



Walton Ford (American, born 1960). *Falling Bough*, 2002. Watercolor, gouache, pencil, and ink on paper. Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery

Educator packet for the special exhibition

Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford

on view at the Brooklyn Museum, November 3, 2006–January 28, 2007

Falling Bough

American History and Natural History

Content recommended for Middle and High School students

Description

In this large watercolor painting, passenger pigeons alight from a huge falling branch. The birds that are clustered on the bough are attacking each other, knocking over nests, destroying eggs—all as the branch is falling to the ground. In the background there are other flocks of passenger pigeons and snapped branches and trees.

The passenger pigeon constituted a third of the natural birds in North America when European colonists arrived, but by the early twentieth century, it was extinct.

John James Audubon wrote the following description of the passenger pigeon flocks arriving in a forest:

As the birds arrived and passed over me I felt a current of air that surprised me . . . The Pigeons, arriving by thousands, alighted everywhere one above another . . . Here and there the perches gave way under the weight with a crash and, falling to the ground, destroyed hundreds of the birds beneath . . . It was a scene of uproar and confusion. I found it quite useless to speak or even to shout to those persons who were nearest to me.

—From *The Audubon Reader*, page 69. See Resources.

Artist Background

As a child, Walton Ford visited the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History and was drawn to the wealth of information contained there: the wall text, the painted landscape backdrops, and the animals. Other inspiration came from the 19th-century naturalist-painter John James Audubon. Audubon is famous for his *Birds of America* prints of the early 1800s. Audubon would kill and mount the birds and then paint them in dynamic poses and natural settings. Ford includes an incredible amount of detail about animals and their habitats in his works, but adds twists to his

narrative—the passenger pigeons are attacking each other and their young as the branches crash to the ground.

The works in *Tigers of Wrath* are watercolors; the animals depicted are life-scale (another legacy from Audubon) and are often surrounded by notes, the Latin names for the animals, and the artwork's title.

Questions for Viewing

What is going on in this image? Describe the types of animals and the landscape.

What are the birds doing? Zoom in on different sections of the branch.

Ford has commented on the dreamlike state of his scenes. What seems unreal in this image? Why?

Ford is inspired by Audubon's writing as well as his artwork. Read the excerpt from Audubon in Description. Compare and contrast the written text with *Falling Bough*.

Activities

Social Studies Activity

Walton Ford has said, "I have a tremendous urge to see the past." Research the time period when Audubon was traveling and documenting the natural history of the American frontier (in the early 1800s). Discuss what role a naturalist-painter would have in the settlers' and government's push westward.

Writing Activity

Some of the birds Audubon depicted are extinct or no longer found in the continental United States. One such bird was the brightly colored Carolina Parakeet (which Ford depicts in *Bird Lime*, on view in the exhibition), which would swarm over Southern crops looking for food. Audubon noted the birds' diminishing numbers during his lifetime due to the high demand for their colorful feathers, the mass clearing of forests, and farmers' eradication of them. Read the quote below from Audubon and write a journal entry from the point of view of a farmer in the Carolinas.

They cling around the whole stack, pull out the straws and destroy twice as much of the grain as would suffice to satisfy their hunger...the Parakeets are destroyed in great numbers...[the farmer] approaches

them with perfect ease and commits great slaughter among them...
The gun is kept at work; eight or ten or even twenty are killed at
every discharge.

—From *The Audubon Reader*, page 102. See Resources.

Make an argument for and against conservation in the early 1800s in
America.

Resources

The Audubon Reader. Edited by Richard Rhodes. New York: Everyman's
Library, 2006

Walton Ford: Tigers of Wrath, Horses of Instruction. With texts by Steven
Katz and Dodie Kazanjian. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002. This
monograph of Ford's work includes an interview and quotes from primary
source 19th-century documents.

Ford is included in the PBS series *art:21*. The series Web site includes
resources and themes for teaching. See [http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ford/
index.html](http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ford/index.html).

Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford is organized by the Brooklyn
Museum.

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