



Audubon's Great National Work: The Royal Octavo Edition of the Birds of America

Ron Tyler

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John James Audubon's boundless enthusiasm for the natural wonders of North America found magnificent expression in *The Birds of America*, perhaps the most beautiful bird book ever produced. Virtually all of the scholarly attention paid to Audubon has been devoted to the double elephant folio of *The Birds*, published in Great Britain between 1827 and 1838. But, as Ron Tyler reveals in this ground-breaking study, even before the larger work was completed, Audubon was contemplating a "petit edition," which would bring his birds to a much larger - and more profitable - audience. This was the royal octavo edition, one of the handsomest publications created in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Published in seven volumes measuring approximately 8 by 11 inches (as opposed to the double elephant folio's 39 1/2 by 26 1/2 inches), it was a truly national work. It went through nine editions during the nineteenth century and sold across the country, providing financial support for Audubon's family for years after his death. Audubon himself called it his "salvator." Because the royal octavo edition is a work of art in its own right and the source of much of Audubon's reputation and popularity, Ron Tyler offers an engrossing narrative of the "little work's" conception, production, distribution, and reception. He mines a rich store of hitherto neglected sources, including Audubon family account books, newly discovered original drawings for the octavo edition, numerous proofs for the plates, sales records, and personal correspondence, for a fresh look at this important aspect of Audubon's career. This study carefully reconstructs the processes that produced the most popular natural history book of the nineteenth century. Tyler describes the changes that Audubon made for his "petit edition," including the addition of seventeen species; explains the printing methods used to produce the plates; discusses, for the first time, the surprising differences between

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