



Willet

The Eastern Willet can perceive differences between its song and that of its western counterpart — the beginning of sub-speciation.

Artists on Audubon:

Sculptor Grainger McKoy

To see Grainger McKoy's sculpture is to see the impossible: birds, alone and in groups, taking flight, frozen in midair ... an airborne hawk struggling with a snake ... a Black Skimmer skirting dark water, its beak open. These birds are alive in every detail, from the number of neck rings or wing feathers to the touches of color at the eye, unaware that they are works of art.

But McKoy's work isn't special effects. It brings to mind the classics of sculpture. "Like those grand masters of the 15th and 16th centuries, McKoy enshrines a sense of the permanent with a fine, feathery touch," says Thomas Hoving, director emeritus of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

With a notable career spanning several decades, McKoy still works in South Carolina, near the town where he was born. He has had one-man shows at the prestigious Hammer Gallery and Coe Kerr Gallery in New York, and in the distinguished Brookgreen Gardens in Pawley's Island, South Carolina.

Q: As a gifted artist who loves the outdoors, you could have chosen any subject. Why birds?

A: I was interested in birds from an early age. I hunted in my youth, ate a lot of birds, watched them a lot. Feathers always intrigued me. I think I chose birds because they fly, and to me, flight represents freedom.



Whip-poor-will

Whip-poor-wills breed with the moon's cycle. Their eggs hatch as the moon waxes, providing many hours of moonlight in which the adults can hunt for food for their young.

The more I look
at a bird, the
more in awe I am
of creation.”

Q: In addition to being beautiful, your sculptures are feats of engineering and accuracy. How did you begin?

A: As a teenager, I became interested in decoys. My mentor, Gilbert Maggioni, wouldn't settle for anything less than total accuracy and fine art in carving. "You have to treat the bird correctly," he always said to me. He inspired me to look at carving as an art form, not a craft. He would take me on trips to museums — the National Gallery in Washington, the Met in New York — where we spent a lot of time observing how great masters treated wildlife. Those experiences

taught me a lot, and set some high standards. I came to see what I do as a search for the truth. When you watch and work closely with your subject, you're awestruck by the detail. The work takes on a soulful quality and inspires a sense of humility. The more I look at a bird, the more in awe I am of creation.

Q: What birds are special touchstones for you?

A: The species indigenous to the South — birds of prey, water birds, ducks, geese — they give you so much to work with. Prey-predator relationships are interesting to me because they tell a story — you see birds struggling with each other to survive, or a bird capturing a snake. Water birds are very expressive, with their long necks and wings. I'm very inspired by them in flight — I stretch their necks and spread their wings and toes so you can see everything.

Q: For much of your career you carved in basswood to create the illusion of feathers. Why did you start working in bronze?



Great Gray Owl

Instead of building its own nest, the Great Gray Owl uses the old nests of other species, cavities in trees or on the ground, and man-made nest boxes.

A: With wood, it's like I was only dancing on part of the stage. Bronze gave me more room to dance — a chance to work with new materials, molds, and do something new. Right now I'm working on a piece for a hospital lobby — a large bronze wing doing a recovery stroke. I've worked hard to get the casting molds just right. Even though it's in bronze, I want it to look as much like a wing in recovery as possible.

Q: That's very apt — a wing in recovery, in a hospital.

A: A recovery stroke shows the wing in its weakest position, yet at its most graceful. I feel that way about people in illness or in crisis.

I've volunteered in hospitals and jails, among children with cancer, whose parents are scared — that's when you have to find the strength inside yourself, the grace to recover from weakness. When a bird is doing a recovery stroke, it's very beautiful.

Q: You've said an environmental message isn't really part of your work. Yet when we hear how you live in the middle of nowhere to avoid tourists, who find you anyway, we can't help but think of habitat encroachment.

A: (Laughs) It's true — although I certainly clap when I see something conserved, I'm not big into the environmental movement.

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Bald Eagle

The Bald Eagle belongs to a group known as fish eagles and is more closely related to kites than to Golden Eagles, which are similar in appearance.

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But anytime I hear tires on pavement way out here I know that's a bad thing for birds and for me!

Q: How would you like your work to affect people?

A: When people see one of my larger pieces from a distance, it tends to affect them all the same. But as they approach, something different clicks for each viewer. An art critic will look at the composition, an engineer will start figuring out how it works. A plantation manager who's eaten a lot of duck will want to really see a duck up close. I love the broad range of appreciation and how different

things in the same piece appeal to different people. Even when I'm here working, I love it when the UPS guy comes by, sees something new, and responds to it. If I were a different kind of artist, doing abstracts like painting a canvas black, I think it would be hard to reach people in the same way.

To experience Grainger McKoy's work, visit his website, www.graingermckoy.com.



In 1832, ornithologist Alexander Wilson observed a flock of Carolina Parakeets "along the banks of the Ohio, in a snow storm, flying about like pigeons, and in full cry." Moved by Wilson's description, sculptor Grainger McKoy preserved the birds in basswood, metal, alabaster, and oil paint. His sculpture is one of the only ways we can experience Carolina Parakeets today. By 1920, dwindling habitat forced these colorful, sociable, once abundant birds into extinction. McKoy's amazing portrait of the United States' only native parrot — a gift to Audubon from Dan Lufkin — reminds us of the wonders we risk losing when we sacrifice nature for civilization.