

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

For the Birds

Before the Discovery Channel and before *National Geographic* magazine, there was artist/illustrator John James Audubon. The lifework of Audubon focused primarily on the wildlife of North America, with a particular interest in ornithology, the study of birds. In his monumental volume *Birds of America*, Audubon seamlessly blended art and science. In each of his 435 illustrations, he depicted not only an animal's physical appearance and habitat, but also its spirit and character. In this lesson students will explore two works featured in *Birds of America* that capture the beauty and ferocity of American wildlife.



White-Headed Eagle with Yellow Catfish, 1828
Robert Havell, Jr., British (active United States)
After a watercolor by John James Audubon,
American
Hand-colored etching and aquatint
Plate: 25 1/2 x 38 1/2 inches (64.8 x 97.8 cm)
Gift of Caleb W. Hornor and Peter T. Hornor, 1968
1968-120-1

Grade Level

For grades 5–8, adaptable for both elementary and high school

Common Core Academic Standards:

SCIENCE, LANGUAGE ARTS

- Reading Informational Text: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media #7
- Writing to Build and Present Knowledge: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, and integrate the information #8
- Listening and Speaking: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations #1; Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats #2

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object title below to view a high-resolution photograph on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object title to view that resource on the National Endowment of the Humanities website. Images that are also available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

RELATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART OBJECT:

- [White-Headed Eagle with Yellow Catfish, Plate 31 from Birds of America, No. 7](#), 1828, by Robert Havell, Jr.; after a watercolor by John James Audubon
ARTstor search: AT14R02

For more information, please contact Division of Education and Public Programs: School and Teacher Programs by phone at 215-684-7580, by fax at 215-236-4063, or by e-mail at educate@philamuseum.org.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECT:

- [American Flamingo](#), 1838, by John James Audubon
ARTstor search: Bien_1984_19_37

Lesson Process

1. Take some time, either as a class or in small groups, to look closely at each work, reading the background information provided online. (Be sure to review the "Teacher Resources" on the Museum website.) Discuss what you have discovered, including any questions you may still have about the paintings.
2. Look at *White-Headed Eagle with Yellow Catfish* (1828) for 60 seconds and jot down five adjectives that you feel best describe the eagle. What about the print made you choose those words? In small groups, share a few of your adjectives and explanations. Were any words repeated in your group? According to the information provided in the Teacher Resources, what did Audubon have to say about the eagle? Do you feel he was successful in conveying his ideas and perceptions? Why or why not?
3. Compare *White-Headed Eagle with Yellow Catfish* with Audubon's *American Flamingo* (1838):
 - Follow the same process selecting and discussing adjectives for *American Flamingo*.
 - If you were to describe each bird with only one adjective, what would it be and why? As a class, share some of your answers.
 - What types of lines do you see used for each bird (for example, diagonal, vertical, horizontal, or curving)? Can you find where Audubon repeated the same basic lines in different parts of the image? What is the effect of these lines in your view of the birds?
 - Create a Venn diagram, noting similarities and differences between these two images. Consider color, line, arrangement, and any other characteristics that you notice.

Assessment

1. In small groups, research an American bird and create a poster or multimedia presentation in the style of Audubon. Include facts about your bird along with your drawing of it. Arrange drawings and written information from the class in a display.
2. Write a narrative description of one of these birds. Use your original list of adjectives in your description. Include your own reaction to the spirit or character of the bird.

Enrichment

1. As a class, watch a segment from a wildlife program that features the bald eagle or flamingo. How does the video segment reveal the spirit and character of the bird?
2. Examine one or two bird field guides. How are these depictions similar to the work of Audubon? Can you see Audubon's influences in the contemporary examples?