

CHRISTIE'S

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AUDUBON'S *BIRDS OF AMERICA* SET TO FLY AT CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK | JUNE 14, 2018

PROCEEDS TO BENEFIT THE KNOBLOCH FAMILY FOUNDATION

**COPY OF THE WORLD'S MOST VALUABLE ILLUSTRATED BOOK UP FOR AUCTION
ESTIMATED AT \$8 TO 12 MILLION- "DUKE OF PORTLAND" FIRST FOLIO EDITION
TOUR TO LOS ANGELES (April 26-28) AND LONDON (May 19-24)**



AUDUBON, John James (1785-1851). *The Birds of America*; from Original Drawings. London: Published by the Author, 1827-1838.
The exceptional Duke of Portland set of Audubon's masterpiece – among the finest copies in private hands of the finest color-plate book ever produced. Featured above: The Winter Hawk (plate 71). Estimate: \$8,000,000-12,000,000

The sky was serene, the air perfumed, and thousands of melodious notes, from birds unknown to me, urged me to arise and go in pursuit of those beautiful and happy creatures.

- John James Audubon

New York – On June 14, 2018, collectors will have a rare chance to own one of the most sought-after books of natural history 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 exceptional "Duke of Portland" set of these 435 lushly hand-colored engravings (estimate: \$8,000,000–12,000,000), among the most superlative copies in private hands of the finest color-plate book ever produced. Prior to the dedicated sale, the book will tour to Christie's Los Angeles (April 26-28) and to Christie's London (May 19-24), where it will be presented for public exhibition. Proceeds from this sale will benefit the Knobloch Family Foundation and its mission to preserve plants, animals and natural habitats through the protection and conservation of land and ecosystems, and to support the advancement of methods for valuing shared natural resources.



Audubon's greatest triumph, *The Birds of America*, is considered one of the world's most preeminent natural history documents and visually arresting works of art. Issued in 87 fascicles of five sheets each, the double-elephant-folio edition contains 435 hand-colored prints featuring 1,037 life-size birds, representing 500 species reflecting his determination to depict all the known species found in North America. This luxurious edition is the most spectacular color folio print series ever produced and is acknowledged as the finest work of colored engraving with aquatint in existence. The towering 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—from the flamingo down to the hummingbird—even if the former had to curve its neck in an elegant arabesque (*pictured left*). His adherence to scale and lifelike depictions was grounded in his profound connection with the natural world which was inseparable from his work.

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. 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.

Carl W. Knobloch, Jr. purchased this volume at Christie's New York in 2012. He has spent a lifetime preserving nature founding the Knobloch Family Foundation to continue that mission. When building his collection, Carl turned for advice to Gudmund Vigtel who for many years was the distinguished Director of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. It is fitting that this remarkable book is now being sold to benefit conservation of the natural environment – a precious resource so dear to both Audubon and Carl.

A Masterpiece of Ornithological Art

John James Audubon was born on April 26, 1785 on a sugar plantation in Haiti, as the illegitimate son of Jean Audubon, a French sea captain and agent for a Nantes mercantile firm, and his mistress Jeanne Rabine, a twenty-seven-year-old chambermaid who died within months of giving birth. John James and his half-sister spent their early years with their father in France. It was here, during long countryside rambles that the young Audubon collected bird specimens to be stuffed and drawn, and began his lifelong fascination with birds. Before the age of 12, Audubon escaped a slave revolt in Haiti, and survived France Reign of Terror, spending months in a dungeon with his family. At age 18 his father sent him to America to avoid conscription into Napoleon's imperial army. John James settled in 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 access to a broader range of birds to hunt and draw. 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.

In the spring of 1824, Audubon tried to find a publisher for his work in New York, and Philadelphia, the nation's intellectual and publishing epicenter at the time, yet there he was met with closed doors and animosity. In May 1826 he landed in England, where he quickly found the support and appreciation that was so lacking back home. It was in London where Audubon established a reputation and secured his entry into the scientific community among its leading scholars of the time including von Humboldt, Walter Scott, John Murray, Thomas Lawrence, Humphry Davy, and a young Charles Darwin. Before the American Civil War, Audubon was one of only two Americans ever elected to the Royal Society of London, the leading scientific institution of its time – the other was Benjamin Franklin. To create the greatest illustrated book on birds, Audubon worked with William Home Lizars, known at the time as “the best engraver in the city,” 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.

In 1830, no longer a provincial curiosity, Audubon was received at the White House by President Andrew Jackson, and the House of Representatives subscribed to *The Birds of America*. That Audubon could complete his monumental project by subscription, with no institutional backing or noble benefactor, was a staggering achievement. To this day, *The Birds of America* is considered the most spectacular color folio print series ever produced and one of the world's preeminent natural history documents.

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. William John Cavendish-Scott-Bentick, 5th Duke of Portland (1800-1879), was a notable eccentric who preferred his own company and excavated an extensive network of tunnels and rooms under the estate, including an underground library and ballroom. William John Cavendish-Bentick, 6th Duke of Portland (1857-1943), inherited the estate from his cousin in 1879. The 6th Duke was rather more sociable than his reclusive predecessor: he carried the imperial state crown during the coronation ceremony of King George VI. Earlier, in 1913, he hosted Archduke Franz Ferdinand during his visit to England, and took him shooting on the estate. During that visit, Portland records in his memoirs that “Franz could have been killed (a year before Sarajevo) when someone in the party dropped a gun and both barrels discharged.”

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TOURING EXHIBITIONS

- **Los Angeles** | April 26-28 | Christie's Los Angeles Gallery | 336 North Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, CA 90210
- **London** | May 19-24 | Christie's London | 8 King Street, London WC2E 8HN, UK

PUBLIC EXHIBITION | 20 Rockefeller Center | New York

- June 9, 11-13, 10am – 5pm
- June 10, 10am – 2pm

BOOKS & MANUSCRIPTS AUCTIONS | 20 Rockefeller Center | New York

- June 14, 2pm | The Portland Audubon
- June 14, *immediately following* | Fine Printed Books & Manuscripts

About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business, had global auction sales in 2017 that totalled £4.5 billion / \$5.7 billion, confirming art market leadership with a 34% increase over 2016. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Christie's offers around 350 auctions 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 also has a long and successful history conducting private sales for its clients in all categories, with emphasis on Post-War & Contemporary, Impressionist & Modern, Old Masters and Jewellery. Alongside regular sales online, Christie's has a global presence in 46 countries, with 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai, Zürich, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.

*Please note when quoting estimates above that other fees will apply in addition to the hammer price - see Section D of the Conditions of Sale at the back of the sale catalogue.

**Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and are reported net of applicable fees.*

Images available on request

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