



August 13, 2004

The Story Behind Audubon's *Birds of America*

- Collaborative Program with the Public Library & Cincinnati Museum Center
- Author Discussion & Booksigning at the Cincinnati Museum Center on Thursday, September 2 at 7:30 p.m.

William Souder, author of *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America*, will discuss and sign his book at the Cincinnati Museum Center on Thursday, September 2 at 7:30 p.m. in Reakirt Auditorium. The insightful book presents Audubon as a complex individual who was shaped by the challenges of the time and place in which he lived. Highlighting the story of Audubon's undertakings, the program is part of the Museum Center's 2nd annual Science Lecture Series and a collaborative partnership of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County and the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal. Audubon is a fitting topic for both institutions since the Public Library owns a rare first and complete edition of Audubon's monumental, *The Birds of America*, and the Museum Center lists Audubon as the first paid employee of the Natural History Museum.

According to *Publishers' Weekly*, "renowned for his knowledge of the American wilderness, John James Audubon (1785–1851) was equally adept at the quintessential American activity of self-invention. Arriving in New York City in 1803, the 18-year-old native of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and illegitimate son of a French sea captain passed himself off as the Louisiana-born scion of a French admiral and claimed to have studied painting with the European master Jacques-Louis David. Audubon (even the name was false) came to the United States to manage a small estate his father co-owned near Philadelphia. Unsuccessful, he eventually tried his hand as a shopkeeper and a mill owner, but failed there, too. His passion for hunting—and for making life-size, realistically posed paintings of the animals he shot—led to the creation of his magnum opus, *The Birds of America*, now one of the most admired works of American art. But this monumental venture was fraught with difficulties that sometimes brought the artist near the brink of despair. Audubon's work was initially scorned in the U.S.; he had to travel through Britain and France to arouse enough interest to fund the project. Even after its completion and

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its enthusiastic reception in Europe and the U.S., the work left the naturalist with only a modest income for a lifetime of effort.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Souder is also the author of *A Plague of Frogs*. A frequent contributor to *The Washington Post* on science and environmental issues, Souder also has written for many other publications including the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Business Week*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Minnesota Monthly*. He grew up in Florida and attended Vanderbilt University and completed his degree in journalism at the University of Minnesota. An avid outdoorsman and bird enthusiast, he lives in the country near Minneapolis with his wife and four children.

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In Praise of Under a Wild Sky: - “Souder presents Audubon as a complex individual: a loving but distracted husband; a driven artist often plagued by doubts; a scrupulous observer of nature who thought nothing of fabricating some of his written material for dramatic effect. Sympathetic yet balanced, this account shows how much Audubon was shaped by the deep paradoxes of the time and place in which he lived.” — ***Publishers Weekly***

“John James Audubon is a legend in the worlds of both art and natural history, and, like many such iconographic figures, what we know of his life is a bare-bones outline. Filling in the details of Audubon’s life in America, including his failures at business, his happy marriage, and his yearning to spend all of his time exploring the wilderness, Souder takes the reader into the heart of this enigmatic, self-made artist and naturalist. Audubon not only created the most famous depictions of birds that the world has ever seen, he also created himself and his mythology at the same time. Selling subscriptions to his bird paintings also involved selling himself, and Souder follows the tale of this driven man with insight and an almost fictional narrative. A highly readable biography.” — ***Booklist***