November of 1973 presented a rare opportunity both for the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission and for the citizens of Louisiana, for it was during that month that J. L. Wade and the Griggsville Wild Bird Society premiered their “Three Centuries Exposition” at Gallier Hall in New Orleans. The educational exhibit consisted of 2,000 great wildlife paintings and first edition reproductions valued at more than a million dollars and is the largest framed collection of early American wildlife art ever assembled.


The Griggsville Wild Bird Society was born in the early 1960's, growing out of the now famous purple martin project in the small community of Griggsville, Illinois. The project was an experiment in which the citizens successfully used purple martins for natural insect control. During the sixty's the Society grew into a full-fledged conservation organization, with members throughout the United States and Canada, and a variety of wildlife conservation activities.

Under the able leadership of J. L. Wade, the organization has flourished and has become an effective force in the North America environmental awakening. They have expanded their activities into the wildlife art field, based on the feeling that this field offered undeveloped potential for stimulating public interest in wildlife conservation through the use of high quality wildlife art paintings. They are presently carrying on many activities in this area, among them a fine art publishing program designed to set some new standards for wildlife art in America and a fine educational art show. One of their current programs is the development of a nature education center that promises to overshadow anything previously done of that nature.

J. L. Wade, in the past decade, has shifted all of his energies and resources to the cause of wildlife conservation in America and has been instrumental in bringing such pioneering nature artists as Mark Catesby and Alexander Wilson into the light to receive long overdue recognition of the general public. Richard Sloan and Richard Timm, probably two of the most admired artists of this generation, are now actively working with Wade and the Society and have consequently provided the stimulus and direction for other programs with similar potential for great public benefit. Their efforts are casting a continuing and healthy light on the great wildlife paintings of the past, which are the beginnings from which America's wildlife art heritage grew.

Among the artists featured at the Exposition was Mark Catesby, an English biologist who came to the colonies as a collector of plant and animal specimens and who ranks as the greatest American bird artist of the 18th century. He did much of his work during the years 1722-1726 in the southeastern coastal regions and subsequently wrote and illustrated a two-volume work, "A Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands," which became a classic reference work on the new world.
Today, and much to the credit of Louisiana, Eric J. Bienvenu of Houma is reproducing by hand, in the same manner in which they were originally produced in the 18th century, the first colored drawings of North American birds—the birds of Mark Catesby. The project will be complete when Bienvenue has colored every one of the 109 bird prints in Catesby's two-volume work, making meticulous notes on the exact materials, color mixtures and brushes he uses in each painting. When the set is completed, the Society expects to use the Bienvenu set of the Catesby birds in a unique educational exhibit which will, hopefully, stimulate public interest in and understanding of antique wildlife art. Eventually this program will be expanded to include the 18th and 19th century techniques of art production.

Bienvenue is a professional zoologist who has applied his experiences growing up among the artistic influences of the New Orleans area and the wilderness influences of the Louisiana coastal marshlands to the creation of American wildlife art, giving Louisiana something else of which to be proud.

Also represented among the 2,000 prints were the works of Alexander Wilson, who occupies a unique position in American history. Wilson is considered by many to be the greatest ornithologist in the history of America with his 9-volume, illustrated masterpiece "American Ornithology." His were the first colored pictures of American birds published in our country, and can be easily identified by the random grouping of birds on each plate. Significant to Louisiana's history is the journey he made down the Mississippi River to New Orleans to observe and paint new species and to attempt to sell his published works. It was on this trip that he discovered the Mississippi kite, which he painted on the river at Natchez.

A wildlife art exhibit is not complete in Louisiana without at least representative work of John James Audubon, but Wade and the Griggsville Society provided us with a remarkable collection to admire. Audubon was the most colorful of the three early ornithologists and the most successful as well, though this is due primarily to the fact that he had more ability as a "self-promoter." Audubon set out to paint every
species of wildlife in America and at the time of his death in 1851 had completed a total of 425 wildlife prints. Unlike most of his colleagues, past and present, Audubon's tributes include both bird and mammal prints, many of which he studied while he was living in Louisiana in the Feliciana parishes.

One of the most delightful aspects of the Griggsville Exposition was the privilege visitors had to meet and talk with Richard Sloan and Richard Timm, two of the most admired contemporary wildlife artists. Richard Sloan's works were represented in two forms—his series of great American bird paintings and the State Bird Program, in which the LWFC is a participant. Sloan's prints are recognized as unprecedented in their detail, authenticity and realism. He has been well known among wildlife art enthusiasts in the Great Lakes area for many years and is an ardent conservationist and an experienced zoo man, widely respected for his knowledge of animal behavior both in captivity and in the wild. Sloan's recent studies have concentrated on many bird species native to Louisiana and the time he has spent in our state has convinced him to establish permanent residence in Shreveport. It is quite an honor that the creator of what is called "the finest artistic achievement of the 20th century in the field of bird prints" has decided on Louisiana for his home, but as he puts it "there is just such a wealth of wildlife in this state."

Richard Timm is a native of the Detroit area and is a man of enormous skill in portraying fine detail and in creating vividly realistic scenes. His time spent in research is evident, both from books and from association with mammals in the vast forested areas of Michigan. Timm's excellent mammal paintings are stimulating appreciation in Americans for this type of fine art and for this type of wildlife on the North American continent.

The only criticism heard from anyone about this lovely Three Centuries of Wildlife Art Exhibition was that it could not remain here forever. It proved a real treat for art lovers as well as for lovers of wildlife, but for those of us who have a deep appreciation and love for both, it was an exceptionally rare experience.