

# Audubon in action

**Illustrators face a choice of truths: should they draw a creature in studio detail, or in its natural surroundings half hidden by shade? John James Audubon tried to capture the nature of birds in pictures backed by passionate prose.**

**Martin Kemp**

Naturalism — showing it as it is — has been the declared aspiration of natural history illustrators since the Renaissance. But, faced with the limitations of static depictions in line and colour on a flat surface, compared with the dynamism of living forms seen in radiant light by a mobile observer, the illustrator has to make radical choices. For example, evoking the play of light across the feathers of a bird camouflaged in its natural environment excludes a careful description of its plumage and silhouette. One variety of naturalism necessarily prejudices another.

John James Audubon's majestic *The Birds of America*, issued in four volumes between 1827 and 1838, courtesy of a distinguished list of 161 subscribers in Europe and America, obviated one of the problems through sheer scale. His 'elephant' portfolio, a metre in height, allowed the life-size depiction of his 435 subjects, albeit with some markedly bent necks, legs and bodies for the bigger species. But all the other choices remained.

He operated almost exclusively with two registers of information. The first is the close-up observation of surface features, based on detailed scrutiny of dead birds, often shot for the purpose — "Alas, poor things," as even

such an enthusiastic 'sportsman' as Audubon lamented. His goal is measured description: "the compasses aided me... regulated and corrected each part". The second is the use of outline to capture the silhouette, motion and dynamic 'personality' of the bird in the field, as it might have been seen fleetingly or at a distance. Defending his use of *outré* poses, he stressed that "nothing can be more transient or varied than the position of birds".

Between these two registers, which play graphically to design and surface pattern, he eliminates much of the plastic description of the bird's three-dimensional form. His resources for the foreshortening of forms are very limited, and he exploits tonal modelling in light and shade only to a modest degree.

**Audubon's emphasis upon surface design does not, as it might in other hands, lead to static or ornamental results. As a passionate field naturalist, more prone to romantic immersion than to systematic analysis, Audubon was concerned to capture the very nature of his subjects — the dynamics of lives dominated by feeding, survival, courtship and reproduction within the rich texture of their environments. The accompanying text volumes, his *Ornithological Biography*, combine sober description with expressions of pantheistic rapture characteristic of Romantic art and science.**

His 'biography' of the mockingbird opens with a florid account of the luscious wonders of Louisiana, "where Nature seems... to have strewed with unsparing hand the diversified seeds from which have sprung all the beautiful and splendid forms which I should in vain attempt to describe". Fittingly for such an abode, the king of songsters conducts an ecstatic courtship, "pouring forth his melody, full of exultation at the conquest he has made".

In the more sober account that follows, Audubon outlines the natural history of the bird, noting that when marauding snakes attack a nest they are assaulted by "many other Mockingbirds from the vicinity". The tenor of his illustration — densely interweaving tree, plant, rattlesnake, birds and nest — is typical of the threat and malevolence that is present, overtly or covertly, in so many of his plates.

Appealing and decorative as his designs may be, the untamed world of action he depicts is closer to Darwin's than to that of the standard bird book. □

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Audubon's Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), from *The Birds of America*, Vol. I, 1931, plate XXI.