

Artist Commentary: Robin Hill

I have studied and painted birds in a number of countries and continents: in various parts of Africa, much of Australia and Britain, some of the European countries, and now on the American continent. I'm often asked whether I get bored painting birds -- but consider the difference between an ostrich and a hummingbird; about as much as between an oak tree and a daisy. Even if variety of birds were my criterion for avoiding professional boredom, the world contains well over eight thousand species of birds. Most of these I shall never see, nor have time to paint.

However, there is usually so much more to a picture than the central subject. The possible arrangements of a composition are as limitless as the variety of the natural world. Painting the branch, the patch of earth, the rock, upon which the bird sits is only the first step in depicting the bird's environment. In studying flowers and foliage, the many ways reflections happen in water, a tangle of grass blades, I am led on endlessly, delving into nature. The element of interpretation is vital, as I seek to add something of myself to the painting. The only limits are personal. My choice of this or that diagonal, balance of mass against detail, dark against light, is a matter of my own aesthetics.

The years at art school set me on the path, but one has to keep pursuing creativity and honing the sensibilities as well as the senses. One essential is to return to the source: subjects are ten-a-penny, but it is composition that is the challenge; and for that, studying nature is the inspiration.

Also, looking at art helps a great deal. Steeping oneself in Botticelli, Durer, Reubens is a continuing education in composition. Absorbing the figure drawings of Michelangelo is almost as good as attending life classes.

One does not work in a creative vacuum. There are always influences. However, there is also the stern necessity of making one's own statement. Early on, for example, when I first realized that I wanted to paint birds seriously, I made the decision about "birds in the landscape."

The majority of wildlife painters up to the mid-twentieth century had depicted creatures in their total setting. Bison roaming a prairie that rolled to the edge of the picture frame and a distant horizon divided the scene. Grouse rocketed over heather-clad hills patchworked with cloud shadows where streams wound back into plummy blue distances. Much of this was excellently conceived and painted. Wonderful artists like the Swede Bruno Liljefors or England's Archibald Thorburn are examples of the very best.

As much as I enjoyed such paintings, I wanted to break away from the landscape approach and make a more contemporary statement. For one thing, however beautiful those earlier paintings were, I felt that they restricted the imagination. I decided to leave something for the viewer to contribute to my pictures: some space for the play of their own fancies.

One influence that modified my approach to painting was the oriental. In certain Japanese screens or certain beautiful Chinese scroll paintings of birds and mammals, there is exactly that use of mass and detail balanced against space that I find missing in much of occidental wildlife painting. Monkeys sit on twisted branches over a stream that has enough substance

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to sway reeds as it passes, yet curls off into the mists of nowhere. Birds dash on angled wings over waterfalls that drop off into airy spaces.

So, in whatever way I could, I tried to refine my own compositions. Many of my early paintings were too stark. Slowly I began to understand and find the balance -- minute detail set off against bulk, line contrasted with wash, dark against light, one small patch of lambent color in a haze of grey.

It is not straightforward; there can be no formula. Each picture is approached warily, as a new problem. Some I do indeed fill from edge to edge; others are almost minimalist paintings. I have come to a kind of manifesto for myself -- create depth but not distance, so that even in a "filled in" painting, I seldom set out to create a landscape in the normal sense of the word. In the more open pictures, I think (or, more accurately, feel) carefully about the white spaces. They too have their designed shapes, and their correctness can be spoilt by the intrusion of a single twig or grass stalk.

Nothing in all this is rigid; eventually there are no rules. I don't believe that one can arbitrarily impose style. The subject, and sometimes the purpose of the painting, should set the style. For example, when I planned the pictures in the book WATERFOWL OF NORTH AMERICA, I conceived them as eventually hanging on a wall, but they were also composed with the book in mind. Consequently, the size and shape of the page were an influence, as were the limitations of the printing process. One of my triptychs, measuring nine feet by five feet, makes quite different demands of composition, style and technique.

One has to nurture an open-mindedness while composing, a naiveté almost. With each painting we are granted a new start in life. Sometimes this new start is bungled. Studies are mad, rough color sketches assayed. One attempts to put it all together in a felicitous way, but it sours. Occasionally I will be halfway through a painting before the dark, suppressed doubt surfaces and with it the realization that the picture is beyond saving.

To be creative is to be a conduit. The perfect line, the exact tone, the sweetest brush marks are all just there -- available, waiting. Sometimes the pipeline is frozen; on others a miserable trickle will seep through, so you persevere. On those very special days of grace, the way is clear; all is simple and easy. Drawings create themselves at the end of the pencil, paint flows, time ceases to exist, and what looks like six days' work will "just happen" in but two. After the fever and the labor and the satisfaction of finishing something, comes the nagging question: Is it ART?

This is a relatively new question, and one that, willy-nilly, the wildlife painter is being forced to confront. I don't think it cropped up in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The few excellent painters who took wildlife as their subject considered themselves, in their innocence, as perfectly legitimate artists, while the public and the critics pretty much concurred. It is the recent rash and profusion of the genre that have brought out the question.

Since the mid 1960s, we have seen an enormous bustle and stir in wildlife painting. Where once there were dozens, now hundreds, perhaps thousands, are earning their living at the business. Most of what is produced is second rate or worse -- but this is true of any branch of the arts.

I would venture that most art critics, most curators of public art museums and the commercial galleries typified by Madison Avenue or Bond Street do not consider wildlife

painting to be Art. This implies, I suppose, that what these painters are doing is illustration. Why the whole genre should be labeled thus is difficult to pin down. Are there no real artists practicing in the field of wildlife?

What are the criteria? Excellence is not one of them. Many painters, absolutely acknowledged as artists, are not particularly good at what they do. We accept that there are great artists, poor artists and every grade in between. Conversely, there are illustrators at the top of their professions who would never be considered artists.

Nor can art be defined by subject matter. We cannot maintain that as soon as birds, flowers or mammals appear as the focus of interest in a painting, some kind of purity or seriousness is sacrificed. Those extraordinarily rich flower pieces of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch School are undoubtedly art.

We find the work of George Stubbs, the eighteenth century animal painter, exhibited in fine art galleries, and certainly not to be considered as mere illustration. His work has a primitive quality, giving it power that transcends the simple depiction of a prize bull or a lion attacking a horse.

A few of Audubon's best pictures have something of this same unsophisticated strength. His birds are usually anatomically and structurally bizarre and placed in dreamlike settings that remind us of the real world, but are subjective creations of the artist. This subjectivity, the liveliness of the depiction and the drama of his compositions give the images that certain mysterious something. We know as we gaze at them that we are looking at art. The work of Stubbs and Audubon, like that of all true artists, whether primitive or sophisticated, has a highly personal quality. The whole painting is a signature

It is generally true that much of wildlife painting has an awful sameness to it. Simply depicting the observed world, as most wildlife painters do, is not enough. The base metal of the objective world, however attractive in itself, must be transmuted by hand, eye and inspiration into the gold of art.

The apples in a Cezanne still life painting are no ordinary apples. The artist has created that which has a significance and an existence independent of the original fruit lying on the plate. This is not to be explained simply by his somewhat unrealistic style. Michelangelo, working in a perfectly realist manner, made precise chalk drawings of the human figure, from which one could give an anatomy. Yet these drawings have a splendid mastery that transcends mere accurate description.

And so, we discover intent as a key ingredient. If the intention is simply to record, then however excellent or delightful it might be, illustration is usually the result. Artists, on the other hand, interpret what they see through a deeply felt, personal vision. In looking at such artists' work, our way of seeing the world is changed and enriched, as some of this interpretive vision is transmitted to us.

It might be argued from the foregoing that few people with the capacity to be artists have been attracted to natural history subjects. I suspect this is true; it is the singer not the song that is questionable. An artist makes Art of any subject.

I will step out onto thin ice -- I think that from Audubon to the present, there have not been a dozen true artists painting wildlife as their chief subjects. What these few have done is to

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quicken the world of nature with a spirit that rises from some wellspring within each of them. Their creatures, like Cezanne's apples, have a glow of inner life which sets them apart from mere illustrations; which is not to say that every picture an artist creates will have that special quality. Many of the best artists will illustrate occasionally, for commercial or other practical purposes, without necessarily compromising themselves. To illustrate a book or design a poster is to step outside the usual boundaries and precepts of fine art, but it is not demeaning, and in some cases it is arguably, Art.

I have tried to explore carefully this matter of art and illustration, but I also feel that a good deal of energy might be misspent in worrying about it. The question is, without doubt, pertinent, although rather more for critics and viewers than the practitioner. The boundaries may be ill defined, but we pursue our craft. Illustrator or artist, our task is to keep striving and, in striving, trust that we create beauty and give pleasure.

As I write these last paragraphs, I can look out of the window and down to the icy lake. Now and then a honking flight of geese comes in, twisting and turning, parachuting down to join others. The growing flock swims in a hole of black water that they have kept open in the snow-covered ice. If I lift the window I can smell the frosty tang of winter in the still air and hear the plaintive, conversational whistles of the wigeon that are standing in mated pairs on the edge of the ice. Beyond the lake the thick stands of leafless oak, wild cherry and maple have a smoky lavender bloom in their tops that glows in the pearly light.

The dog is begging for a hike; the birds are calling; I have been sitting here too long. It is time to walk across the fields of crisper snow, with binoculars and sketch book. Being out of doors will refresh mind and spirit, so that I may continue to celebrate the natural world.