

THE BIRD SERIES

2000-2003



JUDITH VIVELL

THE BIRD SERIES

The earliest paintings known, on cave walls at Lascaux (15,000 B.C.), testify to humankind's admiration for birds and beasts. Animating this planet in much more varied ways than we do, our fellow creatures are generally more interesting to observe and, in the richness of their natural garb, far more attractive. Their company has always inspired us.

During the Renaissance in Europe a welling up of curiosity about the natural world spawned extraordinarily detailed descriptions of its varied beings in words and in pictures, like the resplendent animals and birds depicted by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), in which every inch of fur or feather was meticulously, even reverently, rendered. In their sincere wonderment and devotion to accuracy, such studies are without peer. At the same time, discoveries of hitherto unknown species in far-flung lands generated a flurry of reports. Since most explorers and expeditionary scientists were ill-prepared for pictorial assignments, artists were commissioned by princely courts or educated aristocrats to spread the news. But, after the camera was invented around 1840, photographers like those for National Geographic commandeered the field.

It is a fact that very few artists who have devoted themselves to the study of Nature have achieved significant stature in the pantheon of art. Among the notable exceptions are Georg Hoefnagel (1542-1601), for his delicate insects; Pierre Joseph Redouté (1759-1840), for roses; George Stubbs (1724-1806), for dogs and horses; Antoine Louis Barye (1795-1875), for tigers, bears,

and the like; and John James Audubon (1785-1851), for the New World's birds. It is generally assumed, in matters of scientific illustration, that beauty is inherent in the subject, itself, rather than a result of the illustrator's intervention. Yet in the face of Nature, a true artist cannot help but be inspired and feel an urge to dance with reality, to intensify an image by sharpening a contour, highlighting a texture, or strengthening color. There might be also the temptation to embellish a subject with extra detail, scenery, or some bit of drama, ostensibly to inform or entertain. But anecdote is generally the enemy of art and inhibits imagination; too much information clogs the mind. Perhaps only in the art of the East do we find truly harmonious depictions of animal life in natural settings. The active and the passive elements of nature complement one another in countless Chinese scrolls, Ukiyo-e woodcuts, and in such works as the curiously naïve, but certainly knowing, Mughal paintings of the 18th century where, with scant attention to accuracy in detail or scale, the schematic profile of a waterfowl towers imperiously above a tiny snaking river.

It is perhaps to such pictures that Judith Vivell's may be associated for they, too, are monumental and idiosyncratic, in fine disregard of the expected. Seemingly alive, yet standing very still, the birds in her paintings hold their poses neither to impress nor to ingratiate. They are proud, but aloof, and we are obliged to agree with them: they are marvelous creatures. Painted in oil and oil stick, these escapees from the usual provinces of wildlife parade their outsized splendor with an attitude

peculiarly self-possessed. Figuratively leading the procession are *Whooping Crane I* (Fig. 2) and *Whooping Crane II*: the first arching its form vaingloriously; the second shouting its name. Here, as elsewhere, Vivell eschews all but the essential and portrays the species with summary flourishes. She may not require her subjects to step entirely into the picture, but they must display their most striking features. Generally, they are cooperative in this respect, but each has a mind of its own.

While Vivell has based her paintings on a wide range of observations and images, including photographs she has taken on Deer Isle, Maine, and Sanibel Island, Florida, she seems to have progressed quickly from such references to the invention of her own distinct brood. Each of the species she has painted can be identified by its scientific name, but its cataloged features appear highly generalized and serve mainly to define the peculiar character of each bird. Occasionally, a feathered head assumes the aspect of a speaking likeness, so striking are the portraits of, for example, the haughty *Sarus Crane* (Fig. 1), or the grizzled *Swainson's Hawk* (Fig. 8), who casts his sad, jaded eye in our direction. The selective cropping of these images is intriguing, for we must wonder about unseen parts.

Indeed, it is the license Vivell permits herself as artist, and us as viewers, that makes her birds so mysteriously affecting. Like the Symbolist painters and poets of the late 19th century, she simply suggests, without exactly stating, so that, unencumbered by factual or anecdotal details, our imaginations may wander. More modern artist than birder, she studies her subjects with the eyes of one schooled in abstraction and color field

painting; shapes and hues are foremost in her view; a composition must be tight as a drum. Thus, the color auras that surround the *Great Blue Heron* (Fig. 9), the *Brolga Crane* (Fig. 10), and the *Satyr Tragopan* (Fig. 5) hold each bird firmly in place, while boldly complementing its features. Perspectival space is seldom defined, although Vivell may sometimes supply a fragment of tree or grass underfoot. To her *Jungle Fowl* (Fig. 12) she lends a trailing shadow as subtly dramatic as those appended to Spanish noblemen painted by Velázquez (1599-1660). The vaguely textured backdrops she provides are in dreamy hues, sumptuous in and of themselves, but really designed to enhance the allure of the portrayed subject, like the scumbled ochre curtain that surrounds *Madame Recamier* in her portrait by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) in the Louvre.

Educated in the history of art, as in the mastery of painting, Judith Vivell brings to her work an insatiable appetite for visual experience. For many years she has concentrated on painting human figures, particularly the female nude, as well as landscapes and pure abstractions. The recent turn in her focus, the result of frequent sojourns from her Soho loft in New York City to rural New England and coastal areas, has inspired a burst of activity. Indeed, her grand portraits of feathered bipeds, both common and exotic, convey the fascination that comes with discovery and a marveling at the strange shapes beauty takes.

Colta Ives