

## MARI KLOEPPPEL

*Ojhab (Peregrine Falcon)*, 2005  
Oil on Linen, 20 x 20 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery, Carmel

## CHARLES HOOD

# Condors of Los Angeles

**H**is version of the bird that personified California can sometimes be seen at the Huntington Library in San Marino. Like the bird, he was a remarkable specimen. He could dance, sing, draw, shoot, ride, sew, play the flute, and fence. In London, he wore fringed buckskins; on the frontier, he wore white linen. John Keats called him a fool. Charles Darwin quoted him in his books and may have had taxidermy lessons from him. Harry Truman collected his art, as did Queen Victoria, Roger Tory Peterson, the king of France, Mark Twain. The illegitimate Haitian offspring of a slave-owning French pirate and a mixed-race servant, John James Audubon convinced half of Louisiana and portions of northern England that he was the lost dauphin of the French royal family.

He claimed to have been taught painting by Jacques David. He admired Indians but owned slaves. He went bankrupt often. A dozen towns are named after him, several historical parks, some bridges, an ecological society, one shearwater, a small rabbit, an extinct ram, and an oriole. Amazon displays six thousand hits for his name, but only one title really matters: an intact copy of his greatest book is worth whatever the market will pay—most recently, \$11 million and change.

*Birds of America*: what a grand project. A book that would include every species of bird in America (and a few that he got wrong, so *more* than every species), each drawn life size—even if that meant folding the flamingo in half like a dead body in a suitcase. Those plates in turn would be etched in copper, dipped in acid, hand colored, bound in sets, sold by subscription to the 1 percent who bought nice things, then and now. But why? Does art history have much room for John James Audubon? Robert Hughes lists him in the same breath as Rothko, Grant Wood, Gilbert Stuart, and Andy Warhol. Probably because he was from Oz, Hughes was the nutty exception who proves the rule; in the 1,100 pages of the most recent edition of *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, Monsieur Audubon the rustic genius is mentioned a grand total of zero times.

So here is the great bird itself, plate ccccxvi, on view at the Huntington. Standing there in the dim library and looking at Audubon's condor, one thinks of some kind of queer, wet vulture, seemingly still hoping to be an extra in *Waiting for Godot*. There's money to be made there, too. Single pages, cut loose from the original edition, go