



ART OF NATURE

Three Centuries of
Natural History Art

Stage 1 touring exhibition concept brief:
Art of Nature (working title)
April 2015



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THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

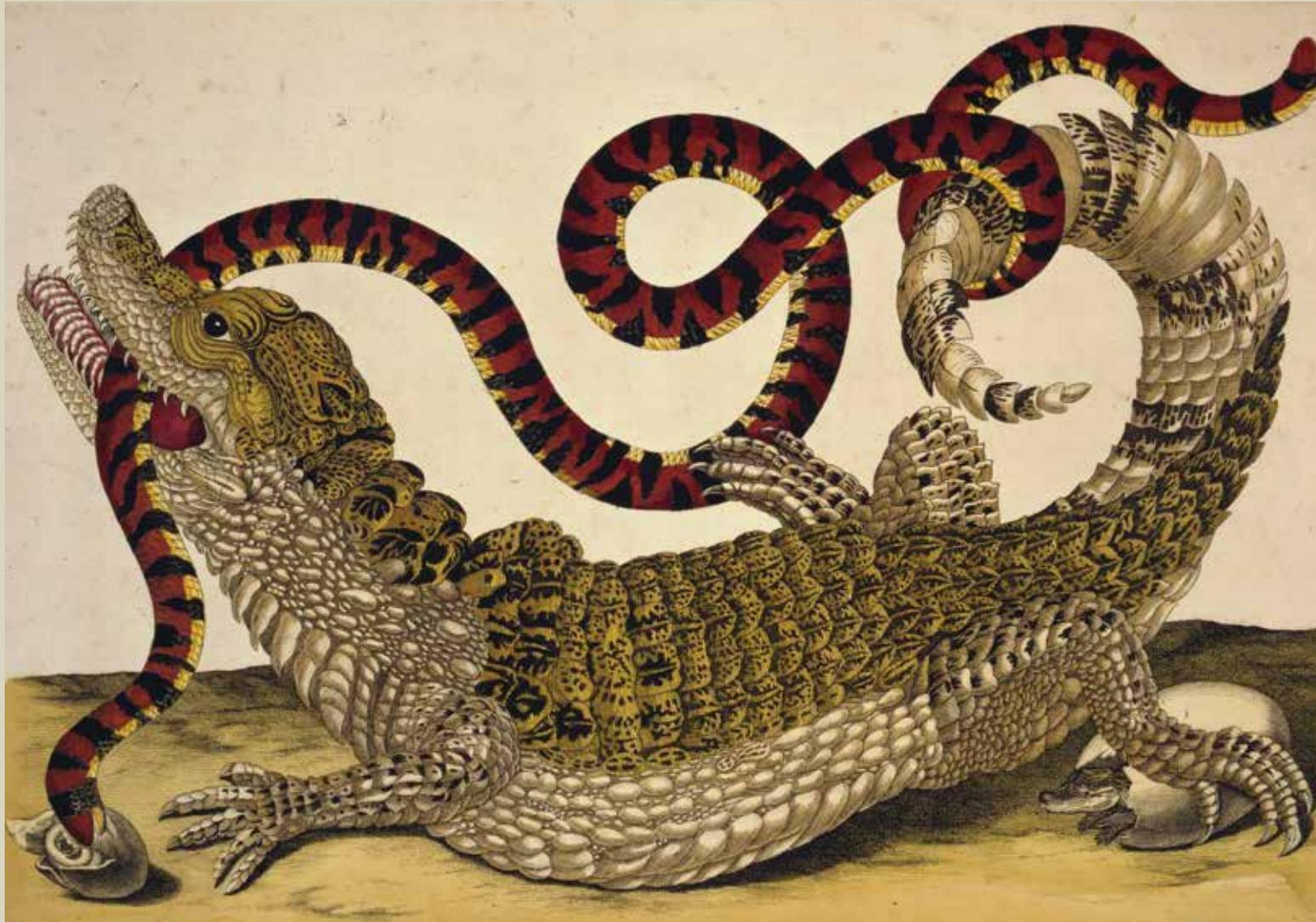
One of the world's leading visitor attractions for engagement with the natural world, the Natural History Museum is a scientific centre of global significance welcoming 5.6 million visitors every year. Our vast collection is an invaluable resource for international scientific research. Our scientists, working in more than 68 countries, publish new discoveries on subjects as diverse as the origins of humans to the environmental threats we face. We present to everyone, expert or not, the latest scientific thinking, challenging what we know and shaping how we understand the world around us.

The collection is at the heart of all the Museum does. One of the best and most diverse of its kind in the world, the 80 million specimens and objects in the collection form a unique record of the natural world and its immense diversity. It represents scientific advancement, and is a historical and cultural treasure-trove, filled with stories of individual specimens, and the explorers, collectors and scientists who helped reveal them. New acquisitions enlarge its scope, new research draws fresh discoveries and new exhibitions reinvigorate its capacity to educate and inspire a global audience.

A photograph of the Natural History Museum in London. The image shows a modern glass extension on the left and the historic building on the right. The glass extension has a grid pattern and reflects the sky. The historic building is made of stone and has a large tower with a spire. The sky is blue with some clouds. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text.

‘The importance of these artworks is often enhanced by their association with some of the most significant and momentous events in the history of the natural sciences. Famous voyages and expeditions of discovery, individual feats of courage and perseverance, and the synthesis of ideas into understanding the origins and diversity of all living species.’

Judith Magee, Special Collections Manager of the Natural History Museum’s art collection



Caiman, *Crocodylus crocodilus* and false coral snake, *Anilius scytale*.
Maria Sybilla Merian. Hand-coloured engraving, 1705.

EXHIBITION SUMMARY

The Natural History Museum's spectacular art collection, one of the largest in Britain, represents works by the world's greatest natural history artists.

Art of Nature selects highlights from more than 500,000 illustrations in the collection to explore the intricate relationship between art and the science of nature over three centuries – from the 1700s to the present day.

Drawings, paintings and sketches of nature combine aesthetic beauty with scientific accuracy, sharply illuminating the close collaboration between artists and western scientists in their endeavours to observe, record and classify nature.

The exhibition uncovers the crucial role natural history art has played in increasing our understanding of the natural world, telling fascinating stories of scientific discovery.

Inspired by stories of pioneering artists and naturalists, visitors will understand the importance of illustration in documenting species. Lavish paintings and prints, and insights from the work of modern scientists, trace the development of printing and imaging techniques in producing increasingly accurate records of the world's changing biodiversity.

Art of Nature is a story the Natural History Museum is uniquely positioned to tell, drawing on our history of research into the diversity of life, and one of the largest collections of natural history artworks on paper. From the classification system developed by Carl Linnaeus in the 1700s, to modern fieldwork and imaging technologies, our scientists continue the work of these pioneering artworks.

EXHIBITION SECTIONS

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

In *Art of Nature* visitors will explore the crucial role natural history art has played in building our understanding of the natural world, telling fascinating stories of scientific investigation through our rich art collection. They will gain an appreciation of how natural history artists worked, the techniques they used and how their art became increasingly scientifically accurate, representing subjects to allow for future study. As well as finding out how these artworks were distributed to an ever wider public, they will discover how new digital techniques have revolutionised how we observe and record species, but also how an important place remains for illustration in recording the natural world.

AV and visual interpretation will show the processes of creating and printing illustrations, taking visitors on the voyages of some of the earliest European natural history artists. Hands-on elements, such as the opportunity to observe and illustrate nature, will add another dimension to the works.

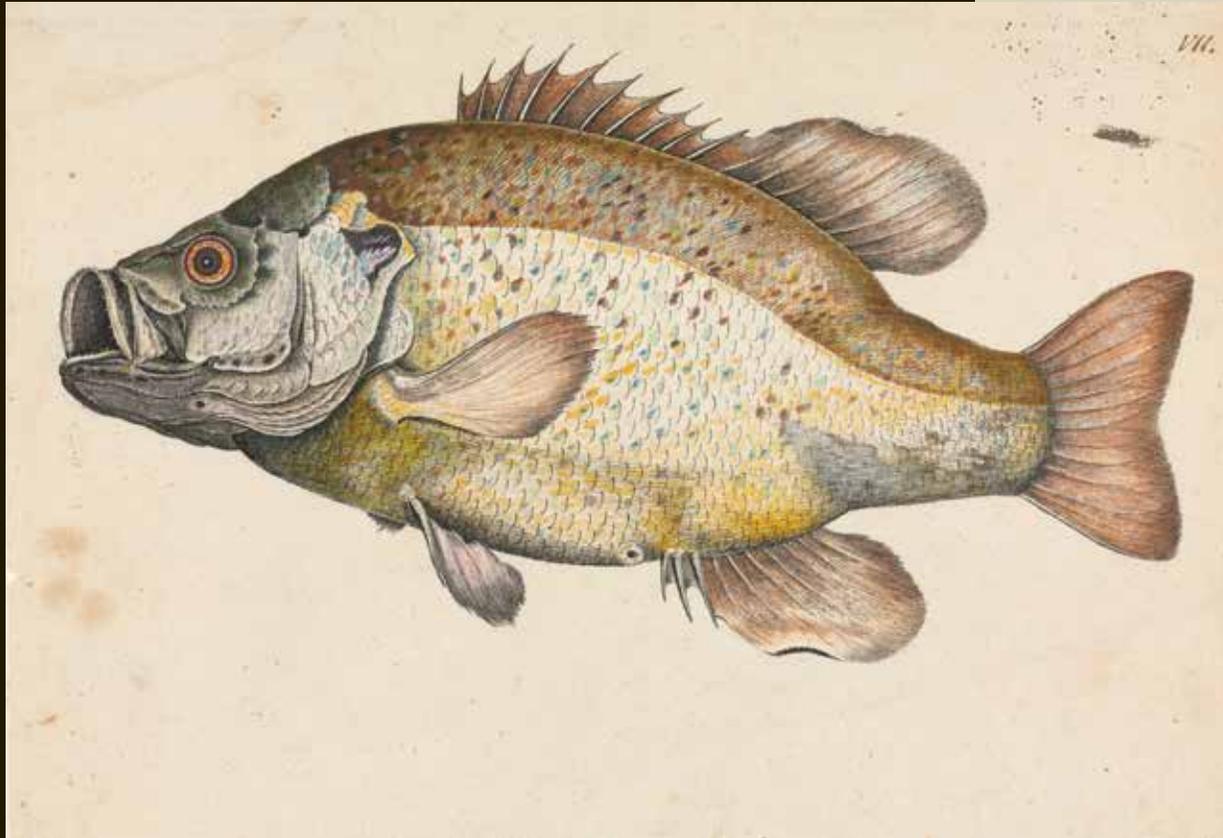
The exhibition has three main sections:

1. Exploring and recording – sketches from the field.
2. Image as knowledge.
3. Supplying public demand.

All of these figures of the Zebra are excellent, but they are on too large a scale, and must be reduced to the size of the figure in the large drawing, which figure is to be cancelled.



Cape mountain zebra, *Equus zebra*.
William Cornwallis Harris. Proof engraving, c. 1838.



SUGGESTED ARTWORK

As this drawing predates any preserved specimens of the warmouth, it is classed as the first record of its existence – the type specimen. William Bartram was the first to describe this fish in his 1791 book *Bartram's Travels* about his time in Florida.

Warmouth, *Lepomis gulosus*.
William Bartram, America.
Watercolour, 1774.

SECTION 1

Exploring and recording – sketches from the field

The exhibition starts by exploring early artistic techniques for observing and recording nature, and focusses on some of the early natural history pioneers from across the globe. The great voyages and dramatic expansion in world trade in the 1700s and 1800s meant amazing numbers of animal and plant species were encountered by Europeans for the first time. Sketchbooks and finished illustrations will show the scale of the endeavour, and how in the field there was often only time to outline and make notes, with full artworks completed at a later date. Visitors will be enchanted by this rich record, which includes works from James Cook's *Endeavour* voyage (1769–1771) and by artists such as Thomas Watling, one of the First Fleet colonists of Australia.

From China, the John Reeves collection shows the incredible efforts of one man, a keen amateur naturalist, to investigate the natural history of Asia. While stationed in Canton as a tea inspector for the British East India Company between 1812 and 1831, Reeves (pictured right) scoured markets and gardens for species from all over the world, employing local Chinese artists to record them. Visitors will see how some local people were inspired to dedicate their lives to the recording and study of natural history. In America, William Bartram (1739–1823), the son of a farmer and nurseryman,

devoted himself to the observation of nature, and his understanding of the inter-relationship between species heralded the study of American ecology.

Visual interpretation will tell the stories of these early pioneers, helping visitors understand the immense significance of the artworks and the lengths to which artists went in order to record the plants and animals they were seeing for the first time.



John Reeves the British naturalist.
Miniature oil painting.
Artist unknown, c. 1815.



Sandbox tree,
Hura crepitans.
Georg Ehret.
Watercolour and ink,
c. 1749.

SUGGESTED ARTWORK

Ehret is considered the first artist to dedicate himself to botany. He spent many years in England depicting newly introduced plants from around the world. His sketches are wonderful examples of his method of working and demonstrate his immense botanical knowledge.



Bee orchid,
Ophrys apifera.
Franz Bauer.
Watercolour,
1792-1817.

SUGGESTED ARTWORK

Some of the most technically sophisticated works ever produced included those of the Austrian-born Bauer brothers, and Franz Bauer is considered one of the finest botanical artists of all time. He became the first botanical artist employed at Kew Gardens, working there for 50 years. His extensive knowledge of botany also enabled him to produce scientifically accurate drawings of parts of plants under the microscope, illustrating pollen grains, plant diseases and the structure of orchids.

SECTION 2

Image as knowledge

In this section, visitors will discover how illustration became an increasingly important tool for scientific classification, as is the case today. Towards the end of the Age of Enlightenment in the late 1700s, scientific interest in the natural world blossomed and illustrations became much more detailed. At the same time exotic plants and animals were beginning to arrive in Europe, either brought in by wealthy collectors or traded from countries controlled by western powers. Natural history art also allowed plants and animals that might not survive the voyage to be shown as they appeared in life.

Here visitors will explore how it became possible for scientists and artists who remained in Europe to study the flora and fauna of distant lands. Scientific benefactors such as Sir Joseph Banks

brought specimens right to their doorstep, allowing them to investigate the natural history of countries they had never even visited. Artists such as Georg Ehret devoted himself to illustrating plants from overseas, in the gardens of wealthy patrons in England full of newly introduced plants from around the world. He also travelled to Holland where he worked in partnership with the celebrated Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, whose system for organising and naming plants relied on an accurate depiction of their morphology.

Visual interpretation will help illustrate this story by demonstrating how imagery became increasingly accurate with all aspects of a plant or animal's morphology captured.

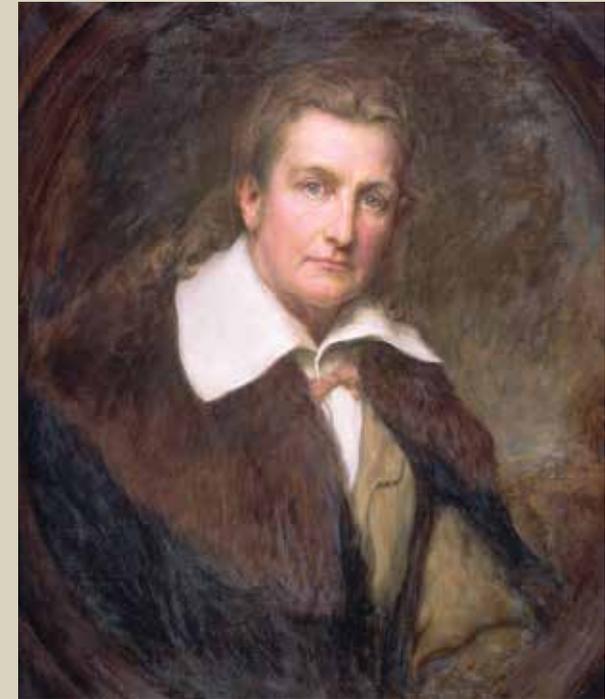
SECTION 3

Supplying public demand

Scientific drawings were in demand from an ever-broadening field of clients, including those who wished to impress their friends with hand-coloured volumes of botanical and zoological drawings. Visitors to *Art of Nature* will be able to admire some of the most beautiful and scientifically important of these.

They will see how some artists, such as John James Audubon, were keen to create works with a wider appeal in order to make them more profitable.

With the invention of photography came a revolution in how the natural world was recorded. Over the past 50 years, photographic equipment and digital imaging techniques have become increasingly sophisticated. Visitors will explore this revolution through short film clips, seeing how the latest technology from scanning electron microscopes has aided the research of Museum scientists.



John James Audubon, by Lance Calkin.
Oil on canvas c. 1859–1936.

SUGGESTED ARTWORK

John James Audubon is considered by many to be the greatest bird artist of all time. The plates from his highly collectable *The Birds of America* were not intended for scientists working to describe and identify species. They were meant to create an impact on a wide range of audiences, bringing to life American wildlife. This work is so highly regarded, it is one of the most expensive books in the world.

Scarlet ibis, *Eudocimus ruber*.
John James Audubon.
Hand-coloured engraving,
1834-1835.



EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

LOOK AND FEEL



CONTENT HIERARCHY

Overall introductory information to the exhibition

Around 150-170 words



Section introductions

This is a narrative overview that gives visitors what they need to know for each section. It will allow them to grasp the changes that took place in the development of natural history art delivered in a storytelling tone.

Around 130-150 words



Sub-story panels (included as required)

Background, contextual information about artists, illustration techniques and science stories.

Around 110-120 words



Object labels

Around 60 words

EXPERIENTIAL HIGHLIGHTS

CONTENT

- early artistic techniques for observing and recording nature
- natural history art produced as a result of the great voyages and dramatic expansion in world trade in the 1700s and 1800s
- varied flora and fauna from different continents
- illustration as a means of scientific classification and the increasing accuracy of natural history art
- new resources for study in Europe brought about by the creation of zoological and botanical gardens and the collections of wealthy individuals
- the broadening public market for natural history art
- the latest imaging techniques, including CT scanning, that draw on this rich artistic past

COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*
- First Fleet collection – first western views of Australia
- Sydney Parkinson's illustration produced during Cook's *Endeavour* voyage
- William Bartram's drawings of American flora and fauna, some of the first to portray them in their natural environments
- Franz and Ferdinand Bauer's works – the golden age of natural history art

APPROACH TO COLLECTIONS

- the majority of the artworks will be wall-mounted but some cases will house bound volumes
- similar elements in large numbers creating a salon-style hang

EXPERIENCE

- authentic and awesome by virtue of the quality of the artworks and the extensive 300-year period they cover
- similar experience to visiting an art gallery
- a place for reflection and contemplation

INTERPRETATION

- diary accounts interspersed throughout the interpretation
- short films giving more in-depth information about particular collections, artists or techniques
- a mix of historic natural history art and the latest in modern digital scientific imaging

Blue great heron, *Ardea herodias*. Mark Catesby.
Hand-coloured engraving, 1731–1743.





EXHIBITION DETAILS

AUDIENCE APPEAL

Research with audiences in our *Images of Nature* gallery, a permanent display of our rich art collection, shows the strong appeal of natural history art to visitors of all ages, particularly those interested in the visual arts and culture. Adult visitors appreciate the opportunity to see works by some of the world's best natural history artists. These include Sydney Parkinson (pictured right), who accompanied James Cook on his first voyage, as well as the revered Austrian-born brothers Franz and Ferdinand Bauer and John James Audubon, who produced the masterpiece *The Birds of America*. Family groups and school audiences enjoy engaging with the works in a more active way, through observation and drawing and watching films demonstrating the process of scientific illustration.

Scanning electron microscope image of a coccosphere, artificially coloured by computer.



Sydney Parkinson, artist on Cook's *Endeavour* voyages, 1768-1771. Oil on board, probably a self-portrait.

EXHIBITION CURATORS



Judith Magee has managed the art collections of the Natural History Museum's library for more than 15 years. She is the author of *The Art and Science of William Bartram* and *Art of Nature*, and has contributed to several other books including *Plant Discoveries: A Botanist's Voyage Through Plant Exploration* and *The Great Naturalists*.



Andrea Hart is a Special Collections Curator at the Natural History Museum where she has worked for more than 17 years. For the past nine she has had specific responsibility for the botany library collections that include artworks, rare books and manuscripts. Her interests lie in natural history art and illustration as well as book and paper conservation, and she is the author of the book *Women Artists: Images of Nature*.

Detail of camelia, *Camelia* sp.
John Reeves Collection.
Watercolour, c. 1820s.



TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Developed as a package scaled from between a 450m² and a 650m² display space the exhibition consists of the following components:

- approximately 100 star artworks from the Natural History Museum's expansive collections with bespoke frames
- full text of the exhibition including section panels and labels for artworks
- media assets such as films, atmospheric sound and other digital content
- design look and feel for the 2D and 3D elements from which each venue can create a detailed design and customised visitor experience
- set of fine art crates for the artworks to travel to and from the venue
- a selection of related retail and publishing products for purchase as an optional add-on package

The Natural History Museum will prepare the specimens for travel in fine art crates and install/exit at the hosting venue. Hosting institutions are responsible for producing the 3D and 2D designs for the exhibition as well as supplying and installing the showcases and set works to security and conservation specifications.

The objects shown are for illustrative purposes. Final object lists will be confirmed with each venue.

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Mandrill, *Mandrillus sphinx*.
John Keulemans.
Watercolour and bodycolour, 1907.