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CONTRIBUTED IMAGE Detail from Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819 - 1905), "Autumn Morning, Racquette Lake" (1872, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, N.Y.)

A walk through 'American Wildlife Art' at Allentown Art Museum of the LV

Wednesday, November 27, 2013 by BUD COLE Special to The Press in Focus

The Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley's Scheller and Rodale Galleries are practically alive with artists' renderings of America's animals from the 1500's to the present-day.

The "American Wildlife Art" exhibit includes prints, paintings, carvings and sculpture of America's birds, mammals, crustaceans, reptiles and other wildlife species. Nature lovers and outdoor sports enthusiasts should not miss this once-in-a-lifetime exhibit..

The creations include works dating back to 16th century by John White (1540-1593), who produced scale drawings of wildlife and maps, thus promoting more settlement and exploration by England in the New World; Mark Catesby (1683-1749), who supplied the Royal Society in London with his artistic descriptions of New World specimens for natural history collections; and early prints by French-American ornithologist, naturalist and painter John James Audubon (1785-1851).

More modern works include those by Arthur Tait (1819-1905), whose collaborations with Currier and Ives brought affordable wildlife art to everyday citizens; Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927), who like Audubon was an ornithologist and painter; paintings by Carl Rungius (1869-1959) and Stanley Meltzoff (1917-2006); wood carvings by Larry Barth; and large life-like bronze sculpture by Kent Ullberg.

"An exhibit like this comes around once every 50 years. The last exhibit similar to this one was presented at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, in the 1960's," says exhibit curator David Wagner. "I doubt that another exhibit like this one will be assembled for another 50 years."

Wagner and former Allentown Art Museum President Brooks Joyner had previously partnered on museum exhibits.

"The exhibit timing coincides with the release of my book, 'American Wildlife Art,'" Wagner says. His book is available in the museum gift shop.

Comments (0)

The exhibition is not a traveling show. Unlike many that move from museum to museum, this exhibition ends permanently Dec. 29 at the museum. Wagner explained the works are on loan from other museums, organizations and the artists themselves. Many of the older works, paintings and the sculpture are fragile and difficult to transport without possible damage.

Wagner used two main criteria for choosing the work and the artists for the exhibit: To reach out to the top artists in their field, and focus on wildlife artists in general proximity to Allentown and eastern Pennsylvania.

For example, Larry Barth, born in Stahlstown, Westmoreland County, has shown his work at the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury, Md. John James Audubon did much of his work in Mill Grove, Montgomery County.

Wagner says his goal for the exhibition was to create, "A walk through of the history of wildlife art." And that is exactly what he has done.

The exhibition begins with sketch prints by John White (1540-1593), an English artist who sailed to the present North Carolina area in 1585 as an artist and mapmaker. He painted Native-Americans at work and play. White's maps were important to later exploration and settlement. A number of Audubon prints, focusing on birds, follows White's works.

The earliest works, like those of White and Audubon, were detailed renderings of a specific animal filling the entire area of the painting. These were done mostly for scientific study. As American wildlife art evolved, the animals were painted in their natural habitats as in the works of Arthur Tait and Carl Rungius.

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My wife, Bev, and I thoroughly enjoyed the "American Wildlife Art" exhibit. The art work is keeping with our outdoor interests and environmental philosophy. As an outdoor-travel writer and sportsman, I found the exhibit to be fascinating. Seeing the prints and original works of artists like Audubon that I've only read about or perused in magazines and art text books is interesting and informative.

Bev was drawn to the life-like green heron carved by Barth. The details on the heron's wings, feet and its feather colors give the observer a feeling that the bird will fly away at any moment. Barth's exceptional sense of design has earned him 14 "Best in World" titles in the Decorative Life-size Division of the Ward World Carving Championship, Ocean City, Md.

Although, I liked the entire exhibit, my highlight was Ullberg's sculpture. During a visit several years ago to Corpus Christi, Tex., I took photos of several large marine sculptures in the parkway near the marina. I did not know they were Ullberg's. To my surprise, Ullberg and I sat next to each other on the flight from Houston to Newark. He was traveling to New York City to receive a National Sculpture Society award. We discussed his wildlife sculptures and my outdoor writings.

Early duck stamp prints and a framed Millennium set of federal duck stamps from 1934 to 2000 should interest hunters and sportsmen. Fishermen will be captivated by Meltzoff's marine paintings of fish and other aquatic life.

Remember, this exhibit closes soon. Make plans to visit. It will not be available to see again.

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