

AviCulture - Wildlife And Avian Art

Bird and nature appreciation carries on in the art realm

By Dick Schroeder

Posted: March 6, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

Wildlife and avian art has come a long way since the early days of hand-tinted plates in nature books. There are artists who can describe a scene with the clarity of a photograph or more so. There are a growing number of enthusiasts who collect this art.

Vintage bird print

Image courtesy Panteek

Some folks collect works by the early artists such as John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and John Keulemans, who did the wonderful illustrations in Mivart's monograph *The Loriidae*. Others choose to collect the works of modern artists, such as Robert Bateman, or these three favorites of mine: Richard Sloan, Gamini Ratnavira and Carel Pieter Brest van Kempen.

It doesn't have to cost a small fortune to be a collector of bird art, but buying original works can make it seem that way. For example, in March of 2000, Christie's New York auction house sold an original, four-volume set of Audubon's *Birds of America*, the double elephant issue, for \$8,802,500 — making it the highest price ever paid for a printed book. Individual plates from this edition can sell for well over \$100,000 each.

Not all original artworks need to break the bank. I have several original pieces that are done by some of my favorite artists that were purchased at an auction.

Some art shows have the artists donate one of their pieces to the auction; then attendees have a chance to bid on the object. They often sell for much less than one would spend in a gallery, and they are auctioned with no reserve.

Prints & Proofs

Many avian artists have prints made of their work. This makes it much more affordable for the collectors and provides the artist with a steady income without having to worry about selling an expensive original in order to eat.

The very best bird prints are done in a technique called giclee (jee-clay). This is a digital reproduction instead of a lithographic reproduction of the original piece. When done on canvas rather than paper, it can be very difficult to tell it's not the real thing. Giclee prints are usually very affordable. Interestingly, Graham Nash of rock & roll fame is credited with developing the giclee process.

If you want something just a touch above the ordinary, there are the artist proofs. These proofs are a limited number, usually less than 20, that are run for the artist's approval before the rest of the edition is produced. They are signed and numbered by the artist, and "artist proof" is written on them. They cost a little more, but then you have one of 15 or 20 instead of one of 250 or whatever the edition is. All prints need to be signed and numbered by the artist to be considered collectible. Otherwise they are little more than a poster.

Sculptures

Bird art doesn't have to be limited to one-dimensional pictures. There are some wonderful sculptures being produced in a wide variety of mediums. The most common is bronze, where the object is first sculpted in clay or wax, then a mold is made. Then the mold is cast in molten metal. These are usually done in small editions and can be expensive, depending on size of the piece, the number in the edition and the artist's fame. For collectors, usually the lower the number in the edition, the greater the value, but it's not a great deal of difference. Many folks don't really care what the number is, they just like the piece.

I once loaned a live tortoise to a local sculptress who normally does bronze castings of horses and dogs. She needed the reptile to study its movement and to capture the spirit of the animal. She named him Jojo (which became the title of the piece) and kept him for about three weeks. She stopped by every now and then to show me how the clay model was coming along. In exchange for loaning Jojo, I was allowed to purchase the very first casting, No. 1 of 10. The real Jojo dug out of the yard and disappeared some time ago, but his bronze likeness still lives on the floor of my entry.

Not all sculptures are cast bronze. Some are done in wrought steel or other metals. I have a wonderful belted kingfisher done in this manner. The various metals make up the colors found in the real bird, with stainless steel making the white cheeks, copper for the rust-colored bands on the breast and a steel head and body with the correct blue patina.

There are also bird sculptures in marble, granite or soapstone that are very lovely. Of course, there's also the carved wooden decoys that have evolved from the early days of waterfowl hunting. These days, far more species of birds are carved in wood than just waterfowl. Some of the techniques used to make the depictions lifelike are amazing. I've seen carved waterfowl for sale in excess of \$10,000 at carving shows. The feathers are so lifelike that you want to touch the piece to see if it isn't really just a stuffed goose or duck.

Where To Look

Perhaps now you have a little interest in seeing some of these wonderful pieces of bird and wildlife art. Many artists have websites that allow online shopping, but you really must see the work in person, especially an original.

There are wildlife art shows held all over the country. Many are local shows with local artists. Maybe they are sponsored by a local chapter of the Audubon Society, or a promotion by a conservation society, as most wildlife artists have a great feeling for keeping habitats and wild places for wild things.

This is a huge subject, one that we will visit again from time to time. Next time we'll probably visit a favorite bird artist or two. Meanwhile you can always run over to eBay and see what's for sale.

[<< Read the Previous Entry](#)