



Natural Habitat

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William H. Gerdtz

David J. Wagner

with entries by

Lisa N. Peters and Carol Lowrey



Spanierman Gallery, LLC

45 East 58th Street New York 10022 Tel (212) 832-0208 Fax (212) 832-8114

Email info@spanierman.com www.spanierman.com

Getting It Right: Roots of Contemporary Wildlife Art

WHILE CONTEMPORARY WILDLIFE art can certainly be differentiated from other genres by its subject matter, it is also distinguished by the fact that its creators stress the importance of “getting it right.” For today’s wildlife artists, the need to know their subject matter is paramount, and they go to great lengths to study wildlife anatomy, behavior, and ecology. They feel it is necessary to work directly from nature, although they also supplement their sketches and field notes with photography. The most prevalent desire among all great wildlife artists today is to make their art come alive, and the various working methods and styles they have developed to accomplish this goal reflect their struggle to emulate the natural world with as much exactitude as possible.

Contemporary American wildlife artists owe a debt to the long legacy of wildlife images created by artists in this country since the sixteenth century, a tradition that William H. Gerdt surveys in this catalogue. In response to a questionnaire I conducted (the results appear at the end of this essay), 116 contemporary wildlife artists listed Winslow Homer, Andrew Wyeth, John James Audubon, and Maxfield Parrish as among the fifteen artists who most influenced them and who earned their highest respect. Many contemporary American artists paint wildlife being hunted, but most depict their subjects living freely in the wild, threatened only by natural predators. Not surprisingly, many wildlife artists are active in groups that aim to preserve wild species and protect their habitats, and the works exhibited here capture the purity of the wild places where the animal kingdom reigns.

The paintings and sculptures created by wildlife artists reveal a range of unique interests. For painters, it is a challenge to convey the relationship between animals and their settings with an expressive use of color, tone, design, and brushwork. Rather than purely documenting their subjects, they aim to render the moods, tensions, and emotions that the animals evoke. Studying effects of light and atmosphere and bringing out formal juxtapositions in nature, they express poetic moments. Sculptors are driven by the desire to capture the essence of animal form and movement, revealing such qualities as grace, strength, or energy. However, as the diversity of work in this exhibition reveals, the range of aesthetic and interpretive concerns explored by contemporary wildlife artists is broad. Despite parallels among works and similarities in stylistic approaches, each artist

has a unique point of view, and each has found an original way to get it right, creating works that are accurate in their details and honest in their expressive qualities.

The aforementioned survey yielded a fascinating result. When asked to list and rank the artists whose work they respected most and who had the most influence on them, the 116 artist respondents overwhelmingly gave the most votes to Robert Bateman (21), Louis Agassiz Fuertes (20), and Carl Rungius (20). These three artists represent distinct traditions that have given shape to wildlife painting today. Discussions of their careers, which form the body of this essay, provide an understanding of contemporary American wildlife art and explain its development.

Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874–1927): The Inner Character of Birds

Louis Fuertes was the son of a Cornell University engineering professor, originally from Puerto Rico. Prophetically named after the great Harvard University naturalist Louis Agassiz, the artist acquired his understanding of art and science as a young man from two mentors. While a senior at Cornell, he was commissioned by the eminent ornithologist Elliot Coues to illustrate a children's book entitled *Citizen Bird* (1897). During production, Coues took Fuertes to the 1896 congress of the American Ornithologists' Union and introduced him to members of the scientific community. One of these was the prominent American painter Abbott Handerson Thayer, known for spiritualized views of female figures that reflected the influence of his academic training in Paris, and for images of the New Hampshire landscape. In the early 1900s, Thayer advanced his reputation as a naturalist—which was a sideline to his career as an artist—and his ideas and those of his son Gerald, especially with regard to camouflage, are recorded in their book *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom* (1909). Thayer was so impressed with Fuertes that he took him on as a student at his home in Dublin, New Hampshire, the next summer. Fuertes, in turn, wrote his senior thesis on the coloration of birds.

After he graduated from college in 1897, Fuertes accompanied Thayer on an expedition to Florida. In the following year, Coues invited Fuertes to illustrate a new edition of his book *Key to North American Birds* (1903). With dual mentors in art and science, Fuertes

Fig. 13. Louis Agassiz Fuertes, *Pygmy Kingfisher*, 1927, pencil and watercolor on paper, 9¾ × 12¾ inches, The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago



quickly matured, and it was not long before his work was in high demand.

In 1902, Fuertes began a long association with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, when curator Frank Chapman (who later gave a start to Francis Lee Jacques, the renowned diorama painter), invited him to serve as staff artist for an expedition to the Bahamas. (Fuertes initially met Chapman at the American Ornithological Union congress in 1896.) This led to other expeditions which took Fuertes throughout North America, South America, and Africa, and to many interesting work assignments. In 1904, for example, the American Museum of Natural History hired Fuertes to work on the background of a flamingo diorama. In 1910, he illustrated *Birds of New York*, and in 1916 *National Geographic* commissioned him to produce the first of three series of mammal paintings for publication. In the 1920s, he was commissioned by Arm & Hammer Baking Soda to illustrate ninety collecting card premiums which contained the slogan, "For the Good of All, Do Not Destroy the Birds." Unfortunately, Fuertes's life was cut short by a fatal car crash in 1927.

Fuertes's oeuvre encompasses thousands of paintings and drawings, which he produced for books, magazines, and private sale. Though he was very prolific, it was not the volume of his work, but his ability to convey the inner character of birds that places him above the competition. Roger Tory Peterson often talked about Fuertes's special talent:

To one who knows birds, there is far more latent life in a Fuertes bird, composed at rest, than there is in an Audubon bird wildly animated. The lay artist, unschooled in a field knowledge of birds, will insist he sees more life in an Audubon bird, but this is because Audubon strongly reflected Audubon in everything he did, whereas Fuertes reflected more the character of the bird, less of himself.¹

Working from field sketches and notes, primarily in pen-and-ink and watercolor, Fuertes developed a spontaneous, painterly style. His approach resulted in sensitive, lifelike compositions which conveyed the inner character of wildlife in a way that few other artists have been able to achieve (fig. 13). Although his works are rarely seen because they are owned by research institutions, they are among the great achievements of twentieth-century wildlife art.

Carl Rungius (1869–1959): Big Game and Plein-Air Impressionism

Born in Rixdorf, Germany (now part of Berlin), the son of a Lutheran minister, Carl Rungius studied animal drawing and painting at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts under Professor Paul Mayerheim. To enhance his formal study of anatomy and draftsmanship, Rungius drew wildlife at the Berlin Zoo and dissected animal carcasses at a glue factory nearby. This training became the source of a lifelong vocation when an uncle, who had become a successful physician in Brooklyn, invited Rungius to go moose hunting in Maine in 1894.

Although Rungius failed to capture a moose on the trip, after he returned to Brooklyn, he painted a portrait of one from specimens at the American Museum of

Natural History and from fresh trophy heads at a taxidermy shop. As fate would have it, William T. Hornaday, the influential first director of the Bronx Zoo, befriended Rungius after he spotted the painting in the window of Knoedler Gallery in New York. Hornaday introduced Rungius to a circle of sportsmen that included George Bird Grinnell, the father of the conservation movement, and Theodore Roosevelt. Around the same time, Rungius met Ira Dodge, a buckskin-clad, big-game guide from Wyoming who, like Rungius, was attracted by the first New York Sportsmen's Show at Madison Square Garden, held in 1895. Whereas Rungius's introduction to Dodge led to new Western subject matter the next summer, his acquaintance with Hornaday led to work in the form of commissions.

The first of these commissions came from magazines, foremost among them *Forest and Stream*. This was the golden age of illustration as well as the age that gave rise to the conservation movement, and conservationists like Grinnell used magazines to advocate the passage of laws to prevent the depletion of wildlife populations. Grinnell, in fact, purchased *Forest and Stream* for this purpose. If magazines were the voice of the conservation movement, then clubs were its constituency. These ranged from the Audubon Society, which Grinnell founded in 1886, to the elite Boone and Crockett Club, which Grinnell and Roosevelt founded in 1887. Among the laws enacted as a result of magazine editorials and club activism was the Lacey Act of 1900, which helped end market hunting by establishing the principle that wildlife belongs to the nation rather than the landowner upon whose property it resides. The act's sponsor was Congressman John Lacey, himself a member of the Boone and Crockett Club. Rungius subsequently received



Fig. 14. Carl Rungius, *Wanderers Above Timberline*, oil on canvas, 36½ × 46½ inches, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson Hole, Wyoming

assignments to create illustrations for a range of other magazines and books, and these led to commissions of paintings by wealthy sportsmen.

Rungius returned to Germany in 1896, but came back to the United States a year later and promptly settled into the routine of spending summers in Wyoming and the rest of the year in New York. After a long courtship, Rungius married his American cousin, Louise, in 1907. A turning point in his career occurred two years later. After seeing his painting of Dall sheep in an issue of the *Bronx Zoo Magazine*, a mountain guide named Jimmy Simpson invited Rungius to visit the Canadian Rockies. Rungius became so enraptured with the northern light, the angular topography, and the moose, elk, deer, bear, mountain goats, and bighorn sheep—which he painted directly from nature—that for the rest of his life he spent about six months a year in the region (fig. 14).

When he was in New York, Rungius continued to paint and be an active member of the city's vital art scene. His first one-artist show opened at the Salmagundi Club in 1907, and he was exposed to new aesthetic currents when he attended the first group show of the progressive realists known as The Eight at the Macbeth Galleries in 1908. In 1913, he attended the Armory Show, the landmark exhibition of modernists, and was inducted into the National Academy of Design as an associate member. The combination of wilderness experience and urbane New York existence had a profound effect on Rungius's art. He not only developed a greater awareness of the structures of landscape painting, but he also modeled wildlife into landscapes through robust, impressionistic brushwork and color. To support Rungius's new direction, William Hornaday commissioned one painting annually from 1914 to 1934 for The Gallery of the Wild that he had established at the Bronx Zoo.

By the 1920s, Rungius's work coalesced into a mature signature style that was vastly different from anything that had been seen before in American wildlife art. True to his own calling, but shaped by the forces of modern art around him, Rungius extended himself and American wildlife art by reducing anatomical and topographical details to strokes of color and blocks of form and mass. His impressionistic *plein-air* paintings were perfectly suited to North American big game and the environment of the Canadian Rockies. Unlike other artists who portrayed wildlife as game for sportsmen, Rungius did not feature hunters or convey a sense of human presence in his mature compositions. Rather he portrayed big game species roaming in pristine wilderness environments, as seen from the perspective of a sportsman.

Robert Bateman (b. 1930): The Influence of the Past on American Wildlife Art Today

Robert Bateman joined the ranks of Fuertes and Rungius after he began to devote himself to wildlife painting in 1975. He is so highly regarded today that a group of artists working under his influence has been called "The Bateman School."

Bateman came to his position in wildlife art somewhat circuitously. Canadian by birth, his ecological interests were first nurtured when his mother enrolled him in the Junior Field Naturalists' Club at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. There, he developed an understanding of scientific method and practiced drawing under the supervision of Terence Shortt, whose work in many ways resembles that of Fuertes. As a high school student, Bateman spent summers working in Algonquin Park, in northern Ontario. While in Canada, he became familiar with the landscape painters who made up the Group of Seven, and his time in the park furthered his knowledge as a naturalist. As Bateman said in his authorized biography: "I idolized Thompson and the Group [of Seven] . . . and I went off in a canoe to sketch and paint at every possible opportunity. I considered it a point of honour to complete an oil painting on the spot as they did."²

After high school, Bateman majored in geography at the University of Toronto, and enrolled in extracurricular art classes. He pursued these interests while traveling through Europe after graduation in 1954, and in 1957–58, throughout Africa and Australia with friends in a beat-up Land Rover. To make ends meet, Bateman taught high school classes in geography and art in Ontario.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Bateman set aside the lessons he had enthusiastically learned from Terence Shortt and the Group of Seven to struggle with other idioms of expression. This resulted in a body of work that Bateman himself characterized by its eclectic attention to contemporary trends:



Fig. 15. Robert Bateman, *Mossy Branches—Spotted Owl*, acrylic on board, 16 × 19¹⁵/₁₆ inches, photograph courtesy of Mill Pond Press, Venice, Florida

I became interested in the work of Picasso and Braque and I found myself using these techniques of perspective and distortion to depict my own world. During this whole period, though I painted in many different styles, I generally chose subjects in nature, as opposed, say, to wine bottles or the interiors of rooms . . . My admiration for the way Oriental painters could capture things in a few strokes led to my excitement with the work of [Paul-Emile] Borduas and some of the abstract expressionist painters of the New York School; in the 1950s—people like Franz Kline, who is one of my great heroes, and Motherwell, Rothko, and Clyfford Still . . . In a sense, I didn't know who the real me was.³

Bateman's search for himself was resolved when he attended a 1962 retrospective exhibition of the work of Andrew Wyeth at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Wyeth's work enhanced Bateman's appreciation for twentieth-century art and helped him fuse his own work with his love of nature. A manifestation of this fusion was evident several months later, when Bateman was teaching in Nigeria under Canada's External Aid Program. In response to an art competition in Nairobi sponsored by the East African Esso Company, Bateman produced two paintings in the heat of the moment, one of gazelles and the other of starling. These, in effect established his trademark style, which always includes taking the viewer by surprise, either through an unusual compositional structure or an unexpected motif. While Bateman did not win the competition, the public acclaim that he received encouraged him to continue in this direction.

For the ten years that followed his return to Canada in 1965, Bateman pursued a dual career, teaching and painting. In 1975, he abandoned teaching altogether, encouraged by two important exhibitions: a sell-out, one-artist show at Tryon Gallery in London, and *Animals in Art*, a blockbuster group exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum. Bateman's renown increased three years later, when Mill Pond Press published his first signed, limited edition photolithograph. He would continue to work with the press in the years ahead.

Although Bateman personally developed his technique of composing his images in his studio by combining aspects of sketches and photographs, he was, by his own admission, greatly inspired by Wyeth. Although Wyeth is most comfortable with drybrush painting and Bateman with acrylic, each artist uses his medium to achieve similar aesthetic ends which are, not coincidentally, highly suited for reproduction. Like Wyeth, Bateman employs unconventional composition and design elements with effective results. However, a fundamental difference between Wyeth's and Bateman's painting is, of course, the location and genus of their subject matter. Whereas Wyeth's imagery derives from Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Cushing, Maine, Bateman's art comes from provincial parks in Canada and Kenya, other wilderness frontiers, and rustic northern settings; whereas Wyeth's painting conveys epic dimensions of rural American life, Bateman's art expresses the ecological complexities of wildlife. Each artist nevertheless explores the mundane as well as metaphysical realities of their respective worlds, and often departs into allegory.

A good example of Bateman's work is *Mossy Branches—Spotted Owl* (fig. 15). It

depicts a spotted owl perched on a mossy bough of an old-growth conifer. Using a hint of raking sunlight to juxtapose the old growth forest and the animal, Bateman shows the shy owl facing the viewer frontally and perched in the foreground. However, the animal is partially hidden by mosses and lichens and the camouflage of its own patterning, while the dense forest can be faintly seen in the background through a bank of gray fog. Listed as a threatened species under the 1969 Endangered Species Conservation Act of Fish and Wildlife, which provides for the “conservation, restoration, propagation, and protection of selected species of fish and wildlife, including migratory birds, that are threatened with extinction,” the spotted owl was a highly charged icon in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s, when the depressed economy in the region left loggers in the Northwest with the real prospect of joblessness. Capturing the beauty of the owl and its interdependence with its ancient forest setting, Bateman charged *Mossy Branches—Spotted Owl* with contemporary political meaning.

Through his sophisticated blend of style and technique and willingness to take ideological risks, Robert Bateman has pushed wildlife art to a new height and inspired others to carry on its traditions.

Ten years ago, I conducted an extensive survey of wildlife painters whose work regularly appeared in museum-quality exhibitions. To ensure that my survey would be statistically valid, but in no way biased or skewed, I enlisted the help of a market researcher to design a questionnaire, and track and interpret the results.

Of the 150 questionnaires that were mailed, 116 were returned. This resulted in an exceptionally high and, therefore, reliable 77.3% response rate. In the questionnaire, I asked the artists who had most influenced them and their work. Beginning from the top, here is a list of the painters who respondents said were the most influential (listed alphabetically in the case of a tie):

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>
1.	21	Robert Bateman	b. 1930
2.	20	Louis Agassiz Fuertes	1874–1927
2.	20	Carl Rungius	1869–1959
3.	12	Francis Lee Jacques	1887–1969
4.	9	Robert Kuhn	b. 1920
5.	8	Winslow Homer	1836–1910
6.	6	Andrew Wyeth	b. 1917
6.	6	N.C. Wyeth	1882–1945
7.	5	Roger Tory Peterson	1909–1996
8.	4	John James Audubon	1785–1851
8.	4	Lynn Bogue Hunt	1878–1960
8.	4	Maxfield Parrish	1870–1966
8.	4	Ogden Pleissner	1905–1983
8.	4	George Miksch Sutton	1898–1992
9.	3	Owen Gromme	1896–1991

My purpose in publishing this list is to give viewers of the present exhibition some sense of the breadth, depth, and diversity of aesthetic approaches that have shaped contemporary wildlife art, and to do so not just from the perspective of someone who possesses training or experience as an art historian or museum professional, but from the perspective of the artists themselves.

David J. Wagner

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Notes

1. Roger Tory Peterson, "Bird Painting in North America," *Audubon Magazine* 44 (January-February 1942), p. 167.
2. Quoted in Ramsey Derry, *The Art of Robert Bateman* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 33.
3. Quoted in Derry, pp. 44-45.

Opposite:
Carel Pieter Brest van Kempen
Bar-Pouched Wreathed Hornbills, Indonesia (detail), 1996
Acrylic on illustration board, 30 × 19 inches

Contributors

WILLIAM H. GERDTS is professor of art history at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, where he has taught for twenty-seven years. Among his many previous museum and teaching posts, Dr. Gerdtz taught at the University of Maryland and was curator of painting and sculpture at the Newark Museum, New Jersey, for twelve years. His extensive writings in the field of American art encompass numerous articles and books, including *American Neo-Classical Sculpture: The Marble Resurrection* (1973), *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still-Life, 1801-1939* (1981), *American Impressionism* (1984), *Grand Illusions: History Painting in America* (1988), *Art Across America* (1990), *Monet's Giverny: An Impressionist Colony* (1993), *William Glackens* (1996), *Impressionist New York* (Abbeville, 1994), and *California Impressionism* (1998). Dr. Gerdtz received his B.A. from Amherst College, Massachusetts, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University.

CAROL LOWREY is curator of the Permanent Collection at The National Arts Club in New York and a research associate at Spanierman Gallery, New York. A doctoral candidate in art history at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, she is the author of numerous articles, essays, and catalogues relating to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American and Canadian art. She curated *Visions of Light and Air: Canadian Impressionism, 1885-1920* (Americas Society Art Gallery, New York, 1995), among other exhibitions, and is currently preparing a catalogue of The National Arts Club's collection of paintings.

LISA N. PETERS is director of research at Spanierman Gallery, New York, and coauthor of the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the work of John Henry Twachtman (with Ira Spanierman). She received her doctorate in art history from the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Her recent publications include an essay in *John Twachtman: Connecticut Landscapes* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1989), *American Impressionist Masterpieces* (1991), *James McNeill Whistler* (1996), and *A Personal Gathering: Paintings and Sculpture from the Collection of William I. Koch* (Wichita Art Museum, Kansas, 1996), *Visions of Home: American Impressionist Images of Suburban Leisure and Country Comfort* (Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1997), and the forthcoming *John Twachtman: An American Impressionist* (High Museum of Art, Atlanta, 1999).

DAVID J. WAGNER is in the process of writing *The Story of American Wildlife Art*, which grew out of his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Wagner received his B.A. from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, and his M.A. from Indiana University, Bloomington. He served as director of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum from 1977 until 1987 and executive director of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center from 1987 until 1994. During the spring term of 1990, Dr. Wagner was scholar-in-residence at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology in Otis, Oregon. In 1992, he was a consultant for Wildlife Art Scholarship at the Roger Tory Peterson Institute in Jamestown, New York. He has served as an advisory board member for the National Art Museum of Sport, the Artists for Nature Foundation in the Netherlands, and the National Park Academy for the Arts. Dr. Wagner has written extensively, contributing to museum annual exhibition catalogues, including *Birds in Art* (Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, 1977-87), *Arts for the Parks* (National Park Academy for the Arts, 1987-91), and *Art and the Animal* (Society of Animal Artists, 1988-94). He has published many magazine articles in periodicals, including *U.S. Art* on such topics as wildlife print collecting and wildlife art connoisseurship.

Endleaf:

Douglas Allen

Brier Rabbit—Cottontail (detail), 1998

Oil on canvas, 30 × 66 inches



Spanierman Gallery, LLC

45 East 58th Street New York 10022 Tel (212) 832-0208 Fax (212) 832-8114

Email info@spanierman.com www.spanierman.com