

**Art and the Natural World**  
**Stark Museum show celebrates nature pioneers**  
Review by Andy Coughlan

H.J. Lutch Stark was an artist. His medium was not watercolor or oils, but nature.

However, his love of nature led him to collect art that celebrated and demonstrated his love of the natural world.

To coincide with the reopening of Stark's beautiful nature reserve in Orange, The Stark Museum of Art is hosting "Celebrate Shangri-La." The show comprises works from the Museum's permanent collection.

H.J. Stark and his wife Nelda C. shared a love of beauty, nature and creativity, Sarah Boehme, the museum's director, said. It is his collection that forms the bulk of the exhibition.

The show features watercolors and drawings of all kinds of flora and fauna, as well as ceramics by Dorothy Doughty, an English artist who produced delicate life-size Worcester porcelain renditions of birds in their environment.

However, the stars of the show are the engravings by John James Audubon, the noted 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalist and artist. A complete collection of Audubon's "The Birds of America" is on display.

The Stark has a complete set – one of only 200 sets produced, of which only 120 are known to survive – and Boehme said the museum's book was once owned by Audubon himself. "Birds of America" features 435 plates with more than 1,000 birds shown.

The large-format collection of prints – the paper size is known as the double elephant folio – allowed Audubon to show the birds full size and are finely detailed. For some of the larger birds, Audubon had to incorporate some creative poses.

In the Stunning "Great Blue Heron," Audubon shows the bird bending its long neck to forage for food. The pose is obviously contrived, but one cannot help but marvel at the beauty of the birds. Its blue plumage is highlighted by the bright orange on its legs and on the arch of its wing.

Fans of the printmaking process will find a copper etching plate for the print of a Swallow-Tailed Hawk. The sparcity of detail is interesting. Audubon did the original watercolors, and traveled to England to find a printmaker, Robert Havell, to create the series. The plates printed black and white and the color was added by hand.

While it is cheap today to acquire photographs and prints of the natural world – if not just downloaded images off the Web – there is a richness to these brilliantly crafted prints that

simply cannot be reproduced without the hands-on involvement of the artist and the craftsman.

Unlike earlier naturalists, Audubon sought to accomplish more than a simple rendering of the birds and animals he saw. He wanted to give the viewer an idea of how the birds lived in their habitats. He often anthropomorphized his creatures to show them protecting their young or defending the nest from predators. This sometimes led the images to border on cartoonish, but it is a small price to pay for such lovingly-rendered, detailed images.

Audubon did not shy away from showing the relationship between predator and prey. In “The Brown Thrasher,” which can be traced back to Havell’s own collection, three thrushes appear to be attacking a snake to protect the nest. One thrush has already given up his life for the cause, its lifeless body suspended between the nest and the snake’s coils.

Other Audubon works on display include pieces from the splendidly-titled “The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America” – literally, four footed mammals.

Audubon and his son John Woodhouse Audubon produced 150 prints which were sold by subscription and collected into volumes which would then be bound into three volumes.

Visitors will recognize the raccoon, although Audubon’s seems quite a bit friendlier than those seen regularly foraging through the area’s garbage cans.

It is easy to take such images for granted with nature programs on TV all day. But seeing these fantastic prints rekindles the sense of wonder that people of the mid-1800s must have felt when seeing these fantastic creatures for the first time.

The exhibition also features books and prints by Audubon’s predecessors. Alexander Wilson’s “American Ornithology” did not place the birds in context, and Mark Catesby’s “Large White Bill’d Woodpecker” allows us a glimpse of a now-extinct Ivory Woodpecker.

These early naturalists saw their art not just as a simple rendition, but as a way of learning through drawing. These artists would often accompany explorers or follow armies into their campaigns to discover an uncharted world.

Through this exhibit, we can share in their sense of discovery and see these animals and birds with the wonder of those who were seeing them for the first time.

The Stark Museum of Art is located at 712 Green Ave. in Orange. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. For more information, call 409-886-2787 or visit [starkmuseum.org](http://starkmuseum.org)