy systems of relationships between species.” For Audubon, trying to “arrange our Fauna in Squares, Circles, or Triangles,” was less interesting and less important than observing birds in nature. In an anecdotal account of one of Audubon’s many outdoor adventures, the artist criticized the withdrawn practices of these Americans:

I marveled that such a place as the Great Pine Forest should be so little known to Philadelphians, scarcely any of whom had been able to direct me towards it. How regrettable, thought I, that the young gentlemen there, so much at a loss to know what to do with their leisure, should not visit these wild retreats so valuable to the student of nature…If they were to occupy themselves with the contemplation of those riches, or in seeking specimens for the Peale Museum—once so valuable and so finely arranged—instead of spending weeks in the smoothing of a useless bow or walking out in full dress in order to display the make of their legs, how different they would feel!

Perhaps Audubon was rejecting scientific academicism in favor the free-spirited adventuring of the American Woodsman. On another level, Audubon could be expressing what Ann Shelby Blum calls the “urban-rural division of practice,” which split practitioners into “those with access to collections and libraries, and those without.” His criticism, however, also closely resembles that made by Buffon against Linnaean
systematists. Like Audubon, Buffon argued that close observation of animals in nature took precedence over sedentary morphological study:

Nothing is well-defined but that which is exactly described. Now, in order to describe exactly, it is necessary to have seen, reviewed, examined, and compared the thing which one wishes to describe. And it is necessary to do all this without prejudging things and without an eye to systematization.219

Audubon adopted Buffon’s dislike for the rigid, linear systems of classification that dominated science and translated them into a celebration of field study. The artist’s innovation was not his critique of established science, but rather his application of Buffon’s theories to a rural American setting.

**Drawing from Life: The Tradition of Buffon and David**

Audubon continued to pursue birds with an eye for their behavior. He began to monitor a family of Peewees that inhabited a cave on the family property. Visiting the site daily, Audubon drew the birds “as I observed them, either alighted or on the wing.”220 Over the course of several months, Audubon accumulated “hundreds of outlines” taken from life.221 According to Audubon, this method of observation followed his appreciation for living nature. Professional scientists occupied themselves with the sterile anatomy of dead specimens, but for Audubon, “the moment a bird was dead, no matter how beautiful it had been in life, the pleasure of possession became blunted for me.”222 Scholars have highlighted Audubon’s “tenacious” desire to draw his birds from life.223 In this way, Audubon’s wish to draw lively and animated birds is conflated with a proto-preservationist, quasi-holistic love of the outdoors.

It was not the living bird that Audubon sought, however, but rather the suggestion of life. Audubon never hesitated to shoot a bird he wished to draw. He
recounts how, in his early efforts at Mill Grove, he would draw dead birds “hung to a string by one foot with the desire to show their every portion as the wings lay loosely spread as well as the tail.” This did not help to animate the dead bird, but it was a method used by many eighteenth century French game painters, who represented dead birds with life-like accuracy. Jean-Baptiste Oudry, one of France’s most celebrated animal painters, used this pose in dozens of oil paintings commissioned by the monarch and other members of the French gentility. Return from the Hunt with a Dead Roe (1721), Round Still Life with a Rabbit and a Patridge (1739), and Still Life of a Hare and a Sheldrake (1740) featured dead, hanging birds prominently (Fig. 12). The birds, in plumage and posture, appear very life-like, but not alive.

Eventually, Audubon began to situate these dead specimens in more animated poses. At Mill Grove, he developed a technique that made this possible. Working with the carcass of a kingfisher, Audubon discovered that he could position the bird in any pose by piercing its body with thin wires, which functioned like an armature. For Audubon, this technique was just as effective as drawing the bird from life. In fact, Audubon called the kingfisher drawing his “first drawing actually from Nature, for even the model’s eye was still as if full of life when I pressed the lids aside with my finger.”

Therefore, an appreciation of living nature did not inform Audubon’s insistence on life-like attitudes. Instead, this practice had its roots in Buffon and David. By illustrating the birds as if alive, Audubon could convey particular patterns of behavior and draw conclusions about animal moeurs. Audubon also wished to give his birds the kind of life found in the human subjects of academic history paintings. As we saw in Chapter One, Audubon’s illustrations were informed by fine art, which primarily depicted human subjects. In developing his method of representation, Audubon
undoubtedly drew from David, who was famous for the theatrical poses of his figures. Trained as he was in the fine arts, it was only natural that Audubon wished to give his birds a Davidian dynamism. Audubon’s avowal to “draw from nature” was thus a synthesis of Buffonian observation and painterly expression.

If only to underscore Audubon’s adherence to French traditions, in these early drawings he used the artistic media favored in French ateliers. The vast majority of Audubon’s Mill Grove drawings showcase oil pastels with “only a few touches of watercolor.” Pastels were an extremely popular medium in France, but almost unused in the United States. Only later, as Audubon began to adopt new painting techniques from other American artists, did he gradually move away from pastel and towards watercolor.

Despite his appropriation of an Anglicized name and his proximity to the nation’s capital, Audubon, it seems, retained many elements of French cultural life. These found expression in both bird- and self-representation. Nevertheless, Audubon identified himself as an American subject. The peculiar synthesis of Old and New World culture that we observe in “LaForest” would find new meaning when Audubon moved from Pennsylvania to the American frontier.

The Frontier: French Culture and the American Wilderness

When Audubon returned from Nantes, he brought an old friend named Ferdinand Rozier, with whom he set up a mercantile partnership. Instead of establishing themselves in Pennsylvania, however, they opened their operation in Kentucky. Louisville, Henderson, and Shippingport were all Kentucky towns situated along the frontier, and Audubon very quickly cultivated an attachment to their profuse wilds and
plentiful birds. Alice Force describes how Audubon was lured by tales of “wild animal hunting in the mountains” and hunters who made a living off of such exploits. Daniel Boone, the exemplar of American fronterismanship, had previously settled in Kentucky. It follows that on the frontier, Audubon “began to blossom into a full-fledged ‘American woodsman,’ quite in accordance with his ambitions.” He began to see himself as an assimilated American, adopting many of the skills and habits of a frontiersman.

This is the myth propagated by Audubon and much literature surrounding him. A symbol ensconced in America’s autobiography, the frontier and its exuberant wildernesses are conflated with an ever-elusive Americanness. Duff Hart-Davis, for example, argues that it was among “the wildness and beauty of [these] surroundings” that Audubon became “more American than French.” And what, exactly, made the frontier so American? It was precisely the mixture of human civilization and “savage,” unconditioned natural impulses. The frontier was the hearth of America’s raw spontaneity—a place where civilization grew out of nature, according natural principles. This, at least, is how travel writers such as J. Hector St. John de Crévecoeur represented the frontier, and how it is now cemented in our popular consciousness.

Audubon’s experience on the frontier was very different from the popular myth. Louisville and Shippingport were heavily populated with French émigrés, recent arrivals and rooted Creoles alike. While Audubon would increasingly represent himself as an American frontiersman—growing his hair long and adorning himself with the trappings of a backwoods hunter—in his habits and his drawings we can locate the persistence of French cultural traditions. Indeed, as historian Frank Levering has noted, Audubon still “stuck out in his adopted country like a French cathedral.”
When Audubon, his new wife Lucy, and Rozier reached Louisville in May 1808, it was already the busiest river port between New Orleans and New York. Named after Louis XVI “in gratitude for French support of the American revolution,” Louisville had become a magnet for settlers ever since Daniel Boone “blazed his trail” from Tennessee. For decades, emigrants had traversed the Wilderness Road, or navigated the Ohio River, in search of Louisville. By the time of Audubon’s arrival, the town boasted more than thirteen hundred inhabitants.

The French presence in Louisville was substantial. Over the course of the eighteenth century, thousands of French fur traders settled in the area to capitalize on the frontier’s high density of beavers. Others had come in order to collect information regarding the red mulberry, which, it was believed, could feed silkworms and thereby expand the French silk trade. During Audubon’s time on the frontier—from roughly 1808 until 1820—two major influxes of French people defined and redefined the social landscape. First, following the Revolution, aristocrats and other supporters of the monarchy fled to America in order to escape the Terror. Then second, following Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo and the (re)establishment of the Bourbon Monarchy, Bonapartists flooded into Louisiana and Kentucky. All of these groups brought with them the cultural practices of their homeland. The catillon, for example, became a popular dance among the small communities of the Mississippi Valley, and its “elaborate steps and interchanges” would influence the development of the American square dance. Such French cultural motifs were ubiquitous.

John and Lucy Audubon quickly fell into Louisville’s social circles of well-to-do French émigrés. These settlers had forged a tight-knit community in nearby
Shippingport, a verdant, less settled enclave known to locals as the “Bois de Boulogne of Louisville.” Audubon enjoyed the “generous hospitality” of these denizens and “the urbanity of their manners.” He and Lucy befriended local expatriates, including James Berthoud, his wife Marie-Ann-Julia, and his son Nicholas. The Berthouds did not discuss the reasons for their emigration, although it was rumored that they were the former Marquis and Marquise de Saint-Pierre, who had fled France with their son during the Revolution. They now operated a lucrative practice in boatbuilding. The Audubons also made the acquaintance of Louis Anastasius Tarascon, a native of Marseilles. Tarascon built a large flourmill near the Ohio falls in 1803, and had since expanded his services to include tobacco warehousing and rope manufacture.

Although much of Louisville and its surrounding settlements were rough and unrefined, as the frontier paradigm suggests, these settlers had built up a “residential enclave” of “elegant houses.” Audubon quickly integrated himself into this wealthy French milieu. The Berthouds and Tarascons “enjoyed his fiddling, his dancing and his animated mind,” accompanied Audubon on swan-hunting expeditions, and entertained his artistic and ornithological pursuits. Even Audubon and Rozier’s business revolved around the needs of this small, affluent community. They wholesaled luxury supplies from France and resold them to these émigrés. A request sent from Audubon to Rozier’s father, a major wholesaler who oversaw the French arm of their operation, gives us a good sense of their target market:

60 dozen green or gray morocco leather powder flasks with copper mountings, 60 dozen powder flasks in mahogany leather, 100 leather boxes, 100 Swiss music boxes and 100 one-gross boxes of sealing wax wafers in assorted colors.
Such commodities were only affordable to well-to-do expatriates like the Berthouds. Indeed, sealing wax was only useful to the literate, which most frontier people were not.

The Audubons thus made a curious frontier couple, simultaneously embracing the open wilderness and fortifying their cultured, European lifestyles. Like Audubon, Lucy adjusted to frontier life while maintaining the refined habits of her British family. “A genteel lady [and] a rugged American frontier wife,” Lucy matched Audubon’s dual penchant for leisure and the wilds. In her essay “Lucy Audubon: The Frontier Spirit,” Caroline De Latte offers a compelling account of this duality. De Latte discusses how Audubon earned “the esteem of the town’s young men,” for his marksmanship and other hunting skills that were valued on the frontier. He also won their admiration, however, for his fencing, music, dancing, and other activities that set him apart as “a gentleman of leisure and property.”

This status was buttressed by Audubon’s financial success in Henderson, where he embarked on a commercial project with his brother-in-law Thomas Bakewell. In Henderson, Audubon finally attained a level of affluence to which he felt entitled. A rising income enabled the him to purchase a house right near the firm’s store. The Audubons’ estate expanded to include eight acres, dotted with cabins, barns, and orchard trees. Lucy collected “silver candlesticks, a silver teapot and cream jug, and three dozen assorted silver spoons,” as well as nine dining tables of cherry, walnut, and poplar. The Audubons even purchased six or seven slaves, which John Audubon coyly referred to as his “servants.” Land and slaves—the two recognizable “status symbols in Henderson”—help cemented the Audubons’ distinction, transforming them into “something of a mercantile aristocracy.” It was here, during the height of Audubon’s commercial success and among their French companions, that John and Lucy started
their family. Victor Gifford Audubon was born in 1809, followed by his brother John Woodhouse in 1812.

John and Lucy Audubon thus emerged on the frontier straddling the line between cultured, and somewhat out-of-place, expatriates and rugged backwoods settlers. Richard Rhodes characterizes Audubon as a “nominal” pioneer, who, like other émigrés, “purchased rather than built the buildings they occupied,” importing a refined lifestyle from the east. To the less cultured locals, Audubon was of a peculiar variety: a capable and self-sufficient frontiersman, whose French accent, and artistic and scientific pursuits set him apart as “furrin.” To the Berthouds and Tarascon, he carried a whiff of home. In many ways, the further Audubon penetrated into the American frontier, the closer he came to his former French lifestyle.

**French Natural History on the Frontier**

The French presence in Louisville influenced Audubon’s scientific development. Situated along a central bird migration route, Louisville and Shippingport offered Audubon endless subjects for his ornithological project. His collection of drawings was “daily augmented” until his portfolio held upward of two hundred pieces. Although Audubon did not encounter any new volumes of French ornithology during this period, he met French naturalists who advanced a European, and even Buffonian, conception of natural history.

Several cultivated Frenchmen in the upper Mississippi Valley pursued natural history illustration. Audubon met Dr. James Deberty Trudeau, who had traveled through Osage County painting bird eggs, though his work never found publication. Nicholas Marcellus Hentz, a Bonapartist whose family fled France following Waterloo, settled in Kentucky and illustrated the region’s insects. Although there is no proof that Audubon
met Hentz, ten years his junior, they had a mutual friend—Charles Lesueur—who offered support to both aspiring naturalists. Louis Tarascon introduced Audubon to Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, a naturalist “fresh from Europe,” who was travelling around the United States collecting new species to exhibit across the Atlantic. Rafinesque, of French and Greek descent, was born in Constantinople, and subsequently moved to Italy and then France. He stayed with the Audubons, both of whom found the visitor somewhat peculiar. In one instance, Rafinesque destroyed Audubon’s violin while attempting to swat a small bat that had entered his cabin. Nonetheless, Audubon was “heartily glad to have a naturalist under my roof,” and took to heart Rafinesque’s advice, “for he was well acquainted with books as well as with Nature and qualified to advise.”

Several elements of Rafinesque’s practice set him apart from the American naturalists in Philadelphia. Like Audubon, Rafinesque was not a Linnaeist. Instead, he followed the anti-systemization popularized by Frenchmen like Buffon and Lamarck. Further, Rafinesque was unconcerned with contributing to an American scientific discourse, and more interesting in parading new discoveries back in Europe. Upon discovering a new plant, Rafinesque rejoiced heartily, hugged Audubon, and “told me exultingly that he now had not merely a new species but a new genus.” For Rafinesque, every finding was an opportunity for enhancing his personal reputation back in Europe. This applied to his pocketbook as well. When Audubon told Rafinesque how certain American shells were ground into lime, Rafinesque was aghast: “Lime! Mr. Audubon—why, they are worth a guinea a piece in any part of Europe.” Although Rafinesque was not Audubon’s only naturalist acquaintance, his presence reinforced a European orientation towards natural history—as both a commercial scientific market, and an
imperial venture. The Philadelphians may have been content building up their own scientific community and financing their own, minor projects, but as Rafinesque made clear, opportunity for financial success and public celebrity still lay in the Old World.

Frontier Portraiture & The French Tradition

The patronage of these French émigrés shaped Audubon’s artistic development. After a business failure in Henderson, Audubon tried his hand at portraiture, marking his transition “from commerce to art.” He received his first portrait commission from James Berthoud, which quickly led to others. He drew the likenesses of Barbara Fontaine Cosby Todd in Louisville, and Reverend Thomas Henderson and Henri de Gallon in Shippingport. Soon, Audubon was producing portraits for all the local notables: "I at once undertook to take portraits of the human ‘head divine’ in black chalk, and…succeeded admirably. I commenced at exceedingly low prices, but raised these prices as I became more known in this capacity…In the course of a few weeks I had as much work to do as I could possibly wish." These locals functioned as patrons of the arts, commissioning works that would reflect their social status. Their patronage was contingent on Audubon’s ability to meet their standards of accuracy and design. Thus, Audubon was not working in “cultural or artistic isolation,” as the myth of the American frontier might suggest. There were particular cultural demands that he had to negotiate if he wanted to succeed.

In these portraits, Audubon followed the stylistic program of French academic portraiture, which found wide acceptance among his French clientele. For the Berthouds, Audubon drew a “matched pair of elderly couple’s portraits,” positioning his subjects in complimentary profiles, James facing right and Marie facing left (Fig. 16). This double-profile had its roots in the Italian Renaissance, but it was particularly popular in the French-American communities. The artist Charles-Balthazar-Julien
Fevret de Saint-Mémin, a royalist living in exile, had made this style popular all across the Middle Atlantic with the help of his physiognotrace, a “bulky machine” that outlined a sitter’s face life-size. Saint-Mémin would then add an overdrawing to finish the portraits (Fig. 15).

Audubon was acquainted with Satin-Mémin’s work, and adopted many of his techniques. “Everywhere he went,” according to Alice Ford, “the crayon portraits of French artist, Saint-Mémin, caught his eye” and he “intended to try his hand at such ‘heads.’” Louis Tarascon owned a portrait by Saint-Mémin, which Audubon would have perused casually during his visits. The portrait of Tarascon, “with its pursed lips and high white collar,” closely resembled Audubon’s profile of Nicholas Berthoud. Both portraits adhered to the fashion of the “French neoclassical profile.” Like Saint-Mémin, Audubon used black chalk, or “crayon noir,” supplemented by graphite. By following Saint-Mémin, Audubon’s portraits, in style and media, met the prevailing tastes of these French settlers.

Audubon’s emergence as a portraitist was concurrent with a breakthrough in his bird drawings. In May 1812, Audubon drew a whippoorwill and a nighthawk in flight, with their far sides accurately foreshortened (Fig. 14). As Richard Rhodes has noted, Audubon had never before attempted such a sophisticated composition. Other contemporaneous drawings show Audubon rendering his birds with greater versatility. A pair of nuthatches from this period, for example, interacts with unprecedented dynamism. Although there is no direct parallel between human heads and flying birds, the defining characteristic of these new illustrations was their expert foreshortening—a skill Audubon exercised in his portraits in order to depict the far side of his sitters’ faces. By employing a technique used in human representation, Audubon moved beyond the
tradition of scientific ornithology, which purposely “avoided foreshortening because the necessary distortions made it impossible to...check measurements.” In a later essay, Audubon denounced the practice, popular among American ornithologists, of denying three-dimensionality:

> Among the naturalists of the time, several who are distinguished have said that representations of subjects ought to be entirely devoid of shades in all their parts; that the colouring of the figure, that must be precisely profile, cannot be understood by the student it differently represented. Why then should the best artists of the same age give us pictures with powerful breadth of lights and shades? And why, still more strange, should every individual who looks on such paintings feel not only pleased but elevated at the grand conception of the painter, and at the nobleness of the subjects being so much like through their effect? My opinion is, that he who cannot conceive and determine the natural colouring of a shaded part, need not study either natural history or any thing else connected with it.277

The “grand conception of the painter,” the “nobleness of the subjects”—such passages reflect a Davidian approach to composition. Audubon’s ornithological innovation thus had its roots in the French academic style.

**Cincinnati, English Portraiture, & Representational Multivalence**

When Audubon moved to Cincinnati in 1820, his portraiture acquired a new versatility. Cincinnati was yet another frontier settlement that defied the stereotype of the isolated hinterland. Home to almost ten thousand residents, it contained an even more diverse array of Old World émigrés. As one early nineteenth-century American author described, in Cincinnati “the Puritan and the planter, the German and the Irishman, the Briton and the Frenchman, each with their peculiar prejudice and local attachments, have here set down beside each other...The society, thus newly organized and constituted, is more liberal [and] enlarged.”278 As Audubon transitioned from the French settlements of
Kentucky to the more broadly cosmopolitan Cincinnati, his portraits began to showcase a wider array of European styles.

In 1820, Audubon worked at the Cincinnati Museum under the directorship of Daniel Drake, a prominent physician, writer, and pioneering proponent of environmental medicine. Here, Audubon expanded his facility in both bird and human representation. Audubon was originally hired to paint backgrounds for Drake’s animal displays. Although none of these backgrounds survive, or at least none can be traced back to Audubon, the practice of painting backgrounds for bird specimens set Audubon apart from other American naturalists. While Alexander Wilson, among others, deployed few background details in their bird illustrations, by the time Audubon reached New Orleans in 1821, his illustrations included full-scale landscapes like the ones he made for Drake.

Audubon also painted several portraits of “trans-Appalachian notables” for Drake’s portrait gallery. Unlike the Berthouds and Tarascons, the Cincinnati elite was primarily English. One of Audubon’s earliest drawings for the portrait gallery depicted the parents of Robert Best, the museum’s curator and a second-generation Englishman. Best’s parents are garbed in “old-fashion Cromwellian dress” and positioned in a three-quarter view popular in English portraiture. In a subsequent portrait of the famous local scientist and English émigré John Cleves Symmes, Audubon again used a three-quarter angle and included his subject’s arm resting on a table (Fig. 17). Portraits for General and Mrs. William Lytle, among others, also resembled the “Grand manner portraiture” popular in England. Audubon abandoned the style preferred by his French Kentucky patrons for his “Anglicized colleagues” in Cincinnati.
As early as 1820, we thus see Audubon maneuvering between different forms of cultural representation. The presence of a variety of European elites, who had the taste and the money to patronize Audubon’s practice, demanded this flexibility. Audubon could now pivot between American, French, and English representations to accommodate his surroundings.

When Vincent Nolte, a European traveler, met Audubon in a small inn near the falls of the Juniata River, all three cultural identities were at play. As Nolte explains, Audubon stuck out as an “odd fish” in the tavern. He wore a Madras handkerchief wrapped around his head “exactly in the style of the French marines.” There was no doubt in Nolte’s mind that this “long-haired Kentuckian…must be French.” When Nolte asked Audubon about his background, Audubon replied in his strong French accent, “hi em an Heenglishman.” Nolte asserted that Audubon looked “like a Frenchman, and you speak like one too.” Assenting, Audubon explained that his wife was, in fact, English and that he was “a Frenchman by birth and native of La Rochelle. However, he had come in his early youth to Louisiana, had grown up in the sea-service, and had gradually become a thorough American.” While Audubon’s story of his early move to Louisiana was false—an effort to make himself appear more American—he also revealed his trans-Atlantic identity: “I am somewhat cosmopolitan,” Audubon added, “I belong to every country.”

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“Nolte like Audubon, had spent years on both sides of the Atlantic. Born in Leghorn, Italy in 1779, he had participated in mercantile trade in Italy, Germany, and later Paris, where he also performed banking duties for the Pope and acted as financial advisor for Lafayette. While living in France, he made numerous trips to the United States as a commercial agent.”
Louisiana and the Lower Mississippi Valley

When Audubon moved from the frontier to the Lower Mississippi Valley, his Frenchness reemerged with even greater consistency. In Louisiana and its surrounding areas, Audubon not only encountered artists following David, but also a large art market that supported these endeavors. It was here, surrounded by French artists and art patrons, international traders, and Bonapartist exiles, that Audubon entered a “seminal period in his life and career” and produced the body of *The Birds of America*.\(^{287}\) His bird drawings, as we will see, reflected the continued presence of French taste.

Down the Ohio River

French Louisiana had always been a destination for Audubon. Back in Henderson, he and Thomas Bakewell considered establishing their business in New Orleans. There, Audubon’s French background would be an asset. According to Bakewell, “the French qualities of Mr. A in language & nationality, wd be an advantage in so Frenchified a place as New Orleans…”\(^{288}\) The two decided to open a commission house and act as consignee for Martin, Hope, & Thomley, a firm from Liverpool.\(^{289}\) Their plan, however, was cut short by the outbreak of the War of 1812, during which time all international trade was blocked. Audubon and Bakewell therefore stayed in Kentucky.

Now, in 1820, Audubon set out down the Ohio River accompanied by Joseph Mason, a talented young flower painter whom Audubon had met in Cincinnati. One of Audubon’s earliest surviving journals documents this downriver journey. In it, Audubon describes, somewhat fortuitously, the increasing Frenchness of his surroundings. During
an early stop in New Madrid on November 21, Audubon made the acquaintance of Mrs. Maddis, “formerly the Lawfull Wife of Mr. Reignier of St. Genevieve,” who ran a store “in Company with a French Gentleman.” Both, according to Audubon, “exhibited much of the French Manners.” Further downstream, Audubon “had the pleasure of meeting an Old, Polite, and well Instructed French Gentleman in charge of about a dozen Pupils.” Audubon showed several drawings to the French gentleman, who examined them “attentively” and “told Me that having Left Europe and the World of Talents for so many Years such a Sight was very gratifying.” Audubon must have encountered a variety of people on his way to New Orleans; however, barring descriptions of the other travelers aboard the flatboat, Audubon records these French settlers almost exclusively. Their shared conventions made these encounters memorable.

Even the views afforded by the flatboat appeared to intensify in French flavor. As “the Plantations increase[d] in number,” Audubon felt that the banks had “Much the Appearance of those on Some of the Large rivers of France.” A few days later, nearing New Orleans, the countryside was “richly adorned by handsome dwelling Houses,” and sprouting green peas and “artichaux, reminding me of the Happy days spent in France.” These parallels are tenuous; clearly, there were notable differences between the central Mississippi Valley and Couëron. What is remarkable, and significant, is that Audubon formulated these connections.

**New Orleans**

When Audubon reached New Orleans, his dedication to the project of the *Birds of America* took on a “new seriousness.” Much of Audubon’s evolution in New Orleans was contingent on the presence of a dynamic French-cosmopolitan milieu. Like Louisville and Shippingport, New Orleans retained many aspects of Old World life.
Unlike Kentucky, however, New Orleans was a large port city in which a heavy flow of capital supported an active art scene. A mass of wealthy merchants patronized a large arena of artists, many of whom were trained in the French academic tradition. As always, the channels of influence are difficult to verify; where exactly Audubon picked up each new technique is hard to say. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate how New Orleans reaffirmed the French tradition with which Audubon was familiar.

New Orleans was home to a cohesive network of émigrés. Before the federal government assumed responsibilities for immigration, the city had “no effective restrictions” on the influx of foreigners. Massive surges of French and Creole settlers defined the cultural landscape, overwhelming the English and Spanish settlers who had dominated local life since the Seven Years War ended in 1763. The Collège d’Orléans, New Orleans’s first institution of secondary education, was established specifically “to perpetuate French influence.” By the time the English travel writer Frances Trollope visited New Orleans in 1827, its Frenchness overwhelmed all other elements: “The town has much the appearance of a French Ville de Province, and is, in fact, an old French colony taken from Spain by France. The names of the streets are French, and the language about equally French and English. The market is handsome and well supplied, all produce being conveyed by the river.” That Trollope enjoyed New Orleans at all speaks to its continuities with European ways of life. & De Tocqueville too noted how: “The Creole of Louisiana invariably conserves much of the air and appearance of la belle France, offering according to his disposition all the varieties of his original stock, from the amiable deportment and companionable bonhomie of the well-bred Frenchmen, to the

& Trollope was notorious for her elitist, Old-World dislike of all things American.
fierce *brusquerie* and swaggering sneer of the gallant.”300 By the time Audubon arrived in 1820, there were three French or Creole citizens for every American.

Unlike Kentucky, Bonapartists dominated French life in New Orleans. Following the establishment of the Bourbon Monarchy, French citizens loyal to Napoleon flocked to New Orleans and formed “a large of vociferous group within the French émigré community.”301 The following year, the Baron Montlezun wrote:

> The French inhabitants are rabid Bonapartists. They are hardly a dozen royalists among them. The Bonapartists await the arrival here of Grouchy…and other great men of that ilk; and to compensate themselves for the general scorn of the citizenry, they seek the approbation of pirates, buccaneers, democrats, terrorists, Septembrists, Robspierists, Maratists, Scévolistes, sans-culottes, regicides, levelers, the champions of liberty, equality, the inviolability of the Republic, fraternity…and death!302

Montlezun’s aristocratic background undoubtedly colored his negative appraisal, but he nonetheless captures the intensity of the Bonapartist presence. Their commitment to French nationalism certainly resonated for Audubon, who carried similar values. He would have savored the Napoleonic processions, in which Bonapartists assembled a band and “paraded through the streets on the anniversaries of Napoleon’s most notable victories.”303

Upon his arrival, Audubon was thrust into these patterns of French life. On only his first day, Audubon and his comrades dined at the home of Monsieur Arnauld, where they had a “great deal of mirth that I call *French gayety*.”304 Although the dinner was a little unruly for Audubon’s taste, the next day his spirits were high enough to participate in a “grande French fête” commemorating the Battle of New Orleans.305 He made the acquaintance of numerous émigrés from his homeland: John Garnier, a hotelkeeper in Natchez, proved to be an “excellent friend.”306 Garnier was also raised in Nantes, born in
La Gascherie, one of “the noblest chateux of the Nantes region.”

He had cultivated an amateur interest in birds and lent Audubon several ornithologies, including Turton’s Linne and Wilson’s American Ornithology. Fresh from Europe, he still “spoke French with the greatest purity,” and acquainted Audubon with the history of New Orleans. Like many of Audubon’s new French acquaintances, Garnier introduced Audubon to other prosperous expatriates. Audubon met the philanthropist Julien Poydras de la Lande, who lived in close by Pointe Coupée. He also met Charles Carré, an amateur ornithologist and the son of a former nobleman. These acquaintances helped facilitate Audubon’s integration into the circles French locals.

Just as Audubon modified his image on the frontier, so too he changed his appearance in order to meet the French urbaneness of New Orleans. He cut his long hair and exchanged his “loose dress of whitened yellow nankeen” for new attire better suited to his cultured milieu. It was imperative that Audubon, as he put it, “dress like other folks as soon as possible.” For the first time, Audubon asserted his affiliation with Jacques Louis David. By invoking his name, Audubon “assured association with the exiled and recently martyred emperor in a region that was a pro-Napoleonic hotbed.”

Here, such cultural signifiers held currency.

The Industry of Fine Art

In discussions of Audubon’s years in Louisiana, the myth of his self-taught genius again overshadows the presence of artistic precedents. In his 1982 catalogue “John James Audubon & his Sons,” Gary Reynolds denies that any art in New Orleans influenced Audubon’s drawings. This is particularly surprising, considering Reynold’s catalogue was prepared for the Grey Art Gallery, which, one would imagine, considered Audubon’s work in the context of art history. Many other writers, including Alice Ford,
pass over this period without considering how Audubon may have profited from his “sudden immersion into this cosmopolitan community of artists.”

On the frontier, Audubon had encountered artists relatively infrequently. Expatriates in French Kentucky patronized small-scale works; however, they could not sustain a full-scale art market. In New Orleans, cross-Atlantic trade fostered a large art market. While Audubon’s Cincinnati patrons could only afford a five-dollar sketch, here, an artist could expect twenty-five dollars per likeness. Audubon finally found an active art scene that could sustain his endeavor.

Audubon and Mason lodged in a room on Dauphin Street in the French Quarter, and acquainted themselves with local painters. They spent their evenings in a local coffee shop, where artists gathered to socialize, listen to music, and watch roulette. Audubon met John Wesley Jarvis, the English-born oil painter, John Etchberger, another portraitist, and Edmund Brewster, a painter and engraver new to the city. He became close with several local French artists, many of whom were trained in French ateliers: Antoine Callas painted neoclassical miniatures, Jean Baptiste Jeannine taught drawing at a local French academy, and Jean Baptiste Fogliardi was hired to paint decorations for Napoleon’s New Orleans funeral ceremony. Audubon’s exposure to these artists and their methods reaffirmed the modes of representation he had received from David.

In New Orleans, Audubon also learned the fine arts of self-advertisement and commission-seeking. Basterop, a self-proclaimed Italianate scene painter, offered Audubon one hundred dollars to help him finish a panorama of New Orleans, although the project never came to fruition. Audubon received one hundred dollars from Roman Pamar, a local merchant, for chalk portraits of his daughters. In one instance, an anonymous French aristocrat, one Madame André, commissioned Audubon for a full-
scale nude portrait. He received in return a one hundred and twenty-five dollar gun with the personalized engraving: “Property of Laforest Audubon, February 22, 1821.” A “spate of commissions” followed as Audubon integrated himself into the European merchant milieu that possessed the disposable savings. For the first time, Audubon had enough work to support himself; and his art became a financially feasible endeavor. As his bird illustrations and portraits amassed, and his reputation grew, more prominent locals began to hire him for portraits and drawing instruction.*

Audubon was not limited to a French artistic tradition. In New Orleans, several Old World styles and techniques converged, and Audubon skillfully navigated between them. In his journal, Audubon describes an encounter with an Italian painter, to whom Audubon showed his drawings. The artist “took me to his painting appartement at the Theatre, then to the Directors who very roughly offered me 100$ per Month to paint with Mons L’Italian.” Taking “heed of the vogue for scenic ‘views,’” Audubon also began to produce cityscapes and landscapes. When Audubon ordered new drawing materials from England, we see this convergence of traditions: “10 lb. Italian Chalk, 6 doz Black Lead Pencils, 2 Grosses Pastels.” The Italian chalk was, of course, an Italian medium, the pastels were a vestige of Audubon’s French training, and the lead pencils were a characteristically Anglo-American medium. In order to make a living on his art, Audubon developed a range of skills that would make his work commercially viable to a

* Audubon’s emergent success in New Orleans appears to have fomented a fiery rivalry with some local artists and art instructors. According to Audubon, after taking on several drawing students, a fellow artist give an “unvarnished characterization of me as a ‘man that came no one knows from whence, and who goes through the streets like the Devil—has as many pupils as he wishes…[and] bought his handsome drawings of beasts, birds and flowers that he shows and says are his own.” Audubon, however, had the last word. With cutting French sardonicism, Audubon rebuffed this “eloquent member” of the “sans culottes of the trade” (Alice Ford, Audubon, by Himself p. 111).
cosmopolitan audience. Thus, when Audubon and Lucy opened a school of art in nearby Natchez, they advertised its very cosmopolitanism: “a school for Drawing in Chalks, and Painting in Water Colours, in all the various styles most fashionable in Europe and or Eastern Cities.”

**John Vanderlyn and French-American Classicism**

New Orleans’s most accomplished artist, and the “leading historical painter of the day,” was John Vanderlyn. As with many of the other painters in New Orleans, Vanderlyn stuck firmly to the contours of neoclassical history painting. He had the rare opportunity of studying with François-André Vincent in Paris, where he “catapulted to fame” with two paintings: *The Death of Jane McCrea*, painted in 1804, and *Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage*, painted in 1805 (Figs. 18 & 19).

The similarities between Vanderlyn’s *Marius* and Jacques Louis David’s *Brutus* demonstrate the extent to which Vanderlyn, like Audubon, followed the French master. The seated, throne-like position of Vanderlyn’s figure echoes that of David’s. They both sit up straight, their legs moved to the side, gazing forward in deep reflection. Both paintings contain classical architecture: David’s Brutus sits along an internal corridor of a robust Doric colonnade and Vanderlyn’s Marius is perched in front of the Parthenon and a crumbling Roman viaduct. In both paintings, background details are suppressed to lend primacy to human action. The figures are simplified in form and austere in coloring, exhibiting the “cool objectivity and incredible smoothness” that defined David’s work. Both paintings, it follows, were well received by their French audience. Napoleon even awarded Vanderlyn’s *Marius* with a gold medal following its exhibition at the Louvre.

Vanderlyn’s *Jane McCrea* demonstrates how the artist used this Davidian program to represent American life. The painting illustrates an American episode, in which “a
young colonial woman was hatcheted to death by Indian mercen­aries in the pay of the British.”\textsuperscript{329} Vanderlyn adopted this scene from contemporary American events, but the painting’s composition followed French neoclassical tradition. The figures are endowed with a Davidian robustness and theatrical disposition. Oliver Larkin notes how “the attitude of the heroine in his \textit{Death of Jane McCrea} recalls David’s \textit{Sabines}, and the postures of his Indians are like those of the Frenchman’s Roman warriors.”\textsuperscript{330} Vanderlyn thus demonstrated how the principles of David’s classicism were not confined to French or classical subjects—they could be assimilated into American art. As David Lubin as noted, Vanderlyn’s \textit{Jane McCrea} was “not merely…an allegorical embodiment of European artistic tradition but also [a] means of symbolically injecting that tradition into an artistically impoverished New World.”\textsuperscript{331}

Audubon approached Vanderlyn for the express purpose of gauging European interest in his work. He sought out Vanderlyn on the advice of Alexander Gordon, a New Orleans merchant who had recovered a lost portfolio of Audubon’s drawings. Gordon suggested that Audubon seek publication abroad, and recommended Vanderlyn as a good resource in such matters.\textsuperscript{332} Although their meeting was brief, Audubon received a positive endorsement from Vanderlyn, who “spoke of the beautifull Coloring and Good Positions and told Me that he would With pleasure give me a Certificate of his having \textit{Inspected} them.”\textsuperscript{333} Vanderlyn wrote Audubon several letters of introduction for relevant artists and patrons abroad.\textsuperscript{334} These letters celebrated the “great truth & Accuracy of representation,” in Audubon’s drawings, which, according to Vanderlyn, were as well-composed “as any I have seen in any Country.”\textsuperscript{335} Vanderlyn thus functioned as Audubon’s gateway into the wider circles of international art production.
It is hard to say what stylistic elements Audubon took from Vanderlyn, especially considering Audubon’s previous exposure to David. We do know, however, that during Audubon’s stay in New Orleans he copied at least one of Vanderlyn’s compositions. An attorney named Joseph Hawkins visited Audubon at his quarters on Dauphine Street and presented him with a print of Vanderlyn’s classical nude *Ariadne* (Fig. 20). Hawkins asked Audubon to copy the head of the figure in color, for which he was willing to pay $50. Thus, Audubon’s connection to Vanderlyn is not merely contingent on the elusive possibility of “influence.” In at least one encounter, Audubon had to delineate Vanderlyn’s form with perfect simulation.

**Audubon’s Illustrations**

During this period in the early 1820s, Audubon’s drawings underwent a sudden transformation and acquired a new level of complexity and vitality. As mentioned above, Audubon’s repertoire of media expanded. As Duff Hart-Davis has explained, Audubon now “started a picture with an outline drawing in graphite...[then] painted over it with watercolour, oil, pastel, chalk or gouache, sometimes scraping away colour to make white lines and highlights.” He began to treat small areas of his work with a clear glaze “to enhance luster,” and improved his skills with watercolor, especially in the stippling of feathers. Such a sophisticated method was the outcome of Audubon’s New Orleans commissions, which forced him to exercise a wider variety of media and techniques.

Similarly, Audubon’s compositions became more varied and intricate. He began to depict several birds of the same species in one illustration. This usually included one pair of mated birds and many times a juvenile. For the smaller birds, Audubon rendered groups of flowers, berries, fruits, and insects, with which the birds interacted, offering
descriptive information in the tradition of Buffon. Twenty-three drawings form 1821, and seven from 1822, include these plant forms. For larger species, Audubon used a horizontal format, and incorporated landscapes and seascapes. The birds themselves increased in “drama and movement,” interacting with each other or otherwise exhibiting particular patterns of behavior. He now positioned his birds in complementary positions, such that if one specimen was viewed from the back, its partner was depicted from the front; if one bird’s wing was tucked, the other’s was extended to showcase the pattern of its feathers. And for the first time, Audubon’s birds were “fully activated in three dimensions.” By the time Audubon left New Orleans in 1826, he had accumulated hundreds of these fresh drawings.

Audubon’s new style reflects the influence of New Orleans’s French-trained painters. Following the *dessin au trait* method taught in the French ateliers, Audubon placed his subjects on a grid, outlined their shape, and then colored them in. The hard contours of his birds and their flat, stylized rendering “parallels the French tradition” of David, as well as the style of French ornithological illustrators like Martinet and Vieillot. His drawings of this period present a broad, but nationally cohesive, complex of precedents.

**Conclusion**

The years 1805-1807, during which time Audubon was following the instruction of d’Orbigny, and the years 1820-1822, when Audubon was ensconced in circles of French painters, emerge as “important periods of activity and change.” Between these periods, Audubon’s skills developed more slowly, pushed along by his portraiture commissions in Kentucky and Ohio. Audubon was continually in dialogue with French
representational traditions, but significant improvements were made when these traditions were closer at hand.

This sequence of events undermines the trajectory of smooth assimilation into American life. In his famous account of America, Alexis de Tocqueville asked his readers to envision “a society formed from all the nations of the world—English, French, Germans…All of these peoples have different languages, beliefs, and opinions.”

Audubon encountered this diversity and maneuvered between respective cultural logics. For de Tocqueville, however, American cultural diversity led to “a society without roots, memories, biases, routines, shared ideas, or national character.” Audubon inverts this supposition; it was precisely the maintenance of these cultural traditions that conditioned Audubon’s emergence as an artist. When French customs reemerged, he harnessed them. When new, English traditions presented themselves, he adapted them.

At the same time, however, Audubon’s is not merely a case of delayed assimilation. It is easy to overstate how much an émigré “brought with him and how much he had saved.” As we have seen, Audubon’s art was not static; it continued to develop in response to his surroundings. As early as Audubon’s first years at Mill Grove, we can also locate the emergence of an American identity; “LaForest” marked Audubon’s identification with rural America. On the frontier, he fostered this identity by adopting the habits of a frontiersman and “the plane dresses of Kentucky homespun.” America became “our country,” and Audubon a patriot. As the name “LaForest” suggests, however, Audubon’s Americanness was intertwined with European forms of cultural identity and status. Like the square dance, his Americanness was a modulation of French custom.
3. *THE BIRDS OF AMERICA*: FRENCH REPRESENTATION & AMERICAN PATRIOTISM

Recovering Audubon through Visual Analysis

Audubon’s drawings from Kentucky, Ohio, and especially Louisiana constitute the body of what we now call *The Birds of America*. By examining Audubon’s drawings, we can locate where he gathered his representational techniques and how he intended for these representations to be interpreted. Careful visual analysis of Audubon’s work, however, is largely absent from scholarship to date. Linda Dugan Partridge, one of few Audubon scholars to undertake any visual investigation, bemoaned this absence as late as 1996. According to Partridge, scholars “typically worked deductively from Audubon’s known biography to point to which events influenced his art” instead of “examining the evidence that the drawings provide.”

The myth of Audubon the untrained artist demands that he be ignorant of all established tastes and cultural institutions. In such a myth, Audubon exists in seamless continuity with the natural world, where his “profuse originality” was an unmediated product of a “genuine love of nature.” Audubon’s work was that of “an artist unhampered either by scientific learning or current artistic conventions.” From the earliest reviews of Audubon’s work, the “directness” of his illustrations and his ability to provide supposedly “accurate” reflections of American nature have overshadowed the fact that these were learned skills. Writing in 1963, Albert TenEyck Gardner maintained

* I discuss the remainder of *The Birds of America* illustrations in the final section of Chapter Four.
that Audubon’s “teachers and colleagues were the wild creatures he loved [and] his reference library was the grand book of the American wilderness spread before him.”

A confluence of factors thus collectively construed Audubon’s drawings as unmoored from representational traditions: myths of his untaught genius combined with a lack of visual analysis have dehistoricized Audubon, recasting him outside the conditions in which his work was embedded. In this chapter, I offer a detailed analysis of Audubon’s *The Birds of America*. In so doing, I hope to delineate the complex of cultural and political meanings implicit in Audubon’s practice. His illustrations reveal the persistence of French academic training; he retained many of the techniques originally appropriated from David and Buffon. On the frontier, and then in Louisiana, the presence of émigré patrons and artists trained in the French “Grand Style” reinforced these compositional and narrative motifs. More than merely regurgitating these techniques, however, Audubon transformed them to aggrandize his adopted country. His compositions celebrated American nature and wildlife in a way that conformed to the standards of eighteenth-century French neoclassical monumentality, sobriety, order, and virtue.

*The French Academic Tradition*

Audubon’s drawings exhibit the compositional and technical motifs of Davidian neoclassicism. The apparent disconnect between ornithological illustration and academic painting, however, has obscured these representational sources. In his short book *Audubon Demythologized*, Michael Harwood asserts that whether or not Audubon actually studied with David, “David taught him nothing about portraying birds.” The underlying assumption sets academic painting in opposition with natural history illustration. However, as we have seen, Audubon’s artistic and scientific pursuits evolved
side by side. Theodore Stebbins, among others, has noted how Audubon “went far beyond the confines of traditional ornithological illustration,” drawing on “a wide variety of artists and artistic traditions.”

Previous scholarship has also emphasized Audubon’s commitment to realism. It was assumed that Audubon’s style, like other early nineteenth century naturalists’, was “defined by the accumulation of detail.” According to this model, Audubon was most “intrigued by the hard evidence of the eye.” Audubon’s actual illustrations, however, tell a different story. They “reflect the Neoclassical imperative to display the subject matter clearly and in its most characteristic manner.” Although it is tempting to see Audubon as a child of nature who worked exclusively from empirical observation, it is important to remember that the stylistic standards to which he held himself promoted a synthesis of observation and idealization. This was not nature untouched. As Joseph Kastner put it, Audubon’s illustrations “seemed more lifelike than life itself, as if art were dictating nature.”

In rendering his birds, Audubon followed the basic design principles of French neoclassical painting, which emphasized sobriety and compositional balance. Looking at any of Audubon’s published illustrations, one notices the precision of his edges, austerity of his coloring, and the general flatness of his figures. As Gloria Fiero has noted, Audubon’s birds are “regularly flattened, emphasizing (in the academic fashion) the silhouette.” In her description of Audubon’s Swallow-tailed Kite, Annette Blaugrund acknowledges how Audubon “reduces the kite’s contours to their essence, repeating their pristine lines in the rippling patterns of the bird’s feathers” in order to create “a consummate sense of design.” Bright colors are completely absent, birds are rendered with stiff clarity, and the landscapes are endowed with similar order. Audubon never
included any suggestions of direct sunlight to give his birds a diffuse glow; he avoided
the fuzziness and suppleness that defined Rococo—and later Romantic—art. His
insistence on a simplified, compositionally unified representation was particular to the
French academic painting prevalent in Nantes and the Paris ateliers.

Like David, Audubon’s restrained style omits circumstantial details. Elisa New
has noted how Audubon’s illustrations suppress secondary action in order to enhance
the subject’s “centripetal power.” Audubon did not merely draw what he saw, but
rather lifted his birds “out of a more complex habitat.” This clarity was fundamental to
David’s classicist schematics. In both the Oath of the Hortaii and The Lictors Returning to
Brutus the Bodies of his Sons, secondary details are cut to the bare essentials: a simple Doric
order, a few pieces of draped cloth, and large patches of light and shadow. Audubon’s
birds, just like David’s figures, are rationally placed, legible in their action, and simple in
their contours.

Audubon’s consistent placement of his birds in profile reveals his commitment
to David’s history painting. On several occasions, Audubon criticized other
ornithological illustrators for the lifelessness of their birds. In particular, Audubon
disliked how they consistently placed the bird’s head in profile, which, together with its
position on an anonymous branch, made for a rather uninspiring picture. In almost
half of Audubon’s bird drawings from 1821, however, Audubon placed the birds in
profile. Indeed, in most of Audubon’s illustrations there is at least one bird in this
pose. How could Audubon ridicule other naturalists for employing the same profile he
used? Audubon, it seems, considered his version distinct. It was not the profile of a dead
bird in an inanimate position, but rather the noble profile of a classical model, placed as
such to convey its dignity. Audubon’s profile pose and idealized physiques suggest a
perfect state of nature in which “all accidental blemishes are purged.” It comes as no surprise that Audubon adopted this new profile in New Orleans, where the classicist portraits of Vanderlyn, among others, could serve as models.

Far from offering direct reflections of American wildlife, Audubon’s work echoed the “Grand Style,” which called for the artist to actively structure and distill his composition. Like David and Poussin, Audubon harnessed a form of realism that “was not the realism of a camera lens; rather it summarized a generalized perception.” Audubon, took his inspiration from nature, but then returned to his studio to assemble these “fragmentary impressions into a harmonious and unified painting.” He subsumed “raw nature” to the “transformative energies of the mind,” modifying his representations to meet French standards of design. Indeed, in many of Audubon’s prints we find the same framing devices that were “endlessly permuted” in works of classicist landscape and history painting: “the trees that frame the picture’s lateral edges…[the] dark foreground coulisse, the middle-ground scoop of water, and the distant mountain.” Almost all of Audubon’s larger birds follow this schema. In the words of Barbara Maria Stafford, we see in Audubon “the rearrangement of nature’s materials in accordance with harmonies already determined by man.”

**Jean-Baptiste Oudry: Birds in the French Academic Tradition**

By using the principles of academic painting to render animal subjects, Audubon tapped into a popular tradition of French game painting. Many scholars celebrate Audubon’s birds for their unprecedented life-like vitality. For some, this is further evidence of Audubon’s “direct” translation of nature to the page and his “clarity of vision.” The game paintings of Jean-Baptiste Oudry, however, prefigured the life-like qualities of Audubon’s drawings. Oudry, who painted scenes of animal hunts throughout
the eighteenth century, applied the rubric of academic painting to animal portraiture. He endowed Audubon with an arsenal of representational techniques specific to animal life.

There are many links between Audubon and Oudry, and many reasons to believe that Audubon actively adopted motifs from the latter. To my knowledge, however, nobody has discussed this connection with any rigor. Jean-Baptiste Oudry was the most celebrated animal painter in eighteenth century France, although his reputation has dwindled since. Beginning in 1739, he functioned as a court painter for the royal family, making more than thirty works under their tutelage. Once established, he became France’s most prominent game painter, producing hunting scenes for a wide variety of patrons and exhibiting publicly in the annual salon until his death in 1755.

Audubon may have known Oudry from his collaboration with the Comte de Buffon. Oudry completed a series of twelve paintings for the Jardin du Roi, where Buffon functioned as director. Most of these paintings represented exotic birds, including cranes, cassowaries, and toucans. He also illustrated several animals for *Histoire naturelle*. It is possible that Audubon saw these works in person, if ever he visited Paris. Otherwise, he likely encountered engravings after the originals.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of the Audubon-Oudry connection lies in the fables of La Fontaine. Jean-Baptiste Oudry illustrated a complete set of engravings for an eighteenth century edition of La Fontaine, which went through several editions and found wide circulation in France and abroad. Several of these illustrations, including eighteen paintings, five drawings, and six engravings “overwhelmed” the Salon of 1753.

3 Ann Shelby Blum makes a passing, yet salient, mention of Oudry. Her insight is quoted in the following chapter.
Audubon is well known for his obsession with La Fontaine. He recounted the “happy days of my youth [when] I was extremely fond of reading what I still call the delightful moral fables of LaFontaine [sic].” As late as 1820, when Audubon was travelling down river towards New Orleans, he recalls “the satisfaction of ransacking the *Fables of Lafontaine, with Engravings.*” Audubon probably procured this volume in Natchez, where French books were easily obtainable. As the primary French illustrator of La Fontaine during the eighteenth century, it is likely that both of these editions included Oudry’s engravings.

Audubon learned how to activate his bird poses from Oudry. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Audubon’s earliest attempts at bird illustration, in which he hung dead birds by the foot, paralleled several of Oudry’s paintings. Other works by Oudry prefigure Audubon’s living birds. In his 1721 composition *Return from the Hunt with a Dead Roe*, for example, a heron exhibits the kind of life-like intensity we find in Audubon’s illustrations (Fig. 22). The heron’s startled gaze and outstretched wings resemble many of Audubon’s pieces, especially his *Golden Eye* (Fig. 22).

Jean-Baptiste Oudry also prefigured Audubon’s depictions bird behavior. Oudry’s *Tulip-Bed and Vase of Flowers* (1744), like Audubon’s *Whippoorwill* portrays a bird in pursuit of an insect (Figs. 25 & 26). In *Water Spaniel Attacking a Swan* (Fig. 23), Oudry depicted a female swan protecting its nest from an intruding dog. Audubon illustrated many similar scenes of nest defense, including *Mocking Birds and Rattlesnake* (Fig. 24). Both artists convey their subjects in the moment of dramatic action, following, as Hal Opperman has noted, the tradition of *Genre pittoresque*, which emphasized “lively as opposed to static” action and the “necessity to capture and hold the viewer’s attention as in the expression ‘piquer la curiosité.’” Both of these illustrations also offer the viewer
several details regarding bird habits. Viewing Oudry’s *Water Spaniel* or Audubon’s *Mocking Birds*, one notices the placement of the nest, the materials from which the nests are fashioned, and how the bird’s spread their wings as a defensive maneuver. These details both give the viewer insight into the animal *moeurs* and endow the composition with narrative action.

Audubon’s scenes of predation appear to be a true innovation, distinguishing his work from all previous ornithological illustrations. Even Linda Partridge, whose scholarship meticulously traces the origins of Audubon’s style, acknowledges that no precedent existed in scientific representation. Partridge takes this one step further, declaring that “painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries supported a taste for images of the hunt and game pieces with killed birds,” however such scenes “presupposed human activity…not animal predation.” Moreover, “wounded, suffering birds only entered the sporting painter’s repertory in the 1830s.”

Oudry, however, was painting wounded and suffering birds as early as 1720. *Return from the Hunt with a Dead Roe*, discussed above, features a wounded heron desperately gasping for life. Many of his early paintings feature birds in similar positions. Oudry was also responsible for several scenes involving bird predation, especially in his illustrations for a 1776 edition of La Fontaine’s *Fables Choisies*. His engravings for “La Grenouille et le Rat” and “L’Aigle et L’Escarbot” both feature large predatory birds carrying dead or dying prey (Fig. 27). In the first, an eagle carries a rabbit in its mouth; in the second, a rat is clutched in the bird’s talons. In *Golden Eagle* and *Osprey*, Audubon similarly portrayed birds grasping their prey (Fig. 28). Oudry’s *Bird of Prey Attacking Ducks*, an oil painting from 1740, bears striking congruencies with Audubon’s *Virginian Partridge* (Figs. 29 & 30). Both represent large predators swooping down from the center-
right, while smaller birds in the foreground scatter in both directions. It is likely that Audubon was familiar with this piece. According to Hal Opperman, *Bid of Prey Attacking Ducks* was extremely popular in its day, and several engraved versions were produced for distribution.  

It thus appears probable that Audubon appropriated his most dynamic scenes from the vignettes of his childhood fables, and the tradition of French game painting. Audubon’s adoption of game painting motifs does not preclude his adherence to the “Grand Style” and the work of David. Audubon and Oudry were both attempting to elevate their respective fields of representation “through the application of the principles of ordonnance, dessin and expression cherished by the Académie.”

**National Politics & Representations of American Nature**

We now know that Audubon’s work had stylistic precedents, anchoring him in a French representational tradition. By deploying these stylistic devices, Audubon drew American nature into a French way of seeing. Audubon, however, perceived of his project as distinctly American. After almost twenty years in the United States, Audubon, like Peale and Wilson, saw American natural history as a patriotic endeavor. He wished to aggrandize his adopted country by raising “an everlasting monument, commemorating with a grand effect the history and portraits of the birds of America.” In order to celebrate American nature, however, he used the European styles and motifs at his disposal. Audubon did not just reference a French visual tradition—he validated American nature according to the French standards of Buffon and David.
Anthropomorphization

Audubon endowed his birds with human qualities, drawing them into Buffon’s discourse of *mœurs*. Many scholars have noted how Audubon anthropomorphizes his subjects; however, they account for this trend as a bi-product of human interpretation. According to Bill Steiner, “because of the way [Audubon] identified with birds, these portraits are in many ways the stories of his own life. They are the actors on his stage.” Thus, Audubon’s paintings “told stories of the conflict, drama, and pleasure of life.”\(^{383}\)

Audubon’s anthropomorphization, however, had direct nationalistic implications. Buffon, we recall, argued that animals adopted human qualities over the course of human advancement. When animals “imitate our manners [and] adopt our sentiments,” they spoke to the strength and longevity of their corresponding civilization—a civilization that was supposedly absent in America.\(^{384}\) Animals reflected the qualities of their “native fatherland to which each is limited by physical necessity.”\(^{385}\) French birds were for this reason “excellent lessons and laudable examples of morality.”\(^{386}\)

By representing his birds exhibiting human virtues, Audubon suggested that American wildlife adhered to the same course of development as Europe, and was not as underdeveloped as French theorists had presumed. Most common among Audubon’s birds is the display of domestic virtues. In *Willow Ptarmigan* and *Great Cormorant*, for example, the male bird is depicted as the stoic protector, surveying the landscape while keeping an eye on the female, who tenderly cares for her newborns (Figs. 31 & 32). All of this action is then situated in the verdancy of a new spring, indicative of their fertility. We see this family dynamic in many of Audubon’s illustrations.

Several of his birds also play out scenes of romance. *Wood Duck* and *Mourning Dove* both depict pairs of courting birds, preening, feeding each other, and incubating
their young (Figs. 33 & 34). With these illustrations, Audubon follows a popular compositional and narrative format that had its roots in the Quattrocento. The birds are represented twice in the same drawing, once in the process of mating and then again after they have mated and are tending to their nest. By subsuming his birds in the Renaissance tradition of human romance, Audubon makes unequivocal the connection between American wildlife and European social custom.

In other illustrations, like *Mocking Birds and Rattlesnake*, the birds exhibit a type of aggressive self-defense that recalls David’s classical scenes of humanist bravery, where citizens like the *Horatii* come to the defense of their country. Audubon’s larger, more monumental illustrations, like *Golden Eagle*, invoke similar notions of bravery. Audubon thus combated Buffon by rendering his birds in a way that met the qualifications for European species. He did not reject the French tradition; rather, he played into it. American wildlife is not given to the uncouth or barbaric, nor is its patterns of behavior unknown or indistinguishable. The New World, like the Old, abided by natural laws that govern all civilized territory.

For Audubon’s admirers, these behavioral patterns did not go unnoticed. Indeed, some of them interpreted these drawings as illustrations of American integrity. In an 1851 essay entitled “Incidents in the Life of Audubon,” published in Godey’s Lady’s Book, the author identifies “a physiognomy expressive of love, of power, of unshrinking bravery.” The habits of Audubon’s birds “present examples of well-regulated, of almost Christianized society. They are married, and are given to marriage; they set up comfortable establishment, which is the result of their own industry.” Even Buffon’s biological connection between human and bird life is evident to this reader: “such birds
[are] the intelligent and ornamental companions of man.” Audubon’s birds validated American claims to virtue, as these values were built into the very fabric of its wilderness.

Audubon was not the only American naturalist to endow his birds with nationalist meaning. In his essay “The Human Lessons of Charles Wilson Peale’s Natural History Displays,” David R. Brigham demonstrates how Philadelphian naturalists like Charles Willson Peale used animals as a “political model” onto which they projected their vision of America: an “economically productive, socially harmonious, and morally upright republic.” Unlike Audubon, however, Peale set himself in opposition to Buffon by asserting that American animals adhered to a Linnaean-type taxonomy. American species were superior to European species because their taxonomy was “at once rank-ordered and cooperative.” He exhibited his specimens in the Peale Museum such that they reflected this taxonomic order. Audubon, on the other hand, followed Buffon’s antisystemization, focusing on the “character,” “attitude,” and “gesture” of his birds as sources of political meaning. Thus, while Wilson challenged Buffon by condemning his logic, Audubon challenged Buffon by applying his logic to America.

**The Order of Landscape**

Audubon modified his backgrounds to resemble the ideal French landscape. Buffon and David offered visions of the European landscape marked by orderly arrangement and climatic temperateness. Buffon’s theory of continental development glorified Europe’s regular, sparsely forested terrain and mild temperatures. These features “would, of course, contribute directly to…gentler morals and greater enlightenment.” David’s neoclassical rubric included similar environmental details. In many of his paintings, narrative action is simplified and represented in sections and landscapes are distilled to reflect the sobriety and seriousness of the figures’ action.
Audubon organized his landscapes to meet these criteria. Compare, for example, Audubon’s *Arctic Loon* (Fig. 35) to David’s *Oath of the Horatii*. Both compositions are cut by the figures into equal vertical trisections. Simple horizon lines cut across both compositions. For David, it is a sober Doric colonnade; for Audubon, it is a distant grey mountain range. Both artists also limit themselves to a remarkably austere palette: restrained hues of blue, grey, and green deny any sumptuousness. Instead, they use the “firm, unequivocal contours” and “bold, flat areas of paint” that characterize academic painting.\(^4\) The entirety of *The Birds of America*, with a few exceptions, follows this formula.

*Arctic Loon*, like Audubon’s other drawings, was not derived from direct observation, nor is it a vision of romantic, unbridled wilderness. Instead, Audubon uses long-standing stylistic devices to create “an idealized vision of perfect harmony.”\(^3\) His painting may be grounded in observation, but, as John R. Knott has noted, it was “clearly conditioned by assumptions about the ideal landscape.”\(^4\) The vogue of American Romanticism, which celebrated “uneven and irregular” and “the grand power of nature,” was not in Audubon’s repertoire, despite his erection as a Romantic American icon.\(^5\)

**Landscape & the Evocation of History**

Amy Meyers recognizes a pattern in which many artists in America, like Audubon, ordered the landscape. These artists “made use of traditional ordering systems to depict the physical environment of North America as an extension of the structure of

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\(^4\) Perhaps Audubon’s landscape was also informed by French garden design, in which symmetry and orderly arrangement was fashionable. David and Buffon did much to condition this approach to landscape and composition, but these qualities were already an enduring element of French visual culture.
the known world."³⁹⁴ Meyers offers the example of John White’s 1585 drawings of Secoton, a native American village. White presents this town as a “highly ordered settlement, organized along a central axis,” such that the native American inhabitants “are shown to control the physical world in which they live.”³⁹⁵ The similarities between White and Audubon are apparent. There emerges, however, one critical difference: where are Audubon’s native Americans? By Europeanizing American scenery and eliminating the presence of native people, Audubon recontextualized, in a literal sense, American wildlife as a product of European history.

Audubon’s landscapes did not only present America as it was in the present—they spoke to a historical development that that was in dialogue with Jacques Louis David and the Comte de Buffon. Their respective artistic and scientific doctrines hinged on the humanist interest in indigenous history. David glorified European republicanism. Through scenes from the classical past, he made reference to the longevity of this political tradition, which, in turn, legitimated the French Revolutionary effort. Buffon also found evidence for European primacy in its history. He formulated links between the quality of a civilization and its climate, determining their relationship based on long historical trajectories of “regeneration” and “degeneration.” The “original type of man” prospered first in Europe, where good, stable climatic conditions nurtured their evolution.³⁹⁶ Western Europe’s long history fostered enlightened society and the development of “gentler morals.”³⁹⁷ In contrast, America had developed more recently, and was thus prone to “degeneration.”

Audubon countered the attack of “degeneration” by manifesting the American landscape according to the pattern of European development. America’s well-ordered and temperate climate spoke to the longevity of the continent. When Audubon discussed
the “invincible attraction” that “drew me toward the ancient forests of the American
continent,” he was directly challenging the assumptions of continental growth that
prevailed in France. This “search for some sense of past” in the American landscape
validated American life as the product of a protracted natural and civil legacy.

Monumentality

Audubon emphasized the physical monumentality of his birds in a way that
challenged Buffon and mirrored David. According to Buffon, just as Europe’s long
history had furnished it with a regular landscape, so too it made European animals large
and formidable. Especially when compared to species of the New World, European
animals exhibited remarkable largeness and grandeur. Similarly, David represented his
figures on a massive scale, amplifying a practice he inherited from the tradition of history
painting. In the Oath of the Horatii, he pushed the dimensions of his canvas to an epic ten
by thirteen feet, the largest format allowed in the annual Salon. David heightened the
musculature of his figures in order to give them a similar grandeur. In The Death of
Socrates, for example, David represents Socrates with the inflated musculature of an
athlete. Socrates was a much-celebrated figure by eighteenth century philosophs, who saw
him as the “embodiment of truth, moral rectitude and self-control.” In order to endow
his figure with this moral credence, David exaggerated his physicality.

Audubon reinvented his subjects as physical emblems of American supremacy.
As Elisa New has noted, Audubon’s birds are “routinely streamlined to body forth a
simpler, yet at the same time, more momentous” conception of American wildlife.
American White Pelican, for example, fills up the entire page, its bill, feat, head, and tail
meeting its edges (Fig. 36). The bird’s stoic grandeur is emphasized by its symmetrical
unity; its legs meet its eyes along the central axis. As in David’s history paintings, all
circumstantial details are made subservient to the central figure. The background’s dark blues and greys highlight the birds bright whites and yellows and the distant landscape stands in direct contrast with its grand immediacy. In the *Golden Eagle*, Audubon likewise “silhouetted the bird against a background of dwarfed landscape” in order to emphasize its largeness. Indeed, in several of his drawings, including *Golden Eagle*, *Wild Turkey Cock*, *American Oystercatcher*, and *Great White Heron* (Fig. 37) Audubon renders tail feathers, wing feathers, and beaks projecting slightly out of frame in order suggest their “commanding size and powerful form.” Theodore Stebbins notes how Audubon’s *Golden Eagle*, “with the huge bird pushed to the front plane,” recalls David’s 1801 *Bonaparte Crossing the Great St. Bernard*, in which the figure of Napoleon is similarly exaggerated (Figs. 38 & 39). The Golden eagle, like Napoleon, dominates its environment, rendering nature subservient to the focal character. American birds thus met the requirements of French monumentality.

**The Bird of Washington**

Perhaps no illustration better demonstrates Audubon’s indebtedness to a European stylistic tradition than his *Bird of Washington* (Fig. 40). Linda Partridge has brilliantly elucidated the visual correlates between Audubon’s drawings and the illustrations of his French predecessors. For example, Audubon copied his *Whippoorwill* and his *Ruby-Crowned Kinglet* from Martinet’s illustrations for Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*. Such continuities demonstrate, according to Partridge, Audubon’s “debt to the tradition of published ornithologies.” However, Partridge traces Audubon’s *Bird of Washington* back to a much more popular source: The *Bird of Washington* belonged “to the venerable tradition following the classic Roman eagle.”
The figure of the classic Roman eagle extends back to the Roman Empire. It was subsequently used in medieval falconry, then entered the genre of baroque animal painting, and was finally adopted by Napoleon Bonaparte as the official symbol of his Imperial campaign.408 The “Imperial eagle,” as Napoleon called it, was subsequently depicted in several French ornithologies, including Barraband’s illustration for Marie Jules-Cesar de Savigny’s *Systeme de oiseaux de l’Egypte*, published in 1810.409 A similar eagle reappeared the following year in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *Jupiter and Thetis*. “Few Frenchmen,” argues Partridge, “needed to have the connection between this ‘scientific’ illustration and Napoleon’s imperial eagle pointed out to them.”410 Audubon’s *Bird of Washington* carried references to a classical tradition as well as contemporary French life. Indeed, it carried a multiplicity references to the previous millennium of European history.

It is very likely that Audubon created the *Bird of Washington* with Napoleon in mind. In other, contemporaneous illustrations Audubon referenced Napoleon. For example, he nicknamed his New Hampshire falcon “le Petit Caporal,” in honor of the French leader (Fig. 41). In general, however, Audubon associated Napoleon with eagles: “Had I been so fortunate as to procure a new Eagle,” he wrote when discussing *le Petit Caporal*, “I should have adopted the names Napoleon or Bonaparte.”411 Audubon finished the *Bird of Washington* in late 1821, following the death of Napoleon in May of the same year. As we recall, Audubon was in New Orleans in 1821, where a strong Bonapartist contingency dominated cultural life. The blow of Napoleon’s death was “staggering to several Bonapartist exiles in New Orleans,” who held widespread public services in his honor.412 Audubon also mourned his death, and expressed his fervent “wish that the Great Napoleon were still existing.”413 Audubon thus drew his *Bird of
Washington when emotions regarding Napoleon’s death were running high, and when his New Orleans audience was demanding images that glorified their leader.

Despite the nuance of Partridge’s analysis, she does not fully elucidate the national and political resonances of Audubon’s *Bird of Washington*. Partridge notes how Audubon’s use of a “published, immobilized, and formulaic eagle” with its “Roman profile” would have been well suited to “emblematize his find as a national image,” but she does not draw attention to Audubon’s conflation of two national iconographies.\(^{414}\)

Audubon not only took a ubiquitous icon of Imperial France to represent his American bird, but also named the bird after America’s greatest political celebrity. Although the *Bird of Washington* would later be revealed as an immature bald eagle, Audubon was convinced that he had discovered a new species. By his own account, Audubon named it after Washington because it was “indisputably the noblest of its genus that has yet been discovered in the United States” and thus must be honored “with the name of one yet nobler, the saviour of his country.”\(^{415}\) By naming America’s “noblest” bird after an American hero while simultaneously adopting a classical, Napoleonic model, Audubon dissolved the boundaries between American and European political and natural representation. Illustrations like *Bird of Washington* embodied a “new intersection,” in which “the noblest traditions of European art” collided with American politics and nature.\(^{416}\)

**Conclusion**

With Buffon and David as his guides, Audubon targeted specific bird attributes that would reflect positively on America: monumentality, antiquity, and order. More so than other American naturalists, Audubon was predisposed to seek similarities between
New World and Old World wildlife, weighing, as Linda Partridge explains, “the perceived new demands of American science against Old World natural history.”

Aududon’s America opens itself to European vision in a manner that reflects Mary Louis Pratt’s notion of “autoethnography.” According to Pratt, autoethnography corresponds to the “instances in which the colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms.” It thus involved the “partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror.” Audubon defies this schema on one important point: he was both “colonized subject” and “conqueror.” Audubon was a “colonized subject,” insofar as he now identified as American and attempted to aggrandize his adopted country. At the same time, his stylistic devices grew out of his education in France and resonated among the French settlers of the American South. When he adopted Davidian and Buffonian modes of representation, it was not merely a linear process of imitation. Rather, Audubon appears to complete a loop, whereby trans-Atlantic subjects reconstituted their environments in a way that resonated on both sides. Unlike other American painters, who “insufficiently digested or inappropriately adapted” European traditions “like children of divorced parents,” Audubon incorporated these traditions fluidly. In his drawings we find none of the “unresolved graft of alien forms and subjects onto a more indigenous idiom.” His ability to weave European traditions into a consciously American enterprise has enabled the icon of Audubon, the American Woodsman, to endure.
4. THE PUBLICATION OF *THE BIRDS OF AMERICA*

The Search for Publication: Philadelphia

When Audubon left New Orleans to find a publisher in Philadelphia, he failed. The city’s leading naturalists, including the Peale family, and its most accomplished natural history engraver, Alexander Lawson, turned him down in succession. After analyzing Audubon’s illustrations, this is unsurprising. His drawings adhered to a French painterly tradition that was foreign to these American naturalists and at odds with many of their scientific principles. We saw, for example, how Audubon’s insistence on three-dimensionality undermined the morphological schema upheld by other American natural history illustrators.

The narrative of Audubon’s innate and unappreciated genius has overshadowed this explanation; the individualist struggle against established power supersedes the weight of national-cultural differences. Writing in the 1820s, Audubon recounted how he “finally determined to break through all the bonds and follow my ornithological pursuits,” despite the fact that those around him “regarded me as a madman.” Audubon’s associates on all sides, according to this story, found his ambitious project quixotic. When Audubon failed to find a publisher in Philadelphia, it played into this narrative.

In New Orleans, however, Audubon found favor among his cosmopolitan patrons, who urged him to seek publication in Europe. When Audubon finally traveled to Europe, he was an immediate success. In Philadelphia, Audubon’s adherence to French representational traditions fell flat, as did his persona of the American Woodsman. In England and France, however, these representations thrived.
symbiotically: the American Woodsman carried exotic appeal, and the persistence of European style made this exoticism coherent. Audubon’s failures and successes were therefore a function of his ability to meet different national-cultural demands.

**Philadelphia**

As Audubon’s success in New Orleans grew, and as his circle of patrons expanded, he was advised to seek support and publication in Europe. One such advocate, an English tourist referred to by Audubon as “Leacock,” encountered the artist sketching a scenic view of Natchez. They conversed until Audubon invited Leacock to meet Lucy and examine his bird drawings. Pleasantly surprised, Leacock wagered that “publication in England might very well be accomplished.” An 1821 letter from Lucy to her cousin Euphemia Gifford reveals that Audubon intended to seek support abroad as early as his first year in New Orleans:

> He is prosecuting a large work on Ornithology which when complete he means to take to Europe to be published...It is his intention to go first to England, and I hope it will be in my power to accompany him and visit once more those scenes of happy childhood.

Lucy encouraged Audubon’s endeavor, but urged him to consider domestic options first. Philadelphia, the hub of American natural history, appeared to be Audubon’s best bet.

When Audubon visited Philadelphia during the summer of 1824, he was consistently denied support. Like any aspiring illustrator, Audubon sought out private institutions, prominent citizens, and other artist-naturalists to support his work. But, according to Audubon, he “found the citizens unwilling to pay for art,” and a small exhibition of his drawings was “less than a success.”
Scholars have formulated two primary explanations for this rejection: a deficit of capable publishers in Philadelphia, and the blanket hostility of Philadelphian naturalists. As we shall see, neither of these explanations captures the whole story.

“No one in America,” according to Richard Rhodes, “had the resources and the experience to produce a multivolume work on the scale he was planning.” Rhodes’s explanation is a common one; however, many expensive works of natural history were published in Philadelphia. William Bartram’s *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* was published there in 1791. The artist William Guy Wall and ornithologists Alexander Wilson both moved from the United Kingdom to Philadelphia before procuring publication. Wilson’s *American Ornithology*, albeit a moderately-sized quarto, was produced in nine volumes with color engravings—certainly a costly undertaking. Oliver Goldsmith’s *An History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, modeled after the *Histoire naturelle*, was reproduced in Philadelphia in eight volumes following its original publication in England. It went through several editions, and sold over three thousand copies. Numerous scientific journals on a range of subjects were published regularly in Philadelphia, many with copperplate engravings. These books demonstrate “a proven American audience for natural history”—an audience that Audubon’s book would surely have attracted.

As the locus of America’s mint and book distribution, Philadelphia drew in a surplus of engravers and printers eager to find the next best seller. According to Blum, there was no shortage of trade publishers “willing to undertake scientific books with reasonable expectations for popular sales.” Furthermore, Philadelphian publishers preferred “popularly oriented natural histories…with pictures like the rural scenes of Thomas Bewick’s wood engravings or the sentimental views of Doughty’s Cabinet,
depicting animals in a human landscape.” Audubon’s *Birds*, even more so than Wilson’s *American Ornithology*, met this demand. The suggestion, therefore, that Audubon’s project was too ambitious for an American publisher appears fallacious, or, at least, only a part of a larger equation.

**The Vendetta**

Many scholars argue that Audubon was unwelcome in Philadelphia because of an unjust grudge held by Alexander Wilson’s associates. Wilson had died in 1813, leaving his long-term project, *American Ornithology*, unfinished. George Ord (Fig. 43), a native Philadelphian, ornithologist, and secretary of the Philosophical Society, as well as Alexander Lawson, Wilson’s engraver, had since taken over the project. During Audubon’s visit, they were working on the eighth and ninth volumes.

Ord and Lawson became Audubon’s primary antagonists in Philadelphia. For many scholars, these men were predisposed to dislike Audubon because his enterprise threatened to undermine their own. Goaded by “jealousy and the threat to Wilson’s supremacy,” Ord and Lawson “did everything they could to damage [Audubon’s] cause.” There was not room for two encyclopedic studies of American birds. Their attacks on Audubon have thus been diagnosed as the “enmity” of a competitor.

This interpretation is salient, insofar as it takes into account the influence capital investment. However, it ignores the specific criticisms leveled against Audubon, notably his continuities with French representation. In order to understand the relationship between Audubon and these Philadelphians, it is important to analyze the specific circumstances prompting their disapproval.
Upon reaching Philadelphia, Audubon showed his work to a group of naturalists gathered at the Academy of Natural Sciences. It was here that Ord and Lawson voiced their displeasure. They both offered the same criticism of Audubon’s paintings: the postures of his birds were unscientific. Ord “belittled what he called absurd, unnatural attitudinizing of birds in habitats to fancy and pretentious.”439 He also disliked Audubon’s inclusion of landscapes and plants, which “detracted from the birds.”440 Lawson considered Audubon’s work “extraordinary for one self-taught,” but he insisted that “ornithology requires truth and correct lines—here are neither.” Audubon’s birds were “too soft, too much like oil painting.”441 They were “romantic, unrealistic, and not in the scientific tradition.”442

By introducing a French painterly style to ornithological illustrations, Audubon had violated the basic tenets of American natural history. As Joseph Kastner has correctly assessed, where Wilson’s work “was scrupulous about accurate representation, Audubon seemed too much concerned with dramatic effect.”443 This dramatic effect was not the result of failure. Rather, it had grown out of Audubon’s early appreciation of David’s paintings and Buffon’s descriptive natural history, which were reinforced in the French South. Neither Davidian classicism nor Buffonian natural history held sway in Philadelphia. Even the city’s fine artists, including Charles Willson Peale and John Singleton Copley, rejected the stylized drama of the “Grand Style” in favor of more rigid realism. Peale’s *Exhuming the Mastodon*, perhaps his most famous painting, is notable as an “intimate and faithful record”444 that had “none of [the] high moral drama” of French painting.445 Audubon’s work conflicted with the imperatives of American design on several levels.
In Philadelphia, Audubon’s frontiersman persona also met with disapproval. On his way to Philadelphia, Audubon reassumed elements of his frontier appearance, which he believed would find greater appreciation outside the circles of Southern French expatriates. In order to appear more American, he re-adorned himself in woodsman’s attire and re-grew his hair—the “original frontiersman’s hallmark.”\(^4\) According to William Dunlap, a contemporary commentator, when Audubon appeared at the Academy of Natural Sciences, his “paintings of birds, executed with crayons, or pastils…were displayed as the work of an untaught wild man from the woods.”\(^5\)

The Philadelphians did not respond well to the American Woodsman. Ord, Lawson, and the majority of the Peale family found Audubon’s frontier attitude “tactless and abrasive” and his long hair and woodsman’s attire “inappropriate.”\(^6\) For Ord and Lawson, the thought of being supplanted by “untutored backwoodsman” was disheartening.\(^7\) Audubon appeared not only flamboyant, but also unprofessional. In an effort to reclaim his professionalism, Audubon asserted that he had studied for years under Jacques-Louis David. This, however, merely “drew of sniff of contempt,” from the Lawson.\(^8\) Whether Lawson found Audubon’s appearance incongruous with his claim of European instruction or dismissed David entirely, it is hard to say. We can conclude, however, that Audubon’s American identity did not work on these Americans, despite its strategic deployment.

**French Congruency**

Audubon, however, found warm appreciation among Philadelphia’s French naturalists. Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (Fig. 42), an artist-naturalist and recent arrival in Philadelphia, praised Audubon’s illustrations and offered his support. Like Audubon, Lesueur was first trained as a fine artist. He had since worked as an natural history
illustrator during many of Napoleon’s expeditions, and as an employee at Buffon’s Jardin du Roi. Since his arrival, Lesueur had begun illustrating Thomas Say’s *American Entomology*. Lesueur’s title page for Say’s 1817 prospectus includes many of the stylistic devices found in Audubon’s *Birds*. Clusters of insects are situated within a fully-rendered environment, where they interact animatedly. Beyond the insects lies a low, simplified landscape framed by two plants in the Claudian tradition. His work, like Audubon’s, relied on “European decorative and allegorical devices.”

Charles-Lucian-Jules-Laurent Bonaparte (Fig. 44), the nephew of the French Emperor, prince of Canino and Musignano, and an established American naturalist, “pronounced my birds superb, and worthy of a pupil of David.” Beyond the work of David, Ann Shelby Blum suggests that Bonaparte “may have appreciated in Audubon’s work qualities reminiscent of the early still-life paintings of birds and flowers, as well as the later richly textured paintings of dead birds by…Jean-Baptiste Oudry.” During this time Bonaparte was collaborating with George Ord on the final two volumes of Wilson’s *American Ornithology*, and yet he did not express any of Ord’s antagonism. Instead of viewing Audubon as a competitor, Bonaparte considered collaborating with Audubon on a “joint work.” This, of course, undermines the “vendetta” theory and instead foregrounds the national-cultural forces at play. When these Frenchmen recommended that Audubon seek publication in Europe, they understood the cultural framework of Audubon’s *Birds* and the tastes it suited. Bonaparte urged Audubon to go to England. Lesuer suggested Paris “might be interested in publication,” and wrote Audubon a letter of introduction to several French painters. Later that year, Audubon wrote a letter to Bonaparte outlining his strategy:
I have…now concluded to leave the U. States sometime in spring for Europe. I shall first land in England and exhibit my drawings there; if not successful in London I shall go to the Continent, pass through Brussels & proceed to that capital where I fervently wish the great Napoleon was still existing, Paris.457

Guided by cosmopolitan merchants in New Orleans, and French naturalists in Philadelphia, Audubon was now determined to find success in Europe.

The Search for Publication: England

Audubon’s decision to produce his work in Europe set him in opposition to many of his Philadelphian acquaintances. Alexander Wilson’s *American Ornithology* had been a domestic operation, and Wilson had paraded this fact publicly. Laura Rigal’s essay “Empire of Birds: Alexander Wilson’s *American Ornithology*” offers great insight into how Wilson’s enterprise was “a self-consciously all-American assembly and display of United States materials and productive power.”458 Wilson hoped to demonstrate America’s independent commercial facility by using American binding, paper, and printing. Although he still relied on imported color inks for his engravings, Wilson “looked forward to the day that America could supply its own.”459 When Wilson began to use locally produced inks, he notified his readers “so that they too could appreciate the progress of national science and manufacture.”460

The present unexampled spirit…for new and valuable manufactures, which are almost every day rising around us; and the exertions of other intelligent and truly patriotic individuals, in the divine science of Chemistry, give the most encouraging hopes, that a short time will render him [the author] completely independent of all foreign aid, and enable him to exhibit the native hues of his subjects in colors of our own, equal in brilliancy, desirability and effect to any others.461
By establishing his work as a national production, Wilson engaged his readers in “the larger national project of improving American culture and industry.”

Despite Audubon’s emerging American patriotism, it seems he had little investment in displaying American productive power. Audubon’s multi-faceted identity moved through these national-cultural divisions. He not only sought patrons and engravers in England, but also enlisted the country’s manufacture. He opted for Whatman paper, made by one of the oldest English paper manufacturers and distributed by two paper mills at Balston and Hollingsworth. His inks were English as well. These details appear circumstantial unless we remember that Audubon had been importing pastels since his earliest days at Mill Grove. Together, they reveal Audubon’s consistent reliance on European production.

Many scholars frame Audubon’s decision to go to England against a backdrop of purported discomfort with the British, sometimes inflating this discomfort into absolute hatred. Alton Lindsey describes Audubon’s voyage to Britain as a necessary, but undesirable undertaking: “risky as it undoubtedly was for a foreigner among a people he had long disliked,” Audubon was obliged to seek support abroad after his “definitive failure to find support in America.” Such accounts construe Audubon’s trip as an undesirable undertaking, motivated mainly by economic necessity.

However, Audubon was not predisposed to dislike the English. One recalls Audubon’s own claim to being a “Heenglishman.” Even before reaching Britain, he expressed a feeling of kinship with his British counterparts. During his passage on the cotton ship Delos, Audubon’s journals show the artist reading and rereading his favorite British literature: Byron’s poems, Shakespeare’s plays, Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, and the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Despite his father’s thorny history
with the British, Audubon conceded that, in truth, they were alike: “I would call them beggars, but as they are much like me, brothers in blood, I would be shocked to say so.”\(^{465}\) Alice Ford suggests that this sentence was Audubon’s only explicit acknowledgement of “the Breton blood in his veins, that of a Celtic strain that settled Armorica in the fifth century.” The broad nature of his claim, however, demonstrates the extent to which Audubon sought wider parallels between Americans and Britons. As we shall see, the correlation Audubon drew was apt. In England, Audubon fluidly integrated himself into English life and found immediate success.

In this section, I outline Audubon’s successes in England and France. First, I offer a description of Audubon’s exploits. This is followed by a discussion of the factors that enabled this accomplishment.

**Success in England and France**

Audubon arrived in England in 1826. His first destination was Liverpool, where he hoped to gain an audience with the Rathbones, an extremely prominent merchant family, for whom Vincent Nolte had written Audubon a letter of introduction. The Rathbones were “at the forefront of Liverpool’s cultural and intellectual life.”\(^{466}\) They had traded in Liverpool since 1742, beginning with a trans-Atlantic lumber operation that had since transitioned into American cotton.\(^{466}\) Mr. and Mrs. Rathbone shared an amateur interest in ornithology. After viewing Audubon’s prints with delight, Mrs. Rathbone “announced that the Rathbone family was at Audubon’s service,” and that they would “do all in their power to help him achieve his goals.”\(^{467}\)

\(^{*}\) According to Richard Rhodes, the Rathbones were in fact the first English company to import American baled cotton (Rhodes, 238)
Their first mission was to find Audubon an exhibition space. The Rathbones convinced the secretary of the Royal Institute, F.J. Martin, to show Audubon's birds in a small gallery. (Later in this chapter, I will discuss the importance of the Royal Institute, and many similar institutions around England, in establishing Audubon's credibility.) Audubon had previously exhibited his works in America, but attendance had been low and responses mixed. In Liverpool, however, Audubon’s exhibit was met with immediate enthusiasm. On opening day, gentlemen and ladies “flocked in” and lavished the drawings with praise. Over the next few days momentum rose. In a two-hour period on the final day, Audubon drew in over four hundred visitors. In a letter to his son Victor sent in September of 1826, Audubon recounted his success:

> My drawings are exhibited at the Liverpool Royal Institution and will continued so this week—the proceeds are far beyond my expectations and it seems that I am considered unrivaled in the art of Drawing even by the most learned in this country… My exhibition attracts the *beau monde* altogether and the Lords of England look at them with wonder more so I assure thee than at my flowing curling locks that again loosely are about my shoulders.\(^{469}\)

Local newspapers also offered a “flattering account of my products and of my being a superior ornithologist.”\(^{470}\) Compared to Audubon’s reception in Philadelphia, Liverpool’s outpour of support was a boisterous convulsion of enthusiasm. A “life mask” was made of Audubon’s face and a phrenologist studied his skull, drawing a comparison with that of Raphael.\(^{471}\) Audubon was not merely a successful naturalist—he was a celebrity.

Audubon received a similar welcome in every major British city. In Manchester, Newcastle, and later London, he and his birds were lauded enthusiastically. When Audubon reached Edinburgh, Scotland, this wave of celebrity hit its apex. “My situation in Edinburgh borders almost on the miraculous,” Audubon wrote to Lucy in December of 1826. Without “scarce one of those qualities necessary to render a man able to pass
thro the throng of learned here I am positively looked on by all the Professors & many
of the principal persons here as a very extraordinary man." His drawings were again
“put up in [a] splendid room—all the Newspapers took notice of them in a very
handsome manner and having continued to do so constantly the rooms have been well
attended.”

Audubon found not one, but two engravers in England. In Edinburgh, Audubon
met William Home Lizars, the city’s most accomplished printer, a founder of the Royal
Academy, and a “driving force” in Edinburgh’s cultural life. During their first meeting,
Lizars perused Audubon’s paintings enthusiastically. “I never saw anything like this
before!” he told Audubon, admiring his “marvelous combination of art and science,
superior to anything in existence.” Audubon and Lizars agreed to print the *The Birds of
America* in “numbers” of five prints, which were to be sent out periodically to Audubon’s
subscribers. Audubon’s job was to collect subscriptions across England and the
continent.

Lizars and Audubon also selected a format for the publication. For many years,
Audubon had stipulated that his birds should be printed life-size. This required the
largest paper available. Lizars began printing *Birds* as a double elephant folio, placing
each drawing, regardless of size, on sheets approximately thirty inches tall and forty
inches wide. After printing only three numbers, however, Lizars informed Audubon that
his colorers had gone on strike and all work had been postponed. By both luck and
exertion, Audubon found the London printshop of Robert Havell and his son, Robert
Havell Jr. Their work was cheaper and better executed than Lizars’s. The Havells printed
the remainder of *The Birds of America* according to the dimensions previously specified.
Once Audubon’s drawings were available as prints, his work found wider circulation and his celebrity proliferated. By the middle of 1827—only a matter of months since meeting Lizars in Edinburgh—Audubon had secured eight subscriptions in New Castle, ten in York, five in Leeds, and eighteen in Manchester.476 One subscriber pasted the first hundred plates along the walls of her mansion.477 In September of 1827, Audubon received his most important endorsement. Writing to Lucy, he recounted “the great Honor of receiving the particular patronage, approbation, and protection of the King who has become a Subscriber also.” The next day, “her Royal Highness” the Duchess of Clarence subscribed as well.478 Audubon had penetrated the highest echelon of English patronage.

When Audubon traveled to France in 1828, he was received with comparable enthusiasm. Baron Georges Chrétien Léopold Frédéric Dagobert Curvier, “the doyen of French naturalists,” reviewed Birds in the journal of the Académie Royale des Sciences.479 This acknowledgement was “a remarkable coup” for Audubon, who had no previous reputation as a naturalist in France.480 Baron Curvier invited Audubon and his cohorts to a dinner party, where Audubon took an “introductory step among the savants Français.”481 The following week, Curvier and Etienne Geoggroy Saint-Hilaire, a fellow naturalist, presented Audubon at the Académie, where Curvier proclaimed The Birds of America “the greatest monument yet erected by Art to Nature.”482 Artists and politicians offered Audubon similar praise. François Gérard, a leading portrait painter and follower of David, called Audubon “the king of ornithological painters.”483 The Duc d’Orleans lavished Audubon with praise, subscribed to his work, and promised to promote it among his Royal associates. Soon after, the Minister of the Interior, on the advice of the
Duc, ordered six copies of *Birds* for various French towns and universities, followed closely by the king Charles X, who subscribed for his private library.

Audubon had conquered Western Europe, raising subscriptions from its most prominent figures. Soon enough, Audubon was “the darling” of polite society:

> I have many comfortable nights at gentlemen’s seats in the neighborhood, and the style of living is beyond all description. Coaches call for me, and waiters in livery are obedient to me as if I myself was a lord of England…If I was no dreading to become proud, I would say that I am, in Liverpool, a shadow of Lafayette and his welcome in America.\(^{484}\)

How can we account for Audubon’s success in Europe? There are several factors, all of which distinguish his European from his American milieu. Some of these factors, such as the development of a bourgeois middle class, were outside Audubon’s control—coincidences that worked to his advantage. Others, such as the stylistic continuities of Audubon’s *Birds* with works of European art and science, were slowly evolving cultural formations that arose from Audubon’s own Europeanness. Still others were direct outcomes of Audubon’s maneuvering: his ability to play into the social dynamics of the European gentry and his sensitivity to their taste for luxurious works of art and natural history. The following sections discuss these key elements in turn.

**Bourgeois Institutional Growth**

The emergence of an industrial middle class in England, which grew out of provincial centers of trade, formed the foundational audience for *The Birds of America*. The Rathbones are an exemplar of this trend. They had risen to prominence by making speculative investments in cotton and developing their enterprise outside of London, where the nobility still held sway. Eager to elevate the standing of their towns, families like the Rathbones helped found institutions for the advancement of knowledge, which
they hoped would compensate for exclusion from universities and other aristocratic institutions. William Rathbone helped establish Liverpool’s Literary and Philosophical Society, a Royal Institute, and an Athanaeum.\textsuperscript{485} The Royal Institute had taken “inspiration” from a similar society formed in London in 1799 by a group of scientifically minded aristocrats. Like other associations of learning, the Royal Institution was a space for the promotion of literature, arts, and sciences.\textsuperscript{486} Every prominent Liverpool family belonged to this “flourishing education and social centre.”\textsuperscript{487} Unlike its London counterpart, however, it had the specific aim of “providing opportunities for middle class liberal education.”\textsuperscript{488} By patronizing works of art and natural history, such families could bolster the prestige of their name and their corresponding institutions.

The Rathbones, like other prominent merchants, bankers, and industrialists, were thus predisposed to entertain new works of science and art. Indeed, all of the cities where Audubon first found success—Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle upon Tyne, and York—had strong bourgeois presences. Edinburgh, in particular, was “riding a wave” of bourgeois growth and intellectual experimentation.\textsuperscript{489} In the wake of the Scottish Enlightenment, Edinburgh had “gathered a coterie of gifted men of substantial achievement” who were “eager to explore new forms in the arts and sciences.”\textsuperscript{490}

Among this intelligentsia, the study of ornithology was experiencing a surge in popularity. Few notable works of ornithology were published in England during the eighteenth century, but Audubon arrived just as “interest in ornithology was growing rapidly.”\textsuperscript{491} Thomas Bewick, the master wood-engraver, helped popularize ornithological illustration with his two-volume \emph{History of British Birds}, published in 1797 and 1804.\textsuperscript{492} In his wake, several bird artists emerged, including Prideaux John Selby and his collaborator Sir William Jardine. When Audubon arrived in 1826, Selby and Jardine had just finished
their monumental *Illustrations of British Ornithology.* Further south, the young John Gould worked as the first “Curator and Preserver of Specimens” at the new Zoological Society of London, where he produced his own illustrations. Audubon was aware of ornithology’s new popularity. In a letter to his friend John Bachman, Audubon offered a cynical appraisal of the ornithological landscape:

Swainson is publishing his incomprehensible Works…Gould has just finished his Birds of Europe and now will go on with those of Australia. Yarrell is publishing the British Birds quarto size—and about one thousand other ninny tiny Works are in progress to assist in the mass of confusion already scattered over the World.

It may have been coincidental that Audubon arrived in England just as enthusiasm for ornithology was mounting, but he was sensitive to its popularity and exploited it accordingly.

This class of bourgeois patrons was critical in financing Audubon’s enterprise. When Audubon visited France in 1828, his drawings were greatly admired. Yet, after seven full weeks he had collected only four subscriptions. Prince d’Essling, the ennobled son of a Napoleonic marshal, explained to Audubon that France was poor. Although there were a handful of urban notables and landed gentry who could support his operation, there did not exist in France, as there was in England, a rising class of self-made industrial bourgeoisie reaping the benefits of successful speculation. “Poor France,” lamented Audubon, “thy fine climate, thy rich vineyards and the wishes of the learned avail nothing; though art a destitute beggar, and not the powerful friend thou was represented to be…Had I come first to France, my work never would have even a beginning; it would have perished like a flower in October.” Only “this most extraordinary Island,” could sustain Audubon’s production.
Social Dynamics

Audubon’s success was in part due to the social conventions of his genteel audience. Owning an illustrated work of natural history was a status symbol. Once a particular publication gained popular momentum, it was necessary for members of these classes to acknowledge it. As we saw with both King George and the Duc d’Orleans, one subscription sparked a series of subsequent subscriptions. These patrons, it seems, carried on a social dialogue through their expenditure—a discourse of capital. Even if these merchants and noblemen did not wish to buy Audubon’s original paintings or subscribe to his work, it was social protocol to make an appearance at his exhibitions, and to express interest and scholarly acumen. Only in Europe, and specifically England, could Audubon find a community with a socially generated interest in illustrated works of ornithology that extended beyond small groups of informed naturalists.

Audubon exploited these channels of communication. The Rathbones, who “knew everyone worth knowing in Liverpool,” were a critical resource. Mrs. Rathbone, whom Audubon called the “Queen Bee,” was a cultural matriarch who used her social contacts to benefit Audubon. She invited him to Greenbank, the Rathbones’ country estate three miles outside Liverpool. Audubon called Greenbank “the habitation of Philemon and Baucis,” after the mortal couple who lodged the gods of Mount Olympus. The name was well earned. At Greenbank the Rathbones invited their most distinguished friends, holding weekly banquets where attendance was regularly above fifteen. Such an assembly of notables was exactly what Audubon needed to promote

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Ω Mrs. Rathbone, like many women of her class, occupied a powerful position in England’s elite circles. Such women played a large, but sadly overlooked, role as facilitators of interaction and social mobility.
his work. Like a hawk swooping upon a covey of partridges, Audubon collected a bounty of subscriptions and letters of introduction.

Mrs. Rathbone also introduced Audubon to William Roscoe, another highly respected Liverpudlian merchant who was also famous as a writer, historian, and art collector. The Rathbones had previously collaborated with Roscoe on the establishment of public reading rooms and botanical gardens in Liverpool. Roscoe acted as liaison between Audubon and potential patrons, arranging meetings with Lord Stanley, the fourteenth earl of Derby, among others. He also ushered Audubon into Liverpool’s societies of learning, including the Royal Institution. “The meetings are generally crowded by Noblemen & Gentlemen,” Audubon wrote Lucy in 1827, “I have some hopes of reaping a tolerable harvest of names.”

Similar encounters marked Audubon’s stay in each British industrial city. Upon reaching Edinburgh, Audubon was thrust into the circles of naturalists and artists formed around the Wernerian Society. There, he met Robert Jameson, a geologist, professor at the University of Edinburgh, and editor of the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal*. Jameson became one of Audubon’s most effective promoters. He would frequently bring a “notable baronet and perhaps a couple more gentlemen” to meet the Audubon and peruse his work. Lizars also functioned as Audubon’s advocate. He spread “the word in Edinburgh as the Rathbones had in Liverpool,” informing local newspapers and societies, as well as Edinburgh’s cultural elite. Lizars procured an exhibition space at the Royal Society, where Audubon showed over two hundred pieces. Visits from Dr. Robert Knox, a wealthy local physician, Captain Basil Hall, a senior officer in the Royal Navy, and the Countess of Morton, followed. The Countess even
invited Audubon to stay at Dalmahoy, where he could view her collection of Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Titian, and Claude Lorrain.508

Audubon navigated the aristocracy with equal determination. In London, where the presence of nobility was palpable, Audubon was “anxious to establish myself...as an artist under the Patronage of some great Nabob.”509 He won the audience of the young Lord Fitzwilliam, Sir Robert Ingels, head of the East India Company, and several members of the Linnaean and Royal Societies.510 Sir Thomas Lawrence, one of the last British artists to receive royal patronage, offered Audubon letters of introduction to other prominent locals.511 So too did the Marchioness of Hertford, King George IV’s mistress, who promised to recommend Birds to “her large and valuable Circle of acquaintances.”512 Each aristocrat Audubon added to his list did more than contribute to Audubon’s financial success; his or her name effectively promoted The Birds of America as a publication of merit.

As Audubon traveled from Liverpool to Edinburgh, Manchester and Newcastle, a pattern emerged in which he collected letters of introduction, sought out local notables, and integrated himself into the social elite. Audubon would hurry “around Manchester, gathering letters of introduction for the worthies of Edinburgh,” then drop of notes to the cities’ most prominent businessmen and critics. By finessing this web of genteel connectivity, Audubon was able to maintain his enterprise.

**The Market for Luxury Goods**

*The Birds of America*—in design, size, and manufacture—was an opulent volume. Among the Philadelphian naturalists, this opulence carried little appeal. In Europe, however, Audubon was not interested in fortifying his reputation among naturalists. Writing to Lucy in December of 1826, Audubon assured his wife, “it is not the
naturalists that I wish to please altogether I assure thee it is the wealthy part of the community. The first can only speak well or ill of me but the latter will fill my pockets.” The nobility and the bourgeoisie alike were eager to represent their status—inherited or acquired—through the acquisition of extravagant books. Audubon fashioned his publication to impart this sense of luxury.

Ever since Conrad Gesner’s *Historio Animalium* (Zurich, 1551-1558), lavish volumes of bird engravings had become the highest possible ornithological achievement. Several such works were produced in France, especially under Napoleon. Audebert and Vieillot’s *Histoire Naturelle De Colibris et Des Oiseaux-Mouches*, published in 1803, was one of several luxury ornithologies available to Audubon. A massive folio, *Histoire Naturelle de Colibris* included 185 color plates with gold-foil type and detailing. Several other works by Vieillot, as well as Levaillant’s *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de paradis*, followed a similar format. These illustrators were constantly trying to outdo each other in size and expense. An advertisement published by Vieillot for his *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de l’Amérique septentrionale*, for example, declared that his illustrations “surpass all previous works on North America” and that his birds were represented life-size—a ubiquitous ambition among ornithological illustrators. Audubon was well acquainted with these works, and even purchased a copy of Levaillant’s book for his personal library. He was savvy to their competitive drive, and the methods by which the producers attempted to outdo previous works.

Audubon did not just follow in the tradition of these luxury volumes—he conspicuously surpassed them. In Chapter Three I discussed how Audubon’s birds conveyed a message of American monumentality through the artist’s emphasis on

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* *Historio Animalium* was published in a four volumes with two hundred woodcut illustrations.
largeness. Audubon insisted that all of his birds—even the biggest species—be represented life-size. Vieillot had printed smaller species life-size, such as hummingbirds and finches, but nobody had yet attempted full-size illustrations of waterfowl or birds of pray. Audubon therefore required the largest available format for reproduction—the double-elephant folio. The sheer size of Audubon’s volume, in which each plate is rendered in full color, made *The Birds of America* the most luxurious of the luxury ornithologies. “The size of the plates exceeds any thing of the kind I have ever seen or heard of,” wrote William Swainson, and English critic.\(^{517}\) Even Audubon’s small birds benefited from this treatment. “The little drawings in the center of those beautiful large sheets,” wrote Audubon, “have a fine effect on the air of richness and wealth that cannot [but] help insure success.”\(^{518}\)

The double-elephant folio was neither a resource for scientists, nor a field-guide for the outdoor enthusiast. Rather, it privileged the sedentary habits of the urban bourgeoisie and landed gentry. Only these people had the financial resources and the living space to display a book of such magnitude. Indeed, *The Birds of America* was so large that it could not fit on an ordinary bookshelf. It required its own bookstand—another expenditure. One of Audubon’s subscription letters announced *The Audubon Stand*:

> The size and eight of the folio volumes are such, that a stand for them will be found a great convenience. The drawings above represent one of the suitable size and strength, which should be made of some hard wood, as oak, black walnut, or rosewood, with easy-rolling castors.\(^{519}\)

Many of his subscribers commissioned custom repositories, including Lucy’s cousin Euphemia Gifford (Fig. 45). The very act of displaying Audubon’s monumental work was thus a reflection of status.
Audubon also fashioned *Birds* into a luxury commodity by referencing the tradition of oil painting. In the words of Ann Shelby Blum, Audubon was able to “push the technical limitations of book illustration beyond the established conventions for natural history, and to invent his own idiom, natural history painting.” What, exactly, does Blum mean by “natural history painting”? Certainly, Audubon surpassed the stylistic limits of ornithological representation by adopting techniques of history painters like David; but Audubon also made two specific decisions in the production of *The Birds of America* that highlighted the illustrations’ painterly quality.

First, Audubon’s printers used an intaglio method heretofore unseen in ornithological illustration, which enhanced the prints’ painterly effect.” Robert Havell Jr. had made an investment in the new process of aquatint etching, a technique whereby the printer could replicate the fluid, flat effect of a brushstroke. He could thus retain a “diffuse painting style” in print. Audubon’s illustrations, a mixture of watercolor and oil pastel, were reproduced without losing their painterly appearance.

Second, Audubon printed *The Bird of America* without text, emphasizing the images as independent works of art. In part, this decision was an attempt to circumvent British law, which required that any written publication be submitted to each of six national libraries (at the expense of the author). *The Birds of America* was far too costly for Audubon to provide copies free of charge. By foregrounding the illustrations, Audubon also privileged aesthetic contemplation above the tedium of scientific analysis. In an

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* Intaglio reproduction is a process whereby an image was recreated on a metal plate with a fine-tipped etching needle. First, a “ground” was painted onto the metal plate and left to dry. Then, the “engraver” etched through the ground with the needle and submerged the plate in acid. The areas in which the ground had been raised were then eaten away. When the plate was printed, the printer applied ink to the whole plate and wiped away the ink that did not enter the grooves created by the acid. What was left on the plate was then transferred to the paper.
essay published in Edinburgh, Audubon asked his readers: “Who is the amateur of paintings who could bear the reading of a description of the structure, muscles, and expression of the face of such a man as Rembrandt, after gazing at the portrait of that eminent artist by himself? The study of ornithology must be a journey of pleasure.”

Enjoying Audubon’s drawings as independent works of art superseded their function as pedagogical tools. Audubon thus avoided text wherever possible. His numbers appeared without written accounts of the birds displayed. This set him apart from other naturalists, for whom, according to Blum, “text remained the primary vehicle for scholarly expression. Pictures illustrated text, not vice versa.” Through his emphasis on images, Audubon infiltrated an audience previously estranged from works of his field.

It follows that Audubon’s illustrations were received as works of art. William Swainson, one of Audubon’s earliest critical admirers and writer for Loudon’s Magazine, characterized Audubon’s “zoological paintings” as “specimen[s] of the fine arts” and highlighted their “poetic sentiment and masterly execution.” According to Swainson, there was little that separated Audubon’s work from that of Rubens or Veronese. Thus, Audubon not only produced work “the size of paintings” but also cultivated “the same audience that appreciated and patronized painting.”

The painterliness of Audubon’s Birds drew it into the tradition of animal portraiture, which had become fashionable among the English gentry. Less than a century prior, the growing popularity of keeping pets lead English lords to commission portraits of their domestic pets, as well as “prize horses and bulls.” These portraits

** Audubon also disregarded any scientific sequence in the publication of his numbers. This, of course, marks Audubon’s continued adherence to the antisystematic program of Buffon. More importantly, his randomized arrangement distanced Birds even further from scientific orthodoxy, making them more accessible to the uninformed viewer. There was no need for taxonomic expertise—nor even any general interest—to enjoy Audubon’s publication.
were extensions of human portraiture, following the same compositional contours and showcasing the same media, primarily oil on canvas. Jean-Baptiste Oudry paralleled this development in France. He not only painted animal portraits, but also large canvases of multiple animals in dramatic motion.

Audubon was aware of his continuities with the tradition of animal portraiture. When John George Children, the secretary of the Royal Society, helped Audubon gain access to the king, they approached a “palace functionary” named Sir Whalthen Waller. Waller recommended that Audubon should “in effect subvert the monarch by presenting him with Sauve qui Peut,” a massive oil painting (nine feet by six) of a fox assailing a covey of quail. The painting in size, composition, medium, and narrative, paralleled popular hunting scenes and animal portraiture. Audubon had labored on this oil painting for many hours, hoping to sell it on the open market in order to finance his publication. Giving it to the king before gaining his audience seemed precarious. Audubon did not offer the king his painting, nor did George IV receive him.

However, Waller’s suggestion is salient: it reveals the extent to which the British gentry drew connections between Audubon’s natural history illustrations and the animal portraits generally produced in oils. Audubon actively sought this connection by reproducing his birds in oil paint on canvas. For two “hard” months in London, Audubon painted in oils “all day, every day.” He churned out small paintings “for a quick profit,” but also labored over a few large pieces, which he hoped to submit for exhibition or gave away to patrons of particular affection. In some cases, Audubon copied directly from works of this genre. His Beaver in a Trap, painted at least four times for different patrons and institutions, follows the composition and narrative of Oudry’s Wolf Caught in a Trap (Figs. 46 & 47). Both paintings show a single wild animal—a beaver
and a wolf—with their forepaws caught in iron traps, staring out at the viewer in anguish. Audubon thus fashioned his *Birds* as a luxury commodity by adhering to the conventions of opulent design found in luxury ornithologies and oil painting.

**Three Large Birds**

For Audubon’s first major prints, the artist and his engravers selected pieces that would resonate for a European audience. Audubon and Lizars decided that each “number” of five prints was to include one large bird, one bird of average size, and three small birds, or as Bill Steiner put it: “one very large and impressive image, one medium and slightly less impressive image, and three small but very pretty images.”

For the first several numbers, the selection for the largest image was critical. These prints were the face of Audubon’s American enterprise: a statement of purpose and an indication of what was to come. Audubon’s first three large prints—*Wild Turkey Cock*, *Virginian Partridge*, and *Bird of Washington*—reveal how he attracted a European viewership.

Audubon’s first large print was the *Wild Turkey Cock* (Fig. 48). In some ways, the *Wild Turkey Cock* was an appropriate symbol for Audubon’s American enterprise. After all, the turkey was native to the New World, and Benjamin Franklin had endorsed it as the official symbol of the United States. Audubon even captioned his engraving “Great American Cock Male.” However, to his British subscribers *Wild Turkey Cock* was not emblematic of America. In fact, the turkey had become a ubiquitous domestic species throughout Europe. First noted by Pedro Alonso Nino in 1499, the wild turkey of the New World was soon brought back to Europe. It was present in France as early as 1538 and in England by 1541, where it proliferated so widely that by the late sixteenth century “it was no longer a curiosity.” The turkey was “so fully assimilated” into European daily life that “their country of origin was often forgotten.”
The turkey was frequently depicted in European art and scientific illustration. Hugh Honour has noted that while “other American birds and animals more rarely attracted the attention of artists,” the turkey figured into numerous works from the Renaissance onwards. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, it appeared in Bronzino’s sketches and a sculpture made by Giovanni da Bologna. The turkey was also a popular bird in English and French ornithologies. Willughby illustrated the bird once, and Bewick twice. In France, it appeared in Pierre Belon’s illustrations for L’histoire de la nature des oyseux, two works by Vieillot, and Buffon’s Histoire naturelle. Meanwhile, Alexander Wilson “sadly neglected” the turkey, as did several other American ornithologists.

In selecting Wild Turkey Cock as his introductory image, Audubon thus offered his European audience something familiar. American wildlife, far from exotic, diminutive, or bizarre, was just like that of Europe. The Wild Turkey Cock was an immediate success. Its popularity among Audubon’s patrons lead him paint two versions in oil. One canvas of “a Turkey cock, a hen, and nine young” was finished in Edinburgh. William Jardin expressed interest in purchasing the painting, but Audubon eventually presented it as a gift to the Edinburgh Royal Institute. Another version was given to Richard Rathbone.

While the iconography of Wild Turkey Cock fit into a European visual tradition, the composition of Virginian Partridge, Audubon’s second large-scale print, had a similar effect. When Lizars first examined Audubon’s drawings, he paused at the Virginian Partridge and “stopped mute for perhaps an instant. His arms fell…then he said, ‘I will engrave and publish this.’” Perhaps more so than any other illustration, Virginian Partridge offered the narrative drama and visual dynamism of a history painting. A violent
image of a “hawk pounding on partridges,” Audubon’s painting was a radical departure from orthodox scientific illustration.\textsuperscript{542} Audubon endows his birds with the frantic emotions and activated positions of a war scene: the hawk plunges with terrorizing ferocity as the partridges scatter recklessly in every direction. More than merely an exposition of bird anatomy or behavior, Audubon’s image is a climatic narrative moment in which the hawk is about to make his final seizure. The viewer is less inclined to consider the bird morphologically and more inclined to wonder how the narrative unfolds. Predictably, the Rathbones commissioned an oil painting of this scene as well. In selecting \textit{Virginian Partridge}, Lizars thus indicated his preference for images that followed the contours of European fine art.

Audubon’s selection for the third number was his famous \textit{Bird of Washington}. The illustration’s connection to a European pictorial tradition does not need to be restated. Suffice it to say, \textit{Bird of Washington} reinforced the connection made by the first two prints.

In sum, Audubon’s prints were by no means unmediated reflections of American wildlife. On top of the stylistic devices Audubon inherited from France, decisions made while printing and advertising \textit{The Birds of America} appealed directly to Europeans, and in some cases were specific to the English gentry. Audubon’s French upbringing, and his ability to maneuver through different national-cultural milieux, made such stratagems possible. Together, they helped Audubon integrated \textit{The Birds of America} into European ways of seeing. To Audubon’s viewers, American birds appeared wholly familiar. Perhaps this is what led François Gérard, upon viewing Audubon’s prints, to formulate a trans-Atlantic parallel: “Are we not all America men? Have we not the same nerves, sinews and mental faculties which other nations possess? By Washington! We have, and may God grant us the peaceable use of them for ever.”\textsuperscript{543}
John James Audubon, the American Woodsman

In the sections above, I outlined how Audubon molded *The Birds of America* to appeal to a European clientele. Audubon also sought to popularize his work through his own celebrity, harnessing particular forms of self-representation that would resonate for this audience. The character of the American Woodsman added an explicitly American dimension to his enterprise, and endowed it with exotic appeal. As we saw in Chapter Two, Audubon developed the persona of American Woodsman on the frontier. The presence of French émigrés simultaneously reinforced European conventions. The result was a combination of frontier appearance and refined social custom. In England, Audubon pushed the frontier dimension of this duality to the foreground.

In this section, I draw on two primary evidentiary sources for Audubon’s deployment of the American Woodsman. One includes anecdotal accounts of Audubon’s conduct while entertaining his European patrons. These accounts come from journals and letters written Audubon and his European acquaintances. The other source is Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography*, the accompanying text to *The Birds of America*. During Audubon’s first year in England he resolved to publish a written account of American birds to supplement the double-elephant folio. From 1830 to 1839, Audubon published the *Ornithological Biography* in five octavo volumes. The publication departed from the conventions of scientific literature by adopting a narrative format—a method used by Buffon and condemned by the Philadelphian naturalists. Nonetheless, or

* In her book *Picturing Nature*, Ann Shelby Blum discusses how during the first half of the nineteenth century Philadelphia witnessed a shift into more “formal taxonomic description,” due to the “institutionalization and professionalization of science” (48). Because the Philadelphian scientists were only a small group of well-acquainted individuals, writers could fashion their texts for “an audience already initiated into formal taxonomic description” (49). The place of narrative in natural history literature thus diminished as professional natural historians began to “compose their descriptions in a terse style and format that accommodated little anecdote or metaphor”
perhaps for this reason, *Ornithological Biography* was an immediate success in Europe and earned Audubon considerable repute as a writer and a naturalist.

*Ornithological Biography* included individual descriptions of each species, interspersed with narrative “Episodes” about life on the American frontier.” Audubon created these Episodes to appeal to the romantic sensibilities of his English readership, which hungered for tales of American adventure. The Episodes functioned as “a way of leavening his natural history” and enhancing the allure of Audubon's enterprise as a whole. As Frank Levering as noted, Audubon’s Episodes were “advertisements” for potential subscribers. “Food for the idle,” Audubon called them in a letter to a friend. The author even encouraged British newspapers to publish portions of his Episodes as ‘filler stories.’ They had no greater purpose than to please his readers. The Episodes thus constitute a fertile field of analysis, where we can examine how Audubon molded his enterprise to meet established taste.

**The American Woodsman**

The character of the American Woodsman was already a popular icon in 1820s; Audubon’s innovation lay in how he exploited it. In Europe, the “romantic myth” of the American frontiersman, who kept to the margins of civilization and preferred to live “according to nature law,” was *a la mode.* James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* novels and hundreds of published travel accounts helped shape an American icon that, (48). Whereas in England, genteel amateurs dominated scientific circles, in America, no such classes pressured scientists to modify their style. By adopting a narrative format, Audubon catered to a British audience, for whom “the specialized language of taxonomy was generally characterized as exclusive and discouraging to the nonspecialist” (48). Buffon lent credence to this “palatable narrative approach” (59).

**” Buffon had popularized the method of describing each animal. He, like Audubon, focused on the animal’s behavioral characteristics but also included morphological and historical information.**
like Daniel Boone, broke off from established society and inhabited the American wilderness in contented solitude. This strain of popular Romanticism had its roots in Industrial Europe, and especially England, where “a society increasingly concerned with the urban ugliness of industrialism [turned to] nature for refuge.” As Edward Nygren has noted, the romantic obsession with American nature and the frontier was initially “an upper-middle-class manifestation” that was “urban in its origins.” It emerged from England’s provincial industrial centers like Liverpool, where these two phenomena converged. Audubon’s appeal was thus based on the “vast, undefiled wilderness he seemed to represent;” a vision of “the New World, beautiful, unspoiled, free.” And it was the “rich and well-read, the denizens of high society,” that responded most enthusiastically to this cultural spectacle.

“Since I have been in England, I have studied the character of the Englishmen as carefully as I studied the birds in America, and I know full well that in England novelty is always in demand, and that if a thing is well known it will not receive much support.” Audubon’s statement reaffirms the extent to which he was sensitive to the proclivities of his European associates. He knew that he offered two novelties of his own—bird drawings that had a “life-like” quality new to the practice scientific representation, and a fresh American frontier persona. He indulged his audience with hyperbolic visions of life in the wilderness, imitating animal sounds and Indian “war whoops” and relaying stories of adventure. Having spent his entire life maintaining and even buttressing his connection to the Old World through commerce, association, and representation, Audubon now exploited the character of the American Woodsman as a symbol of his difference.
This strategy of cultural differentiation was far from new. When Chester Harding, an American painter, visited England in 1823, a local promoter of Harding’s work advertised the artist as “self-taught—a mere savage—right slap out o’ the woods—never saw a picture till a few months ago—we Americans are all the rage here now.”

Audubon’s supporters promoted his frontier persona in a similar way. On the advice of William Lizars, Audubon had local portraitist John Syme paint his likeness in full woodsman apparel with rifle, wolf-skin coat, and an unkempt mane (Fig. 49). In line with this image, Audubon wore “fringed buckskins” and brandished a walking stick wherever he went. Writing to Lucy from Liverpool in 1827, he urged her to keep good care of “my Case Jacket gun…my Indian hunting dress and Travelling things as I wish to present them to some friends here or [a] Public institution.” Audubon presented himself as a quasi-ethnographic subject—an American specimen that could be displayed as a foreign curiosity.

The Episodes

The Episodes of Ornithological Biography were, as Scott Russell Sanders put it, “a literary analogue to his long hair and long beard, his fringed buckskins and drawing-room high jinks.” Audubon recounted stories—real, embellished, and totally fabricated—of picaresque adventure and the dangers of the American wilds. On the frontier, one ran the risk “of being murdered, while asleep in encampments, by prowling

* The relationship between curiosity and natural history in Audubon’s self-presentation begs for further exploration. Alan Bewell has noted how “romantic natural history was not simply about exhibiting interesting specimens abstracted from their natural environments; instead, it was engaged in the more comprehensive task of recreating these natures themselves, which exhibiting entire inventories of colonial natures as a whole” (17). It would be interesting to see how forms of self-representation among naturalists and explorers were subsumed into this “comprehensive task.” In the case of Audubon, it seems that the naturalist himself became another object of fascination, inventoried and exhibited like his birds.
and ruthless Indians,” whose “murderous countenances,” could take on “a terrific grin.” Audubon also included “first-hand” accounts of America’s most famous outdoorsmen, including Daniel Boone. Sporting a “homespun hunting, moccassined but barelegged,” Boone, was a “broad-chested, muscular giant of the Western forests, His countenance reflected his great courage, enterprise and perseverance.” In reality, Boone had none of the mythic stature described by Audubon, but observational accuracy was not the author’s intent. Indeed, the story itself is an embellishment; Audubon never met Boone.

The reader of Audubon’s Episodes repeatedly finds the narrator in Boone-esque attire, tarnished by weeks of outdoor adventure. “Disagreeable to the civilized eye, for not having trimmed by beard or hair,” wrote Audubon about himself, “the painter Hogarth could not have asked for a better model for Robinson Crusoe.” Like the archetypical American hunter, Audubon’s “feet are well moccasined; he wears a belt around his waist; his heavy rifle is resting on his brawny shoulder; on one side hangs his ball pouch, surmounted by the horn of an ancient Buffalo, once the terror of the herd, but now containing a pound of the best gunpowder.” In Audubon’s writings, the character of the American Woodsman took on even more mythic proportions.

In accordance with his backwoods persona, Audubon represented his art as a natural gift, not a learned practice, and his rise to prominence as a romantic struggle against all odds:

For a period of nearly twenty years, my life was a succession of vicissitudes. I tried various branches of commerce, but they all proved unprofitable, doubtless became my whole mind was ever filled with my passion for rambling and admiring those objects of nature from which alone I received the purest gratification. I had to struggle against the will of all who at that
period called themselves my friends. I must here, however, except my wife and children. The remarks of my other friends irritated me beyond endurance, and, breaking through all bonds, I gave myself entirely up to my pursuits…Years were spent away from my family. Yet, reader, will you believe it, I had no other object in view than simply to enjoy the sight of nature. Never for a moment did I conceive the hope of becoming in any degree useful to my kind, until I accidentally formed acquaintance with the Prince of Musignano at Philadelphia.566

As Richard Rhodes has noted, Audubon thus becomes a “Candide figure, an innocent of the woods whose art had evolved in passionate purity.”567

As we have seen, American naturalists disliked the unprofessional flamboyance of Audubon’s frontier persona. In Europe, it was precisely Audubon’s unprofessional appearance that set him apart as authentically American. Contemporary European critics wrote endlessly about Audubon’s rugged Americanness. William Swainson’s review of The Birds of American in the Edinburgh Literary Journal invoked Robinson Crusoe as the only previous American to confer such an intense mood of American adventure.568 In a piece for Blackwood’s Magazine, editor John Wilson recounted the effect of Audubon’s presence among the British elite: “when we first set eyes on him in a party of literati…he was such an American woodsman as took the shine out of us modern Athenians.”569 Some found the character of the American Woodsman more enthralling than Audubon’s actual book. Sir Walter Scott, for example, was most interested “in the idea of Audubon as a hunter who roamed the wilderness with savages.”570 It was precisely Audubon’s departure from the conventions of European society that made his Americanness genuine.

The character of the American Woodsman also authenticated Audubon’s illustrations. For Baron Curvier, Audubon’s lack of formal scientific training enabled him
“to create an original work of natural history than no professional naturalist would probably have the idea of attempting.” Visiting Audubon’s Edinburgh exhibition at the Royal Institute, a French critic described “a landscape wholly American, trees, flowers, grass, even the colors of the sky and the waters, quickened with a life that is real, peculiar, trans-Atlantic.” Audubon possessed a “magic power,” whereby his viewers were “transported into the forests which for so many years this man of genius has trod.” Audubon’s birds, as we have seen, borrowed heavily from representations of European nature and wildlife. Only the aura of the American Woodsman made these images “a real and palpable vision of the New World, with its atmosphere, its imposing vegetation, and its tribes which know not the yoke of man.” Imposing vegetation, savage tribes—these were entirely absent from Audubon’s actual images. It was not Audubon illustrations, but rather the figure of the American Woodsman that seemed to capture “an entire hemisphere.”

The English Gentleman

Audubon offset this American Woodsman persona by simultaneously forging his status as a learned gentleman. This duality is apparent in Audubon’s earliest letter of introduction, written by Vincent Nolte to the Rathbone family. First, Nolte highlighted Audubon’s unique Americanness. He was a “native of the U.S.” who had “spent upwards of twenty years in all parts of them.” It was for this reason that Audubon could “convey a far better idea of American Birds than all the stuffed birds of all the museums put together.” At the same time, Nolte made sure to position his American comrade within the conventions of British propriety. Audubon was “a gentleman of highly respectable Scientific requirements,” whose “collection of ornithological drawings could prove a most valuable acquisition to any Museum, or any monied patron of the arts.”
The American Woodsman may have had exotic allure, but Nolte had to appeal to the Rathbones’ sense of decorum in order to integrate Audubon effectively. Thus, when some of Audubon’s acquaintances urged him “cut his hair and find new clothes better suited to his high-profile circle of acquaintances,” Audubon “politely declined; the dress and the hair, he was convinced, were an important part of his attraction. He was a gentleman, they had Vincent Nolte’s word for that; he was urban, respectable, well spoken; his manner could be impeccable. But he was a frontiersman as well.”

By exhibiting these identities simultaneously, Audubon enabled his viewers to see “wild” America without negotiating new environments or new ways of seeing. Wherever Audubon traveled, he would take a hotel room suited to his titled guests. Audubon recounted one such venue: “there was a large buffet decorated with a pair of stuffed pheasants, a black horsehair sofa, some armchairs, a mirror, and even some geraniums.” His patrons could thus absorb visions of wild America within the comfort of their normal circumstances. Such spaces also served to reinforce the luxury status of The Birds of America.

Audubon knew how to gather and deploy symbols of repute that would resonate for his viewership. Over the course of his travels, Audubon infiltrated every major institution of science and art. By lecturing to, displaying his prints for, or otherwise socializing among each establishment’s associates, Audubon earned membership. He became a Fellow of the Wernerian Society of Edinburgh in December of 1826, the Royal Society of Edinburgh in March of 1827, The Linnean Society of London in February 1828, and the Royal Society of London in March of 1829. Each affiliation was a mark of distinction, and Audubon advertised these marks enthusiastically. On the lower left of each print in Birds appears a variation of “Drawn from Nature by J.J. Audubon, F.R.S,
F.L.S.” (F.R.S. stands for Fellow of the Royal Society, F.L.S. Fellow of the Linnaean Society). In a prospectus for Birds, published in Edinburgh in 1831, Audubon again advertises himself: “fellow of the Linnean and Zoological Societies of London; member of the Lyceum of New York; the Natural History Society of Paris; the Wernerian Natural History Society of Edinburgh: Honorary member of the Scottish Society of Architecture and Sculpture, &c.” Although Audubon paraded his untutored backwoods genius, his titles ensured his subscribers that he met the expectations of European art and science.

Audubon also exploited the names of his most prestigious clientele. The Birds of America was published “under the special patronage of her Most Excellent Majesty, Queen Adelaide,” and its subscribers included “His Most Gracious Majesty, George IV,” “His Most Christian Majesty, Charles X,” “His Majesty Philippe I. King of the French,” and “Her Royal Highness Mademoiselle d’Orleans.” To any Englishmen, these details were significant marks of distinction. When he wrote to Charles-Lucien Bonaparte asking if he could advertise his subscription, the idea “was to use the name Bonaparte to attract others.” If Audubon’s woodsman apparel established his American authenticity, then his connection to these notables established his international prestige.

In the Ornithological Biography, Audubon fortified his status as a gentleman of learning. He hired William MacGillivray, a young zoologist from Scotland, to correct his spelling and grammar, polish his writing, and supply the scientific information that Audubon lacked, namely technical morphology. MacGillivray endowed Audubon’s writing with gentlemanly refinement. Scott Russell Sanders has drawn attention to how MacGillivray put Audubon’s writing “through a wringer of Victorian prose” that “washed out some of its color and idiosyncrasy.” By employing the “language deemed
proper at the time for an educated audience” the text “became less American and more British.”

In *Ornithological Biography* Audubon fashioned himself as a learned scholar. John R. Knott draws attention to one such passage. After recounting the carnage of a cormorant shooting, Audubon transitions his narrative to “the scene of writing,” where the author sat “peaceably scratching my paper with an iron pen, in one of the comfortable and quite cool houses” of Edinburgh. Here, Audubon placed himself “in the genteel world of his readers, recollecting in the tranquility the heat and emotion of his…adventures.” Similarly, Audubon references his “notable friends and subscribers.” At the beginning of his text, Audubon thanks “the Adamsons, the Turners, the Donkins, the Buddles, the Charnleys and…the noble family of the Ravensworths,” in Newcastle, and “the Gotts, the Bankses, the Walkers, the Marshalls, [and] the Davys” in Leeds. As the volumes of *Ornithological Biography* progress, “we hear of more and more prominent people in some way drawn into the effort, as Audubon’s name dropping charts his progress through…social and political elites.” Such references helped the author establish “a relationship with his readers that would ensure his credibility and sustain their interest in the enterprise.”

Does the figure of Audubon as the English gentleman mark his assimilation into English life? Several scholars have made this interpretation. Mary Durant argues that Audubon had undergone a transformation in England; he “was a markedly different man from the rough-and-ready fellow who worked his way down the Mississippi as a huntsman.” Sanders also identifies a “transformation from backwoods shopkeeper to cosmopolitan artist.” However, as we saw in Chapters One and Two, Audubon had

* Knott offers a compelling account of Audubon’s “Dual Persona” in his book *Imagining Wild America*, which in many ways prefigures the duality I construct.
always fancied himself a cultured gentleman. When Audubon wrote to Lucy from England about how he had “come to fine dressing again—silk stockings and pumps; shave every morning; and sometimes dress twice a day,” he was making reference to an older, similar habit growing up in Nantes and Mill Grove. In truth, it seems that Audubon evolved in two directions, amplifying his “rough-and-ready” persona while also reestablishing his identity as a European gentleman. The success of Audubon’s Birds depended upon this duality. The American Woodsman established Audubon’s reputation as “an authority on American nature” and his illustrations as “authentically American.” The European Gentleman enabled his viewers to connect to an otherwise alien enterprise; they could see themselves in the figure of Audubon and judge his work according to their own system of evaluation.

The same rules apply to Audubon’s illustrations. His birds, with their life-like poses and habitats, appeared to be direct reflections of the American wilderness, carrying with them all of the exotic mystery of the American Woodsman. However, by adhering to European painterly techniques and “the conventions of the game paintings that hung in the homes of many of his new patrons,” Audubon offered his birds up for direct visual consumption. His viewers did not have to renegotiate their way of seeing. Audubon flattered his European supporters by suggesting that they were encountering something completely new and deeply American, while presenting them with images that they already had the tools to interpret.

“No Taste in America”

When Audubon left England for America in 1831, his new British allegiances lingered. The Birds of America was still in the beginning stages of production. After four
years of hard work, Audubon had secured his ongoing operation and could now return to fulfill his ambition of drawing every American species.

As almost every biographer mentions, Audubon looked forward to his triumphant return. This return, however, was bittersweet. During Audubon’s time abroad, the American scientific establishment had voiced several criticisms of his work. In December 1828, Audubon received a letter from Thomas Sully informing him that a group of Philadelphian naturalists, lead by George Ord, had launched an attack on papers Audubon presented to the Wernerian Society in Edinburgh. In several newspapers, Ord challenged Audubon’s assertion that vultures found their prey with eye sight instead of olfaction. He also questioned Audubon’s *Mocking Birds and Rattlesnake* (Fig. 50), in which, he argued, a rattlesnake was fallaciously situated in the branches of a tree. For Ord and his constituents, Audubon’s work was nothing but “a pack of lies.”

William Dunlap, chronicler of American arts during the 1830s, slighted Audubon as well. Dunlap expressed a strong preference for Alexander Wilson: “we have seen that Wilson, a modest unpretending man did for the science of Ornithology, and the skill he acquired as a draughtsman, without having his hand guided by David [or any] masters.” Dunlap preferred Wilson’s spirit of simple, self-made American entrepreneurship to the extravagance of the foreign-trained Audubon.

Perhaps this condemnation worried Audubon, and perhaps not. After all, the vast majority of Audubon’s subscribers were in England, and they cared far less about the scientific rigor of his illustrations. In combating these accusations, Audubon adopted the perspective of his English clientele. “No taste in America,” Audubon lamented in 1830. It was to Britain that “I owe nearly all my successes.” Audubon continued to cater to the tastes of his established audience, and even revised his technique to meet
their preferences. In this section I discuss several aspects of Audubon’s final illustrations that reflect his ongoing commitment to a European audience. In the process, I also highlight the French sources from which Audubon adopted his new approaches.

**New Birds and the “Mixed Prints”**

When Audubon embarked on his last major drawing expedition, he encountered an overabundance of new species. Beginning his new expedition in the marshes of New Jersey’s Great Pine Forest, Audubon continued down through Charleston and into Labrador and the Florida Keys. This extremely ambitious undertaking yielded dozens of water bird illustrations. On top of these successes, Audubon met Thomas Nuttall and Dr. John Kirk Townsend, who had just returned from a western expedition through the Rocky Mountains and along the coast. Nuttall and Townsend had collected hundreds of new plants, furs, and bird skins. After some negotiation at the Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia, Nuttall agreed to sell Audubon 90 western bird skins, including, by Audubon’s estimate, about forty new species. He now had a surplus of new subjects to complete the four hundred prints he originally advertised.

Indeed, Audubon had more new species than four hundred prints would allow. He would have simply expanded the number of etchings in *Birds*, but he worried that some of his subscribers would balk at the extra cost. Britain was in an economic slump, and some of Audubon’s subscribers were running out of “money and patience.” Audubon’s solution was to convince them to accept payment for thirty-five new prints,

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5 Interestingly, Audubon began to name new species after his British patrons, just as he had done Napoleon. *Bewick’s Wren* and *Stanley’s Hawk* (named after Lord Stanley), among others, appeared in his new numbers. The national-political implications of this decision were strongly felt. Several American naturalists contested Audubon’s *Stanley’s Hawk*, arguing that the bird had been previously named Cooper’s Hawk after the founder of the New York Lyceum of Natural History.
in which the artist would consolidate many of the new species. Beginning with plate 353, Audubon placed two or more species in a single composition. Plate 400, for example, portrayed the *Arkansas siskin, Mealy redpoll, Louisiana tanager, Townsend’s finch,* and the *Buff-breasted finch.* Some such prints contained up to eleven birds from six different species.

In all, Audubon included seventy species in thirty “mixed prints” (Fig. 51). In these mixed prints, Audubon rendered birds from different habitats in a single image. He was aware that this violated the scientific tenets followed by his American detractors. He assured his Philadelphian associate Edward Harris that he was “forced to finish [his] work in as few Numbers of plates as possible…[And therefore] I am forced to introduce as many new species of the same genera in the same plate as circumstances will afford.” This, at least, is how Audubon represented his decision to his few remaining allies in Philadelphia. Audubon also understood that his British subscribers did not know, nor did they care, about the accuracy of Audubon’s illustrations. In fact, the pastiche-like quality of these mixed prints, in which assorted colorful birds preen, sing, and interact jovially, became some of Audubon’s most popular pieces. In the collection and execution of his final illustrations, Audubon thus weighed his decisions against the demands of his European readership.

It is also possible that Audubon took his new compositional format from Jean-Baptiste Oudry. Audubon, as we recall, was “extremely fond” of La Fontaine’s illustrated fables. In one autobiographical account, Audubon mentions one fable by name: “I frequently perused the one entitled *L’hirondelle et les petits oiseaux.*” Oudry’s popular illustration for this fable features eleven birds of many varieties mingling on four branches (Fig. 52). Just like Audubon’s illustrations, Oudry’s birds interact in different
poses. Some are rendered in flight while others sit perched on branches. With this illustration in mind, it appears that Audubon took both stylistic and scientific cues from Europe.

**Priorities of Representation: Effect and Fidelity**

Even if Audubon’s mixed prints were the outcome of financial necessity, numerous other prints demonstrate his disregard for the dictates of his Philadelphian colleagues. Audubon placed several birds on or near vegetation from unrelated habitats. Plate 393, for example, shows a Northwestern warbler and two Western bluebirds on an allspice plant native to the Carolinas. Similarly, plate 395 showcases three western warblers in a wahoo, an eastern shrub. Audubon even gave Robert Havell, who had yet to visit the Americas, permission to fill in many of his backgrounds. By 1835, Havell was responsible for more that fifty scenes. Havell contributed more ecological mix-ups to Audubon’s prints. He placed Audubon’s Bay-breasted warbler, native to the Great Lakes, on a cotton plant, and the Palm warbler, another inhabitant of the great lakes, on a wild orange tree.

These errors were too numerous for Audubon to claim ignorance. In fact, Audubon kept close watch over the production of his prints, even while abroad, and sent Havell very detailed instructions. In a letter regarding the *Great White Heron*, for example, Audubon elaborated on his desired color and design: “have the water a *Pea-green* tint. Keep the division of the scales on the leg & feet white in your engraving—the colouring over these will subdue them enough…. Finish the houses better from the original which you have.” If Audubon departed from fidelity, it was not due to inattention. The artist was fully aware of the corners he was cutting, and the ecological barriers breeched by outsourcing his landscapes. That Havell might take inspiration from his local British
landscape and “use his own ideas of composition” for *Birds* did not bother Audubon. The publication was a product of these trans-Atlantic efforts.\textsuperscript{607}

**Cityscapes and Townscapes**

In his new illustrations, Audubon began to include motifs of settlement and industry, which were tailored directly to his British subscribership. By including elements of human civilization, Audubon manipulated his illustrations to reflect the tradition of English landscape painting. It also had the effect of making America appear more “civilized.”

British aestheticians had long favored scenes of settlement. In his immensely popular *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1791), William Gilpin set out the tenets of English picturesque landscape painting. “The idea of a wild country, in a natural state,” wrote Gilpin, “is to the generality of people but an unpleasing one. There are few, who do not prefer the busy scenes of cultivation to the grandest of nature’s rough productions.”\textsuperscript{608} A “vast, wild, and unfinished” country, on the other hand, was merely a “shapeless waste.”\textsuperscript{609} Audubon was familiar with Gilpin’s argument. Not only were his ideas generally accepted by English landscapists, they were also “widely disseminated” in America.\textsuperscript{610} Audubon had never rendered his America very wild. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Audubon’s landscapes were always tamed in the Davidian manner, suggesting that America, like Europe, followed the standard course of continental and societal growth. Now, however, he made this latent reference to American civilization explicit.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} It is possible that Audubon took inspiration for these illustrations from Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*. A 1792 English translation of Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* features birds placed in front of a variety of human settlements (Fig. 55). *The Crow* includes a small town with a log cabin in the foreground. *The Royston Crow* also includes a town, this time with a larger industrial edifice. *The
According to my research, few, if any, of Audubon’s pre-England drawings depicted human settlements. Now, with the help of Swiss-born landscape painter George Lehman, Audubon began to include settlements of every variety. *Swainson’s Hawk, Glossy Ibis, and Greater Yellowlegs* all feature small, frontier edifices. Behind the Swainson’s hawk lies a cabin, in front of which logs sit ready for transportation downriver. *Snowy Egret*, and *Common Snipe* are both rendered in front of plantations. *Snowy Egret* (Fig. 53), for example, features a large manor house and storehouse surrounded by a fence. Leading up to the house is a roadway and a bridge—an example of America’s expanding infrastructure. One can even make out a gentleman—not a woodsman—with a rifle, and a dammed river basin.

Townscapes emphasized the growth of American settlement to a greater degree. Audubon’s *Brown Pelican* and *Brown Noddy* are both placed in front of seaside towns. The Brown booby overlooks a port town in Dry Tortugas, where large edifices line the shore and smaller homes recede into the mainland. A long wharf with docked ships alludes to local mercantilism. Finally, *Great Blue Heron, Canvasback, Long-billed Curlew*, and *Greenshank* all offer views of full-sized cities. Behind the *Canvasback* lies Baltimore (Fig. 54). The city extends beyond the edges of the page, giving the impression of continual settlement. Large edifices recede into the distance and sailboats and cargo ships crowd the water in the middleground. The central bird in the illustration leads our gaze directly to this cityscape with its beak. In *Long-billed curlew*, one of Audubon’s “most successful and popular compositions,” he included a view of Charleston.  

*Jackdaw* features a crumbling fortress much like that shown in Audubon’s *Greenshank* (fig. 56). It is likely that Audubon encountered this edition in one of his patron’s libraries, or during his visit to Oxford and Cambridge in 1828.
some stationary and others with masts raised, fill the port. City hall, a church, and a prison dominate the middleground. As with Baltimore, Charleston appears to stretch further than the eye can see. Here, America is not wild. It is a fully operational nod of commerce, religion, and government.

Audubon’s cityscapes undermine the idea that Audubon’s art expressed the Romantic sensibility of “human capacities dwarfed by the power of nature.” Unlike early American travel writers such as Alexander von Humbolt and later American Romantic painters like Thomas Cole, Audubon emphasizes human civilization, distilling the American wilderness and relegating it to the periphery.

We can trace this pattern through the *Ornithological Biography* as well. Audubon may have indulged his readers within visions of unbridled wilderness, but these passages are offset by references to the expansion of American settlement and commerce. In an episode entitled “Improvements in the Navigation of the Mississippi,” Audubon traces the development of American steamboats from their first appearance on the Ohio River in 1810 through 1826, when fifty-one boats carried 29,000 tons up and down stream. Audubon made sure to add that the “amount for the present year will be much greater.” In these passages, the author celebrates America’s emergence as an advanced civilization.

In “The Squatters of Mississippi,” Audubon traces the progress of a frontier settlement from a group of aimless wanderers into thriving, commercial hub. Squatters were notorious for their uncouth and nomadic habits, but Audubon remarks on their “respected” lifestyles and celebrates their industry, solidarity, and commercial acumen. As “their savings and goods increase, along with domestic comforts of every kind,” the squatters formed small communities through marriage and trade. “Where one cabin once
stood, a neat village springs up with its warehouses, stores and workshops to dignify the place.” The process culminates in the establishment of a fully formed city:

Thus are the vast frontiers of our country peopled, and cultivation gradually extended over the Western wilds. No doubt the time will come when the great valley of the Mississippi, still covered with primeval forests and dotted with swamps, will smile with cornfields and orchards. Crowded cities will rise along its banks, for all the world to marvel at Providence and its bounty.

In many respects, Audubon reflects what Knott calls “the prevalent view that wilderness was a stage in the emergence of a new nation, the beginning point of a narrative of progress rather than a state that one could hope to preserve.” Indeed, in several parts of *Ornithological Biography*, the growth of industry supersedes the splendors of unspoiled American wilderness: to this “great continent” Europe “sent forth her adventurous sons, to wrest for themselves a habitation from the wild inhabitants of the forest, and to convert the neglected soil into fields of exuberant fertility.” Audubon thus wrote from the perspective of an industrial Englishman, who “accepted the interests of the settled world.” America, like Europe, followed a civilizing course of development.

**Conclusion**

Audubon’s adoption of English conventions—both visual and personal—marks his third major national adaptation. In Audubon’s writing, we can locate at least one overt reference to the simultaneity of these three identities. In the Episode “A Ball in Newfoundland,” Audubon recounts a birding expedition along the east coast. Upon anchoring at “the pretty little village,” locals expressed concern over the presence of the “warlike schooner.” To quell their anxieties, Audubon and his cohorts raised “the Star-Spangled Banner to the masthead at our Captain’s signal, in a salute to the French and
British flags” that were already waving. This display of tri-national allegiance immediately “drew a welcome.” That evening on shore, Audubon and his son John Woodhouse attended a ball, where John, “by way of an overture, played ‘Hail, Columbia, Happy Land,’ then he fiddled the ‘Marseillaise,’ and finally, ‘God Save the King.’” Here, on the “groundfloor of a fisherman’s house,” amidst dance and general merriment, all three national identities were at work.

The lines separating these identities are not very clean. Much of Audubon’s American identity was informed by European popular culture. Similarly, many of the cultural patterns Audubon originally encountered in France—and among French-American émigrés—reemerged and found new meaning when he reached England. We cannot simply delineate Audubon’s identity as a triangle formed by three national poles; in the course of his work, the very meaning of these poles was obscured and transformed by subsequent cultural formations. Rather, if I might draw on Buffon, this complex constituted a “web,” whereby original cultural formations merged and transformed in unpredictable flux.

Jean Rabin, Jean Jacques Fougère Audubon, John James Laforest Audubon, and John James Audubon, the American Woodsman; these names delineate several permutations of Audubon’s national and cultural identity. Most striking, perhaps, is the fact that he had so many names at all! One’s name, after all, is implicated as an immutable insignia of selfhood. Audubon continuously “edited and embroidered” not just his appearance and manner, but also his name, his place of birth and his personal
history. If nothing else, Audubon compels us to radically reconsider our own rootedness in a singular way of being.

From this reconsideration arises another: if Audubon could distort, manipulate, and exploit his cultural identities, were they mere artifice? On dissecting Audubon’s Americanness, this conclusion looms ominously. Yet, Audubon was a firm American patriot, and in his most private letters he expressed this patriotism with profound devotion. Writing to Lucy from England, Audubon often recounted how, “when I think of America—her beautiful forests and songsters…my eyes fill with big tears.” These declarations of American patriotism pepper all of Audubon’s correspondences. Throughout his endeavors, Audubon championed America and, in the words of Robert Henry Welker, “reacted to various aspects of American society with the true patriot’s critical discrimination.” Audubon’s patriotism, whether French, American, or English, was not a ruse, but rather an honest expression, which accumulated significance over time. Like Benedict Anderson, I call into question the conception of nationality as an arbitrary invention. Anderson cautions his readers to distinguish between Ernest Gellner’s definition of a nation as an “invention,” “fabrication,” or “falsity,” and urges them to replace these descriptors with “imagining” or “creation.” Audubon’s identities were not “inventions,” but rather “creations.” He did not masquerade “under false pretences,” but sought out meaningful connections.

My analysis is thus situated between the humanist notion of fixed individual identities and the antihumanist conception of “ideologically constituted social subjects.” Audubon is neither a self-manifested genius who pursued a singular course of development, nor a cultural dope, passively absorbing local dogma. Rather, he maintains a certain self-consciousness, with which he maneuvers opportunistically
between the cultural formations at his disposal. Following David Lubin’s definition of “identity politics,” Audubon was a member of several “identity groups.”629 At any given moment, he belonged to a number of these groups, “not all of which were necessarily in coalition with one another and some of which were actually in direct opposition.”630 Indeed, Audubon was responding to strikingly oppositional demands. The Philadelphian engraver Alexander Lawson criticized Audubon’s illustrations for the absence of “truth and correct lines.” Yet Sir Walter Scott disliked the same drawings for their “extreme correctness.”631 Not only do Lawson and Scott offer contradictory accounts of Audubon’s drawings, they also express inverted preferences. Audubon negotiated these conflicting cultural frameworks, and his work found different meaning depending on the framework at play.

As a product of slow evolution and conscious revision, Audubon’s identity was continuously unresolved. Until his death in 1851, Audubon was in an evolving dialogue with his personal history and immediate surroundings. Writing to a close friend after *The Birds of America* was finally complete, Audubon intimated the persistence of this transformation: “Myself a Naturalist no longer! No more advertisements of this poor me. No more stares at my face whilst traveling—No, I have some idea of revising even myself and altering my very name, not to be pestered anymore.”632
EPILOGUE: MAKING AUDUBON AMERICAN

Over the last four chapters, I have demonstrated how Audubon wove French and English motifs into his American narrative. The question remains, how has Audubon’s identity since been reduced to a single American dimension? What events, individuals, or cultural transitions made this possible? To what extent did Audubon himself erect this myth, and how much was formulated in retrospect?

The transformation of an individual into a national icon is difficult to trace. The phenomenon is deeply intertwined with the tacit swings of popular taste and ideology, and rarely leaves compelling historical evidence in its wake. Over the course of my research, however, I have found several clues that may have contributed to Audubon’s emergence as an American icon: the publication of an octavo version of *Birds* in the United States, a wave of nativist criticism following Audubon’s death, and the ideology of the conservationist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Briefly delineating this evidence will give insight into the process of appropriation, which separates Audubon’s history from Audubon historiography. I also hope that my discussion will open up new avenues for future research.

**Royal Octavo Edition**

After publishing the double-elephant folio, Audubon set out to produce an octavo version of his work. Ron Tyler has noted how scholars generally pay Audubon’s octavo edition little attention, regarding it as “little more than a pale imitation of the masterpiece.” However, analyzing the modifications made for Audubon’s second American edition reveals how he differentiated between his American and his European
readership. When Audubon reprinted his *Birds* in the United States, he made several changes to accommodate the demands of the American public. By reducing size and cost, presenting his information in a Linnaean manner, and making minor adjustments to the illustrations, Audubon made his work accessible to a broad American public, and more appealing to circles of American naturalists who criticized his previous efforts.

Audubon realized that by printing a smaller version *Birds*, and by using a more affordable printing process, he could tap into a domestic market that had grown during his time abroad. After arriving in New York in 1839, Audubon began to produce the *Royal Octavo* edition. He selected the new printing method of lithography, which had recently outpaced etching and engraving in affordability and speed. The Philadelphia lithographer, J.T. Bowen reduced the original bird images with a camera lucida and reprinted them as a one-hundred-part set over the next five years. At approximately ten by seven inches, the new octavo was, according to the New York *Albion*, “fitted both in size and price for general circulation.”

Unlike Audubon’s folio, the octavo *Birds* had an extended subtitle: *The Birds of America from Drawings Made in the United States and their Territories*. It emphasized the extent to which Audubon’s book was a product of American experience. Likewise, Audubon gave many birds in the *Royal Octavo* American names. His *Virginia Partridge* was completely redrawn and renamed the *Common American Partridge*. He renamed and redrew the *Surfbird* as *Townsend’s Surfbird* in honor of the American explorer. Much like Wilson, Audubon was beginning to promote his work as an American enterprise. Audubon’s American readership could now participate in this cultural production.

Audubon restructured his octavo around the Linnaean system—a remarkable change considering his enduring loyalty to Buffon’s anti-taxonomy. He reorganized and
renumbered all of his prints to follow the scientific order espoused by the Philadelphian naturalists, including Wilson and the Peales. Instead of beginning his text with a first-person narrative preamble, as he had the *Ornithological Biography*, the octavo began with a dry account of Vulture morphology:

Bill of moderate length, stout, cerate; upper mandible with the tip elongated and decurved; lower mandible rounded and thin-edged at the end. Head rather small, or of moderate size, ovato-oblong, and with part of the neck destitute of feathers. Eyes of moderate size, without projecting ridges. External aperture of ears rather small and simple. Skin over the fore part of the neck bare, or merely downy.637

Such descriptions stood in stark contrast with the light-hearted narratives enjoyed by Audubon’s British clientele.

Audubon also made concessions to American naturalists by modifying the depiction and distribution of his birds. Audubon removed much of the vegetation that Ord and Lawson had criticized in his illustrations. With the help of Bowen, Audubon cut leaves and branches out of *Sparrow Falcon* and *American Redstart*, erased landscapes from *Canadian Woodpecker*, *Common Tern*, *Ivory Gull*, and *Harris’s Finch*, and omitted the shrubs from behind the *Willow Ptarmigan*.638 These changes served no other purpose than to meet the standards of American ornithological illustration.

Upon Audubon’s return to the United States, George Ord and other Philadelphians flung new criticisms at him for departures from fidelity. Ord denounced Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography* as an invention:

If the fidelity of his narrative had corresponded with his perseverance, his fame would repose on a basis which time would not diminish, but what will be the decision of posterity on the merits of one who has wantonly violated the dignity of truths by rendering her subordinate to fiction!639
Audubon made several adjustments that conceded to these criticisms. He fixed errors in identification, about which most European readership had had no complaints. The Blue-green Warbler, for example, was changed to the correct Cerulean Warbler. He removed illustrations of the Yellow Warbler, Yellow Redpoll Warbler, Hemlock Warbler, and Cerulean Warbler, which had all been misidentified and printed twice in the double-elephant folio. He also separated Havell’s mixed prints into new plates of one species each. For example, Audubon divided the original plate 343 into seven Bowen prints: Rocky Mountain Flycatcher, Short-legged Pewit Flycatcher, Least Pewee Flycatcher, Small-headed Flycatcher, Blue Mountain Flycatcher, Bartram’s Vireo or Greenlet, and Least Flycatcher. A reprint of Audubon’s book was by all measures an appropriate time to correct errors. These particular changes, however, seem to respond to the attacks of American naturalists—attacks that were absent abroad.

Audubon’s modifications appear to have facilitated his success as an American producer. The octavo edition of Birds was an immediate bestseller. The first three hundred copies sold out instantly, followed by another three hundred. By 1841, Bowen had produced 1,475 copies of the first volume. Three years later, Audubon had more than twelve hundred subscribers for the complete set of seven octavo volumes. It is undeniable that Audubon’s new edition resonated for his American audience. Further research, however, is needed to follow up these claims. For example, an examination of contemporary American responses to the Royal Octavo will give insight into how Americans perceived Audubon’s operation.
Nativism

An emergent nativist rhetoric in American criticism may have contributed to the historiographic appropriation of Audubon. According to Ron Tyler, the royal octavo appeared “at the height of Americans’ frenzy for ‘national’ works of art and literature.”643 In my research, however, I found that a nationalist rhetoric enveloped Audubon’s work only following his death in 1851.

Several American reviews published between 1830 and 1850 attempted to reclaim Audubon as an American, but acknowledge his indebtedness to Europe. An 1835 review of the *Ornithological Biography*, published in Boston, celebrated the fact that Audubon’s “own country is now affording him a support equal to that of Europe,” however “it was not so in the beginning; and had he not received encouragement abroad, his great enterprise might have been delayed for years.”644 For this author, Audubon’s success, and the discourse of science at large, was contingent on these international dynamics:

> Far from regretting this circumstance we are glad to see that the spirit of science, like that of Samaritan benevolence, makes of no account the boundaries which separate nations, and regards the honor of all such enterprises as belonging, not to the particular region, but to the whole intellectual world.645

While Audubon was still active, moving back and forth across the Atlantic, his American admirers acknowledged his multiple allegiances. A letter written to Richard Harlan by John Abert expresses this sentiment. Abert describes Audubon’s celebrity in America, England, and France, “each of which country appears to rival the others, by distinguishing him with academic honours.” Abert recognizes that “our country cannot
claim the merit of having taken the lead in this honourable struggle,” but takes satisfaction in knowing that Audubon is “a citizen and a native.”

After Audubon’s death in 1851, a new wave of eulogies reclaimed Audubon as an American. Waldemar Fries offers a preliminary investigation of the “laudatory obituaries” that appeared in the newspapers of America’s cities. The Boston DailyAdvertiser called Audubon’s Birds “an honor to the country and a permanent monument to the memory of the author.” In the Boston Daily Atlas, Dr. Thomas Mayo Brewer remembered Audubon as “one of our most distinguished citizens,” who “has done so much alike for his own fame, and that of his country.” It was for this reason that he stood as an “example” to his “countrymen.” A review in the Saturday Courier called the royal octavo “an honor to the American nation,” and a contemporaneous issue of the Albion celebrate Birds as a “national and instructing work.” By 1858, Audubon and his work were considered so profoundly American that the U.S. Secretary of State ordered one hundred copies to be sent as gifts to foreign powers—“an unofficial acknowledgement of the national role Audubon’s works had assumed.”

Fries remarks on how almost all of the obituaries he encountered over the course of his research describe Audubon as a native of Louisiana. This fiction facilitated Audubon’s absorption into the tide of nativism that swelled during the three decades preceding the Civil War and proclaimed “America for the Americans.”

Further research in this area might follow a wider cross-section of American reviews. I have only located sources from the North—primarily Boston and Philadelphia. Reviews in the South, especially from the French-speaking regions where Audubon spent many years, might offer new insights into this phenomenon. So too might an analysis of Audubon’s connection to the emergent call for a distinctly American
Perhaps it is unsurprising that a similar nativism colored the work of American painters in the 1850s. The patriotic dimensions of the Hudson River School are well documented. Worthing Wittredge expressed the hopes of these American landscapists in 1859, around the same time that Audubon’s eulogists were glorifying his Americanness:

We are looking and hoping for something distinctive to the art of our country, something which shall receive a new tinge from our peculiar form of Government, from our position on the globe, or something peculiar to our people, to distinguish it from the art of the other nations and to enable us to pronounce without sham the oft repeated phrase, ‘American Art.’

It is possible that Audubon’s legacy was remolded during this period of American self-definition. By looking at post-obituary writings about Audubon in relation to the national call for an American art, one might shed light on Audubon’s historiographic appropriation, as well as his connection to American Romanticism.

**Maria Audubon**

The publication of Audubon’s journals in the late nineteenth century reveals how this Americanizing trend entered scholarship. Although eulogies and other celebratory writings emerged in the 1840s, not until the late-nineteenth century did Audubon become a subject of scholarly inquiry. When Maria Audubon, Audubon’s granddaughter, published several of his journals, this current of scholarly interest emerged.

Maria Audubon’s editing, however, is notorious for whitewashing and manipulating biographical information in order to cast Audubon in the “appropriate” light. Several changes she made appear to exacerbate misconceptions surrounding Audubon’s identity. Herrick has noted that Maria Audubon “accepted the late tradition, without a shred of historical evidence in support of it, that he was a Louisianian by birth and first saw light on a certain plantation on the north side of Lack Pontchartrain about
It follows that Audubon’s mother died not after giving birth in Saint-Domingue, but in Mandeville, Louisiana during “one of the local uprisings of slaves which were of frequent occurrence.” By further muddying the location of Audubon’s birth, and eliminating Saint-Domingue and Nantes from Audubon’s biography, Maria Audubon undeniably added to the mythologization of the American Woodsman. In order to test the impact of her writings, however, further research should look into contemporary responses to Maria Audubon’s writings—reviews of the edited journals and other published criticism. These documents will elucidate the impact of her revisions.

The Audubon Society

The Audubon Society’s nationalist movement of American bird conservation undoubtedly reinforced to the iconic image of John James Audubon. Theodore Roosevelt’s national conservation movement emerged just as Maria Audubon was distributing Audubon’s journals. Roosevelt frequently employed patriotic language to support his cause: Conservationism had clear advantages for the American people, contributing to economic efficiency that would enable the United States to better compete with other nations.

The Audubon Society, which also took shape in the late 1890s and early 1900s, profited from Roosevelt’s policies. As Oliver Orr has discussed, the Audubon Society pursued “as many executive orders for bird reservations as possible,” establishing seventeen such reservations with the signature of President Roosevelt. The Audubon Society contributed to the de-historicization of Audubon by conflating his name with a national cause to which, in reality, Audubon had only a tenuous connection. As a symbol
for these movements lobbying for environmental reform, Audubon buttressed a didactic nationalism that was meant to appeal to the American public.

It would be interesting to explore whether or how the Audubon Society harnessed the same nativist rhetoric as Roosevelt. Further research might examine advertisements made by the Audubon Society in issues of *Forest and Stream*, as well as early editions of the *Audubon Magazine*, which was first published in 1886 and continues through the present. Local records of Audubon Society membership and planning, especially among the earlier societies formed in New York, Philadelphia, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and New Jersey, might offer additional clues.

Of particular interest is the figure Elliott Coues, the president of the American Ornithologists’ Union in the 1890s and the chairman of their program committee. Very little has been written about Coues. In my research, I have only encountered three short biographical texts, published in *The New England Quarterly*, *The Auk*, and the journal of the National Academy of Sciences. Coues, however, functions as the connective tissue between Maria Audubon’s Americanized journals and the Audubon Society’s nationalist program. As chairman of the AOU, Coues oversaw the development and spread of local Audubon clubs. He also co-published the two volumes of Audubon’s journals with Maria Audubon. Located at this juncture, Coues blurs the line between the dispassionate scholarship that was the ostensible aim of Maria’s publications, and the Audubon Society’s nativist advocacy. An analysis of Coues manuscripts, as well as the letters he exchanged with Maria Audubon, might offer insight into this peculiar combination.
Conclusion

Scanning the spines of my Audubon books, I am again surprised by the number of times a permutation of “America” appears in their titles: Richard Rhodes’s *The Making of an American*, Shirley Streshinsky’s *Audubon: Life and Art in the American Wilderness*, Ron Tyler’s *Audubon’s Great National Work*, Stanley Clisby Arthur’s *Audubon, an Intimate Life of the American Woodsman*, Duff Hart-David’s *Audubon’s Elephant: America’s Greatest Naturalist and the Making of the Birds of America*, the list goes on. These publications span the last century, and yet the signifiers remain constant. My study has, I hope, revealed the peculiarity of this representation and problems of its consistency, as well as prospects for its revision.

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Special Collections (Wesleyan University) Middletown, CT
New York Historical Society, NY

Works By Audubon:

Audubon, Maria Rebecca, and Elliott Coues. *Audubon and His Journals*: Scribner's Sons, 1897.


**Works About Audubon:**


**Nature & Natural History:**


**Art:**


**Nations, Nationalism, and Travel Writing:**


**Life in America:**


"The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography." v. ill. 26 cm. v. 1-1877.


1 Audubon the American Woodsman
Captain Jean Audubon

La Gébétière, the Audubon house in Couëron
Mill Grove, Pennsylvania
Oil painting by Thomas Birch (c. 1830)

The Peale Museum c. 1822

The Bakewell Residence at Fatland Ford, c. 1897

Charles Willson Peale - The Artist in his Museum (1822)
C.W. Peale - George Washington (1795-98)
Drawings made after Audubon’s visit to Nantes in 1805

Chute de L’Ohio (1808)

Belted Kingfisher (1808)
Hanging Bird Paintings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry
The Audubon & Bakewell mill in Henderson

Audubon’s breakthrough whippoorwill c. 1812

Physiognotrace portraits by Saint-Mémin, rendered in crayon
Black chalk portraits from Kentucky: James Berthoud, Marie-Anne-Julia Berthoud, and Nicholas Berthoud
Anglo-American portraits by Audubon

Thomas W. Bakewell (1820)

John Cleves Symmes (1820)
Oudry - Return from the Hunt with a Dead Roe (1721)

Audubon's Golden Eye Duck

Oudry - Water Spaniel Attacking a Swan (1740)

detail of Mocking Birds and Rattlesnake
Lesueur’s cover for *American Entomology*

Charles Lesueur
portrait by Charles Willson Peale (1818)

Charles-Lucien Bonaparte
drawn by Charles de Châtillon

George Ord
painted after John Neagle’s portrait (1829)
Ottoman Commissioned by Euphemia Ford to house the Double-Elephant Folio

Modern Cases for displaying the Double-Elephant Folio
Audubon - Beaver in a Trap

Oudry - Wolf Caught in Trap (1732)
John Syme - John James Audubon (1826)
Oil on canvas
Painted on the request of William Lizars
Mocking Birds and Rattlesnake

A “mixed print”

Oudry’s illustration for La Fontaine’s L’hirondelle et les petits oiseaux

detail of Snowy Egret

detail of Canvasback
Illustrations from an English edition of Buffon’s Histoire naturelle (1792)

The Jackdaw

Audubon’s Greenshank