

## CHAPTER 1 — Bird Watercolors

**B**ackground: The members of the Corps of Discovery were familiar with many of the species of birds they saw on their expedition. With notes and drawings, they described new species in their journals. Another American, however, became famous for his drawings and paintings of the birds of North America.

The other American was John James Audubon (1785-1851). Audubon was born in Haiti, grew up in France, and came to the United States in 1803 to avoid conscription into Napoleon's army. After he had been in the United States a while, Audubon undertook an ambitious project. He would draw every species of bird in this country.

Audubon observed birds in their natural habitats and noted their behavior, for example, what they ate. He would select and kill a specimen and pose it in a naturalistic position using wires to hold the specimen in place. He often posed birds feeding or perched on a branch. Usually he drew the birds life size. Often his assistants would add the background plants and landscapes. Each drawing was an accurate and beautiful representation.

In 1824, Audubon took his portfolio to Philadelphia, which was a center for science. Audubon's rough ways, acquired in the wilderness, did not appeal to the Philadelphians. This lack of appeal gained no support from them for his work.

In 1826, however, the British issued the first printed edition of his drawings and paintings. This edition consisted of 400 engravings. The book was printed on paper two by three feet and took twelve years to complete. Audubon had found the success he craved. His works of art are powerful and brilliant and are authoritative images of American bird life.

In this exercise, the students will first draw a bird in a natural setting and then paint the picture in watercolors.



### Materials

- Scrap paper on which the students can practice drawing.
- Paper on which they can draw with pencil and apply watercolors. Enough to practice with the watercolors before they paint their birds.
- Watercolor sets, extra brushes, and water containers, such as baby food jars or plastic tubs.
- Pencils and erasers.
- A few fine-line ink pens or fine-line felt-tip pens.
- Colored paper on which to mount the finished watercolors.

## Planning

- Obtain books containing pictures of birds, trees, and insects or separate pictures of these subjects for your students to look at during this exercise. Available books include, for example, encyclopedias, field guides, and books featuring Audubon's work. Look for birds indigenous to the Pacific Northwest.
- Gather branches with small leaves, berries, seed pods, blossoms, or nuts to show the students and share with them.
- Provide book holders or page holders on which the students can place the books or pictures while they draw.
- Set up all the supplies the students will need in one central location, such as on a long table or a couple desks in the classroom.
- Put together an example of a setup such as appears in one of Audubon's paintings.
- Set aside a space on which to place the watercolors while they dry.

## Procedure

### *Introduce the exercise*

When you are ready to begin this exercise

- Tell the students that they are going to draw a bird in a realistic setting, that is, a bird on a tree branch perhaps eating an insect or a cherry.
- Display several of the books and pictures of birds, insects, and trees.
- Show the students where the supplies are and tell them what they'll need.
- Offer them the branches you've gathered. Tell them they can gather others, if they wish.
- Demonstrate how you arranged the example setup.

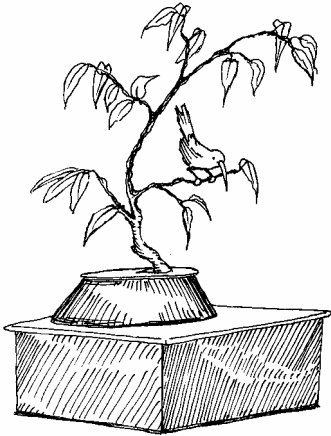
### *Start the drawing exercise*

- Tell the students to find a picture of a small bird that they like.
- Tell them to practice drawing on the scrap paper.
- Advise them to sketch lightly on the watercolor paper and avoid erasing whenever possible.

### *Start the painting exercise*

- Distribute sheets of paper on which the students can practice using the paint.
- Tell them to practice applying and changing the colors—more water for light shades and less water for dark shades.
- Demonstrate how to dip the paintbrush in the water and, with your fingers, make a point of the bristles. Making a tip allows you to make fine lines.
- Describe the technique for using watercolors:
  - Apply a light shade of color to the picture. If the bird is black or another dark color, leave blank the spaces where other color goes when they apply the dark paint.
  - Allow the first application to completely dry.





- Apply other coats of paint to reach the overall desired color of the bird. Always allow the paint to dry between applications.
- Apply accent and shading to the picture.

Example: There is a tiny bird in the Northwest that is olive and sage green and has yellow feathers on its chest and black feathers around its eyes. Apply sage green first (sage is a pale yellow-green) and leave the chest unpainted. Then apply the darker olive green to outline the feathers and to show where the feathers darken on the bird's wingtips and back. Apply yellow paint to the chest. Apply black paint around the eyes. Remember to let the paint dry between applications.

- Encourage them to add details such as feathers, patterns, shadows, and other interesting items they see.
- Tell them to allow the watercolors to dry when the picture is finished.
- Tell them they can use the ink or felt-tip pens to apply other accent lines to the completely dry watercolor.
- Tell them to sign and date their paintings in one of the lower corners.
- Show them how to mount the picture on a frame made of colored paper.

### Extensions

Create a gallery of watercolors in the classroom, hallway, or cafeteria, for example. Enhance the display with bouquets of branches and interesting arrangements of rocks.

Consider making a bird sculpture of papier-mâché (see lesson 6.5, "Paper Salmon"). If the students make a sculpture, hang the sculptures to display them.

Have a printmaking session using linoleum block prints of the bird and branch designs.

Collect students' writing about birds—poetry or descriptions of a bird and its habitat. Such writing could be displayed with the watercolors or be entered into the books the students will be making.

Copy each drawing before it is painted and collate these copies into a coloring book. Identify the bird in the drawing and the artist.

