THIS WEEK'S WORDS TO LIVE BY:

"The bird of Time has but a little way to fly — and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."  — RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM

OCTOBER 2, 1966
A Thousand Birds

BY TIMOTHY H. MULLIGAN

Next week will see the publication of a remarkable set of books, two volumes, priced at $75 and entitled "The Original Water-Color Paintings by John James Audubon For 'The Birds Of America,'"

Probably the greatest painter of birds who ever lived, Audubon lived to see engravings of his masterpieces reach the public. But the original paintings, many of them differing markedly from the engravings, never were reproduced in color either during his lifetime or for more than 100 years afterwards. The originals were left to his widow, following his death in 1851, and then in 1863 were bought by the New-York Historical Society, in whose collection they still are.

Now wisely, since it would be hard to think of any other body of native artistic work of greater value to the American public, the Society has allowed American Heritage to photograph the entire collection and arrange it in the form in which it will be published on October 10th.

A great event in the history of American art

These volumes are a landmark in the history of American art, and we are proud to show one of their plates on our cover and, on this page, photographs of some of the others.

Audubon was 55 in the autumn of 1820 when he set out in pursuit of a dream that would take him years to realize. But he was a genius possessed of an iron will and completely dedicated to his work. The result of all this sacrifice was "The Birds Of America," a double-elephant folio of prints priced at the fantastic amount, in those days of the 1830s, of $1,000 per set. It was soon recognized as "one of the most precious documents in the archives of American art." In fact, in the winter of 1864-65, a set was sold for about $65,000, and it is not unusual for certain of the individual engravings to sell for more today than the original price of the entire set.

Audubon was fully aware of the importance of what he was doing in terms of ornithology, and he also realized the artistic value of his work. Because of this, he wanted to share his accomplishment. So, to reach a wider audience than could see his original paintings he went to Europe and commissioned copies to be made by an English engraver, Robert Havell, Jr., an artist in his own right.

His project was completely successful. It has become the engraved copies rather than the painted originals that have gained fame, and it is the copies that established his reputation, the original engravings becoming rarities in themselves.

But in many cases the finished engraving was very different from the original painting. In our reproduction of the Barred Owl, for example, the original painting showed only the owl on the branch. For the engraving, however, Audubon painted a squirrel on a separate piece of paper and had it incorporated into Havell's engraving.

There are other differences between the originals and the copies. Presumably, after the paintings reached Havell, they were traced off onto copper plates; when the engraving was completed in black and white — by a combination of aquatint, etching and other processes — colors were painted in by hand by a staff that at one time numbered 50 men and women. However, the outlines do not in every case correspond to the drawings, and in the hands of different workmen the colors were not always uniform.

In addition to some of the engravings not being up to Audubon's standards, reproductions have often been copies of copies, and many of the reproductions have grown so different from his original work that the essential qualities of the artist's original paintings have been lost. With the publication of these two volumes, the paintings stand out again as the masterpieces they are. (THE END)