

*Audubon's Aviary:
The Original Watercolors for
The Birds of America*
by Roberta J.M. Olsen
Skira Rizzoli, 2012

Anyone who has a rudimentary acquaintance with birds knows something about John James Audubon and has seen reproductions of his bird art in books and as posters. Perhaps this familiarity has bred a dullness of response. But try taking a look at Audubon's paintings—from which copperplates were made—at the “Audubon's Aviary” exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, which begins in spring 2013. You'll be stunned.

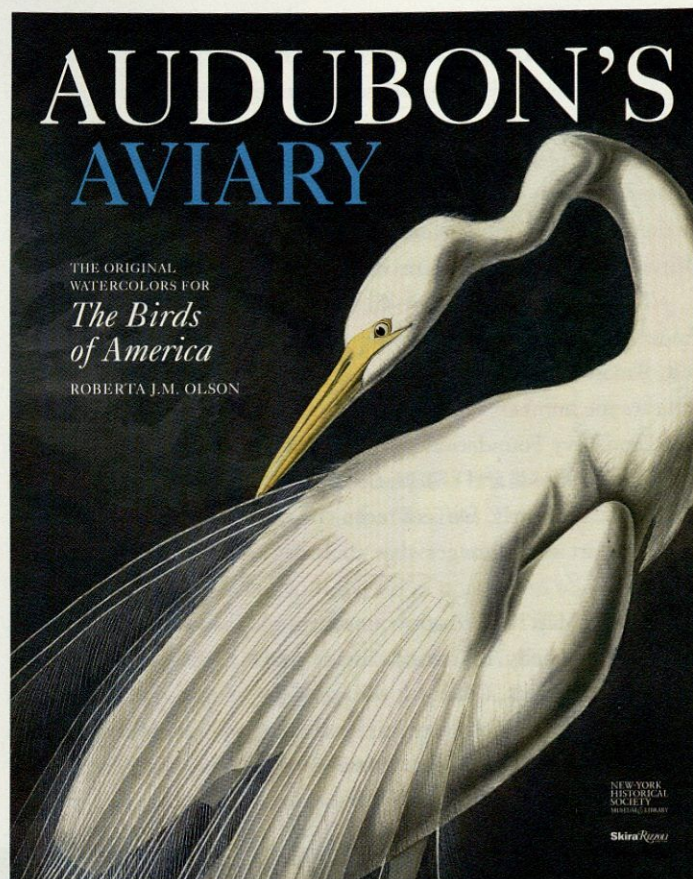
Now Roberta J.M. Olson, who has overseen the “Aviary” exhibits and is curator of drawings for the Society, has brought something of this excitement to a book.

One of the greatest treasures held by the New-York Historical Society is its collection of Audubon's watercolors, the basis for his monumental work, *The Birds of America*. Most were purchased from his widow, and the Society continued to add to its collection, which also includes one of the magnificent double-elephant folios engraved by Robert Havell, Jr. Today the Society holds the most impressive collection of Audubon material anywhere.

Olson's book includes a biographical sketch, two essays, and highlights from *The Birds of America* paintings. One hundred and fourteen works of art are culled from the total of 435, and there are miniature versions of “the rest of the flock.”

Besides reminding us of important events and relationships in his life, Olson presents Audubon as a complex figure; unraveling his story, she states, “beg[s] for several lifetimes and multiple volumes.” In recent years there have been some significant Audubon biographies and a great number of articles. In a small space, Olson's sketch fits well beside them and adds new insights.

In the first of the two scholarly essays, Olson illuminates Audubon amid his contemporaries and predecessors. He is a pioneer, she shows, with unparalleled field experience and relentless curiosity. Here and in other parts of the book, illustrations are enormously



helpful in making points, comparing Audubon's paintings to those of other artists or showing blow-ups for detail. The second essay, by Marjorie Shelley, teases out Audubon's technique, about which he himself was notably silent. It's a masterly exposition of the artist's “endless inventiveness.” Her discussion would turn anyone into an Audubon fan.

The next section, a selection of the paintings, is a treasure. It includes Audubon's comments taken from the text that accompanied his plates for *The Birds of America*, analysis of technique, biographical or contextual information, current information about the bird displayed, and one or more additional small illustrations that shed light. But it is the paintings, so beautifully and vividly reproduced, that are the main show.

With impressive scholarship, delicacy, and respect Olson brings us close to the paintings and to the man. At one point, she evokes how Audubon's brown ink fingerprints on the back of some paintings make her feel that she is in his presence. This extraordinary book makes me feel the same way.

“Audubon's Aviary: Part 1 of the Complete Flock,” the first of three annual exhibitions at the New-York Historical Society, will take place March 8-May 19, 2013.