

## “We left all on the ground but the head”: J. J. Audubon’s Human Skulls



We usually think of the artist-ornithologist John James Audubon, gun on shoulder or pen in hand, as a man with his eyes on the sky. Audubon, after all, was the special chronicler of North American birds. But from time to time, Audubon looked at the ground. Like many naturalists of his generation, he raided burials or picked up human skulls he found. He then sent them to Dr. Samuel George Morton, the Philadelphia craniologist we remember as the father of “scientific racism,” the idea that cranial capacity mirrored racial hierarchy.

Our recent racial reckoning and the harassment of Black birder Christian Cooper in New York’s Central Park took me back to Audubon’s contribution to Morton’s skull collection. Audubon sent Morton five skulls from Texas—the heads of four Mexican soldiers and one “Hispano-Indian,” bullet-riddled and left unburied in the aftermath of the Battle of San Jacinto.



Figure 1: J.J. Audubon in Later Years. Fredricks, Charles DeForest, 1823-1894 Photographer, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In 1843, Audubon set out on a last adventure, traveling up the Missouri River and out the Yellowstone. He felt his age, turning 58 that spring. (Figure 1) A year earlier, he had settled his family into "Minniesland," his country estate in northern Manhattan. With his great work on *Birds of America* behind him, Audubon was anxious for a last chance to see the creatures of the American west and to collect specimens for a catalogue of the *Quadrupeds of North America*. He described squirrels, rats, porcupines, beavers, wolves, and buffalo and visited the Mandan and Assiniboiné villages devastated by the smallpox epidemics that swept the northern plains in the 1830s. And Audubon sent Morton another five skulls. (Figures 2-4)



Figure 2: Canada Porcupine, The Quadrupeds of North America, Plate XXXVI. Audubon, John James; Audubon, John Woodhouse; Bachman, John, Public domain, via

[Wikimedia Commons](#).



Figure 3: American Bison or Buffalo, *The Quadrupeds of North America*, Plate LVI. Audubon, John James; Audubon, John Woodhouse; Bachman, John, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Figure 4: American Beaver, *The Quadrupeds of North America*, Plate XLVI. Audubon, John James; Audubon, John Woodhouse; Bachman, John, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Morton and his skull measurements have long been part of the scholarship on American racism, but what happens when we draw Audubon into the racial drama? Should Audubon's connection to Morton send a shiver through the history of this remarkably talented, complicated man?

By 1843, Audubon was famous, well known as an artist and naturalist. But he had never been a rich man, and his ambitious projects needed support. He counted on the forts and trading posts the U.S. government maintained in the West and on a network of naturalists who helped collect specimens and sell books. Morton, president of Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences, sustained Audubon's connection to the scattered players in the world of American science.

Morton was a generation younger than Audubon, but the friendship between the two men ran back through the 1830s. Morton, with his institutional connections, helped assure Audubon a place in the country's scientific establishment. He settled some of Audubon's debts when the artist was in England and soothed his worries about upstart rivals. In return, Audubon looked for skulls for Morton. European craniologists weren't ready to share their skulls with the Americans, although Audubon did find Morton a portfolio of sketches.

Morton had begun gathering skulls in the early 1830s, an avocation he shared with European colleagues bent on finding ways to map differences among humans. In 1839 Morton published his speculations about racial hierarchy in *Crania Americana*, a lavish atlas of human skulls. (Figure 5) By his calculation, skulls with the greatest internal capacity had belonged to members of the Caucasian race, and therefore Caucasians had bigger and better brains. The contention is absurd, but, at the time, it had the sheen of objective science and appealed to those hunting for a racist logic to defend holding people of African descent in slavery.



Figure 5: Lithograph from Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana*. F. Davis (engraver), Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

To make his case, Morton needed a lot of skulls. He turned to travelers, soldiers, and adventurous naturalists like Audubon. Decades of violence against the native peoples of the Americas and the brutal poverty of African American communities gave Morton and his colleagues an advantage among skull hunters. He was particularly proud of his collection of Native American skulls. “The Indian crania contained in this series,” he wrote, “have received my especial attention, both in respect to their number and authenticity for they have been collected with great care by the gentlemen whose names are associated with them.” Among those gentlemen was “J.J. Audubon, Esq.”

We know that before heading out to St. Louis in 1843, Audubon stopped in Philadelphia and spent a Sunday with Morton. The two men looked over Morton’s collection and discussed the plants, animals, and people Audubon would find on his travels in the West. Audubon’s “Missouri River Journals” capture a countryside alive with the animals he had come to see—rabbits, turkeys, porcupines, marmots, groundhogs, Pouched Rats, swallows, finches, “a great number of Parakeets,” and on and on. He delighted in the seemingly endless abundance of living things. Audubon and his companions killed wolves and buffalo, skinned foxes and hares, chased running antelope, and traded for pelts of badgers and grizzly bears. (Figures 6-7)



Figure 6: Townsend's Rocky Mountain Hare, The Quadrupeds of North America, Plate III. Audubon, John James; Audubon, John Woodhouse; Bachman, John, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Figure 7: Common American Shrew Mole, The Quadrupeds of North America, Plate X. Audubon, John James; Audubon, John Woodhouse; Bachman, John, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The prairies seemed to abound in animal life, but Audubon reserved very different descriptive phrases for the native peoples he met on hot July days at Fort Union, such as “miserably poor, filthy beyond description.” He also saw remains of human communities—Mandan and Assiniboine villages devastated by the smallpox epidemics that swept the northern plains in 1837. “I have been hearing much of the prevalence of scurvy, from living so constantly on dried flesh, also about the small-pox, which destroyed such numbers of the Indians,” he wrote, “Among the Mandans, Riccarees, and Gros Ventres, hundreds died in 1837, only a few surviving: and the Assiniboins were nearly exterminated.” (Figure 8)



Figure 8: Sarony, Major & Knapp, Fort Union, and Distribution of Goods to the Assinniboines [i.e., Assiniboines] (New York: Sarony, Major & Knapp, between 1857-1864). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The epidemic had been devastating, Audubon knew. During the weeks spent at Fort Union, he penned an account of the “fearful ravages” of smallpox. He must have known that a people “nearly exterminated” left few to help bury the dead. The skulls Audubon collected for Morton that summer earned casual mentions in his journal. On June 18, he and his companions puzzled over when it might be best to “take away the skulls, some six or seven in number, all Assiniboin Indians.” On June 22, walking over the prairie, “I found an Indian’s skull (an Assiniboin) and put it in my game pouch.” And on July 2, he and a companion “walked off with a bag of instruments to take off the head of a three-years dead Indian chief, called the White Cow.” They tumbled the coffin out of a tree burial and found a body wrapped in two buffalo robes and “enveloped in an American flag.” They took the head, Audubon wrote, and left the rest on the ground.

Morton’s catalogue also credited Audubon with contributing the skull of a 50-year-old Blackfoot man named “Bloody Hand,” along with the heads of two “Upsarooka” men, both about 40 years old. And two skulls: “1230. Assinaboin Indian of Missouri: woman, aetat. 20. I.C. 85. 1231. Assinaboin woman, aetat. 18. I.C. 85.” “Nos. 1230 and 1231, from J.J. Audubon, Esq., A.D. 1845,” Morton added. Audubon’s memory of the “Indian skull” tucked in his game pouch and Morton’s measurements are all we have left of these two young women—a small trace of racism’s heavy toll.

Scholars once suggested that the mother of the Saint-Domingue born Audubon was of African descent, although evidence suggests rather that his mother was a French-born chambermaid. Audubon constructed an American identity built partly on a foundation of white racism, a fact worth acknowledging. Audubon dressed in the buckskin of an American frontiersman, trafficked in specimens recruited to serve a malicious science of racial hierarchy, and bought and sold a handful of people he enslaved. Although Audubon archives hold only a scant trace of the Assiniboine women, his biographers give us something more on the people he

owned, particularly two men, who traveled with him down the Mississippi to New Orleans, where he sold them. The two men disappeared into the cotton economy, while profits from their sale were used to support Audubon's work on *The Birds of America*.

I started looking at Audubon's connections to Morton last fall when a woman from the National Audubon Society wrote to ask about ties between the two men. She told me they were thinking about the racist traces that stain so many of our institutions and about the "whiteness" of birding. Did Audubon's connection to "scientific racism" matter? And then Morton's skulls came back into the news with renewed outrage over human remains still in collections at the University of Pennsylvania.

Audubon's role in our racial reckoning is small. His life was not simple, but he lived with advantages accrued by whiteness. Some of those advantages stuck with him even after he died in 1851. Unlike the women whose skulls he plucked off the prairie or the man he called "White Cow" whose coffin he tumbled to the ground, Audubon remains buried in New York's Trinity Cemetery and Mausoleum, on a plot that once was part of his estate at "Minniesland" on land that once belonged to the Lenape. His wife and sons buried Audubon in a modest grave, but in the 1880s, members of the New York Academy of Sciences began collecting dimes from school children and dollars from Gilded Age A-listers—Rockefeller, Huntington, Carnegie, Edison, Vanderbilt, Morgan, and dozens of others—to raise a monument over the crypt of the artist ornithologist. You can find it near 155th and Broadway. (Figure 9)



Figure 9: Audubon Monument at Trinity Church from Maria R. Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals*, vol. 1, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899). Unknown author, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Following Audubon's story leads us back to graves robbed and lives lost and asks us to pay attention to scraps hidden in shadier moments of Audubon's

marvelous art. White racism buoyed the careers of men like Morton and Audubon, but it's worth remembering that neither Morton nor Audubon had a lock on talent, beauty, or brilliance. Consider Audubon's contribution to Morton's collection and acknowledge the ghosts that haunt this archive. Mourn for the unburied dead, for naturalists whose talents were squandered picking cotton and artists whose skills disappeared in communities "nearly exterminated."

## Further Reading

Audubon described collecting the human remains he sent to Samuel George Morton in his "Missouri River Journals." The journal is included in the indispensable Library of America edition of *John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings* (1999), edited by Christoph Irmscher. Daniel Patterson also edited an edition of *The Missouri River Journals of John James Audubon* (2016) along with original commentary. The American Philosophical Society has digitized Audubon's correspondence with Morton, and it is available [online](#). Readers interested in Audubon's biography and his place in American arts and letters can turn to Alice Ford, *John James Audubon: A Biography* (1989); Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* (2004); and Gregory Nobles, *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman* (2017).

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