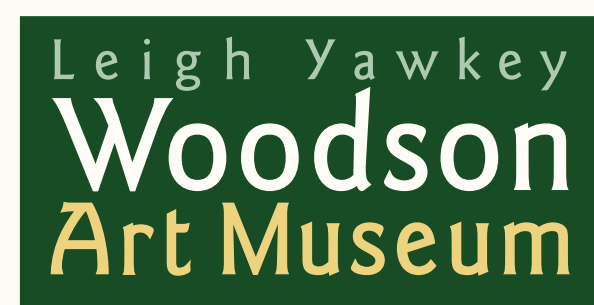


# Revealed - A Message from 1834

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## INTRODUCTION

While many versions of celebrated naturalist and artist John James Audubon's (1785-1851) *Birds of America* exist today, very few of the artist's oil paintings have survived. One such painting, *Pacific Loons* (*Black-throated Divers*), belongs to the permanent collection of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin (Figure 1). A plate, similarly entitled *Black-throated Diver*, appears in *Birds of America* (Figure 2).

A key part of Audubon's success was his ability to circulate copies of his work to a wide audience—a practice that critically relied on his relationship with his print publishers. Of these, none was more important than his relationship with Robert Havell, Jr. (1793-1878). As was the case between many artists and their printmakers, there was extremely close collaboration between Audubon and Havell that mutually impacted the artwork. There are some cases where Audubon left a drawing unfinished and Havell completed it and added a background. This collaboration has been identified in works such as Audubon's *Roseate Spoonbill* (Figures 3 & 4).

Close inspection of *Pacific Loons* alongside the print for which it served as a study, suggested that there was more to the painting than meets the eye and that the painting and print may further reveal the working relationship between Audubon and Havell. First, there is one fewer bird in the oil painting than in the print. Second, there were irregularities in the painted background suggestive of overpainting, with some degree of graphite visible under raking light. In a collaboration between the Woodson Art Museum and Middleton Spectral Vision, the Reveal-Scan-M spectral imaging system was used to investigate the painting in the visible and infrared wavelength regions.



FIGURE 1

John James Audubon, *Pacific Loons* (*Black-throated Divers*), ca. 1834, oil on canvas, 34 x 47 in., Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Nancy Woodson Spire Foundation

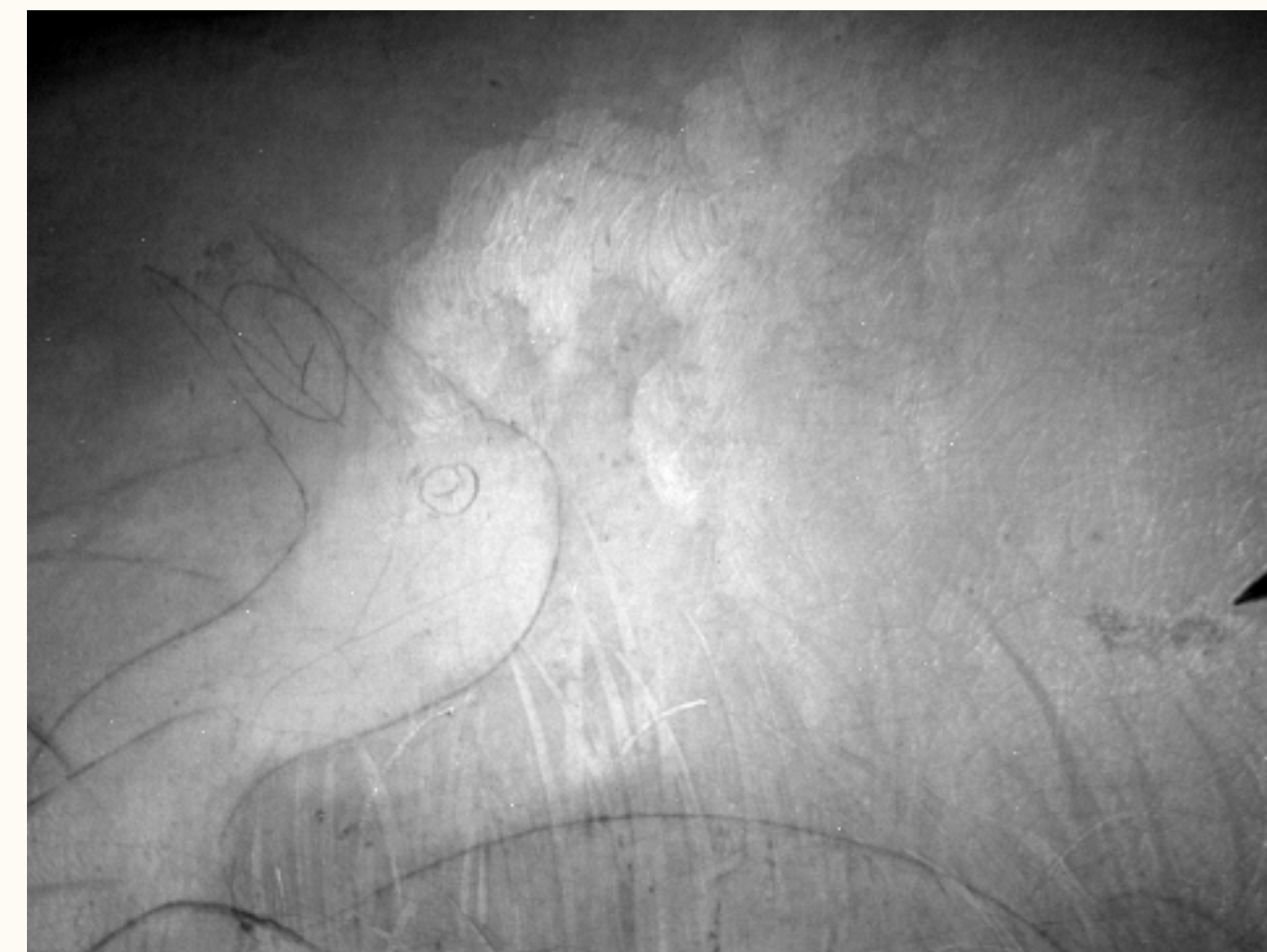


FIGURE 5

Difference image created by 0.62\*all infrared filter—0.38\*visible component 2. Note the sketch of an additional bird with an egg in its beak.

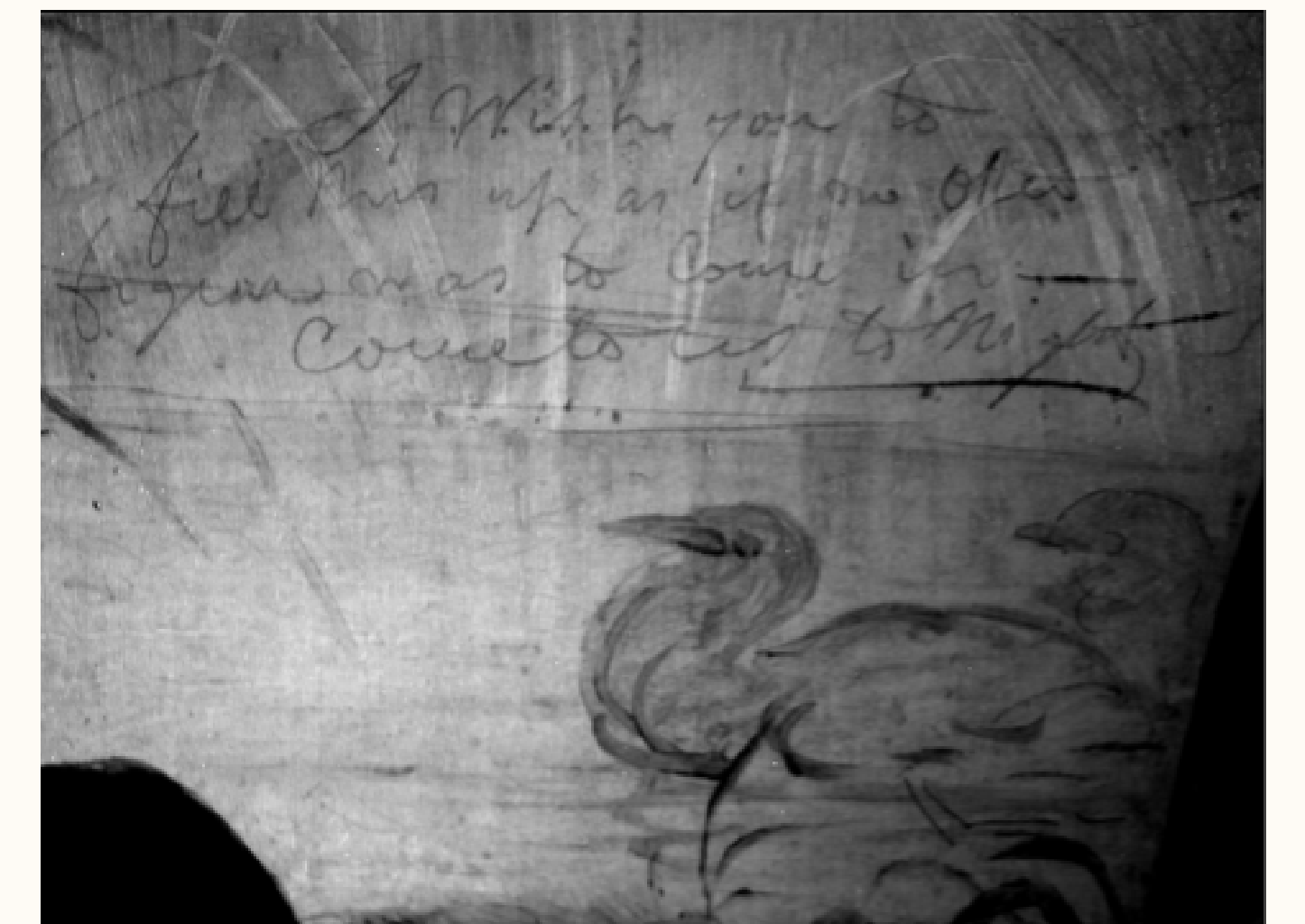


FIGURE 6

Difference between IR comp 1 and IR comp 2. Text reads: I wish you to fill this up as if one other figure was to come in—come to us tonight

## RESULTS

The first surprising revelation when investigating the painting with infrared light is the appearance of an additional sketch of a loon underneath the sky above the grass in the painting's center. This sketch, shown in Figure 5, has its head angled upward with an egg in its mouth. The bird's pose and general position—between the two adult loons—anticipate the positioning and pose of the juvenile bird featured in the later print. Two additional juvenile birds appear in the painting swimming between the two adult loons. Their location is similarly reminiscent of the location of the juvenile in the Havell-produced print.

An even more surprising revelation is a message hidden underneath the top layer of paint, but clearly visible with the infrared camera (Figure 6). It reads "I wish you to fill this up as if one other figure was to come in—come to us tonight." The message seems to be instructions to Havell on how to produce the final print, and points to the practicalities of their collaboration. While Audubon's collaborative process is well documented in his surviving correspondence and typical of people producing illustrated works at the time, it is unique to see such evidence of collaboration existing within the artwork itself, especially considering Audubon's oil paintings are somewhat rare.

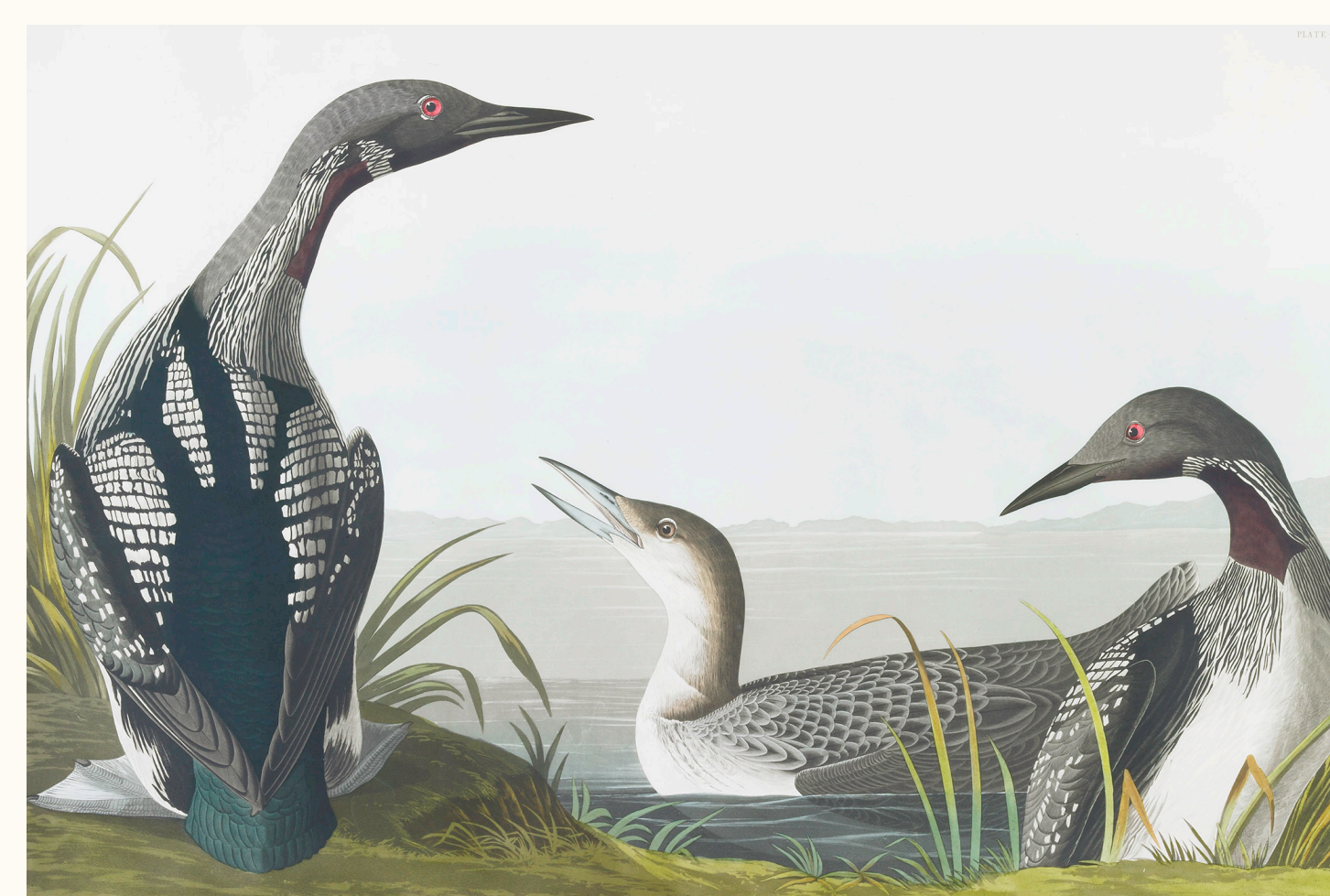


FIGURE 2

John James Audubon and Robert Havell, Jr., *Black-throated Diver*, Pl. 346, hand-colored engraving and aquatint on paper, 25 7/8 x 39 in., Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Nancy Woodson Spire Foundation and partial gift by W. Graham Arader Galleries



FIGURE 3

John James Audubon and Robert Havell, Jr., *Roseate Spoonbill*, Pl. 321, hand-colored engraving and aquatint on paper, 25 7/8 x 39 in.



FIGURE 4

John James Audubon, *Roseate Spoonbill*, *Study for Havell*, ca. 1831-32, watercolor, gouache and black ink on paper, Collection of the New York Historical Society