

# Students Question Students

*John James Audubon & Jim Miller*

## *Birds of the Enlightenment & Elegant Waders*

*Critical thinking questions authored by students to challenge fellow students to thoughtfully engage with the artwork presented in the exhibition.*

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1. John James Audubon (1785-1851) was never trained as a professional scientist, but he possessed great interest in the natural world. He studied birds the most. He is famous for his attempt to document all types of American birds through detailed illustrations that depicted them in their natural habitats. As an artist, Audubon was innovative. However, he was sometimes criticized for the flitting, flying, animated birds in his work, *Birds of America*.

Looking closely at his two prints on display, *Wilson's Plover (1834)* and *American Widgeon (1836)*, what are some recurring motifs for how Audubon chose to represent his subjects? Next, compare Audubon's work with other naturalists who have illustrated birds before him. How was his artistic style influenced by them? Finally, how did Audubon differentiate his style from his predecessors?

2. Jacque Eustache de Sève, *Le Vautour, Le Roi des Vautours*

Jacque Eustache de Sève preferred to illustrate his birds before a deep landscape and architectural structures or ruins, as if they were on a stage (ex. *Le Vautour, Le Roi des Vautours*). How does this differ from how other naturalists depicted their birds? Why might Jacque Eustache's method of depicting birds be considered unusual for a naturalist? Can you find any other illustrations that present the birds in a similar manner?



*Le Vautour, Le Roi des Vautours*, copper plate engraving by Hubert, 24 x 18.25 framed

3. attr. William Croome, after William Hodges, in turn after Roelant Savery, *Dodo*

The Dodo was a flightless bird that inhabited the island of Mauritius. Europeans first encountered this animal in 1598, but by 1680, it was extinct. Croome's illustration of this bird dates to 1855, long after its extinction. He based it on an earlier illustrations made after Roelant Savery's famous painting of the Dodo (1626). Do you think that widespread illustrations and publications on the Dodo in the 17<sup>th</sup> could have helped its chance at survival? How so, or how not?

4. Jim Miller presents his birds as an abstract form. He relies on techniques like extreme close-up, tight cropping, vivid color, simple composition and plain backgrounds to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. How do Miller's use of these techniques evoke an emotional response, and what emotions was he trying to evoke? How does the Jim Miller's use of lighting elicit emotion from the viewer? How does the contrast the plain background and white bird effect the composition? Why do you think Jim Miller chose the birds in the photographs, and why did he position them the way he did? What effect does this have on the photograph?

5. Johann Andreas Pfeffel - *Ciconia, Hirundo, Gracus, Falco* (1731-1735)

In this artwork, Pfeffel took on the task of illustrating four very different birds: the white stork, swallow, crow, and the falcon. These four birds have very different natural habitats. How does Pfeffel's positioning of the birds and their interaction with natural objects such as reeds, tree branches, and the ground communicate to the viewer each bird's environment? Do you think that these four unique birds should have been grouped together in this artwork? Does the elaborate baroque framework enhance the representation of the birds or distract from it?

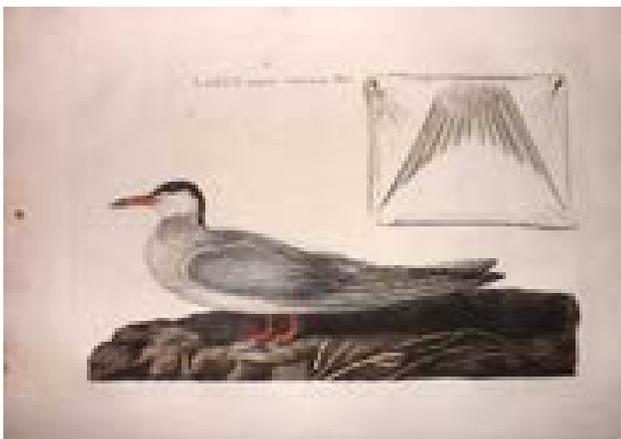


Johann Andreas Pfeffel, *Ciconia, Hirundo, Gracus, Falco*, copper engraving by I.G. Prinz, 24.25 x 18.25 framed

6. Christiaan Andreas Sepp - *Larus minor cenereum, Mas.* (Common Tern) (1770-1789)

Underneath Sepp's depiction of the common tern is an environment which appears to be dark soil or rock with strewn branches or roots. Do you believe this gives the viewer enough information about the tern's habitat? There is an illustration of a pinned piece of paper showing the tern's tail feathers.

Do you believe this looks out of place? Do you think the artist could have shown the bird from a different angle to capture the tail feathers? Why are these particular feathers shown?



Christiaan Andreas Sepp or his son Jan Christiaan Sepp, *Larus minor cenereus, Mas.*, engraving, hand colored as issued, 30 x 22.25 framed

7. Jim Miller has always had a lifelong interest in birds even more so in those native to Florida. He began his close-up photography of birds in 2003. He is a contemporary artist but can easily be comparable to Audubon.

What features of Miller's works are similar to Audubon works? How has Miller deviated from Audubon's techniques?

8. Jim Miller believes that by presenting birds so directly, there will be a powerful response to viewers. The focus of these photographs is on the aspects of bird and their behavior. The pictures are intended to create a strong emotional response. What techniques of

Miller's Flamingo pieces give off an emotional response? Which of these aspects is most powerful to you?