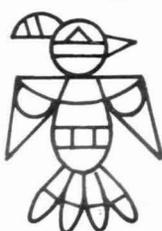




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# EX LIBRIS



by Sheldon Dingle

There are several theories regarding art. According to Tolstoy, art serves primarily as a medium of spiritual communication. According to Freud, the mainspring of art is emotion or subconscious expression. Who knows how many other theories there are but the two just mentioned are admirably manifested in a book called

*Louis Agassiz Fuertes  
 and  
 The Singular Beauty of Birds.*

The book is a tribute to one of the finest bird painters ever to live. Fuertes painted over a thirty year span ending August 22, 1927, when he was killed in an automobile accident. He was a prolific painter having illustrated three books by the time he graduated from Cornell University and sixty books during his life time.

At his father's urging Fuertes prepared for a profession in architecture but he had the heart and soul of an artist. Fortunately, at Cornell he met Elliot Coues, the leading ornithologist of his day, and Abbott H. Thayer, a prominent artist. The two men became friends and mentors of Fuertes and encouraged him in his desire to paint birds. From the time he left school, Fuertes never lacked assignments and commissions in painting. He illustrated books, bird magazines, and turned out many privately commissioned canvases. He also served as an official painter with numerous biological expeditions..

Dr. Frank Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History describes Fuertes at work while on one of these expeditions: "Fuertes in possession of a freshly captured specimen of a bird which was before unknown to him, is for the time wholly beyond the reach of all sensations other than those occasioned by the specimen before him. His concentration annihilates his surroundings. Color,

pattern, form, contour, minute details of structure, all absorbed and assimilated so completely that they become part of himself, and they can be reproduced at any future time with amazing accuracy."

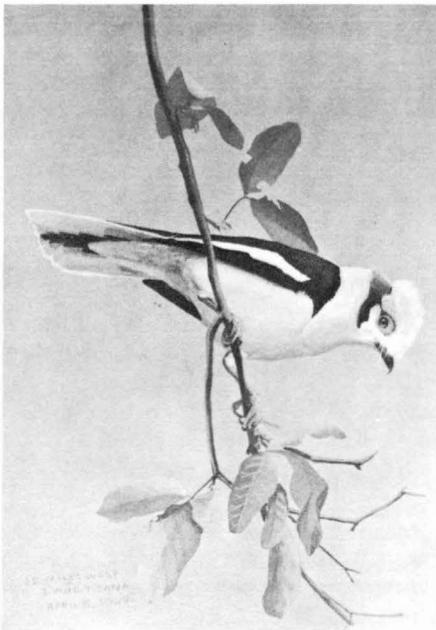
There is no doubt that Fuertes was enthralled with birds. While on expedition in southern Alaska he wrote in a letter to his wife: "There has been a bird note that has mystified us all. . . it was absolutely a monotone, as true as a flute, beginning piano and going through a fine crescendo, and dying out again at the end. First it would be given in a fine soprano, and after a few seconds it would come in a deep contralto; the third would perhaps be between the two in pitch, and so on. The range was about through five or six tones — the high ones, seemed, when heard well and near, to have a slight



tremolo. It seemed like some Grimm's fairy-tale bird, never seen, but heard, and luring the child on and on, and the woods are of a character quite in keeping with the illusion. . ."

From Abyssinia he wrote: ". . . a band of blood-winged leaping turacos is no flat affair. The morning water-flight of sand grouse is a stirring sight. . . Five hundred flamingos that don't even move away as the caravan skirts the salt-encrusted beach. . . found me short-winded as I forgot to function for the time being. I was afraid I'd be a bit jaded on [flamingos] but there's no danger. I had the same almost unbearable thrill — wide, deep, and full — that my first glimpse gave me so many years ago. . ."

Fuertes' letters are a rich legacy filled with a rough humor, human interest, and his intense excitement with the

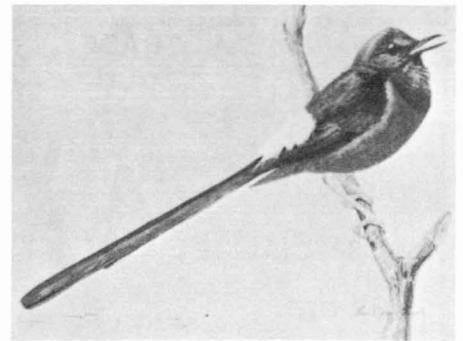


cation between the artist and the viewer.

The whole volume is illustrated with seventy-seven sketches in pen and ink, pencil, and a black and white wash. Almost none of these sketches have ever been reproduced before. A vast panorama of birds is depicted, drawn as they actually appear in life. A woman who had just come from viewing some of Fuertes' paintings met him on the street and asked, "Louis, how do you do it? How do you paint them so exactly?" "But that's the way they are," he answered.

To see for yourself how Fuertes' paintings really are you need only to purchase the volume at your local book store. In addition to the color plates, drawings, and letters, the book contains an outstanding biographical essay by Professor Frederick George Marcham who also assembled and edited the paintings, drawings, and letters.

Louis Agassiz Fuertes' place of honor among bird-painters of the world was summed up by Frank Chapman when he said, "If the birds of the world had met to select a human being who could best express to mankind the beauty and charm of their forms, their songs, their rhythmic flight, their manners for the heart's delight, they would unquestionably have chosen Louis Fuertes."



beauty of birds. The letters section of the book is a capsule of exquisite literature that reveals something of Fuertes' philosophy or theory of art.

After the letters comes sixty full-page color plates. Fuertes' paintings focus on the qualities of the living bird — the internal spark — rather than on form alone. His birds are a spiritual communi-

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