

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## HISTORIC WILDLIFE PAINTINGS TO GO ON EXHIBIT

A major collection of wildlife paintings by some of this country's most well known artists has been "rediscovered" by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is being loaned to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia where it will be placed on exhibit.

Among the 487 works in the collection are 220 by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, considered by many professional ornithologists and bird-watchers to be the greatest painter of birds of all time, surpassing even John James Audubon in realism. Many works by J. L. Ridgeway and Ernest Thompson Seton, two other outstanding artists, are also included.

Most of the paintings were painted between 1890 and 1927 for the Bureau of Biological Survey, a predecessor agency of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. About a third of the watercolors, pen and inks, washes, and scratch boards have never been on public exhibit. Others were published in Government publications and reports. Some were commissioned as field studies or scientific sketches.

But despite many attempts over the years to exhibit or publish the works, for the most part they have remained stored in a vault at a Fish and Wildlife Service Laboratory for the past 50 years.

Although the storage prevented them from being seen by lovers of wildlife art, it also kept them in superb condition, preserving their vibrant color and detail. Their protection from daylight prevented the high acid content paper from eating away at the watercolors. The paintings were originally purchased from the artists at \$20 to \$30 apiece. A recent appraisal has set the value of several works at \$5,000 each and the entire collection at \$416,000.

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"The paintings represent one of the largest single collections of wildlife art in the nation," according to Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "They're a national treasure and we've finally found a way to get them to the public. The Academy's eagerness to exhibit the collection, coupled with its plans to conserve and publish them, make that institution the perfect repository."

Fuertes, who died in 1927 when he was 53, was a prolific painter and a master of watercolor. His skill at portraying the bird in life-like attitude was so great that the artist-ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson has remarked that there is a generation of birdwatchers who peer through their binoculars and see not the specimen they are looking at, but that bird transformed in their imagination into a Fuertes painting. Almost all of the present generation of new painters have been particularly influenced by him.

Fuertes' paintings graced everything from magazine articles to Government publications to cards given away inside baking soda packages. He traveled throughout the world on major expeditions not only to paint, but also to gather scientific data. The Service's collection spans his entire career and includes a series of colorful Mexican birds and a series of eagles, owls, falcons, and other raptors with their prey which have not been in print.

The 487 works represent 26 artists and constitute one of the largest collections of wildlife art which has never been on public display. Although the subject of most of the paintings are birds, there are a number of mammals and landscapes.

The Academy of Natural Science, which will receive the paintings on a 25-year loan, is planning a major exhibition in 1979. Roughly 80 percent of the collection is in excellent condition. The rest of the paintings, many of which had hung on walls in Government offices, need varying degrees of restoration which the Academy will perform at no cost to the Government. The Fish and Wildlife Service initiated the loan to provide better protection and security for the collection and to make it more available to the public. The Academy will eventually use parts of the collection in traveling exhibitions and will publish many of the works which have not been on public display.

On accepting the paintings, Academy President Thomas Peter Bennett said, "We're delighted to be able to cooperate with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and we look forward to making such an important collection accessible to the public through exhibition and publication while helping to preserve and conserve it for the future."

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