

Lars Jonsson's Birds: Paintings from a Near Horizon

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Lars Jonsson's Birds: Paintings from a Near Horizon.—

Lars Jonsson. 2009. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 192 pp., 150 color illustrations. ISBN 9780691141510. Cloth, \$55.00.—This 10 × 12 inch book is based on the catalogue from an exhibit of the author's artwork in Germany in 2008. In its press release, the publisher states that the book is primarily a collection of Jonsson's work from the first decade of the present century, but its coverage is broader than that, and it might well be called a pictorial autobiography. Included are samples of the artist's work from every aspect of his career, from early childhood drawings, to teenage sketchbooks, to field-guide illustrations, to his most recent and, some might say, most ambitious and artistic endeavors. Also included are some beautiful photographs of the artist at work and of the surrounding environment on the Swedish island of Gotland. The text is minimal but critical for proper viewing of the artwork.

Following the author's foreword are three essays by outside contributors. Adam Duncan Harris, curator of art at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, begins with "Lars Jonsson: The Beauty of Nature," in which he discusses Jonsson as one of the premier bird artists of our time, or perhaps of all time. He points out that

There is a distinct difference between pretty and beautiful, for beauty can be found in objects that are decidedly not pretty. To even attempt to capture the beauty of nature . . . requires more thought, more time, more energy than most artists are willing to invest, but, to Jonsson, this investment is part and parcel of what it means to be an artist. (p. 17)

Jonsson's work is far more than the expression of natural talent, which it certainly is, because it is informed by a profound and intimate understanding of the subject matter and refined by years of devotion to the craft of painting. Harris lists Jonsson's major influences, all of which are apparent to anyone familiar with recent bird art, including Louis Agassiz Fuertes and Robert Verity Clem, as well as field-guide artists Roger Tory Peterson, Don Eckelberry, Arthur Singer, and Robert Gillmor. I am personally gratified to see Harris's defense of field-guide renderings as "an underappreciated part of the art historical cannon" (p. 18). Harris blurs the well-entrenched distinction between art and illustration and suggests that Jonsson's early work on field guides was akin to attending art school. It trained his eye to see precise detail and refined the skills necessary to render it convincingly. With that disciplined foundation, Jonsson could broaden his horizons to include what he calls "emotional journeys into representation" (p. 19). Because he paid his dues as a field-guide illustrator, Jonsson's recent paintings, some of which approach the abstract, gain a credibility they might otherwise lack.

In a short biography "About Lars Jonsson," Swedish wildlife sculptor Kent Ullberg provides some insight into Jonsson's development from child prodigy to master artist. At the age of 15, Jonsson had his first public exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Stockholm, which "caused a sensation among the museum's professionals" (p. 21). He wrote and illustrated a

series of field guides in his twenties and, at the age of 36, became the youngest artist ever selected by his peers to receive the Master Wildlife Artist Award of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wisconsin.

Swedish science journalist Fredrik Sjöberg's "On the Subject of Beauty" is a long, rambling, and, to one accustomed to scientific writing, overly literary essay that nevertheless provides important insights into Jonsson's work and, by extrapolation, that of other bird artists. Like Harris, Sjöberg defends birds as a legitimate artistic motif, and he decries the hypocrisy in mindlessly categorizing thematic renderings (wildlife art, cowboy art, sports art, etc.) as outside the realm of "fine" art.

These essays establish a lens through which the reader can view the artworks themselves. The paintings and drawings are presented in five chapters: Early Works, Sketchbooks, Watercolors, Oil Paintings, and Ornithological Works. The order is not chronological (I would have expected the technical illustrations to follow the sketchbooks), but that does not detract from the heuristic value of the collection. Anyone who is anywhere in the process themselves, or just interested in the ontogeny of a bird artist, will learn much from this book. Jonsson intersperses the artworks with comments, which are always enlightening, but mostly the pictures speak for themselves. Among the small selection of early works, many are so sophisticated that one would have to be told they are not more recent. In fact, a 1970 painting of a Parasitic Jaeger in the Faeroe Islands reminds me of some of the later Arctic bird landscapes of George Miksch Sutton. The early paintings also reveal Jonsson's ability to draw with the brush, so that pencil outlines are minimal. This ability serves him well in his sketchbooks, which he does mainly as a form of note-taking, but which are stunning artworks in themselves. The pages incorporate written notes, but the color and pen-and-ink sketches are each worth at least the oft-mentioned thousand words. Jonsson's method is to draw directly from life, usually from a distance using a spotting scope, which works particularly well with birds that pose in the open long enough for the sketch to be done. (The sketchbook examples he chose to show include no skulking or canopy-flitting passerines.) Again, his ability to draw exactly what he sees is evident. He may correct a pencil line slightly with another, but I see no evidence of erasure. The first try is almost always right. Indeed, his skill at drawing with pen and ink without an initial pencil guide is stunning. He describes the process of beginning a drawing a few seconds after initial observation to take advantage of "the human's short visual memory" (p. 51). He constantly refers back to his subject for details and states "I do not have a photographic memory, but a trained ability to draw what I actually see." Indeed, he considers that "To see truly in the field, you must totally trust your eyes and forget: [*sic*] what you know" (p. 22). Thus, he treats each bird encounter as a new experience, whether or not he has observed that species or individual before.

Probably because I work mostly in watercolor myself, the 44 pages devoted to more recent works in that medium are my favorite part of the book. Jonsson's skill with wet-on-wet painting, dry brush, and masking techniques are apparent throughout. His total mastery of these techniques imparts a deceptively effortless look to his work, which ranges from closely detailed portraits such as the Long-eared Owl (p. 111), Eurasian Woodcock (pp. 118–119), and white Gyr Falcon (p. 98) to the nearly abstract Eurasian

Wigeons (p. 81), bullfinches (p. 109), and Common Buzzard (p. 93), which look like random blobs of color up close but resolve into wonderfully understated but evocative renderings with increased distance. The looser paintings take full advantage of wet-on-wet painting, in which darker pigments are introduced into a wet wash so that the new color bleeds into the earlier one. It is a very difficult process to control, yet Jonsson succeeds repeatedly, as in the aforementioned buzzard, whose only close detail is in the face. The bird's entire upper surface could have been produced with fewer than 10 wet brush strokes. For the gyrfalcon, he has apparently masked the bird's silhouette in some way (he doesn't discuss it) and then applied a wet background wash around it, into which he dripped just the right amount of water, one drop at a time at just the right time in the drying process, to push aside the pigment and produce the "feel" of snowflakes. Then, in the foreground, he has used dry brush (not really dry, but with as little water as possible) against the paper's texture to produce the ragged edge of snow against dark rock. The pattern on the bird's back is then meticulously painted in, feather by feather, so that in one painting we see the full range from exquisite detail to abstraction. It is a stunning showcase of artistic mastery. Several of the watercolors are not bird paintings at all, but landscapes, often rendered as if seen through a frosted window. Two of my favorites, in which the birds are merely incidental, are the seascapes on pages 68 and 69. They reveal that despite his protestations to the contrary, Jonsson's visual memory is impressive. Both paintings use no more than three colors to produce a very convincing rough winter sea, frozen in full motion, all done without any preliminary drawing in pencil. As all artists know, the ocean does not pose, and such freehand brush painting requires both a mental snapshot as a guide and a very adept hand.

Oil is a very different medium from watercolor, requiring entirely different basic materials and studio setup. Relatively few bird artists have worked successfully in oils, perhaps the best known being Francis Lee Jaques. Lars Jonsson is equally adept in both media, and his oil paintings are surprisingly similar to his watercolors in their overall look. He applies the paint thinly, sometimes using the white of the canvas in the composition as one would use blank spaces on watercolor paper. From a distance, or on the printed page, his oil painting of Eurasian Magpies (p. 148) could easily be taken for a watercolor. But oils have several important characteristics that watercolors lack. They remain workable for days and can be overpainted completely, allowing changes as the painting evolves. An oil painting never has the spontaneity of a watercolor but usually looks more thought out, more finished. Indeed, Jonsson discusses his rather laborious work on some oil paintings in stark contrast to the quick work of the watercolors. He offers two oil paintings of Gyr Falcons that the reader can compare with the previously discussed watercolor. Pages 144–145 show a white gyrfalcon in gray wintry weather. The background is much more detailed than in the watercolor, and, despite the heaviness of the medium, Jonsson depicts the intricate dorsal pattern with the same precise detail as in the watercolor. On the following two pages is a surprising painting of a pair of white gyrfalcons backlit against the sunrise. Although it is a snow scene with mostly white birds (what you know), not a bit of white paint is apparent. Rather, this composition is one of the most colorful in the collection (what you see)! The brilliant gold of the morning sun shades to pink toward the horizon, and the birds themselves, haloed against the strong light, are blue with

purple touches in the shadows. It could have looked garish, but it works splendidly and is probably my favorite of the oil paintings in the book. Jonsson uses an oil painting of a covey of Gray Partridges (pp. 152–153) to demonstrate how, even for the masters, a certain amount of trial and error is involved. He shows four stages, the first a rough sketch, the second a seemingly finished painting, and the third the same painting with a cutout of white paper hiding one bird to see if the composition would balance better without it. In the final version, that bird has been painted out. Such a late-stage change would not be possible in watercolor.

The final chapter is, to me, an all too brief sampling of Jonsson's more technical works, including plates from his landmark *Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East* (1992, Christopher Helm; 1993, Princeton University Press) and others from a series of more focused guides to sandpipers (*Calidris* spp.), loons, and jaegers, as well as a guide to plumages of the western palearctic gulls that is still in preparation. Among these paintings are some of the relatively few examples in the book of his use of gouache (opaque watercolor). His technique in gouache tends to simplify detail (he is what Don Eckelberry would have called a "leaver-outer"), to the point of being diagrammatic at times, the influence of Robert Gillmor being readily apparent. Jonsson's field-guide plates are, in my opinion as a colleague in this narrow field, among the most visually pleasing ever done. I am still thrilled every time I page through his European field guide, which evolved from a series of small regional guides done in the 1970s. Rather than follow the stricture of the 1970s that all birds on a page should be in the same pose for comparison purposes, Jonsson painted his birds, as he states, to be interesting, attractive, and lifelike. Other, more recent field guides have also departed from the line-them-up-in-rows philosophy, perhaps influenced by Jonsson's style. The book concludes with a showcase of recent limited-edition lithographs, a life chronology, a list of exhibitions, and a bibliography.

Throughout this book, Jonsson emphasizes the importance of drawing directly from nature, downplays the role of innate ability, and implies that his work is primarily the result of a lot of hard work and training of the eye and hand. I am a skeptic, not of the necessity for hard work, but of the idea that natural ability is less important. The suggestion that anyone with enough hard work could produce the body of work that Lars Jonsson has is preposterous. I once heard a colleague say that he could be as good a bird artist as any if he just put in the time. The point he missed was that wanting to put in the time is part and parcel of the talent. If one is not driven to perfect supposed abilities, he or she does not really have them. The inborn ability to draw that Jonsson clearly has can be fine tuned, polished, and educated as to subject matter, but it cannot be learned or taught, in my opinion. One either has it or not, in varying degrees. The earliest drawing (p. 34) in this book is one that Jonsson's mother saved from 1957, when he was four. It is a typical scrawling child's drawing that, to me, shows no special promise. Yet a mere three years later, Jonsson's parents were accused of fraud when they entered some of his work in a children's art competition. The judges thought that such work could not have been done by a child! One of his teenage sketchbook pages shows six quick small sketches of a Collared Flycatcher, all made with minimal lines in apparently a matter of seconds, with no corrections, yet each one is a perfect snapshot of a moment in the life of this bird. Like avian flight, such ability to sketch with

exact accuracy develops inevitably, without practice, and is well established as soon as the necessary motor skills develop. We have all known those children who, even in elementary school, could make beautiful representational drawings without any training. As evidence that such abilities are innate rather than learned, I offer the case of a savant I once observed on a TV program. The man could hardly speak or care for himself, but he could draw animals seen briefly, say, at the zoo, with amazingly accurate detail (but through a very slow and laborious process). When asked how he did it, he forced out the word "remember." He did not learn this skill by practice. But Jonsson is right that what one does with such ability depends on how much work one is willing to invest.

Jonsson also claims never to copy photographs, stating that "It is easy to have good photos and to want to paint something pretty, but that usually makes for uninteresting results" (p. 19). Nevertheless, his painting (pp. 114–115) of a Greenfinch pursued in flight by a Eurasian Sparrowhawk had to have been at least informed by, if not based directly on, photographs. The eye simply cannot see, nor the brain record, that much detail and action in the split second depicted. That is why Audubon's birds in flight look stiff to our modern eyes, educated by videos and stop-action high-speed photography. In this case at least, Jonsson has to have painted what he knew rather than what he saw. But the result is hardly uninteresting and shows that he is not such a purist after all.

In his essay, Harris goes so far as to state that

the ability to capture a moment convincingly on paper or canvas is central to the creation of a great work of art. Many have the ability to copy a photograph, but few take the time to go beyond that rote activity to be truly creative; it is difficult and it takes a lot of practice. (p. 19)

Does that mean that those of us who lack Jonsson's innate sketching ability, or who cannot remember an image for even a few seconds, or who must make numerous trial-and-error lines before developing a coherent drawing, or who rely on photographs to capture what Lars Jonsson captures in his field sketches, should just give up? I think not, especially if one is willing to deal with the difficulty and put in the practice. Other paths can lead to the same place.

For me, sketching in the field is a distraction from observation and a waste of time because my sketches are so poor as to be uninformative later. (I am referring not to diagrammatic sketches for identification purposes, which anyone can and should do, but to the kind of quick drawings Jonsson does that capture a particularly interesting posture or attitude.) So, I frequently refer to photographs, often several, when I make my basic drawings. I believe that distilling a single portrait from a series of photographs and piecing together several such components into a coherent composition is just as valid a method as simply drawing the whole thing freehand. However, I agree with Harris that copying a single photograph entirely, instead of using it as one of many references, is just copying. Those of us who lack Jonsson's innate ability to sketch accurately will never gain it despite all the work there is time to do, but we can, by use of other tools, produce good illustrative work and, yes, even art. Many artists who have innate drawing skills lack the patience to work on details or the drive to do such clinical work as field-guide plates. They will never reach Jonsson's level of accuracy and evocativeness, while others with more desire

but less natural ability may come closer. Lars Jonsson has the innate ability, has done the work, and has studied the subject matter to become perhaps the premier bird artist of our time. He gives us both inspiration and instruction, and I wholeheartedly recommend his latest book.—H. DOUGLAS PRATT, *Research Curator of Birds, North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, 11 West Jones Street, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, 27601. E-mail: doug.pratt@ncdenr.gov*