

Grade 3: Unit 3, Week 5 The Art of Illustrating

Read Aloud: **Painting Birds: The Life of John James Audubon** by Steven Otfinoski

Wonderful Words: *portray, authentic, leisurely, sleek, native*

Painting Birds: The Life of John James Audubon

John James Audubon loved all kinds of birds. He spent his life studying them. He used what he learned to paint all the birds of North America. Today, these paintings are famous. His paintings can be found in museums all over the United States.

Audubon was able to capture the shape, texture and color of the birds he painted. He was the first artist to portray birds in their actual size. He included every detail of the birds he painted. When you look at one of his paintings you can see the texture of the feathers. You can almost feel the power of the wings.

The Artist

John James Audubon was born in Haiti in 1785. When he was a young boy, he moved to France with his family. His father was in the French Navy. He owned a farm in the United States. When John was 18 his father sent him to the farm, hoping John would take care of it. But John didn't want to do that. He wanted to hunt, fish, and draw birds.

“I seldom passed a day without drawing a bird, or writing something respecting its habits.”

—*John James Audubon*

John drew lots of pictures of birds. He wanted to make them look authentic. He studied birds closely. He painted birds eating. He painted birds nesting. He painted them looking for food. John Audubon's drawings showed exactly how each bird looked.

The more he painted, the more lifelike the birds looked. There was a touch of grace and power in his work.

In 1808 John married Lucy Bakewell and the couple moved to Kentucky. John and a friend went into business there. They ran a general store.

John really didn't like working in the store. He would leave to leisurely walk through the woods to hunt and draw. If he felt sleepy, he would nap. The business soon failed.

John knew that what he really wanted to do was paint full time. Lucy agreed to help. She got a teaching job to support the family. By this time, they had two young sons.

John went to New Orleans. He arrived in a pitiful state. He had no money. He was hoping to support himself with his work. He was a talented musician who played the violin and flute so he sometimes gave concerts and played for dances.

He earned some money by painting portraits. But he also painted birds. John wanted his bird paintings made into a book, but he couldn't find a publisher. He thought he'd find one in England. So he taught art to raise money for the trip. In two years he had enough.

John finally did find someone to print his bird pictures in a book. Since his books were engraved, they cost a lot of money.

The Art of Engraving

An engraver first traces each image onto a copper plate using a sharp metal tool. Chemicals are added to deepen the lines of the image. Next, the lines are filled with ink. Then the plate is used to print the image on paper. In Audubon's day, all colors on the engraving were painted by hand. The final results were beautiful.

Success

Many people wanted John Audubon's book. Though success was his, John wasn't content. He didn't think his book was complete and official. He wanted to show every bird found in North America. In 1829, he left England. He went home to his family. Then he set off to find more birds.

He tramped through woods, swamps, and tall grasses. He searched and searched for more birds. Often, he'd crouch and wait. He hoped to spot a sleek bird he hadn't seen yet.

John wanted to learn as much as he could about birds. He wanted to know if a bird returns to a nest after it has left.

John was the first person to put bands, strips of material, on young birds. He banded the birds in the spring after they were born. The next spring he would check to see if those same birds had returned. He found out that some of them did.

By 1838, John's great work was finished. It wasn't just one book. It was an amazing set of four books called *Birds of America*. It had 1,065 paintings. Each was close to life-size. The set weighed 45 pounds (20.41 kg). Audubon's paintings of birds were

extraordinary. Every detail was accurate and the paintings included backgrounds of plants and animals.

From Birds to Other Animals

John was a success now. He returned home to his family. He bought a house on New York's Hudson River. He was not young. But he started a new project.

He wanted to paint all the animals in North America. John traveled to the West to find animals for his book. It was dangerous work. The American Bison was one of the animals Audubon painted. Once a buffalo chased him, but a friend helped him escape.

Audubon's animal books contained 150 paintings. His two sons helped with the work. Both of Audubon's sons became artists. Victor was known for outdoor scenes and wildlife paintings with background landscapes. John helped paint many animal portraits and pioneers going west. A friend, John Bachman, wrote the text that told about the pictures.

Two of Audubon's animal books were published before he became ill and died in 1851.

His sons finished the third book after his death.

Years later, a young student started a group to protect birds. He called it the Audubon Society in honor of John.

Today the National Audubon Society works to save both birds and other animals. It honors a great American, John James Audubon.

John James Audubon wanted to paint birds and wildlife. He worked hard and realized his dream. The people of North America were able to appreciate the beauty of their native animals. And that is still true today.

portray

Define: To **portray** something is to make a picture of it.

Example: Samantha's painting **portrayed** children playing in the park.

Ask: What might you draw if you wanted to **portray** a big city?

authentic

Define: When something is **authentic**, it is believable; reliable; correct.

Example: The bear in the museum diorama was so **authentic**; I thought I saw it move.

Ask: Which would be a more **authentic** picture of someone—a cartoon drawing or a photograph? Why?

leisure

Define: **Leisure** is having the time to do what you want to do; free time.

Example: After finishing our chores, we **leisurely** watched two movies.

Ask: What is something you like to do in your **leisure** time?

sleek

Define: **Sleek** is when something is smooth and shiny.

Example: I slipped and fell on the **sleek** ice.

Ask: Which is **sleek**—a dirt road or a brand new car? Why?

native

Define: When plants or animals are **native**, they happen naturally in a region or country.

Example: The Wild Dogwood tree is **native** to Florida.

Ask: Why might it be difficult for an animal that is **native** to Alaska to live in Florida?