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Paul A. Johnsgard

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

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The Art and Artistic Legacy of Louis Agassiz Fuertes

Paul A. Johnsgard
School of Biological Sciences
University of Nebraska – Lincoln 68588
pjohnsga@unlserve.unl.edu

Perhaps some Nebraska birders will not immediately recognize the name Louis Agassiz Fuertes, as he died almost 80 years ago. Yet he influenced the art of bird painting as much as did John James Audubon, and provided wonderful artwork for many major state bird reference books. He also personally tutored George Miksch Sutton, the Nebraska-born artist and biologist who provided the NOU with its Burrowing Owl logo, and who contributed greatly to American ornithology, especially that of the southern Great Plains.

It is interesting that, like John James Audubon, Roger Tory Peterson and George Miksch Sutton, we would never think of referring to Louis Agassiz Fuertes in any other way than including his middle name. It is not that there have ever been or will ever be another Louis Fuertes with whom we might possibly confuse him; Fuertes had no comparable antecedent. Dr. Livingstone Farrand, Cornell University’s president at the time of Fuertes’ tragic death, did not hesitate to schedule a memorial service for him in Willard Straight Hall on the University campus on October 30, 1927. When reminded that such action for a non-academic was without precedent in Cornell’s history, Dr. Farrand simply replied, “There is no precedent for Louis Agassiz Fuertes.” And so there was none. Like Mozart, he arose from moderate obscurity, exploded in a shower of unmatched talent, and disappeared all too soon, leaving the world to cherish his work but also to grieve and wonder what sort of elemental mix could ever produce such a person.

It is true that Fuertes came from fine parental stock; his father was a professor of civil engineering (and later dean of the engineering college) at Cornell, and his mother was noted for her outstanding musical talent. He had three brothers and two sisters, but none of these would ever attain the heights of fame that Louis would eventually scale. It is also true that his father had high hopes that Louis might become an outstanding architect or engineer, and when Louis entered Cornell in the fall of 1893 he enrolled as an architecture student. He had traveled in Europe with his parents the previous year, studying for a time in Switzerland, and began to exhibit the sort of drawing talent that an architect might need. However, like Charles Darwin, their fathers’ dreams were not to materialize, since Louis was far more interested in studying nature directly than in pursuing academic studies. It is perhaps ironic that his father had bestowed the name “Louis Agassiz” on his son in honor of the internationally famous scientist, whose primary maxim was, “Study nature, not books.” It is also perhaps apocryphal, but quite possibly true, that once during a class Louis escaped out a side window of the Cornell lecture hall he was attending, in order to track down the identity of a bird he heard singing outside. Finally, his exasperated father sought the advice of Cornell’s renowned botanist Liberty Hyde Bailey as to what he might possibly do about his wayward son. Bailey’s simple and sage advice was, “Let him go.”

And did Louis go! Although his talents would certainly have become known eventually, he was fortunate enough to be discovered by none other than Elliott Coues, then President of the American Ornithologists’ Union and perhaps the greatest ornithologist that America ever produced. Serendipitously, Coues was the
uncle of a friend and fellow member of the Cornell glee club. The critical initial meeting of Fuertes and Coues occurred in 1894, when Louis was only a sophomore, and during a trip of the glee club to Washington, D.C. From their first meeting it was already apparent to Coues, who was known universally for his sharp critical tongue and feared as an implacable enemy of mediocrity in all forms, that Louis had an artistic talent of immense proportions. Coues urged Louis to consider becoming a professional bird artist (never mind that such a profession didn't exist at that time; even John James Audubon had died in poverty). Thanks to Coues' professional influence, Fuertes was able to have his artwork exhibited at the 1895 (12th) annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in New York. This group then had about 600 members nationwide, including all of America's best-known ornithologists, and its journal The Auk was already the primary scientific ornithological periodical in America. Furthermore, Coues invited Fuertes to illustrate a children's book, Citizen Bird, that Coues was then writing with Mabel O. Wright. Thus, his painting career was launched.

Although Fuertes wasn't able to attend the 1895 meeting of the A.O.U., he did attend the following year. There he fell under the strong and pervasive influence of Abbott H. Thayer, who was already a nationally known nature artist. Thayer accepted Fuertes as a sort of surrogate son, and he spent a great deal of time with the Thayer family at their homes in New York and New Hampshire. Thayer had undergone four years of artistic training in Paris, and urged Fuertes to develop his already keen powers of observation to new levels. Thus, in only two years Fuertes suddenly had the advice of a highly talented and successful painter, and of America's most competent and famous ornithologists. Additionally Coues hired Fuertes to
illustrate the fifth edition of Coues’ forthcoming (in 1903) *Key to North American Birds*, a reference work that was destined to become the mainstay of American ornithology, and which even today receives frequent use by professional ornithologists such as myself.

The artistic influence of Abbott Thayer was a powerful one, for it had become an over-riding issue with Thayer that animals such as birds primarily had evolved their distinctive colors and patterns for protective (concealment) reasons, rather than perhaps for achieving conspicuousness (advertisement) in their environment. Included in the means of achieving concealment are such devices as disruptive patterning (patterns that tend break up the body into many confusing or distracting forms), background-matching colors (cryptic coloration), and countershading (the tendency to have pale underparts and dark upperparts; thus countering the shading effects of the underparts caused by overhead light). This concealment argument obviously makes sense for some species, such as for many ground-dwelling or ground-nesting birds that might be vulnerable to visual predators. However, Thayer tried to apply it in many extreme cases, such as trying account for the pink coloration of flamingos and roseate spoonbills by suggesting that they would become virtually invisible at sunrise and sunset, when the general coloration of their surroundings is briefly pink to reddish.

Although some of Thayer’s arguments, such as those regarding countershading, were compelling and eventually accepted by biologists, they thrust Fuertes into a nearly lifelong dilemma. He must not only try to satisfy the controversial artistic views of Thayer, who constantly urged Fuertes to hide the birds effectively within their background, but also attempt to deal with the equally understandable views of virtually all publishers, who always urged him to make the birds more conspicuous and contrasting against their surroundings. Fuertes additionally had to cope with the economics of expensive color printing, which dictated that as many birds as possible must be crowded into a single plate, regardless of the possible straining of credulity that such crowding of subjects might produce. However, an inherent advantage of such grouping, as later exploited by field-guide artists, is the instructional potential for easy inter-species visual comparisons by people wishing to learn field identification traits. It is a testament to Fuertes’ compositional ability that one may marvel at the multi-species plates in, for example, *The Birds of New York* or *The Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States*, without first thinking about the ecological or behavioral problems inherent in such groupings.

Evidently Fuertes decided quite early that he would primarily be a painter of bird “portraits,” rather than painting subject matter in which birds might play an important role within a much broader landscape, in the manner of the great contemporary Swedish nature artist Bruno Liljefors. Such bird portraits were first perfected by Jacques Barraband, a French artist of the early 1800s, who probably painted his subjects from mounted specimens. In a 1910 article in *The Amateur Sportsman*, Fuertes described himself as “a bird portrait painter.” His friend Frank M. Chapman similarly described Fuertes as a “great portrait painter of birds.” Chapman later (1937) described Fuertes’ genius and compared his approach to art with that of John James Audubon, the other great historic figure in American bird art. Chapman believed that both men possessed an extreme love for birds, possessing “some rare and precious heritage,” as well as a “loving sympathy” for birds. Both artists killed thousands of birds, either for preservation as scientific specimens or as a basis for painting, yet both obviously and paradoxically loved their subjects intensely. In the words of Wilfred Osgood, Fuertes might sit with a freshly killed bird in hand, “stroking its feathers in detached ecstasy, and crooning
over it in a manner that in another might have seemed ridiculous.” In his Abyssinian memoirs Osgood also wrote (1936) that Fuertes was uniquely able to “spread the charm and beauty of birds, not merely by accuracy of line and color, but in the expression of subtle intangible qualities approaching spirituality.” Chapman (1937) stated that, whereas Audubon attempted to produce the visual effect of life by painting his subjects in motion (often inaccurately), Fuertes achieved his visual magic through “his ability to produce facial expressions which could be worn only by living birds.”

Besides an intense appreciation for the appearance of a bird, Fuertes could thus consign to memory a bird’s special qualities that gave it a unique character or “personality,” and delay converting these impressions to paper for several hours after experiencing the scene or event. Frank Chapman commented that “His mind appears to be a delicately sensitized plate designed especially to catch and fix images of bird life” (Chapman, 1927). I have personally known only one artist of similar retentive abilities. Paul Geraghty, a Canadian artist of rare talent, once visited me while I was doing fieldwork in Grand Teton National Park. Paul could spend an entire day in the field with only binoculars in hand, but that night would sit down with pencil and paper and draw dozens of scenes of birds and mammals with camera-like precision, sketching as fast as the graphite would flow from his pencil-tip. Chapman believed that this photographic-like retention of form, color, and even recalling complex bird songs gave Fuertes a special capacity for achieving authenticity. It is rare that a knowledgeable ornithologist will fail to recognize a Fuertes painting well before seeing his distinctive initials or signature; only the works of a few other more recent artists such as George Miksch Sutton can so readily carry the cachet of authenticity that is present in any Fuertes bird portrait.

Starting with a trip to Florida with the Thayer family in 1898, Fuertes soon participated in a series of field expeditions to observe and collect Snowy Owl  Louis Agassiz Fuertes
Photo courtesy of the U. S. Department of the Interior
specimens in such remote places as Alaska, western Canada, Mexico, Colombia, and the American West. He even took time to go collecting on his honeymoon, and on one occasion had to be rescued from a steep cliff-face he had climbed down in trying to recover a Zone-tailed Hawk that he had shot. On such expeditions he would hunt from sunrise to about noon. In the afternoon he would skin and prepare study specimens of the birds he had collected, and then paint selected examples while it was still early enough to paint by natural light. In the evening he would enter his journal notes and catch up on correspondence. Fuertes was especially careful to note fugitive “softpart” features, such as the texture and colors of the eyes, bare skin, bill, and even the inside of the mouth or what the bird had been eating when shot. Pencil sketches, washes, and transparent watercolors were variously used; Fuertes’ abilities to depict soft feathers with the brush is legendary, and totally different from the “hard-edged” feathers of Audubon and his followers. Probably many of these field sketches were intended only as preliminary studies for future, more finished works; but they have an immediacy and visual power that is unmatched, and are far superior to what would be expected as specimen studies that might supplement a biologist’s field notes.

During a 1925 trip to Wyoming Fuertes encountered James E. Baum, a wealthy Chicago sportsman and big-game hunter who was also a fine writer with connections to the Chicago Daily News. The following spring Baum proposed making a hunting trip to Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), a remote area in the great Rift Valley of northeastern Africa that was rich in wildlife but having few if any restrictions on the killing of game. Shortly afterwards Fuertes and Baum visited with Wilfred Osgood, curator of mammals at Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History. Together they worked out a proposal to have the museum underwrite, not a recreational hunting trip, but a scientific collecting expedition to this little-visited and biologically unknown country. They also approached the Chicago Daily News for financial support, and soon received word that the paper would pay $25,000 to help finance the trip. It was thus to become known as the Field Museum/Chicago Daily News Abyssinian Expedition, and would be Fuertes’ last expedition. He was 52 years old at the trip’s outset in the fall of 1926, at the peak of his artistic powers, and would live only a few months after his return to Ithaca the following year.

The Abyssinian Expedition

The expedition traveled by boat across the Mediterranean from France, through the Suez Canal, and arrived in Djibouti (then part of French Somaliland) in early October of 1926. The group then traveled by train to Addis Ababa, capital of Abyssinia. The scientific party included Fuertes, Osgood, and Baum, plus Alfred M. Bailey, a young ornithologist who had very recently been hired as a collector and curator by the museum. The final member was C. Suydam Cutting, a wealthy museum patron and volunteer participant in the expedition, who also made a 16-mm documentary film of its highlights.

After a few weeks of settling in at the Imperial Hotel of Addis Ababa, the group obtained an audience with emperor Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari), then only 34 years old. He was highly receptive to and favorably impressed by the group, and provided them all the documents they would need for travel and collecting throughout the entire country. Before leaving Addis Ababa, Fuertes was devastated to learn that his personal gear, including clothing, field equipment, and all of his drawing and painting supplies had been lost en route. Fortunately, he was able to buy a small set of watercolors in Addis Ababa, and evidently made do with such paper and brushes as were also locally available for his drawing and painting needs.
Most of the Abyssinian paintings were done as life-size specimen studies on paper measuring approximately 11 x 15" (28 x 38 cm.), but some sketches are on sheets as small as 7 x 9" (18 x 23 cm.). A few formally composed and more scenic watercolors such as the groups of Colobus monkeys, White-eared Turacos and Mountain Nyalas were done on sheets as large as approximately 14 x 18" (35 x 46 cm.). These are all undated but were probably all executed after his return to the U.S. 

By the latter part of October, before setting out on their main expedition, Fuertes and “Bill” Bailey had each collected and prepared more than 80 specimens in less than a week while staying eight days (October 18-26) at a ranch north of Addis Ababa, in Shoa Province. On October 21 Fuertes painted the first of his bird studies, of an African Harrier Hawk, and a day later painted a Thick-billed Raven. These and the remaining watercolor studies were all done in natural size, and thus most of the larger species were simply head and shoulder portraits, often with small whole-animal images in the background. Fuertes also began a large series of variably completed pencil sketches while at the ranch.

On October 30 the entire group reassembled and departed from Addis Ababa, with 36 pack mules, plus dozens of packers, muleteers, cooks, interpreters, and guards. Fuertes and Osgood headed south, through Arusi, Bale, Sidamo and Galla provinces. Within three months they returned again to Addis Ababa, reaching there on January 21, 1927. By then Fuertes had preserved 559 bird skins that he had obtained in more than 40 field camps, had already painted nearly 40 field studies of birds and mammals, and made about 20 pencil drawings. During their second month-long stay in Addis Ababa they again visited Haile Selasse, and Fuertes presented the emperor with the choice of a finished painting, to be made from one of his field studies. The emperor chose his portrait of the Narina Trogan. On his 53rd. birthday, February 7, Fuertes was in Addis Ababa, packing trunks for shipment to Khartoum and itching to be back in the field. The group left two days later.

Again leaving Addis Ababa, the party headed north toward Gojam Province, into a mountainous region, and across the valley of the Blue Nile. From there they headed west of Lake Tsana. During this phase Fuertes completed an additional 30 or so watercolors, and at least a dozen pencil sketches. One of the last birds to be collected (by Alfred Bailey) in Abyssinia and painted by Fuertes was the African Swallow-tailed Kite. It was obtained on April 15 near Metema, the westernmost town in Abyssinia (Bailey, 1977). The very last subject for Fuertes’ brush was a Four-banded Sandgrouse, obtained on April 17. Then the group crossed the Sudan-Abyssinian border and arrived in Khartoum on April 24. At this time they began to pack and prepare for shipment 22 cases of their accumulated specimens, including some 2,000 birds and nearly as many mammals. They then headed down the Nile to Cairo and Alexandria, and on to Europe, where Fuertes was reunited with his wife and daughter in London on May 12, 1927 (Mary Boynton, pers. comm.). On his return to Ithaca, Fuertes had nearly a year’s work to catch up with, but he couldn’t resist showing the plates to friends and colleagues. During a chance encounter with a young acquaintance, Henry Guerlac, Fuertes called him over, and the two sat down on a sidewalk in Ithaca, feet in the gutter, and “gloated over” the illustrations, oblivious to both oncoming traffic and pedestrians (Marcham, 1971). In a letter written to George Miksch Sutton on June 26, 1927, he excitedly reported, “We had a marvelous trip in Abyssinia, and among other things I got far the best lot of field studies I ever did on one trip; a hundred color studies and a lot of drawings” (Sutton, 1979). Frank Chapman (1928) similarly described his Abyssinian studies as “incomparably the best he ever made in the field.” Chapman had seen them as a result of a visit that Fuertes and his wife had made to their home in Tannersville, New York, during which Fuertes had told them of the Abyssinian trip and had
shown them his wonderful collection of paintings. Tragically, on their return trip he was killed near Unadilla, New York. The car in which he and his wife were traveling was struck by a train at a railroad crossing, the view of which had been concealed to them by a load of hay. Incredibly, at the moment of the crash the packet of paintings was thrown free of the demolished car and was rescued intact. Mrs. Fuertes was also thrown free, but was seriously hurt.

The entire collection of Abyssinian field studies was later purchased from Mrs. Fuertes by C. Suydam Cutting, patron of the Museum and a participant in the Abyssinian expedition, and in due course were presented to the Field Museum. Mr. Cutting also guaranteed the cost of reproduction of a selected group (32) of the watercolor plates, including 28 bird subjects and four mammal studies, or about a third of the total 108 paintings done by Fuertes during the expedition. These were published in album form, and printed on high-quality heavy stock, using up to nine offset lithographic colors, and with image sizes of 20 x 25 cm (8 x 10"). Introductory comments were provided by Winfred Osgood. In 1936 a selection of 16 of these same plates (14 birds, two mammals; all of which were also in the album) were included in a book that represented the combined Abyssinian journal notes of Fuertes and Osgood (Fuertes & Osgood, 1936). These plates were reproduced at slightly smaller size than in the album, and had much narrower borders. Both publications soon went out of print and rapidly became collectors' items. Some of the Abyssinian studies have also been reproduced more recently, most notably in the biographies of Fuertes by F. G. Marcham (1971), which included 12 bird and two mammal portraits, and that of R. M. Peck (1982), which included ten color and eight halftone reproductions of the Abyssinian birds. However, a substantial number of the Abyssinian watercolors and pencil sketches remained unpublished, all of which are still housed in the rare book room of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Fuertes' Artistic Legacy

The artistic legacy left by Fuertes is both real and symbolic. Frank Chapman (1928) summarized Fuertes' list of “more important” published bird illustrations, which represent a lasting, substantive artistic legacy. These total at least 400 monochrome illustrations (about half appearing in Coues' Key to North American Birds) and at least 700 color plates, with the largest number (250) appearing in the National Geographic's Book of Birds (1918), and a lesser number (106) in E. H. Eaton's Birds of New York (1910-1914). There were also 68 plates in E. H. Forbush's three-volume Birds of Massachusetts (1925-1929), which are generally considered to be Fuertes' best illustrations, given the limitations of crowding several species on a single plate. A total of 35 color plates and 35 halftones appeared in The Bird Life of Texas by H. C. Oberholser (1974), nearly 50 years after Fuertes' death. More than 100 also appeared in the National Audubon Society's Bird Lore magazine between 1903 and 1926. These latter plates typically appeared as frontispiece illustrations, and collectively included most American passerines, as well as later series on swifts, hummingbirds, woodpeckers and herons. Several series of small but charming paintings were reproduced on cards published by Church & Dwight between the 1920s and 1940s, and were included free in boxes of baking soda. Such sets were avidly collected by children and introduced many of them (including me) to Fuertes and to many American bird species for the first time. More complete listings of his published plates were provided in an obituary by Frank Chapman (1928), and in a biography by M. F. Boynton (1956).
In addition, Fuertes completed many unpublished works on birds as commissioned projects or simply as gifts, as well as many mammal studies and those of other biological subjects. The archival library of Cornell University, which also includes most of Fuertes' surviving papers, has over 2,500 pencil sketches. Thus, his overall output of published and unpublished paintings must have easily exceeded three thousand items, but no complete accounting, or catalogue raisonné, exists.

Additionally, Fuertes left a powerful and lasting mark on subsequent generations of American nature artists. Perhaps the person most directly affected by Fuertes, because he received extensive instruction in bird art directly from the master, was George Miksch Sutton. The summer (1916) that Sutton spent in the Fuertes household as a teenager transformed his art and shaped his life. Sutton went on to become the premier bird artist of America following the death of Fuertes, and especially his early work sometimes is so close in style to that of Fuertes that it is sometimes necessary to examine the artist’s signature to be certain of its origin. Sutton was himself a great teacher as well as an outstanding scientist, giving advice and encouragement to many talented artists. These have included Robert Verity Clem, whose shorebird paintings carry the authentic smell of tundra and marshland, the late and tragically short-lived Donald L. Malick, whose African field studies often bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Fuertes, and John O'Neill, who knows the visual feel of the American tropics like few others. No bird artist alive is likely to be ignorant of Fuertes' work, and probably all have gazed at his work in wonder, asking themselves, “How in the world did he do that?”

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