

AUDUBON AND UNION COLLEGE

Sarah Mottalini, Curatorial Assistant of Art Collections & Exhibitions, Union College
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Union College President Eliphalet Nott demonstrated his characteristic progressive nature when he purchased a complete set of the four-volume, double-elephant-folio, *Birds of America*, from Audubon in the summer of 1844.¹ The artist was visiting the campus to tour Jackson's Garden with its namesake, fellow naturalist and Union professor, Captain Isaac Jackson.²

Nott's tremendous purchase remained safely within the care of the college library until commencement 1971, when the entire contents of volume one of *Birds of America*, on display in a locked glass case in the library for the weekend's festivities, was wrenched from its cover and case by two thieves, leaving a bloody trail as evidence of their deed.³ The prints, some bloodstained and severely torn, were eventually recovered with the help of the FBI and a rare book dealer from Texas.⁴ The harrowing recovery tale has received some controversy of its own in recent decades, and the reliability and possible culpability of the book dealer, John Holmes Jenkins, who was ostensibly murdered in 1989, has been called into question.⁵ The Audubon portfolios remain one of Union's most precious Special Collections holdings today.

The New-York Historical Society purchased the entire cache of 474 original watercolors Audubon painted as preparatory studies for *Birds of America*, acquiring 470 from Lucy Audubon in 1863.⁶ Of these watercolors, 435 served as the models for the final Havell engravings for *Birds of America*, but thirty-nine were not included for a variety of reasons.⁷ Schaffer Library at Union College has recently purchased, with gifted funds from alumnus David Seeley, a member of the class of 1970, twelve facsimile prints from these thirty-nine "to complete our flock." Seeley made this gift in honor of former Union College President Harold Martin. These full-size replicas were printed using the original watercolors, which have been on display recently in an on-going, three-part exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, *Audubon's Aviary: The Complete Flock*, 2013-2015.

Union College is also fortunate to have recently acquired another group of facsimiles this time of the final Havell engravings, rather than the original watercolors, from a 1985 collaboration between the National Audubon Society and the Abbeville Press. To produce this group of full-size facsimiles of all 435 prints to commemorate Audubon's 200th birthday, the Audubon Society's copy of *The Birds of America* was used and the printing was done in Tokyo, Japan on paper from New York's own Mohawk Paper Company.⁸

¹ "The Great Audubon Caper, Revisited," *Union College Magazine* (March/April, 1986): 20-21.

² John James Audubon to W.G. Audubon, Esq., 16 July 1844, Schenectady County Historical Society.

³ Phillip J. Wajda, "True Crime or Texas Tall Tale? Unraveling a 40-year-old Mystery," *Union College Magazine* (Summer, 2011): 4.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Olson, *Audubon's Aviary*, 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Steiner, *Audubon Art Prints*, 83.