



Finally, there is one raptor image by Audubon with unexpected origins. Of his “Bird of Washington” he wrote,

If ornithologists are proud of describing new species, I may be allowed to express some degree of pleasure in giving to the world the knowledge of so majestic a bird.<sup>39</sup>

Audubon was convinced this was a distinct species; in fact it is an immature bald eagle.<sup>40</sup> The watercolor drawing for plate 11 of *The Birds of America*, inscribed New Orleans 1822 (fig. 49), may be a copy of an earlier pastel,<sup>41</sup> since Audubon recorded taking a specimen in 1816 and seeing his last live example in 1821. The eagle is perched on a rock (which, Audubon noted in his *Ornithological Biography*, was this bird’s nesting habitat), back three-quarters to the viewer, its stance vertical. The curve of its shoulders is sweeping and exaggerated. The design and handling of some drawings dating from 1814 to 1816 are more relaxed and assured than in the stilted “Bird of Washington”; its archaic quality is odd even in light of his reliance on illustrational conventions.

Audubon’s “Bird of Washington” belongs to a venerable tradition following the classic Roman eagle. The type was utilized in medieval falconry treatises and was adapted to the northern baroque genre of animal painting. It recurs in raptor illustrations from Ulysses Aldrovandus’s encyclopedic *Opera Omnia* (1599–1603) through ornithologies of the early nineteenth century. For instance, the exquisite golden eagle that Barraband drew for Marie Jules-César de Savigny’s ornithology *Système des oiseaux de l’Égypte* (1810), published pursuant to Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, carried a substantial iconographic weight on its noble shoulders. Few Frenchmen needed to have the connection between this “scientific” illustration and Napoleon’s imperial eagle pointed out to them.<sup>42</sup> Although Audubon’s bird resembles Barraband’s in crisp contour, their shared debt is to the neoclassical tradition in general.

Still, the “Bird of Washington” is, with the exception of borrowings from Wilson and Catesby discussed above, the only one of Audubon’s drawings with an identifiable source. Its specific origin was a plate dated 1806 in Rees’s *New*

39. Audubon, “Bird of Washington,” *Ornithological Biography*, 1:65.

40. *Ibid.*, 58–62.

41. *Original Water-Color Paintings*, vol. 2, pl. 228.

42. Audubon titled his own stiff and heraldic merlin for *The Birds of America*, pl. 75, “le Petit Caporal,” honoring Napoleon.



**Figure 49.** Audubon, “Bird of Washington” (1822); watercolor, 96.8 x 65.1 cm. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.



Figure 50. Titian Ramsay Peale and Charles Willson Peale, *The Long Room* (1822); 35.6 cm x 52.7 cm. Detroit Institute of the Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Director's Discretionary Fund.

*Cyclopaedia*, showing a golden eagle on its rock opposite the condor of Magellan (see fig. 39). The birds apparently were reproduced after specimens on display in cases lining the left wall of the Long Room in the Peale Museum, as identifiable from an 1822 watercolor (fig. 50). That Audubon relied on either Peale's displays in Philadelphia, or the *Cyclopaedia*, published in the same city, is a notion new to Audubon scholarship. Evidence points to the published plate as his direct source. The golden eagle is perched on its outcropping precisely as is Audubon's bird, with the same curve to the wings and wingtip overlapping tailfeathers, the same angle of stance, contour of the head and beak, furrowed brow line, and even an identical highlight in the eye. The feet on Audubon's bird are more complete, a consequence of his emphasis on the importance of the claws in species identification. He clearly shows ten tailfeathers in the drawing, where he specifies twelve in his text;<sup>43</sup> but there are ten, though asymmetrically arranged, in the Rees print. Audubon's bird faces to the left, as does the eagle in the *Cyclopaedia*, whereas the original mount

43. Audubon, "Bird of Washington," *Ornithological Biography*, 1:63.

faced to the right to bracket the grouping in its case. These discrepancies suggest, then, that Audubon borrowed from the illustration. The *Cyclopaedia* would have been easily available to Audubon on any of his several business or family trips to the Philadelphia region; or perhaps it was obtainable in the library of a friend in Kentucky or New Orleans. It was definitely on the shelves of the Cincinnati public library when Audubon worked there preparing his own museum displays in 1820, when he would have been especially predisposed to search out models.

On one hand, it is ironic that Audubon relied on a published, immobilized, and formulaic eagle as the matrix for the bird he was proudest to discover. He could have chosen a more mobile model, for raptors pictured with prey had always been an acceptable alternative convention. On the other hand, the hierarchic Roman profile would have been well suited to underscore his claim of cataloguing a new species, and to emblemize his find as a national image.

This near-plagiarism was not seized upon by Audubon's Philadelphia enemies in his own time, although they had the originals near to hand. Perhaps it held less interest for them because it bore no relation to Wilson's illustrations and did not impinge on his primacy in any way. Precisely because Audubon relied on a format so grounded in both traditional imagery and ornithological illustration, his specific source remained masked.

John James Audubon's reputation far surpassed that of any other ornithological illustrator, and his bird drawings were as accomplished as he and his promoters claimed. But, contrary to his self-styled legend, his education was not achieved in the wilderness, nor did he simply use his early reference tools to catapult his own work far beyond their range. Rather, if we can borrow Buffon's metaphor, Audubon does not stand at the apex of some attenuated Chain of Being. He is one glittering strand in a broad and dense woof.

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