

IN NATURE, A FRIEND
by Lucy Bowers

The expansive, perfectly white walls of the Martin Museum have stood still for months as the world halted to a stop. Unanticipated circumstances, resulting from the ongoing worldwide pandemic, have left a residue of unknown and sense of incompleteness since its beginnings in March. Displays in the Martin remained unseen, forced to shut down momentarily and open back up six months later, hopes dwindling as each month passed by. Until American artist John James Audubon's collection of gorgeous bird prints flocked back for the second time to the walls of the Martin, and with them, a rekindled sense of beauty amidst national chaos.

"We began to think about, how can we ease into this year and make everything work? One was to keep the [other exhibit] 'Floating World' up, and two was to bring this exhibition back," gallery attendant Elisa Crowder said.

When the Martin Museum's collection of Audubon's work was on first display in 2018, locals were deeply moved by the exhibit. Its eight week long stint, the typical length for an art exhibit, was still not long enough for art aficionados and novice appreciators alike, who begged for more time to visit the artwork. Two years later, in a time where nothing is certain, it seemed the time was right - bring back the birds.

During his time in the 1800's, Audubon was not known in the art community for his kindness. The ego-centric artist gained the attention of the community when his works began exploring what the rest of America simultaneously explored: the unseen world of the western United States. New species of animals and foreign plants captured the imaginations of the American public. It was a new kind of unharnessed beauty that was destined for appreciation.

At the time, artists used taxidermies as their sole inspiration for naturalistic artwork. Animals were perfectly poised, stuck in the image as lifeless creatures. Audubon created prints that were *alive*. He

joined scientists in being one of the first to document the unexplored frontier, observing animals in their natural surroundings and focusing on their mannerisms. Those observations, paired with the use of taxidermies for color and texture reference, would be used to create his prints.

As you look at the carefully printed birds on the unblemished white walls of the Martin, you see creatures in movement. They are flying, or perched, or craning their necks. They are birds as you might observe them in your backyard. To the modern American, while still beautiful, this sentiment is not exactly groundbreaking. But for early twentieth century folk, it was a brand new and never before seen way of illustrating the outdoors.

There was desire among locals for Audubon's exhibit to re-open because it captures what many Wacoans cherish - the enjoyment of nature.

"The Audubon is a really impactful exhibition. You have bird lovers who want to come in. You have naturalists today who want to come in. In Waco, out at the Waco wetlands, there is a club of people who train to know how to go out and enjoy nature, spot plants, spot animals, spot birds. Some of them do it for themselves, some of them give tours. They were wanting to be involved [in the exhibit]," Crowder said.

In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, perhaps now is the time to get back to basics in nature. To savor the gift of the naturally poised art in our backyards, and to look upon birds with a sparkle of appreciation that we wouldn't before. While gathering with other people is limited in order to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading, we are invited into community with nature. To intentionally notice the environment around us and each twitch of a finches neck, or flap of a crows wings. When we appreciate nature, we find in it a friend.

In a phrase, to go back to basics.

Audubon saw something other artists before him did not: unstaged portraits of the everyday. It is no mistake that the exhibit made another round at the Martin Museum, and in the sixth month of a worldwide pandemic. It was an act of destiny, of art beckoning us to pause, appreciate and never take simplicity for granted.