

Sotheby's

Mohammad, Arsalan: 'A Miraculous Diversity of Beautiful Forms' How A World of Natural History Inspires Walton Ford
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Walton Ford: *Eureka* (2017) Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper
50 1/2 x 119 1/2 inches

The American artist Walton Ford is known for his study of classic natural history authors and artists, dating back centuries. A student of colour plates, sketches, pen and ink illustrations, dioramas, engravings, watercolour paintings, scientific drawings and diagrams, Ford investigates the entrancing lost world of books by natural historians over the ages, inspiring his own distinctive and beguiling body of work.

Ford's extensive research is accompanied by a penchant for esoteric myth and fable, contemporary pop culture (this goes both ways; one of his commissions was sleeve art for the Rolling Stones' *GRRR!* Greatest hits collection in 2012) and fictionalised representations of beasts, real and imaginary, from the griffin to the MGM lion.

In 2015, he created a show for the Musée de la Chasse in Paris, which featured a series inspired by the Beast of Gévaudan, a mysterious wolflike creature which wreaked havoc in eighteenth-century France. In 2017, Gagosian, Beverly Hills, showed *Calafia*—paintings inspired by the myths, legends, and folklore of California. Earlier this year (2022), he made a show of watercolours for Gagosian, New York, some of which riffed on the journey of Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca, the killing of one of the last great auks, and the trapping of a golden eagle that was subsequently painted by John James Audubon.

On the occasion of a series of sales at Sotheby's in London and New York, our thoughts turned to Ford and wondered what he would make of our lots. There was only one way to find out...

When did you first encounter classic natural history books and drawings, and can you recall the impact they had on you?

I grew up in a family of amateur naturalists - people who were hunting and fishing and could identify birds, animals, fish, and amphibians. This type of imagery was around the house. From my earliest memories we had Audubon. So it wasn't a big revelation or a sudden impact. It was the milieu in which I grew up and marinated in.



SAVERIO MANETTI *STORIA NATURALE DEGLI UCCELLI* (FLORENCE, 1767-1776, 5 VOLS, FINE CONTEMPORARY CALF GILT) ESTIMATE: 60,000 - 80,000 GBP

What technical aspects of wildlife art books most appealed to you? For instance, was it the watercolors, ink and drawings? Or the proportion and composition? What was remarkable about the way these books represented the natural world?

From an early age I was drawn to watercolor. It's pretty much the language of the field, before photography. I was making pseudo-Audubon paintings from the time I was about seven or eight. I've always been interested in how the white page that many animals in natural history are painted against, functions both as paper and sky. There might be text across the white page which also seems to represent air and light and distance. This is true in a lot of Western natural history art, and in Japanese and Chinese traditions as well. There's a push/pull between the two dimensional and the three dimensional, and that was always interesting to me; even as child. As a child, I think I related most strongly to primates and big cats, but there really was no preference.



WALTON FORD *LE MAROC* (2022 WATERCOLOR, GOUACHE AND INK ON PAPER 60 X 60 INCHES)

Your works present creatures, extant and extinct, in often surreal scenarios and combinations. Outside of natural history, what ideas and influences feed into these tableaux?

My painting style has arisen from my study of natural history art, but the subject matter and the narrative impulse draws from a wide range of sources - film, underground comics, literature, museum dioramas, Dutch still life painting, and erotic art, to name a few.

'I would never wish to restrict my point of view; it changes from painting to painting. That's what keeps me interested.'

Following on from this, do you generally position wild animals as being symbolic or metaphorical? How should we read the creatures in a Ford landscape - motivated by human-like emotions and needs or autonomous beasts?

I seek to use every possible way of observing or thinking about the animals I paint. In a general way, they're animals as they exist in the human imagination - which I've said many times. That said, I would never wish to restrict my point of view; it changes from painting to painting. That's what keeps me interested.

What can you tell us about your own collection of natural history books? How long have you been collecting and are there any artists you are especially fond of?

One treasure I have is a very fine copy of Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*. His delicate wood engravings of birds are beautiful, but there's a wonderful bonus—narrative genre scenes are sprinkled throughout the text.

Who are your favourite natural history writers?

I have to agree with E.B. White that Edward Howe Forbush's delightful book, *Birds of Massachusetts*, is endlessly entertaining and informative. It's a treasure trove of anecdotes and understated humor. Also Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals*, which is an ancient Roman text. The thing I love about Aelian is that he has no interest at all in whether or not what he is repeating is true. He was gathering everything he could learn that was written about animals at the time. There are some wild and delightful stories in there. Errol Fuller has written in depth about (often) extinct animals in a scholarly, entertaining, and very informative way. He's also a friend of mine and a terrific guy. Another person I consider a friend is David Quammen, whose book, *Monster of God*, is a proper masterpiece. I was lucky enough to contribute the cover art.



WALTON FORD AVATARS THE BIRDS OF INDIA (1996, WATERCOLOR, GOUACHE, AND PENCIL ON PAPER 59 3/4 X 40 INCHES)

As we face unprecedented levels of crisis around environmental concerns, threats to wildlife worldwide and ecological panic - how can libraries such as the ones in this sale remind and inspire us to care and conserve our world?

These books and prints remind us of the immense diversity of life on earth. They were made during a time when Europeans were first coming into contact with, and first realizing the immense diversity that evolution had created. Contemporary natural history museums have generally eliminated the kind of displays that might show thousands of varieties of beetles or butterflies or specimens that were collected. These vast collections are generally behind the scenes in such museums. The trend has been towards simplifying and dumbing-down the message to the public. These books, on the other hand, often offer a comprehensive survey and a better reflection of how evolution has created this miraculous diversity of beautiful forms. That alone is of great value.

'Narrative, beautiful, sometimes horrifying': Walton Ford discusses his favorite lots from Sotheby's upcoming auctions, 'The Library of Henry Rogers Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven Part II' and 'Books & Manuscripts'.



MERIAN, MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN'S CLASSIC STUDY ON TROPICAL INSECTS ESTIMATE: 100,000 - 150,000 USD

Maria Sibylla Merian: *Merian's Classic Study on Tropical Insects*

"Maria Sibylla Merian is one of my heroes. She basically invented the idea of the explorer/naturalist artist, making images to explain her discoveries. Every natural history book that I'm inspired by is a descendant of her work. She had a brilliant, graphic sense of composition. It's completely whimsical and free. There's a kind of outsider artist feel to her work that keeps it incredibly fresh.

'Every natural history book that I'm inspired by is a descendant of her work'

She was an absolute first-rate scientist, observing the metamorphoses of insects and amphibians, clearly showing her discoveries in the most concise informational graphics that are also ravishingly beautiful paintings. Though there are no records of her adventures, we can only imagine the bravery and courage it took to travel to Suriname in the 18th Century. I've yet to see a Merian image that didn't pull me in. It has everything that I want in my own work—it's narrative, beautiful, and sometimes horrifying. After looking at a Merian, you leave feeling smarter than you did before you saw it."



FRANÇOIS LEVAILLANT HISTOIRE NATURELLE DES OISEAUX DE PARADIS ET DES ROLLIERS (PARIS 1806. 2 VOLS. LATER MARBLED CALF) ESTIMATE: 15,000 - 20,000 GBP

François Levaillan: *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux de Paradis et des Rolliers*

"Nobody in the history of art has painted bird feathers better than Jacques Barraband. The actual tactile feel of feathers, the look of iridescence, and the complexity of a bird's plumage—stiff wing feathers paired with the softness of the breast feathers—are so vividly realized in Barraband's paintings. They almost pop out of the page they feel so three-dimensional.

'This is the closest you can get to having an actual specimen in your hand, or being at the zoo and seeing the living bird in front of you'

Unlike Audubon, Barraband had no stories to tell about his birds—they're simply shown to their most beautiful advantage as objects to admire. In spite of the two-dimensional format, this is the closest you can get to having an actual specimen in your hand, or being at the zoo and seeing the living bird in front of you."



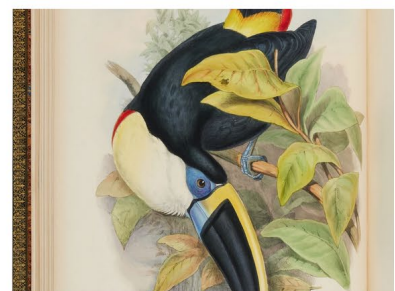
CAMILLO DE VITO *VEDUTE DI NAPOLI* (EARLY 19TH CENTURY) ESTIMATE: 20,000 - 30,000 GBP

Camillo de Vito *Vedute di Napoli* (Early 19th century)

"I love the genre of painting the erupting Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples. Of the many artists that tackled this, Camillo de Vito was one of the better ones. These beautiful books of gouache paintings produced to sell to travelers were like the Instagram of their day, in a sense. They were objects that were brought back to places like England, and would have created a sort of envy in the people that were unable to go on a grand tour. These were glorious vacation trophies made in a time when you might have a gorgeous book of gouaches done by an accomplished artist if you wanted to document your travels.

'These beautiful books of gouache paintings produced to sell to travelers were like the Instagram of their day, in a sense'

There's something very pop culture about this - there are repeated tropes within this genre, but these tropes were based on very careful observation of light, fire, and weather. They're remarkably accomplished, beautiful souvenirs. The fact that an artist like this might have created many of these images gives rise to a sort of confident bravura technique - they are painted with such confidence, rapidity, and freshness in spite of the fact that this imagery became somewhat cliched. When it's done at its best, as it is here, there's an undeniable power to it."



John Gould *The Birds of Australia, The Birds of Asia* and *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae, or Family of Toucans* included in *Fine Books and Manuscripts*

"Of all the artists that worked with John Gould on his many natural history books, my two favorites are Edward Lear and Joseph Wolf. Edward Lear—of the *The Owl and the Pussycat* fame - was a brilliant natural history artist who brought the whimsical humor of his nonsense into his images of parrots, owls, and other animals that he strongly related to. Wolf, on the other hand, I think of primarily as a channeler of the energy of birds of prey. The unemotional fierceness of falcons, hawks, and eagles was his specialty. This dispassionate murder, and the nature of birds of prey, is beautifully displayed in this print of a saker falcon casually killing a beautiful green lizard. Gould was fortunate to have two such brilliant artists working under him."