

For Immediate Release

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A REDISCOVERED ORIGINAL SUBSCRIBER'S SET OF AUDUBON'S PLATES OF THE BIRDS OF AMERICA TO BE OFFERED AT CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK

The Magnificent Sachsen-Meiningen set of Audubon's The Birds of America
June 25, 2004

New York, NY -- On June 25, Christie's New York will offer the Sachsen-Meiningen set of plates from John James Audubon's monumental work The Birds of America, which was published over eleven years from 1827 to 1838. Considered the greatest color-plate book of ornithology ever produced, this magnificent set of hand-colored engravings is one of only a few known unbound copies in existence.

The set was originally subscribed by Queen Adelaide, wife of King William IV of England. Born Adelaide Sachsen-Meiningen, Adelaide married the Duke of Clarence, the future King William IV, in 1818. Upon her death in 1849, the set passed to her brother, Duke Bernhard II of Sachsen-Meiningen. Queen Adelaide was the second subscriber to Audubon's great project, following that of King George IV. As the set was never bound, the sheets retain their full uncut dimensions with the widest possible margins. Since the set is incomplete - eleven plates are missing - the sheets will be offered individually, presenting print collectors and natural history enthusiasts with a unique opportunity to obtain some of the finest Audubon prints.

The ducal house of Sachsen-Meiningen was founded in 1681 under Duke Bernhard I (1649-1706) who oversaw and commissioned the construction of the castle Elisabethenburg in

Meiningen, which started in 1682. The house Sachsen-Meiningen was sovereign until 1918, when the German Empire became a Republic.

From 1821 to 1866, Duke Bernhard II (1800-1882) ruled Sachsen-Meiningen. Bernhard II guided his duchy into prosperity and continued to increase the ducal art collection, purchasing important works of art.

His son, the liberal Duke George II (1826-1914), continued the family tradition of art patronage and under his power Meiningen became a cultural center of European importance.

The ducal art collection contains important Old Master paintings from Dutch and Italian masters, as well as an important collection of coins. The most important works of art have been preserved in the castle Elisabethenburg and a number of objects have been on public display since the end of the 19th century. Besides art, the ducal collection also boasts an extraordinary library founded by Bernhard I. In 1941, the library contained approximately 56,000 volumes, 100 incunables, 205 manuscripts, 182 musical sheets, 1,200 prints and 2,300 works on paper.

Due to the political changes in Germany in 1945, all the belongings of the princes Ernst, George and Bernhard were confiscated. Totally by chance, The Birds of America were not looted as the engravings were hidden away, only to be rediscovered during the 1950's in the East German Republic.

The Sachsen-Meiningen set of plates was recently restituted to the heirs as a result of a settlement between the ducal house of Sachsen-Meiningen and the regional government of Thüringen. For the future, the 'Kulturstiftung Meiningen' will take care of the preservation and presentation of the ducal collections.

It was originally planned that Audubon's The Birds of America would be issued serially in 80 parts of five plates each, a total of 400 plates. The final count, however, would increase to 435 plates and 87 parts due to discoveries of new species made by Thomas Nuttall and John Kirk Townsend during the Wyeth Expedition to the Columbia River in 1834.

The monumental format of this work (double elephant folios of about 3 ft. high) was due to Audubon's insistence on life-size illustrations and his determination to depict all the known species found in North America. To publish the work he had envisioned, Audubon traveled to Britain, where he met one of his early acquaintances, William Roscoe, the historian and botanist who helped arrange exhibitions of his drawings. At one such exhibition in

Manchester, the American consul, F.S. Brookes from Boston, advised Audubon to publish his work by subscription, a traditional method of raising funds to offset the tremendously high expenses involved in such a publication—which Audubon anticipated would take 14 years to complete. Seeking patronage for his work, Audubon traveled to the noblest homes of Britain and Europe, and to the new markets of the young American Republic—as may be seen from the original list of subscribers.

*To create the greatest illustrated book on birds, Audubon worked with Robert Havell of London, a senior member of the well-known family of artists and aquatinters, and his son Robert Jr., an accomplished engraver in his own right who at the time worked for Colnaghi. Audubon's masterpiece *The Birds Of America* is possibly the highest achievement in ornithological art today.*

Born in 1785 in Santo Domingo (now Haiti) as the illegitimate child of a French sea captain and his Creole mistress, Audubon and his half sister spent their early years with their father in France. It was here, during long countryside rambles that young Audubon collected bird specimens to be stuffed and drawn, and began his lifelong fascination with birds. In 1803, following the loss of the family fortune, John James was sent to Philadelphia, where he met Lucy Bakewell, the daughter of a prosperous neighbor. They married in 1808 and moved to Kentucky.

*The largely unspoiled wilderness of Kentucky provided Audubon with a vast hunting ground for birds, allowing him to continue his specimen collection and artistic endeavors. Without any artistic training to speak of, Audubon developed a new method of mounting dead birds on wires as an aid to delineation. In 1810, Audubon briefly met Alexander Wilson, the distinguished ornithologist, who had published the first two volumes of the artist-author's pioneering work *American Ornithology*. Although the idea of publication first entered his mind on this occasion, it was not until 1820, that Audubon came into his full powers as a brilliant painter of birds and master of design.*

*Christie's has previously offered Audubon's elephant folio on a plate-by-plate basis in 1987 for the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences and in 1982 for the Delaware Art Museum. The combined value of the set, consisting of 424 images, is estimated to realize between \$6 and \$8 million. The world auction record for John James Audubon complete *The Birds of America* is \$8.8 million, and was realized by the Fox-Bute copy sold at Christie's New York in 2000.*

Auction: The Magnificent Sachsen-Meiningen set of Audubon's The Birds of America
June 25 at 10 a.m.
Viewing: Christie's Galleries at Rockefeller Center
June 19-24

The Audubon Birds of America set will also be on view in London, Seattle, Dallas and Chicago.

Additional information about Christie's sale of the Sachsen-Meiningen set of John James Audubon's The Birds of America can be found on www.christies.com closer to the sale date. All lots from the sale can be viewed online along with full catalogue descriptions on Lotfinder®, which also allows clients to leave absentee bids. www.christies.com provides information on more than 80 sale categories, buying and selling at auction, complete auction results and Christie's international auction calendar.

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