

# The “Self-Portrait” of John James Audubon Is a Copy

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For more than a decade, I have been conducting an expansive investigation of the life and works of John James Audubon (1785–1851), the famous painter and ornithologist. My goal is not to reshuffle century-old anecdotes, as many biographers have done, but to locate novel primary sources — lost specimens, letters, diaries, etc. — that expand and reframe our understanding of Audubon’s art, science, and pseudoscience (e.g., Halley 2015, 2016, 2018a–c, 2019a, 2020a–b, 2022). One of the most mysterious artifacts known to Audubon scholars is an oil painting purported to be his self-portrait (Fig. 1). Privately-owned, the painting is framed with a placard that reads:

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, PAINTED BY  
HIMSELF ABOUT THE YEAR 1822

How well established are the claims in this inscription? How do we know that Audubon was the creator and subject of this painting? Are there primary sources that shed light on these questions? Here, after many years of investigation, I summarize what I have learned about this obscure topic. As usual, with Audubon, there is more than meets the eye.

## A Review of the Evidence

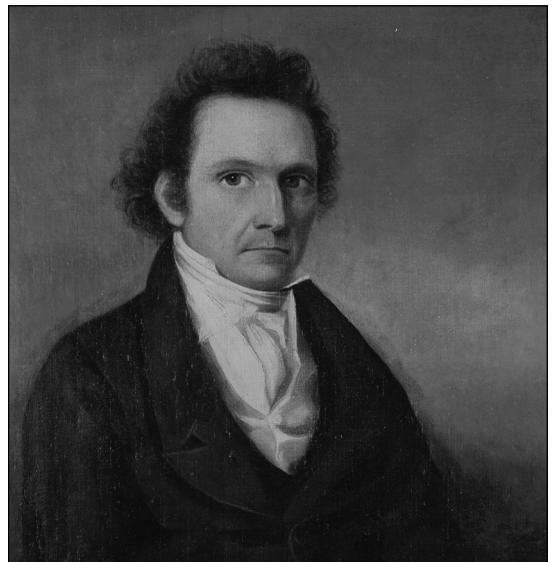
The first claim — that Audubon is the subject of the portrait — is easily established through provenance. The existence of the portrait was revealed in the 1880s, after its owner Mrs. E. C. (Johnson) Walker brought it to the attention of Robert W. Shufeldt (1850–1934), an ornithologist who was briefly the husband of Audubon’s granddaughter Florence. Shufeldt (1886) published an account of his interactions with Walker and a poor-quality reproduction of the portrait. According to Walker’s account, Lucy Audubon was her childhood tutor from 1827 to 1830, at the “Beech Grove” plantation managed by her father, William Garret Johnson, in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. The oil painting was one of several items that Lucy reportedly left in the Johnson’s home when she departed:

There was a portfolio of quite a number and variety of [prints of] birds left with my father

by Mrs. Audubon, but they have been given to different members of our family. [My father] left a half-finished portrait of [Audubon’s] wife and two sons, a portrait of [Audubon] himself in oil colors, taken by himself with the aid of a mirror and a life size American Eagle.” (Walker in Shufeldt 1886)

Walker’s story is largely corroborated by an independent source, which was apparently unknown to Shufeldt. More than 30 years before Walker came forth with the self-portrait, Thorpe (1851) visited Beech Grove and published the following descriptive account:

In the hospitable mansion of [William Garret Johnson], in the parish of West Feliciana [Louisiana], if one will look into the parlor, they will see over the piano a cabinet-sized portrait [of the ornithologist], remarkable for a bright eye and intellectual look ... Opposite hangs ‘a proof



**FIGURE 1.** Monochrome print of the oil painting purported to be the self-portrait of John James Audubon (1785–1851). Original work in private collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University (ANSP Archive Collection 457).

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impression’ of ‘the bird of Washington,’ a tribute of a grateful heart to an old friend<sup>1</sup> ... in the family holding these pleasing mementos, the ‘Audubons’ lived for many years ... Here it was that the wife of the great naturalist bid him go forward with his work, and not only cheered him on, but threw the acquisitions of her own industry into the glory of the future. (Thorpe 1851)

With the provenance of the painting now established, we may feel confident that the clean-shaven subject of the oil painting is indeed Audubon. However, other than the testimony of Walker, what evidence is there that the oil painting is Audubon’s self-portrait? There is only one mention of a self-portrait in “primary” sources, to my knowledge (see Halley 2022, for issues related to Audubon’s diaries). On July 26, 1824, after a nostalgic visit to Mill Grove, Audubon wrote in his diary: “Gave Mr. Haines my portrait, drawn by myself, on condition that he should have it copied in case of my death before making another, and send it [i.e., the copy] to my wife” (Buchanan 1868: 87–88). This passage refers to Reuben Haines III (1786–1831), the Corresponding Secretary of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP), who was one of three ANSP members who nominated Audubon for membership in 1824 (Halley 2015, 2018c).

For several years, I have suspected that the painting in question is the copy mentioned in Audubon’s diary transcript, not the original. Historians have merely assumed that it was Audubon’s self-portrait, based on Walker’s testimony, and that it was created in 1822/23, because that is when Audubon painted oil portraits of his sons, Victor and John, and of a local family, the Flukers (Arthur 1937, McDermott 1958, Peck 2020). However, “a glance at [the oil portrait of Audubon] in comparison with the portraits of [his sons] and [the] Fluker boys shows such an advance in skill that it could not have been done at this early date” (McDermott 1958). This anomaly may simply be evidence that the oil painting was not painted by Audubon at all, but by an unidentified portraitist in Philadelphia, commissioned by Reuben Haines.

### New Evidence from Wyck

Fortuitously, I served (twice) as the resident caretaker of Wyck, the ancestral home of Reuben Haines in Germantown, Philadelphia, and have been studying the Haines family papers for more than a decade. My persistent search for information was finally gratified in 2018, when I found an unpublished letter dated 1897, from Francis Cope Haines (1857–1918), a grandson of Reuben, in response to an inquiry made by William Henry Wetherill (1838–1927), a descendant of the Wetherill family who purchased the Audubon homestead at Mill Grove in 1813 (Ford 1964). The letter contains the testimony of Reuben’s youngest daughter, Jane Reuben Haines (1832–1911), who recalled that an “unfinished sketch” portrait of Audubon was at Wyck during her childhood. Although interested in birds, Jane was not a subscriber to *The Auk*, journal of the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU), where Shufeldt’s (1886) reproduction of the oil portrait was published. Indeed, it seems likely that her memory of Audubon’s self-portrait was untainted by outside influences and based entirely on her own experience. The following is extracted from Francis’s letter (Wyck Association Collection, American Philosophical Society [APS] Library Mss.Ms.Coll.52):

Germantown Phila. March 3d 1897

Dear sir: Since acknowledging the receipt of your letter of 26th ultimo I have inquired of my Aunts Mrs. Hannah H. Bacon and Miss Jane R. Haines what knowledge or recollection they have of the portrait of Audubon of which you wrote. These ladies are the only surviving children of my grandfather Reuben Haines of Germantown. Neither of them has any recollection of any full-length portrait of Audubon being in the possession of the family.

Miss J. R. Haines who occupies [Wyck] the old homestead S.W. Corner of Germantown Ave. and W. Walnut Lane has however a childish recollection of a portrait of Audubon in either watercolor or black + white which only extended to below the shoulders and was appar-

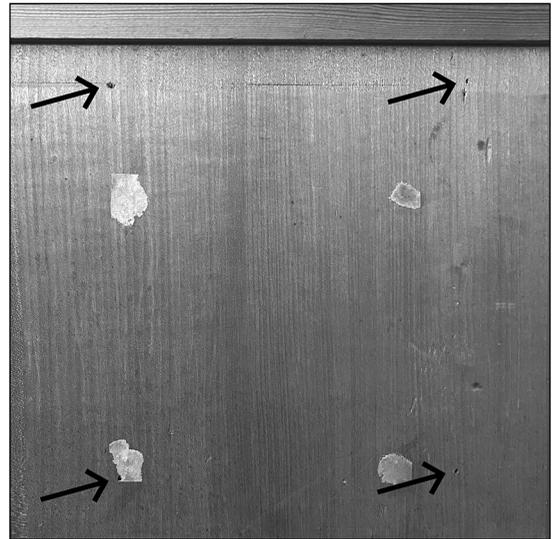
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1.Thorpe’s (1851) account confirms that the “life size American Eagle” mentioned by Walker was a double-elephant folio print (likely uncolored) of the Bird of Washington, which I have argued was an invented and fraudulent species, based on a partially plagiarized painting and reinforced with fabricated data (Halley 2020b).

ently an unfinished sketch for it was never framed but simply fastened inside a bookcase door. She has no knowledge of what has become of the sketch-portrait. From her description it seems somewhat similar to the portrait by Henry Inman the painter. She has a very strong and vivid memory of more than sixty years, but she was born near the time of my grandfather's death in 1831.

Her sister, Mrs. Bacon, although several years older has no recollection of any portrait at all of Audubon, not even the one Miss Haines remembers. Her memory is not naturally as strong and retentive as that of her younger sister and she never had the same interest in ornithology which Miss Haines has in a popular way and would therefore not be so apt to remember incidents connected with Audubon. So far as myself is concerned I have no recollection of my father telling us of such a portrait as you speak of and I think he would have done so if it had remained in our family after my grandfather's death,<sup>2</sup> for he took much general interest in birds and encouraged us, his sons, to observe and study them in our boyhood and he was also very active in the management and development of the Academy of Natural Sciences. He was born in 1820 and was somewhat over four years of age at the time of the visit to Audubon's home on the Perkiomen Creek.<sup>3</sup> I would suggest the probability of this portrait having been presented to the Acad. of Natural Sciences sometime prior to or shortly after my grandfather's death and would recommend a search being made in the Minutes of the Academy from 1824 to about 1835.<sup>4</sup>

On the second floor of Wyck, in the "Museum room," stands a large wooden cabinet where Reuben kept his fossil collection and other natural curiosities. This



**FIGURE 2.** Inside surface of the door of Reuben Haines's fossil cabinet at Wyck. Four small pinholes in the door, indicated by black arrows, form a vertical rectangle with the dimensions  $21.5 \times 19$  cm (length/width ratio = 0.88). The white paper adhered to the door is younger than the pinholes, because one of the holes is partially covered by the paper in the lower left. Other than the absence of the items that once hung here, the cabinet and its contents are thought to have been virtually undisturbed since Reuben's death in 1831 (see Halley 2019b). Photograph by Cara Caputo. Reproduced courtesy of the Wyck Association.

is the same cabinet in which I rediscovered the lost holotype of *Baculites ovatus* Say, 1820, after nearly two centuries (Halley 2019b). Where else would Reuben have kept Audubon's self-portrait, but in this cabinet, his own private shrine to natural history? Jane remembered that it was "never framed but simply fastened inside a bookcase door." A close inspection of the door reveals four tiny pinholes on the inside surface (Fig. 2).

According to Shufeldt (1886), the canvas of the oil painting is tacked to a handmade wooden frame

2. Reuben Haines died suddenly in October 1831 (Halley 2018c). It is plausible that the portrait hung in the cabinet during the 1830s, long enough to impress upon Jane's memory, but was removed by 1840 or so.

3. Reuben and his wife Jane hosted Audubon overnight at Wyck on July 25, 1824, then took him in their carriage to Mill Grove the following day (Halley 2015, 2018c). This was the occasion when Audubon gave his self-portrait to Haines, on condition that he have it copied. Mill Grove is situated on the Perkiomen Creek near its confluence with the Schuylkill River, exactly 17 miles (27.4 km) from Wyck following the route they most likely traveled (i.e., Germantown Ave., to Ridge Rd., to Egypt Rd.).

4. No such record or painting has been located at the ANSP.

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with the dimensions 31 × 26 cm (length/width ratio = 0.84). This is approximately 44% larger and slightly narrower than the pinhole dimensions (Fig. 2), exactly what we would expect to find if the copyist chose to work on a canvas that was slightly larger than the original. The copyist would not have needed to resize the image because Audubon’s figure does not take up the entire canvas and his jacket is extended to the elbow. If the image was cropped to “below the shoulders,” as Jane remembered, the figure would fit neatly within the pinhole dimensions.

### Conclusions and Reflections

In summary, the primary record supports the copy theory. There is no primary evidence whatsoever that the oil painting was “painted by [Audubon] himself about the year 1822,” as the inscription on the frame claims, only Walker’s testimony about events that she and her father did not witness. An eyewitness account by Reuben Haines’s daughter describes an unfinished “sketch” portrait at Wyck in the 1830s, and her story is corroborated by physical evidence in the form of pinholes with the appropriate dimensions in the door of Reuben’s natural history cabinet. Furthermore, there is no reason to suspect that “honest Quaker Haines,” as Audubon called him to Thomas Sully in August 1824 (Herrick 1917: 339), failed to complete his task. Audubon had requested that Haines commission a “copy” (i.e., an oil portrait), based on an original self-portrait that may have been executed in pastels or watercolor, and to have the copy sent to Lucy in Louisiana. This neatly explains how the oil portrait ended up in the Johnson’s house in West Feliciana, Louisiana, where Lucy was employed from 1827–1830, and why Lucy was apparently willing to give it away — because it was a copy, probably with little sentimental value.

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Audubon’s original self-portrait, which served as the source material for the oil portrait copy, is still missing and may have been destroyed. I have thoroughly searched the Wyck house, including combing through the pages of books in the library, hoping to find it tucked in, but to no avail. Wyck is a mysterious place, and the portrait could still turn up there, but that would surprise me. It was probably removed by 1840, late enough to have impressed on Jane’s memory but early enough for no memory to have formed in the next generation of the Haines family. If the self-portrait does exist, I suspect that it is preserved in a public archive somewhere, filed under an anonymous label (e.g., “portrait of unidentified man”), thus escaping the notice of scholars. If so, to find it, we will need a strong search image and a fair dose of luck.

Therefore, I implore you, dear reader, to be on the lookout for the lost self-portrait of John James Audubon! It was probably not executed with oil paints, but instead with pastels (“black + white”), Audubon’s favored medium for portraits (Peck 2020), or perhaps watercolors, on a piece of paper approximately 22 × 20 cm, with pinholes in the corners.

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