

Press Release

CHRISTIE'S

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AUDUBON'S *BIRDS OF AMERICA* SET TO FLY AT CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK

COPY OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE BOOK UP FOR AUCTION

**ESTIMATED AT \$7 TO 10 MILLION- FIRST FOLIO EDITION OF JOHN
JAMES AUDUBON'S *THE BIRDS OF AMERICA* TO BE SOLD JANUARY 2012**



Audubon, John James (1785-1851), *The Birds of America; from Original Drawings*, 1827-1838

Estimate: \$7,000,000 – 10,000,000

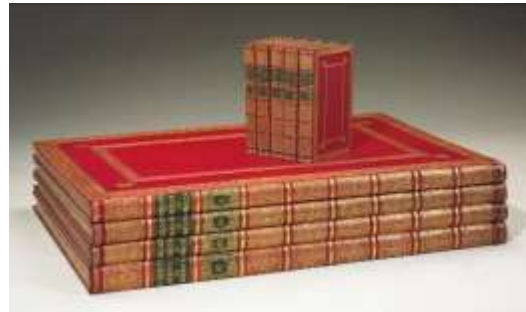
Shown Above: Plate 411, Common American Swan

How could I make a little book, when I have seen enough to make a dozen large books?

- John James Audubon

New York – On 20 January 2012, collectors will have a rare chance to own one of the most sought-after books of ornithological art ever created: a full-size, complete first edition of

John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* (1827-1838). Christie's New York will offer in a special sale the sumptuously-bound "Duke of Portland" set of these 435 lushly hand-colored engravings (estimate: \$7,000,000 – 10,000,000), still considered the highest achievement in ornithological art. Bibliographers calculate that the entire first edition numbered just 200 completed copies produced over an eleven-year period, of which 161 copies were created for paid subscribers. At present, only 120 complete sets are known to exist in the world, 107 in institutions and 13 in private hands.



The monumental format of this work — a four-volume set of double-elephant folios over 3 feet in height — was dictated by Audubon's insistence on life-size illustrations and his determination to depict all the known species found in North America. The illustrated volumes are accompanied by a complete first edition set of Audubon's five-volume, *Ornithological Biography, or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America* (1831-1849), bound in a matching crimson gilt-paneled morocco leather. The set was acquired by William Henry Cavendish Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, the fourth Duke of Portland (1768-1854), at some point after 1838, and has been maintained in excellent condition, with fresh, vibrant colors.

Francis Wahlgren, Christie's International Head of Books and Manuscripts, said, "*Christie's is deeply honored to be entrusted with the sale of the exemplary copy of Audubon's masterpiece, The Birds of America, the finest color-plate book ever produced. The excellent condition of the entire set is a testament both to the loving care taken by generations of the Portland family, as well as to the quality of book production who produced the volumes more than 170 years ago.*"

A Masterpiece of Ornithological Art

Born in 1785 in Santo Domingo (now Haiti) as the illegitimate child of Jean Audubon, 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.



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 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.

The Portland Family

The Portland family descended from Hans Willem Bentinck (1649-1709), one of William of Orange's closest allies during and after his ascent to the English throne in 1688. In recognition of his friendship and support, Bentinck was created the 1st Earl of Portland; his eldest son Henry succeeded him as Earl and was created 1st Duke of Portland in 1716. Bentinck's grandson married Lady Margaret Cavendish Holles Harley, the greatest heiress of her day, in 1734, herself a collector of natural curiosities and an eminent scientist. Their son, William Bentinck, the 3rd Duke, was twice Prime Minister in 1783 and 1807-09. In the late

19th century the 6th Duke is best known for his magnificent underground buildings in Nottinghamshire.

Auction: Fine Printed Books and Manuscripts including Americana

January 20

Viewing: Christie's Rockefeller Galleries

January 14-19

About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business had global auction and private sales in the first half of 2011 that totaled £2.0 billion/\$3.2 billion. In 2010 it achieved global auction and private sales of £3.3 billion/\$5.0 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's conducted the greatest auctions of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and today remains a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 450 sales annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$100 million. Christie's has 53 offices in 32 countries and 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai and Hong Kong. More recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in emerging and new markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai

**Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.*

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Images available upon request

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