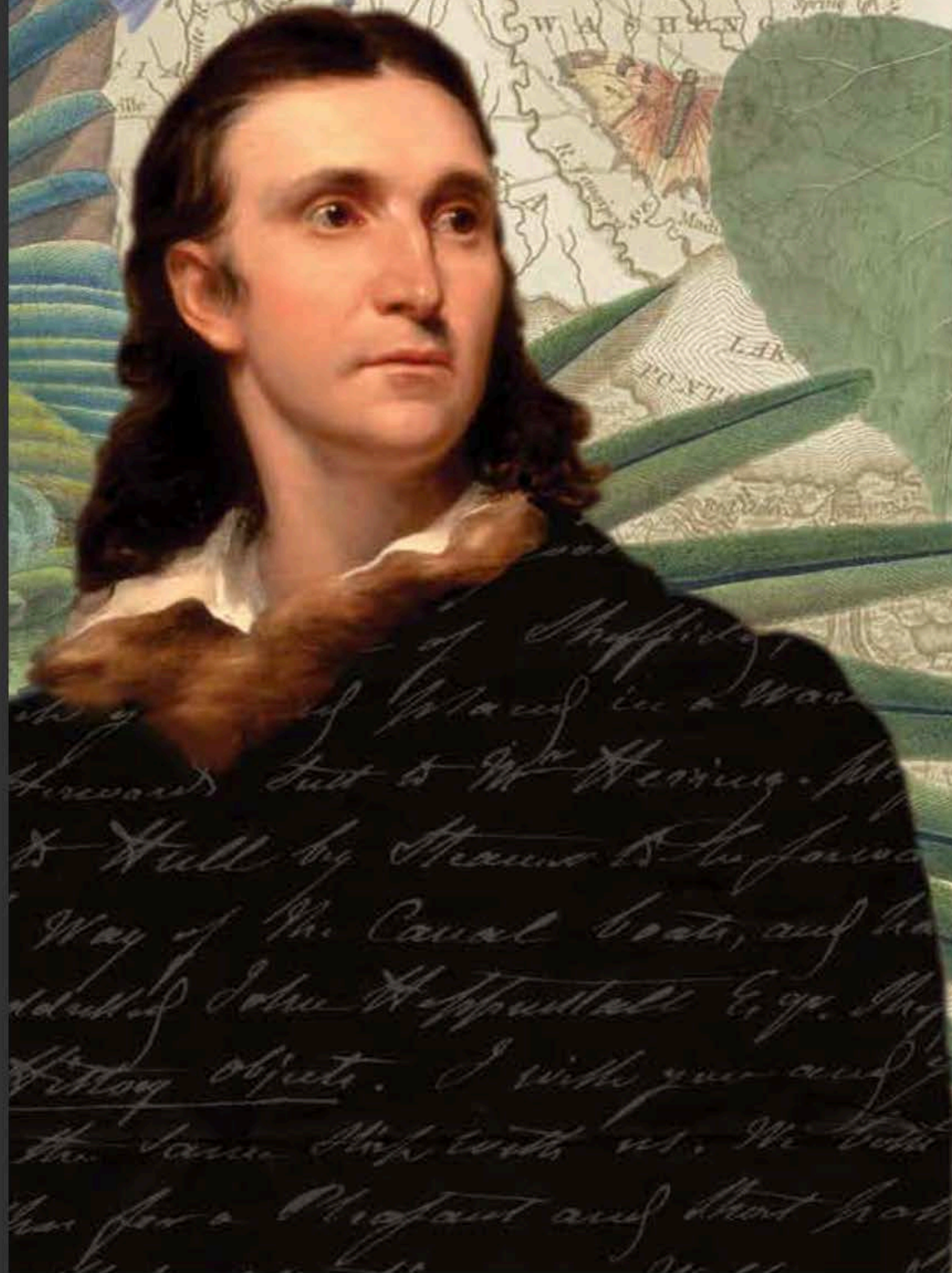


AUDUBON'S

Louisiana



tion price (\$125) that Wilson was asking, and telling Audubon in French: "Your drawings are certainly better, and again you must know as much of the habits of American birds as this gentleman."

Audubon showed Wilson some of his own work, and almost pleadingly proposed a collaboration. Wilson, no doubt stung at having a potential subscription so near to his hand before losing it, curtly declined Audubon's offer and departed in a huff. We can only imagine Audubon's state of mind at that time. First, he had just met someone who was nearing completion of a monumental project that had only been a vague dream of his up until that point. Secondly, the author of what would become the first U.S. bird field guide - a document which he sorely needed, and would cost him untold hours to (unsuccessfully) track down in subsequent years - had just walked out of his door.

Ultimately, Audubon's passion would come to dictate his true vocation, but not before a ten-year string of financial misadventures would render him penniless and force him to sink or swim. Running into a rare bit of luck in 1820 he obtained a job as specimen preparator at the new Western Museum, a natural history museum downriver in Cincinnati, Ohio. Though short-lived, the job afforded three valuable opportunities. First, he was subsequently invited to mount his first ever exhibit of bird paintings at the Western Museum, an academic institution (resulting in important letters of recommendation from important people). Second, while in Cincinnati he learned that he could generate income fairly easily by both teaching art classes and drawing or painting portraits of people who could afford such things. He came to realize that such "as needed" skills could free him to pursue his now-solidified objective of painting every bird native to the United States. He could carry those skills with him wherever he went, thus supplying his family with much needed money, as well as keep him furnished with bird-shot, gunpowder, and art supplies. Third, Cincinnati is where Audubon was fortunate enough to cross paths with Joseph Mason, a thirteen-year-old art student of his, and a true painting prodigy - especially when it came to painting foliage, flowers, and other botanical elements. Audubon had already decided that his bird paintings would be rendered with each species in its own natural environment; not upon some generic branch as depicted by his predecessors.

It was at this point that Audubon's true mission became clear to him. He would travel to New Orleans to paint more birds. He had been there before (chasing down yet another sketchy business partner who had made off with a steamboat in which they had co-invested) and had seen lots of birds. In 1820 New Orleans was the 5th largest city in the United States. Surely he could find work there painting portraits and teaching art. Moreover, he had an Ohio River friend who traded regularly there



Opposite: Blue-winged Warbler by John James Audubon with background painted by Joseph Mason

