

John James Audubon was an American wildlife artist. His great ambition was to paint all American species of birds. He was born in 1785 in Haiti and lived for some time in France. Audubon showed an interest in nature and drawing even as a child. Audubon came to the United States in 1803. His family estate outside Philadelphia provided him the opportunity to hunt, study, and draw birds. Audubon participated in bird-banding experiments in North America, learning that the species he had observed always returns to the same nesting sites. Audubon tried his hand at business, continuing to draw and paint only as a hobby. He eventually went bankrupt. So, with nothing to lose, Audubon set off on his quest to paint all the species of birds in America. He took with him only an assistant, a gun, and his artist's tools. His life was extremely difficult.

Audubon's recognition as an artist began in 1826 when he took some of his paintings to England. There, Audubon, "the American Woodsman," became an immediate success. His life-sized, dramatic bird portraits were highly praised. Audubon found a printer to reproduce his paintings in book form, later collaborating with a Scottish ornithologist to provide written descriptions of the bird species. Audubon had achieved fame and financial security, if not wealth. His book, The Birds of America, is still important today. Audubon spent his final years in New York City, dying in 1851.

Audubon's legacy lives on in the Audubon Society, dedicated to bird conservation.

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Reading Level: 9.2	Dale Chall: 9-10	250 words
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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Gr: 9

WCPM: \_\_\_\_\_ Errors/Min: \_\_\_\_\_ % Accuracy: \_\_\_\_\_

Flu Rating (4-16): \_\_\_\_\_ Comp (1-6): \_\_\_\_\_

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Winslow Homer was a self-taught illustrator and painter. His work presents American individuals and nature. Homer was born in Boston in 1836. He was an apprentice for a short time. Soon, however, he became an independent and successful illustrator for magazines and newspapers. In 1861, Harper's Weekly hired him to sketch Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. During the Civil War, Homer visited battlefields in Virginia to draw scenes of soldiers' lives both in conflict and in camp. One of his first important oils was Prisoners from the Front (1866). This painting now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

After painting with oils for twenty years, Homer began to work in watercolors. Throughout the rest of his career, he created important works in each medium. During his life, the United States was undergoing rapid change, particularly in cities. In contrast, Homer's paintings often featured old-fashioned scenes of rural life, children, resorts, and women.

After Homer lived in an English fishing village during 1881-82, he shifted his artistic focus to seascapes. These are probably his best-known works. His paintings show the sea as both beautiful and powerful. Frequently his work represents a fierce struggle between man and the sea, between man and nature. One such masterpiece is Eight Bells (1886). His later works are both heroic and thought provoking.

Homer found artistic inspiration everywhere he went. However, his main studio remained in remote Prout's Neck, Maine, where he died in 1910.

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Flu Rating (4-16): \_\_\_\_\_ Comp (1-6): \_\_\_\_\_

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Andrew Wyeth, one of America's best-known and best-loved artists, was born in 1917. He was the youngest child of painter N.C. Wyeth. Wyeth stopped attending school after third grade because he was so prone to illness. Instead he was taught and trained at home by his father, who had himself established a reputation as an illustrator of children's books like Treasure Island and Robinson Crusoe. Wyeth displayed a notable and precocious artistic talent, mounting his first one-man show when he was only twenty. His celebrated career has spanned over sixty years. The exhibition of Wyeth's work at the National Gallery of Art was particularly significant because this venue had never before featured the work of a living artist.

Wyeth's paintings display diversity in media, style, and subject matter. Although he has used egg tempera for textural effect, he has worked more extensively in watercolor. He remarks that watercolor reflects best the austerity he often intends to communicate. Critics note that his style has evolved from realistic images to surrealistic expressionism. Wyeth himself characterizes his style, particularly in his winter scenes, as "not romantic." He often aspires to evoke, in his words, "lonely bleakness," "quiet," and "chill reality."

His favorite locales are Maine landscapes and his winter home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. His favorite human subjects are his wife Betsy and his neighbor's German nurse, the inspiration for his acclaimed Helga series. Almost everyone recognizes at least one Wyeth by either sight or name; the poignant reality of a Christina's World (1948) is unforgettable.

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Flu Rating (4-16): \_\_\_\_\_ Comp (1-6): \_\_\_\_\_



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Georgia O'Keeffe, perhaps the best-known of American women painters, was born in 1887. Her family encouraged her to be well-educated, but more than that, independent. She declared early her desire to become an artist and began private lessons at age eleven. Although her studies at the Art Institute of Chicago were interrupted by illness, she was later able to resume her education in New York.

With neither her permission nor her knowledge, a friend submitted samples of O'Keeffe's work to the avant-garde photographer, Alfred Steiglitz. This introduction began a lasting professional, and eventually personal, relationship with Steiglitz, who sponsored and managed her work until his death. The two artists lived together for several years; they married when O'Keeffe was twenty-three and Steiglitz, fifty-four.

The predominant subjects of O'Keeffe's paintings were flowers. Her vivid depictions of flowers were neither sedate nor domesticated. Rather, her brilliantly-colored and stylized flowers expand to occupy whole canvases. After visiting New Mexico, O'Keeffe became captivated by the light and images of the desert Southwest. Many of her best known pieces are set in this locale: surreal images of adobe buildings, desert panoramas, and floating cow skulls.

After declaring her desire to live to the age of 125, O'Keeffe helped prepare a retrospective of her work for the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In 1986, however, she died at age ninety-eight.

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Reading Level: 12.0	Dale Chall: 11-12	226 words
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Flu Rating (4-16): \_\_\_\_\_ Comp (1-6): \_\_\_\_\_

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