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Museum Observation 1

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Museum Observation #1: New York Historical Society

It is clear from the NMC Horizon report that the coming challenges in the museum field will revolve around technology. How an institution uses these new options is key in their success at reaching a wider range of audiences. Larger institutions such as my partner museum, The New York Historical Society (NYHS), face this problem in a far different way. Bringing in online visitors is not always an issue, but the largest obstacles come with those viewers ability to easily access record, artifacts and information.

Since my chosen work from my partner museum is not on view there is a process to accessing it in person through contacting the reference department. My work is currently unavailable because of its current place in storage and in ongoing research. This work has not been on view in a long while but is included in a collection of several hundred-similar works which are occasionally on view. The work itself is a drawing showing a certain breed of bird living in the Americas, the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. When united with the entire collection my selected work and the rest become one of the largest animal drawing collections, which were created by one of history's greatest ornithologists, John James Audubon¹. Researchers are able to access this collection through the New York Historical Society's website in the area for special collections. Users can then search this collection based on keywords or titles or scroll through the collection looking for specific works.

¹ John James Audubon, National Audubon Society, Accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.audubon.org/content/john-james-audubon>.



► **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), Havell plate no. 336**

OBJECT NUMBER: 1863.17.336
ARTIST/MAKER: John James Audubon
OTHER ARTIST: Maria Martin
DATE: 1831
MEDIUM: Watercolor, graphite, pastel, black ink, collage, black chalk, and gouache with touches of white lead pigment[?], scratching out, and selective glazing on paper, laid on card
DIMENSIONS: Paper: 35 3/4 x 25 7/16 in. (90.8 x 64.6 cm) Mat: 53 x 39 in. (134.6 x 99.1 cm)
INSCRIPTIONS: Inscribed at lower left in graphite: "No 57 -- / 281"; at upper right: "Weight of Young / 1 lb 7 ozes -- / Interior of the bill / Greenish Yellow -- / Nictated Membrane / Weight -- 1 lb 7 1/2 o.zes / Sex -- Male -- Gut the size[cut] / a raven's quill very long. --"; at middle right: "Male adult Spring plumage 1. / Young in October 2."
DESCRIPTION: Adult male, below; immature, above
GALLERY LABEL: The background flora has been identified as Smilax (*Smilax pseudo-china*) and was painted by Maria Martin
CREDIT LINE: Purchased for the Society by public subscription from Mrs. John J. Audubon

Due to ongoing research, information about this object is subject to change.

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The Audubon collection is one of the most important ornithological drawing collections in the world. This means that researchers from around the world attempt to access them. The NYHS even makes it clear on certain works, including my chosen piece, that “Due to ongoing research, information about this object is subject to change.”³

² Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, New York Historical Society, Accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/yellow-crowned-night-heron-nyctanassa-violacea-havell-plate-no-336>.

³ Ibid.

These entire collection is accessible from the NYHS website on the page dedicated to special collections. The following shows how viewers would see this collection if they began looking for it.

▶ Audubon's Watercolors for The Birds of America

In 1863 Lucy Bakewell Audubon, the widow of John James Audubon, sold to the New-York Historical Society her husband's preparatory watercolors for his seminal work *The Birds of America* (published serially in London between 1827 and 1838).

[See full collection](#)



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▶ Audubon's Watercolors for The Birds of America

[About](#) [Has Image](#) | [Full Collection](#)



Artist: John James Audubon
Title: Snowy Owl, Havell Plate no, 121
Medium: Watercolor, graphite, pastel, and black ink with touches of glazing on paper, laid on card

John James Audubon is revered as one of the most gifted naturalist-illustrators of the nineteenth century. So it is hard to believe that, following his death, his widow Lucy had trouble finding a repository for her husband's legacy. In 1862, Mrs. Audubon offered the New-York Historical Society the original drawings used to produce Audubon's seminal work, *The Birds of America*, and though it would take a year to raise the funds needed to acquire the drawings, in 1863 New-York Historical finally purchased all 435 preparatory watercolors, plus thirty-four other works. Today, New-York Historical has the largest holdings of Audubon-related material in the world.

A limited selection of the holdings are on view in the Luce Center. All 474 watercolors in the collection will be on display in [Audubon's Aviary](#).

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⁴ Special Collections, New York Historical Society, Accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibits/collections/list>.

⁵ Audubon's Watercolors for The Birds of America, New York Historical Society, Accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibits/collections/about/1201/grid/paged/title>.

In today's technological age, information is everywhere. Viewers judge things based on how that information is delivered. Today, viewers can access entire museum collections and libraries worth of information at the push of a button. The New York Historical Society, like many other museums, use multiple social media platforms engage with visitors. Instagram has become specifically important because it allows institutions to post easily viewable pictures with large captions of information. The NYHS uses this platform about once a day, with a wide range of images and announcements based on daily events and specific and strategic information. The John James Audubon collection made appearances on the NYHS Instagram page for days like National Bird Day and Thanksgiving. This use of themed markets lets institutions and viewers to engage based on time of year, topic and many other categories.



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⁶ New York Historical Society, Instagram, Accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdlKdrMDtVQ/?taken-by=nyhistory>.



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The NMC Horizon report section about digital technology from 2016 focuses on creating a digital strategy and program for digital implementation. Saying, “Digital strategies are more than the development of a website; they are the multiple channels of technologies that provide unique opportunities for audience engagement.”⁸ This means that institutions across the museum field are attempting to connect with audiences on a greater level. Not every piece of a museum’s collection can have a place on the wall or be seen by everyone who wishes too. However, museums such as the New York Historical Society have created web platforms to allow viewers to see and engage with artifacts from the safety of their own home, while still getting an educational experience. Social media provides even further access to collections and information, as newer generations become even more in touch with technology and the digital

⁷ New York Historical Society, Instagram, Accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BbkzByCDadn/?taken-by=nyhistory>.

⁸ New Media Consortium, *Developing Effective Digital Strategies*, From NMC Horizon Report 2016, 2016.

world it is important for museums and collecting institutions to grow and have easily accessible collections.

Works Cited

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