
to orders for 200 complete sets of the prints, priced at the then-enormous sum of \$1,000. (First editions now sell for as much as \$4 million.) Audubon subsequently turned to documenting the mammals of America.

The artist changed forever the way in which birds are illustrated. Before him, noted illustrators such as Alexander Wilson (1766–1813) used stuffed birds as models and produced accurate but stiff and static images. Audubon, by contrast, “sought to gain direct knowledge of his subjects in their natural settings by traversing woods, plains, and swamps all over the land,” May notes. He rarely painted stuffed specimens but instead “drew directly from freshly killed birds in order to capture the shapes, textures, and colors as accurately as possible. He threaded birds with wire to set them in poses which were both characteristic of their daily activities, such as foraging or hunting prey, and aesthetically pleasing.”

In Audubon’s work, Theodore E. Stebbins, curator of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, observes, “the noblest traditions of European art and European ornithology met with wilderness America.” No one in America could match him “for graphic inventiveness until Winslow Homer some 60 years later.”

A Whale Of a Reputation

“Melville Climbs the Canon” by Paul Lauter, in *American Literature* (Mar. 1994), Box 90020, Duke University, Durham, N.C. 27708-0020.

Despite the academy’s “canon wars,” Herman Melville’s status as a great American writer seems secure. But this dead white male owes his position to more than just the undoubted virtues of his work, maintains Lauter, a professor of literature at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn.

Melville (1819–1891) was among the more celebrated American authors at the end of the 1840s, but he subsequently fell into such obscurity that his death prompted only a single obituary notice. He was not rediscovered until the 1920s, and as his reputation rose during that decade, critics radically made over his image,

Lauter argues. At the beginning of the decade, the author of *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) was seen—as the publisher of a 1921 book about him put it—as “the father of South Sea literature.” The “primitive” was in vogue after World War I, and Melville, who, as one writer noted, came from “the best American stock, English, Scotch-Irish, and Dutch,” seemed a safe guide. “Well-born, and nurtured in good manners and a cosmopolitan tradition,” the critic Richard Weaver observed in 1921, “he was . . . a gentleman adventurer in the barbarous outposts of human experience.” And he did not “go native,” critic Carl Van Doren added approvingly.

Before long, however, a different Melville emerged from the writings of biographer Lewis Mumford and others: the author as heroic genius misunderstood by the masses. The neglected Melville, Lauter writes, came “to stand more generally for the plight of artists in crass materialistic societies, like those of America in the 1850s and 1920s.” Critics endlessly quoted Melville’s lament in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne: “Dollars damn me. . . . What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” (Few critics of the period noted that Melville was finishing *Moby Dick* [1851] when he penned that complaint.)

Increasingly, Melville came to be seen “not as a transparently approachable chronicler of sea tales, but as a densely allusive composer whose most precious treasures would be yielded up, as with other modernist texts, only to learned initiates.” At the start of the Melville revival, he was valued *despite* his mannered style; by the end of the 1920s, “his value lay precisely in the appeal of his style to a modernist reader.”

“The appeal of the myth of the misunderstood, exiled artist to modernist intellectuals, however differently articulated . . . can hardly be exaggerated,” Lauter notes. The myth “elevated writers to positions of moral primacy and their priests, the critics and professors, to cultural dominion.” Melville has many virtues as a writer, but it is because he came to embody that myth, Lauter contends, that he has remained “required reading.”