

Rare Ornithological Books
from the
Frances R. Cope, Jr.
Collection Exhibition

The Library Company
of Philadelphia

April 25 - September 23, 1994

by Dale R. Thompson
Canyon Country, California

In 1980, while in Holland I had the privilege to view one of the original large folio volumes of John Gould. This volume was titled *Birds of Australia* which had beautiful hand-colored plates of many of the psittacines found in our aviaries, along with many of the other families of beautiful birds found in Australia. This volume was owned by a superb aviculturist of Australian parakeets including the Hooded Parakeet. The volume was kept in very good condition. It was truly an honored experience to view close up this historical piece of artwork.

I was very excited when Eileen Shapiro, Development and Publicity Coordinator of The Library Company of Philadelphia, wrote me concerning an exhibition of many rare ornithological books from the Francis R. Cope, Jr. Collection. This is truly an incredible collection of rare books which not only includes a complete set of John Gould's 12 monumental works but also the works of John J. Audubon, Alexander Wilson and other superb artists. To explain in detail, I have taken the following information directly from the news release from the Library Company of Philadelphia.

"The exhibition *Fine Feathered Friends: Rare Ornithological Books from the Francis R. Cope, Jr. Collection* will be on view from April 25th to September 23rd, 1994 at the Library Company of Philadelphia. The Cope Collection contains major works by John James Audubon, John Gould, Daniel Giraud Elliot, and R. Bowdler Sharpe — the most important artist-ornithologists of the 19th century. The huge folio volumes of delicately hand-colored plates are among the most beautiful and most prized of all books. In this first interpretive exhibition of



From R. Bowdler Sharpe's "Monograph of the Birds of Paradise" (1891-1898).

the Cope Collection, these natural history masterpieces are placed in historic, scientific, and artistic context. *Fine Feathered Friends* shows how the works of these 19th-century ornithologists and artists are artifacts of the historical period in which the beauty of nature was discovered just as it was beginning to disappear.

Audubon, Gould, Elliot, and Sharpe's data on classification, coloring, habitat, nests, eggs, and the like is still used by scientists and environmentalists. For much of the 19th century, natural history was the most rapidly advancing branch of science. At the beginning of the century, the endless and colorful variety of birds was persuasive evidence that nature was ordered by the hand of God; by

1900 it was generally accepted as proof that nature was ordered by the Darwinian principle of natural selection. Ornithologists were also part of the advance guard of an expanding industrial civilization which was soon to spoil the beauty they celebrated. The discoveries of the 19th-century naturalists captivated the popular imagination. Amateur naturalists found they could make important contributions to science simply by describing unrecorded species in their own back yards, and then went on to form organizations devoted to saving endangered species from extinction.

The universal appeal of these books, however, derives also from the fact that they happen to be the highest achievements of the graphic arts in the

19th century, some would say of all time. These ornithologists were superb artists — Audubon was perhaps the finest American painter of his age. Gould only made the rough sketches for his books, but they were finished by Edward Lear, who is better known as the author and illustrator of the *Book of Nonsense*. No expense was spared in the transfer of these paintings into the media of copperplate engraving or lithography; each plate was colored by hand under the supervision of the artist. As a result, these plates do far more than merely record the scientific data about the appearance of the birds. They capture their breathtaking beauty, their mystery, and their magic.

In 1992, the Library Company was named trustee of the Cope Collection which had been assembled during the 1950's by Francis R. Cope, Jr., an amateur naturalist who lived in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. His collection is a reflection of a 20th-century man's love of nature and books. The exhibition celebrates this important acquisition by calling public attention to these books, both to their scientific importance and to their beauty.

The exhibition and the accompanying public programs have been generously funded by the Pennsyl-

vania Historical and Museum Commission, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and The Quaker Chemical Foundation.

The oldest cultural institution in America, the Library Company was founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin. The Library Company's mission is to collect, preserve, and make available in our Reading Rooms and through frequent exhibition, loan, and publication our unparalleled collection of primary research materials including rare books, manuscripts, photographs, graphics, and objects relating to all aspects of American history and culture from the colonial era through the Civil War."

Highlights from the Collection

- Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology or the Natural History of the Birds of the United States* (2nd edition, New York, 1828-1829) — Wilson was the father of American ornithology.

- John J. Audubon's *Birds of America* (1840-1844, 7 volumes) — Octavo edition which was a smaller and more popular edition.

- A complete set of John Gould's 12 monumental works which total 44 large folio volumes. The titles of these works are:

Birds of Asia

Birds of Australia
Birds of Europe
Birds of Great Britain
Birds of New Guinea and the Adjacent Papuan Islands

A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains

The Mammals of Australia

A Monograph of the Odontophorinae or Partridges of America

Monograph of the Pittidae or Ant-Thrushes

Monograph of the Ramphastidae or Family of Toucans

A Monograph of the Trogonidae or Family of Trogons

A Monograph of the Trochilidae or Family of Hummingbirds

- The collection also includes similar works by John Gould's followers including Daniel G. Elliot and R. Bowdler Sharpe.

The Library Company is located at 1314 Locust Street and is open Monday - Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 4:45 p.m. Admission is free. For information call (215) 546-3181. Gallery talks and a lunch-time lecture series accompany the exhibition.

There are many book collectors and enthusiasts, as I am, in the avicultural community and I highly recommend those in Philadelphia and surrounding states to make an effort to visit this wonderful exhibition. ●

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