BIRDS

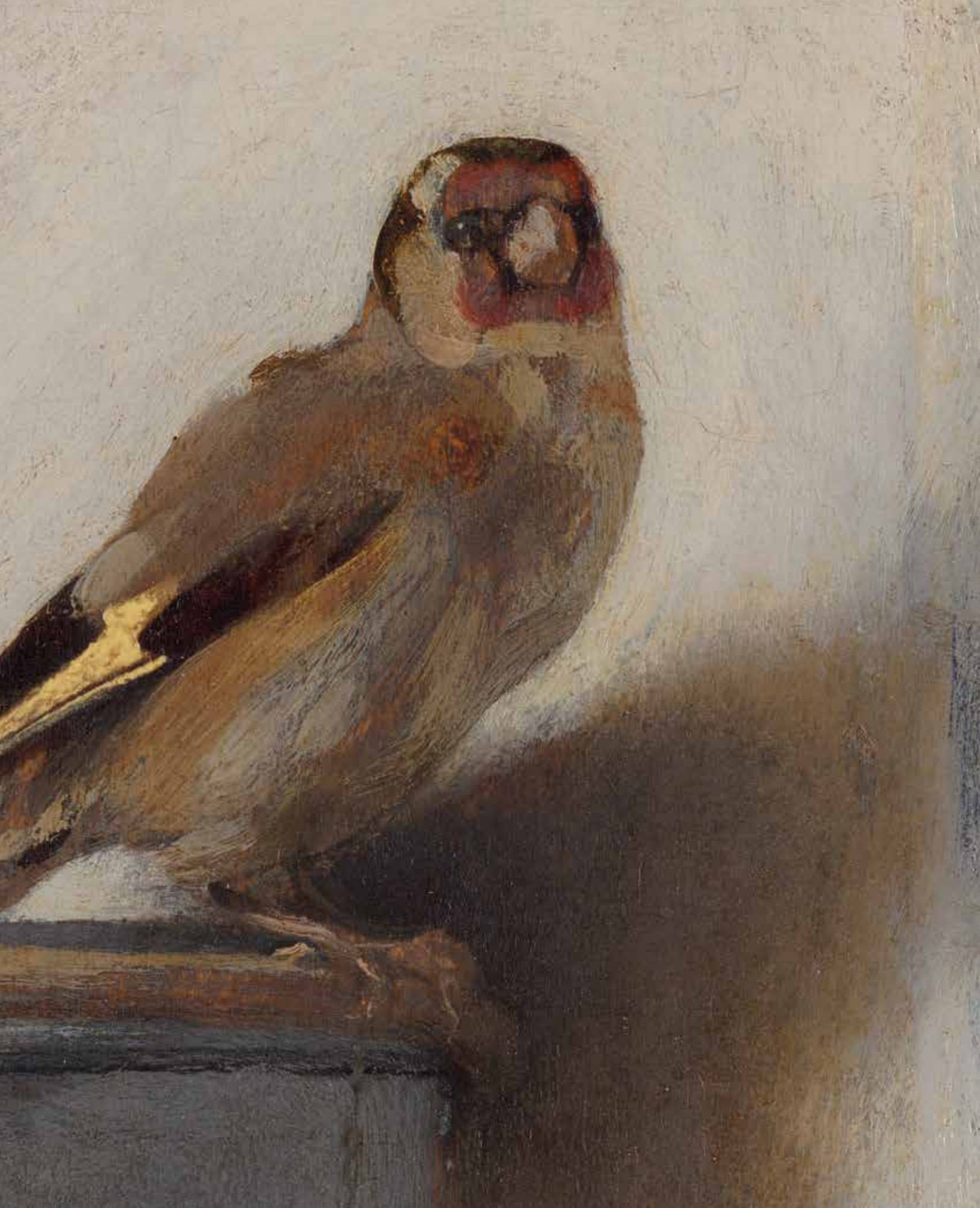
BIRDS

The Goldfinch, Birds, Art and Us

Simon Schama
Martine Gosselink

Mauritshuis | HANNIBAL

BIRDS through the eyes of Martine Gosselink



Why *BIRDS*?

Martine Gosselink

On 13 May 2023, I read the following headline in *The Guardian*: 'Simon Schama on the broken relationship between humans and nature: "The joke's on us. Things are amiss."' It introduced an extract from the opening chapter of *Foreign Bodies*, the latest book by the acclaimed British writer, (art) historian and TV presenter. Two things struck me about the piece. As always with Schama's writing, the erudition and eloquence were admirable. But, despite my not entirely inadequate knowledge in the area under discussion, I was shocked by the alarming message. I could have cried.

I read: 'A south Asian vulture population of 40 million in the 1980s now numbers around 19,000 forty years later. This is more than a catastrophic species loss, bad enough though that is. The dramatic depletion of vultures has unpicked the ecological threads that have tied human and animal culture together in India for centuries. The reverent freedom given to sacred cows by Hinduism, so that they might wander the streets until their bodies lie down in peaceful death, depended on the working assumption that carcasses would be cleaned by scavenging vulture flocks. Without the vultures, decomposing cattle have attracted rats and feral dogs, whose numbers have increased exponentially as the birds have disappeared. A collateral result is the steeply rising incidence of rabid attacks on humans, many of them fatal.'

Here is another extract: 'This shrinking of distance between wild and human habitats has also encouraged the long-distance traffic in wild animals. In 2005, it was estimated that each year of the previous decade had seen the live trafficking of 40,000 primates, 640,000 reptiles, 4 million birds and 350 million fish, numbers that have almost certainly increased in the years since.'

In this way, Schama points out many abuses. All these examples are a source of profound sadness. The relationship between humans and animals is completely out of balance. And humans themselves will ultimately suffer. Pandemics and climate crises will be rampant. Simon Schama tells it the way it is, sparing no one, certainly not those responsible.

The *Guardian* article prompted the Mauritshuis to ask Schama to act as guest curator for the exhibition *BIRDS*, which focuses on the relationship between humans and birds. *The Goldfinch* (1654) – for decades one of the most beloved paintings in the museum – is not only an extraordinarily endearing finch portrayed by the seventeenth-century painter Carel Fabritius. As a bird species, the finch has been important to humans for centuries. Humans taught this bird to draw water from a container using a thimble-sized bucket, hence its nickname in Dutch: *putter* or *puttertje* (little *putter*). The word *putten* means to draw water, therefore a *putter* or *puttertje* refers to the person (or animal) that draws water. Humans have also attributed a religious significance to the bird. We will return to this in more detail later.

I contacted Simon and he immediately said yes. I jumped for joy! Now, two years later, the time has come: everything is ready and our dreams have come true. Throughout this preparatory period, we sent each other messages – from London, New York, Amsterdam and elsewhere – about birds we encountered along the way, whether on a balcony, in a park, a museum or in nature, or the traces they left, for instance as droppings on a windowsill. We laughed about those strange birds and ourselves, and I learned a lot from Simon. It has been a great privilege to have been able to spar and play with this knowledgeable, wise, funny and empathetic man. I have cherished every minute of our collaboration.

Simon Schama and *The Goldfinch* invited winged creatures from all corners of the world to take part in the exhibition: birds that have all been involved by humankind in the human world, sometimes with the complicity of the birds themselves, but often in an imposed relationship.

As we set about planning this book and exhibition, we were constantly confronted with the vast scope of the theme, the relationship between humans and birds. Because we focused primarily on this relationship, we dropped almost all topics relating solely to the life of birds themselves. But even so... Birds have been flying and walking on the Earth for 150 million years. There are 11,000 species of birds, 500 of which have been observed in the Netherlands alone. These species all fall under the term 'bird', but many are as different from one another as night and day. We have interacted with many of these distinct bird species for as long as humanity has existed. Every culture has its own way of dealing with the species in its environment, and has its own history in that regard. As a result, countless meanings have been attributed to birds throughout the ages, in legends, fairy tales, stories, religions, poems, musical compositions and artistic works. Where to start our story was therefore a difficult question – but where to stop even more so.

To give you an idea, we will embark on a short journey through folklore and legends about mythical birds. In Denmark, the supernatural raven Valravn, who was once a knight, can only break the curse by drinking the blood of a boy. In the Indian state of Manipur, the story is told of Hayainu, a girl who turns herself into a hornbill to escape her cruel stepmother. Herodotus, Aristotle, Pliny and Aelian all mention the crocodile bird, which enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the Nile crocodile, whose throat and teeth it keeps clean. A martlet in English heraldry is a bird without feet that never roosts, from birth to death. Lui-kong-tsiau is the name of a bird in Taiwan: the sky darkens as soon as it perches in the treetops and the storm will break as soon as it crows. In the Philippines, the limokon is considered an omen bird; it helps people with trade and communicates with the dead. For the Sumerians, King Etana ascended to heaven with the help of an eagle. The Romans had caladrius, a white bird that healed the sick by taking over their ailments. The Chinese guhuoniao bird abducts infants and then raises them itself. In 570, the year of Muhammad's birth, the ababil birds protected the holy Kaaba in Mecca from the army of the Ethiopian ruler Abraha by dropping stones on the latter's elephants. Aceh in northern Sumatra is home to Si Parkit Raja Parakeet, 'the king of parakeets', who escaped from a golden cage. And in large parts of Asia, the kalaviṅka is worshipped as an immortal bird with a human head who sang while still in its egg and who preaches the teachings of Buddha.

There is no end to these avian stories. Nor to many other subjects to do with the relationship between humans and birds. Nevertheless, we sought to outline a framework. An obvious subject would have been birds in art – after all, millions of birds have been depicted in the visual arts over the centuries – but we did not take this as our starting point. So what did we turn our attention to?

Well, hunting, for example, in the chapter entitled *Stilled Flight*. We hunt birds to eat them or put them in cages, but we also use birds to hunt: hawks and peregrine falcons are trained to catch rabbits, hares and ducks. *The Fate of the Flightless* focuses on birds as a source of food. We eat not only the meat of chickens, ducks, geese, quails and pigeons, but also their eggs. In some countries, it is customary to eat birds' nests.

We admire birds for their colourful plumage, which we were only too happy to acquire for ourselves to ornament our hats and boas. Feathers are the focus of the chapter called *Plumage*.

Birds are special on account of their song, their dance, their colours, but above all because they can do something we can't, which is to fly. You can read more about this in *Envying Avians*. The flying ability of birds has led humans to study them and make use of their specific characteristics in our aviation technology. Researchers are also interested in the aerodynamics and navigation capacity of birds. You can read more about this in *The Genius of Birds*.

In countless cultures and religions, birds act as mystical mediators between heaven and earth. This is the focus of *Heavenly Messengers*. In the seventeenth century, virtually everyone understood the lesson to be learned from a painting showing a girl next to an empty birdcage: she was no longer a virgin. Learn more about the sexual connotations and romantic meanings we have projected on to birds in the chapter entitled *Lovebirds*.

However, these perspectives paint anything but a complete picture of the numerous relationships that exist between humans and birds. For example, this book doesn't cover genetic research on chicken embryos, or the question of how birdsong is influenced by human sounds. You will learn nothing about how geese were trained as guard animals, about their relationship with the Roman goddess Juno, or about the fact that their fat was used to treat wounds. And you can forget about the fairy tales of Mother Goose; the board game called The Game of the Goose and its history; or the fact that geese were considered a type of fish, which means that Christians were allowed to eat them during Lent.[1] Nor will we look into the role of birds in heraldry and vexillology (that is, the study of flags). Regardless of how special the stork has been, and still is, as a centuries-old symbol for the Hague, we will not delve into it, nor will we explore bird behaviour, which has been studied since time immemorial to predict the weather. But other elements, both familiar and surprising, will be examined. Read on in the knowledge that there are vast textual and visual riches to be found between heaven and earth about our bond with our winged friends.

There is, we know, a great deal of despair in the world about the state of biodiversity in general and about the decline in birdlife on the planet, in particular the decline caused by humans. But there is also hope. In the course of this project, all those involved couldn't help but talk to others about birds. It was remarkable how we all became contaminated by a positive variant of 'bird flu', as it were, and how many responses this triggered. People looked at birds with new eyes, and interest in avifauna grew week by week. People reached out to us with all sorts of things, from sound recordings captured in a forest to bird apps that allow you to identify species by their song. We received tips about birds in art, music and literature, as well as about how to interact with birds in your garden or on your balcony. One afternoon, just as I was starting to write a paragraph about birds and love, two white doves landed in my garden. I had never seen them there before. Once I had finished the passage, they flew off. I was left with the feeling that we had worked together briefly, the doves and I. That same afternoon, Simon messaged me from his home in New York State: 'Amazing – as I was writing birdy stuff, a hummingbird (sacred to the Maya and Aztecs!) flew into our glass-walled living room, got frantic, kept flying into an abstract triptych by David Rankin, a friend of ours. It took me nearly 20 minutes of arm-flapping Big Birdyness for the sweet tiny thing to find an exit! I think word has got round about our exhibition in the avian world!' This is no doubt wishful thinking on the part of two people who were deeply immersed in their bird bubble, but who are also convinced that humans and birds are inextricably linked and that we must continue to make this bond visible. Who knows, perhaps the beauty of all the pieces featured in this book and exhibition will lead to a growing interest in birds.

Together Simon and I assembled an anthology of writings about humans and birds. This means that, in addition to the topics mentioned above, we have included a separate section that collects excerpts from fairy tales, fables, stories and poems, from ancient times to the present day, from China to Suriname and everywhere in between.

In addition to the essays by Simon Schama, Adrienne Quarles van Ufford and myself, we asked a number of writers to contribute to this book. Simon approached the British authors Laura Cumming and Philip Hoare: Laura on account of her award-winning book *Thunderclap: A Memoir of Art & Life & Sudden Death* (2023) about *The Goldfinch*, Carel Fabritius and other Dutch painters; Philip, not only on account of his inventive books starring whales and other inhabitants of the sea, but of course also for his book *Albert & the Whale* (2021), in which he explains that Albrecht Dürer would forever change our view of nature through art. The idea to involve writer-philosopher Eva Meijer, the author of *Bird Cottage* (2018), was a priceless tip from Tommy Wieringa. Approaching Flemish writer Stefan Hertmans was the joint brainwave of publisher Gautier Platteau (Hannibal Books) and myself. I don't remember what prompted it, but it may well have been his unequalled book *Dius* (2024), with its marvellous cover (fig. 2, p. 174). It shows two fighting birds (a falcon and a heron), which is a detail from the painting *Young Knight in a Landscape* (c. 1510) by Vittore Carpaccio, which Hertmans writes about in this book.

All the writers focused primarily on bird/human relationships in Europe, occasionally allowing themselves to venture beyond, knowing that all cultures have rich literary, mythological, religious and artistic histories in this field. The texts in the book are accompanied by the works on display in the exhibition plus a lot more material. There is no chronological, geographical or thematic order to be found in the publication. We have allowed the texts to flutter freely, as befits birds.

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to this book and the exhibition *BIRDS*, especially Hannibal Books and the Mauritshuis's own magnificent and imperturbable exhibition team, led by Suzan van den Berg van Saparoea. Several names have already been mentioned, but another one needs to be highlighted, that of curator Justine Rinnooy Kan. What a joy it was to develop a concept with you – a concept that took flight early on. And lastly, our sincere thanks go to Adrienne Quarles van Ufford, the curator who temporarily adopted the name 'The Goldfinch' for this exhibition.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous support of the Vriendenloterij, Sichting de Johan Maurits Compagnie, our Friends of the Mauritshuis, the Lucas Fonds, Fonds 'De Opzet', Dutch Masters Foundation and the Thurkow Foundation.

On behalf of the Mauritshuis, *The Goldfinch* and Simon Schama, we are also greatly indebted to: Valentijn As, Martin Clayton, Maghiel van Crevel, Laura Cumming, Eric Dereumaux, Gerald Derksen, Emily Ehrman, Tracey Emin, Charlotte La Forêt, Araceli Rojas Martinez Gracida, Manon Henzen, Iris van Herpen, Charly Herscovici, Stefan Hertmans, Auke Florian van Hiemstra, Philip Hoare, Friedell ten Holt-Derksen, Rick Honings, Edwin van Huis, Wilt Lukas Idema, Jan van IJken, Dominika Kasova, Michiel van Kempen, Séan Kissane, Tamara Kostianovsky, Suzanne Lambooy, Bram Langeveld, Louise Lawler, Eva Meijer, Wayne Modest, Markus Müller, Sara Nijssen, Kim Oosterlinck, Aude Raimbault, Pieter Roelofs, Naomi Sanyang, Axel Schering, Margot van Schinkel, Annette Schmidt, Ilona van Tuinen, Matthias Ubl, Marieke Vellekoop, Petra Warrink, Harry Weller and Mariet Westermann.

1 Boussauw 2024, pp. 49–50.

Oh, for the Wings...

Simon Schama

FIG. 1
Owl, c. 40,000–26,000 BCE. Engraving on rock, 45 cm high. Salle Hillaire, Chauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d'Arc.

Around 35,000 years ago, give or take a millennium, someone, in the gloom of the Pont d'Arc caves at Chauvet, felt the need for the company of an owl. So that someone took a bone or a flint, and scratched one into the limestone wall (fig. 1). There it perches, unmistakeably owlish: wings neatly tucked, tufty-eared, motionless, watchful. Discovered in 1994, it is the earliest known image of a bird, and one of the few appearing in Paleolithic art, dominated as that was by hoofed quadrupeds. But here is an owl, perhaps already imagined as guardian-protector, alert to the presence of peril, since, after all, the nocturnal bird could see when the caves went dark, and humans, for the most part, could not.

Fast forward 20,000 years to the decoration of the caves at Lascaux, and here are a pair of birds, facing in opposite directions. The little songbird is described by the shorthand profile familiar to the illustrators of children's books and the icon designers of Twitter. But above, or beside it, depending on your point of view, is a bird of another feather entirely: a man-bird or bird-man, its beaked head set atop a human body, albeit one whose arms are outstretched diagonally, in the manner of unfolded wings. Even at the dawn of culture, then, the imagination of *Homo sapiens* was taking flight.

Since then, virtually every human culture, in some form or other, has turned bird-catcher: for food, for sport, for instruments of writing and the plumage of vanity that supplies airs and graces. Since roughly fashioned flutes were the first musical instruments to be discovered in Ice Age caves, the inspiration for paleo-music may have been the song of birds that greeted our distant forbears when they emerged from their stone shelters. Birds are Jurassic descendants, and for seers and poets, not just a particular arrangement of bones and feathers, but metaphysical message-carriers, from the domain of the gods. 'Hail to thee, blithe Spirit/ Bird thou never wert,' Shelley insists, hymning the skylark, 'That from Heaven or near it/ Pourest they full heart.' (p. 183). When mortals imagined human-looking intermediaries between themselves and the immortals, they instinctively supplied them with wings. If the fate of our gross bodies was to crumble into the receiving earth, our spirit selves did what birds routinely do – ascend – into the paradise humans conjure from the optical infinity of the sky. Some religions – Nepalese Vajrayana Buddhists and Zoroastrian Parsi – ensure that consolatory ascent by having white-backed or slender-billed vultures consume human corpses laid out for them atop stone *dakhma,* so that the remains of the dead rise into the heavens within the bellies of the scavenging birds. One of the standing stones at the earliest known temple, at the Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepi in Upper Mesopotamia (now Turkey), has the familiar profile of a vulture, leading some archaeologists to believe that this may have been the way the dead were disposed of 11,000 years ago. Now, in India, this ancient rite of inter-species recycling has been precluded by the near extinction of millions of vultures that have consumed the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac along with the carcasses of cattle that have been indiscriminately dosed with the drug.

No other creatures have fixed themselves so obsessively and ubiquitously in our restless, earth-stuck imaginations, the fixation painted, imprinted, sculpted, filmed in our art. They can appear as terminal destroyers or primordial creators, or first the one, and then the other. They have featured in high art as agents of torture, shredding the innards of presumptuous, fire-questing Prometheus. And birds have been sexualised, at least when Jupiter was said to have disguised himself as a swan and – this stretches the imagination, even for readers of Ovid – after some feathery foreplay, copulated with the Queen of Sparta. Out of the resulting egg hatched not a damp cygnet, but Helen, whose beauty would swerve history and doom Troy.

Unless the bird is flightless, or unless (as has happened) a camera can be attached to the legs of migrating geese, the inner motions of the avian flock, their social orchestration, remain elusive to humans; confined as we are for the most part, to distant observation. There is one great exception, however: the Galapagos Islands where Darwin's finches revealed to him the biologically transforming truth of natural selection. On those islands one may tactfully walk amid nesting flocks in their thousands, without the birds bolting, scattering or flying up in alarm, for humans, in the recent past at least, have never come among them as predators, or robbers of eggs. And so, one makes one's way between their nests, incredulously, as if admitted to a prelapsarian Eden.

second peacock obstructs the child's view of the stream of blood. Only we can see that, as the rivulet of blood flows towards us before falling over the stone ledge.

Even by Rembrandt's standards, this is a wilfully un-beautiful, un-game piece. In the twentieth century it ended up in the collection of Jean-Joseph Marie Chabot, who had lent it to the Rijksmuseum from 1923 to 1942 before selling it, in occupied Amsterdam, to the dealer Ernst Göpel, who bought it for Hitler's intended Führermuseum in Linz, where, had that materialised, it would have been an unlikely focus for a quiet meditation on mortality.

Rembrandt's hanging, bleeding birds have struck a creative chord with successive generations of artists challenging the aestheticisation of animal death. Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) above all, who went from meditative immersion in Rembrandt's hanging bodies to arranging carcasses in his studio and painting them with a thick whirl of paint that suggested thrashing vitality before the translation into 'still life' (figs. 7 and 8).

Tamara Kostianovsky (b. 1974), the daughter of a plastic surgeon, grew up in Argentina during the era of military rule when humans were hunted and made to disappear. The country has possibly the most carnivorous diet in the world, so it was impossible to avoid the spectacle of butchered, hanging carcasses, birds or beasts. The Argentinian style of barbecuing a whole animal on a frame (not unlike a music stand or an easel), spreadeagling the body, was bound to trigger thoughts of sacrifice, sacred or profane. Interest through her father's profession of what lay beneath the dermis might have been registered in painting, had it not been for a time of sudden, personal difficulty. Kostianovsky arrived in New York in 2000 exactly at the point when the Argentinian economy and currency collapsed, leaving her without the means to buy canvas, pigment and the rest. She turned instead to her wardrobe, to clothes she had stopped wearing but not yet thrown away: T-shirts, jeans, scarves, jackets, whatever came to hand, also discarded cushion covers, upholstery, towelling, bed linen. With a specific subject in mind, these textiles, cut, shredded, restitched, would be the makings of her art. But it was the next step, so counter-intuitive, that would create her striking originality. The repurposed fabrics were, by definition, domestic, personal, sometimes intimate; many of them in the bright colours and printed patterns of dress or domestic interiors. Using them for bloodied carcasses, including exposed or trailing viscera (or in another project, the brutally exposed rings of tree stumps), was both a move that could simply collapse under the weight of its incongruousness, or – as it turned out – an inspired turn that brings together slaughter and comfort (fig. 9).

Which of course is what Weenix's game pieces do, but by erasing any physical signs of a kill in favour of the polished aesthetic of the ornamental trophy. Breaking the illusion, Kostianovsky restores the bloodying. Violently made wounds gape, viscera poke through the openings, but every bit of the carnage is executed in materials that, but for their shredding into remnants, could be fabric available for online shopping. Somehow the exposure of just what it takes to feed consumer tastes and appetites, rendered in the materials of our daily comfort, makes that acknowledgement all the more painful.

Big Vulture multiplies these colliding sensibilities. The dead bird was itself nourished from the dead. A length of pale fabric describes the naked neck of the vulture, famously fixated on cleaning itself after a carrion feed. The dark shreds that make up its feathers suggest the preening that takes up much of its day. But one of the wings – of a span that is the widest of any bird in the world – is broken. The knowledge that there are currently just 500 or so condors left in the wild somehow piles on the dismay. And Kostianovsky seems to have made this particular bird a ragged, rag-made faux-creature. That something nonetheless *is* being renewed, namely the textile strips that have been saved from the landfill and turned into questions about how we look at the death of other species, only makes that self-interrogation more acute. This is, inter alia, what strong art is supposed to do.

It is, of course, anachronistic to think that the original subscribers to the folio edition of *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon (1785–1851), the first volume (of five) appearing in London in 1827, would have thought that killing the subjects in order to lend his plates maximum life was in any way paradoxical or cruel. That the observed bird was dead was a given condition of its illustration. Audubon's predecessor, Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), who illustrated

FIG. 5 (Cat. 11, p. 72)
Jan Weenix, *Dead Swan*, 1716. Oil on canvas, 173 × 154 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

FIG. 6 (Cat. 10, pp. 70–71)
Rembrandt, *Still Life with Peacocks*, c. 1639. Oil on canvas, 145 × 135.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

FIG. 7
Rembrandt, *Deposition of Christ*, c. 1632–1633. Oil on panel, 89.4 × 65.2 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

FIG. 8
Chaïm Soutine, *Dead Fowl*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 97.5 × 63.3 cm. Joseph Winterbotham Collection, Art Institute Chicago.

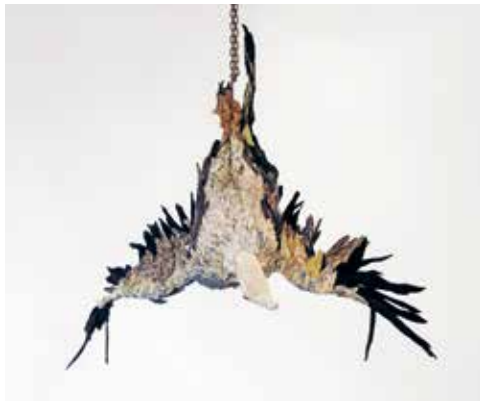


FIG. 9 (Cat. 18, p. 85)
Tamara Kostianovsky, *Big Vulture*, 2016. Discarded and recycled textiles, 132 × 218 × 135 cm. Courtesy RX&SLAG, Paris/New York.

268 species in his *American Ornithology,* drew live birds when he could sketch without disturbing them but resorted to freshly killed ones when this was impractical. When Audubon was in Boston in 1833 looking for a golden eagle to draw, he discussed with his doctor George Parkman (who would himself be murdered by a Harvard professor of chemistry fifteen years later) the best means of killing such a large bird without doing damage to its plumage (fig. 10).

Drawing the wild bird in some dramatic pose, like a kill, amid the landscape or seascape that sustained it was what distinguished Audubon's images from traditional European ornithologies that displayed them without habitat, as if they were already (as they were) detached scientific specimens. Audubon was after the bird in its full, living nature, and did all he could to document that nature: stalking and noting the behaviour of waterfowl, raptors, common backyard songsters, making copious notes not just of the birds themselves but of their habitat; whether or not they lived in flocks, mated pairs or alone, until he had the richest possible picture of their habits.

But the golden eagle was most abundant in the country west of the Rockies where Audubon had never set foot, and he had to rely on a bird trapped in New Hampshire and sold to him in Boston. How to kill it then with least damage, and also, to give Audubon his due, with minimal pain? The choice was between gassing the bird with a mix of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide given off by a coal fire, or electrocution, which Audubon was eager to try but had to abandon for lack of a battery big enough to kill the eagle with one decisive bolt.

What followed was a tragic farce. Audubon imagined a bond between man and bird, especially this one that made such strong eye contact. At times he thought of freeing the eagle, thinking 'how pleasing it would be to see him spread out his broad wings and sail away towards the rocks of his wild haunts', but then 'someone seemed to whisper that I ought to take a portrait of this magnificent bird' and he returned to his plan of execution.

A heavy blanket was thrown over the cage; a coal fire was lit. For his own safety Audubon exited the room, waiting next door 'to hear him fall down from his perch, but after listening for *hours* [his emphasis]', he went to the cage, lifted the blankets and there the bird was very much alive 'with his bright unflinching eye turned towards me, and as lively and vigorous as ever.' He subjected the eagle to the same treatment the next day with smoke so thick it was more likely to kill the household than the bird. And since it was too big 'to throttle... I thrust a long, pointed piece of steel through his heart when my proud prisoner instantly fell dead without even ruffling a feather.'

The dead eagle was quickly pinned in the theatrical pose Audubon wanted: set against snow-covered mountains (lifted from his hero Jacques-Louis David's portrait of Bonaparte crossing the Alps); the bird, its beak open as if emitting a cry of triumph, flies upwards with a hare in its grip. As if inspired by the new genre of Gothic horror, Audubon adds a gruesome detail. A talon punctures the left eye of the hare, from which blood is already leaking. In the original drawing, Audubon gave himself a background walk-on as a figure crossing a perilously sloping wooden bridge slung between two peaks. The print retains the bridge, but Audubon, imagined witness to the kill and the flight, has vanished.

A 19-year-old Charles Darwin heard Audubon lecture in Edinburgh when he was briefly a medical student there, and the ornithologist's best biographer, Richard Rhodes, believes that the student might have been impressed by the American's painstaking attention to anatomical and behavioural detail in each species he had observed. *Birds of America* and the textual volumes *American Ornithology* appeared when Romanticism and the sentimentalising of birds was making way for a drier-eyed, more factual account of the natural world. The violence of raptors was becoming seen as part of the natural order in which stronger beasts preyed on the weaker.

Though there had been a demand for pictures of epic animal fights – lions attacking horses for example – for centuries, the spectacle of avian violence never really had much of a market in the nineteenth century, devoted as the middle class still was to Shelley's metaphysical ode to the skylark.

FIG. 10
John James Audubon, *Golden Eagle*, from *The Birds of America*, 1827–1838. Hand-coloured aquatint from *The Birds of America*, vol. 2, plate 181. Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

Due to a threat of war, in 1938 a red triangle was applied at the back of the panel, a mark reserved for irreplaceable masterpieces in the museum.

Cat. 1

Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654. Oil on panel, 33.5 × 22.8 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 605.

Plumage

Martine Gosselink

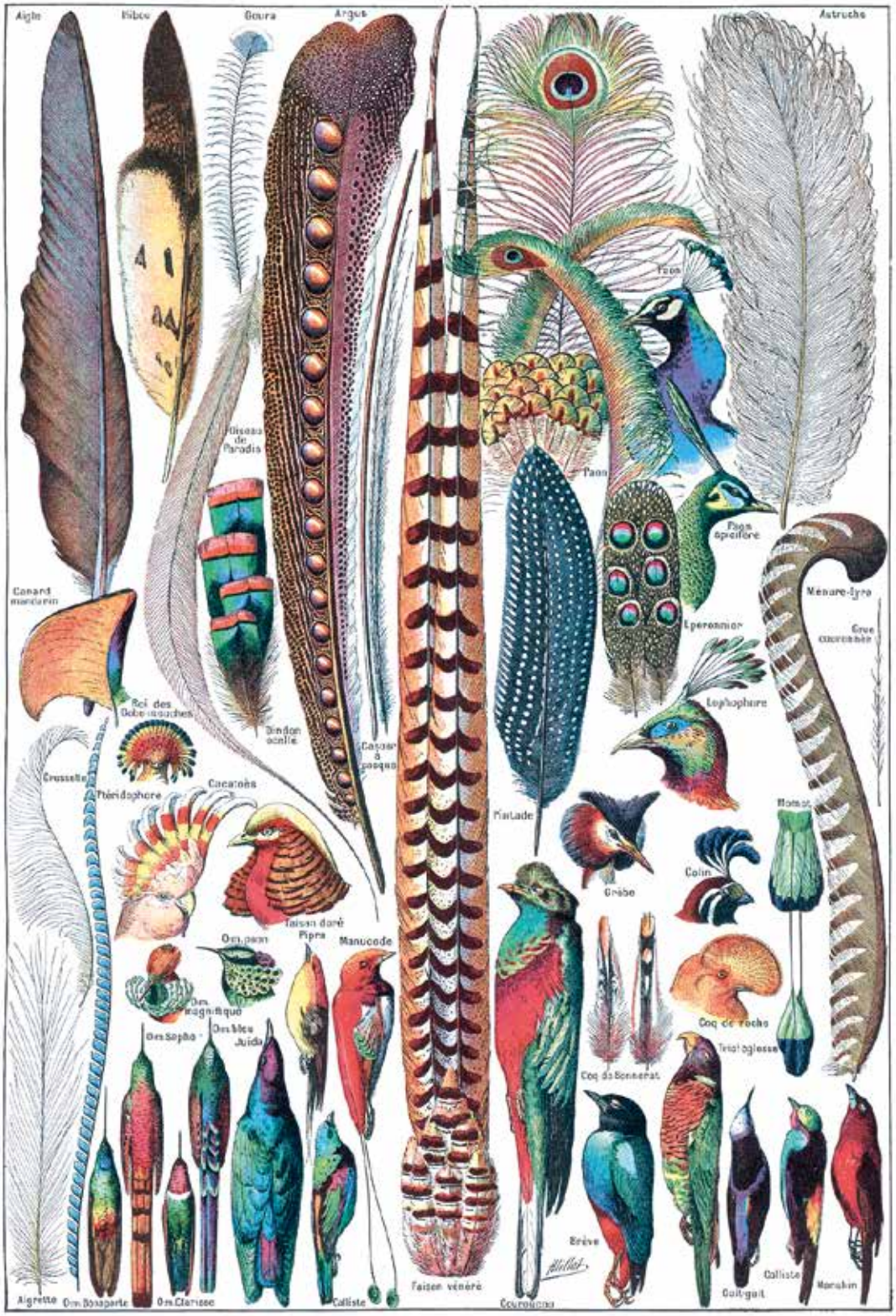


FIG. 1
Adolphe Millot, types of feathers, 1907–1910. Colour lithograph from *Le Larousse pour tous: Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique*, vol. 2, p. 465. Librairie Larousse, Paris.

Almost all adult birds have feathers (fig. 1). Consider the feather as an extension of the skin, in the same way that we have nails and hair and other animals have antlers or quills. A bird's body is covered with feathers for flying and display, but also for keeping warm. In particular, down feathers (*pluma* in Latin) are there to provide warmth and regulate moisture. Covert feathers streamline the bird's body and keep the down underneath dry. The sturdy remiges – the flight feathers in the wings – enable the bird to rise so that it they can fly. The rectrices – the flight feathers in the tail – are used for stability, steering and braking. Feathers are made of keratin, a tough, insoluble protein, which means they can be kept for a long time in a temperate climate, provided they are properly preserved.

Humans love feathers, not least because they serve several purposes. Since the sixth century, we have been using the outer flight feathers of geese and swans as writing materials (fig. 2). As soon as these birds lost their flight feathers during moulting – making them temporarily unable to fly – the feathers were collected to make quills. It was a truly disposable writing tool; after being trimmed too many times, one had no choice but to discard the goose feather. These organic writing instruments were commonplace until the nineteenth century, when they were replaced by modern pens (our word 'pen' comes from the Latin *penna*, meaning feather). In the following verse, Dutch poet Jacob Cats (1577–1660) expresses the view that the goose is little more than a supplier of pens:

FIG. 2
Gerard ter Borch, *The Letter Writer* (detail), c. 1655. Oil on panel, 38.3 × 27.9 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

The goose, which almost has no brain,
And lives by no art or wisdom,
But does nothing else but
To seek food in the green;
It gives man the swift pen,
The best gift that I know of.[1]

But we also use bird feathers in many other ways. Down and feathers have been utilised since time immemorial for their insulating properties. Feather-filled duvets made their appearance in Europe around 1300. The seventeenth-century English diplomat Paul Rycaut is said to have brought eiderdowns from the German territories to England, where the first use of the word duvet – the French word for down – was by the writer Samuel Johnson in 1759. Initially, only the nobility slept under down duvets. Since the twentieth century, however, they have become commonplace for many sleepers: in 2015, the BBC reported that 7.6 million duvets had been sold in the UK alone in the first half of that year. And let's not forget the immense numbers of feathers produced for pillows, thermal clothing and sleeping bags. Birds keep us warm!

Down quilts are articles of daily use nowadays. But in the past, the large-scale consumption of feathers served another purpose: as decoration or ornamentation to indicate one's social status. As early as the Palaeolithic period – also known as the Old Stone Age – feathers were used across the world in jewellery, musical instruments, weapons, clothing, masks, hats, headdresses and other head coverings. The inhabitants of the African continent were probably the first to do so.

Originating from Angola, this costume made of raffia and feathers (cat. 27, p. 102) is a rare nineteenth-century double-mask. The Wereldmuseum Leiden describes it as an Ndunga mask. It measures 175 cm high and comes from the Woyo or Vili, two related ethnic groups living on Angola's Loango coast. Like the Roman god Janus, the mask has two faces, painted in white, orange and black. Members of the Ndunga society who were allowed to wear these cloaks served the king and the most important spirits. The feathers on this object – which come from turacos (blue), sea eagles (black), hornbills (black and white) and guinea fowls (speckled white) as well as red-tailed parrots, great spotted cuckoos and roosters – offered protection to the spirits that had descended into the mask. Such protection may have been necessary since at the time when the mask was made, the territory of the Woyo and Vili was fraught due to border disputes, rivalries between neighbouring peoples, and colonial interference. The Ndunga mask was used to maintain order and for sentencing in relation to such matters. Ten similar masks are known worldwide, with six held in Dutch museums.

Around 1840, a Native American used the large feathers of a three-year-old eagle and the quills of a porcupine to make a headdress (cat. 21, p. 96). The bird was not chosen at random; an eagle's feathers brought wisdom to the wearer.

FIG. 7
Anonymous, *Mlle des Faveurs à Londres* (Miss des Faveurs in London), c. 1775. Etching, 342 × 248 mm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

FIG. 8
John Collet, *The Preposterous Head Dress, or the Feathered Lady*, 1776. Hand-coloured engraving, 354 × 251 mm. The British Museum, London.

The accompanying poem can be translated as:

> My hairstyle does indeed resemble a dovecote,
> Since all those pigeons come there to rest,
> But what are you doing, Englishman, shooting at them?
> Must you act recklessly on account of our foolishness?

The print *The Preposterous Head Dress, or the Feathered Lady* dates from the same period (fig. 8). It shows a wig decked like a Christmas tree with ostrich feathers. In another satirical print, ostriches, angry at having been plucked bare, take revenge on the young ladies displaying their feathers (fig. 9). Mocking outlandish fashion trends featuring feathers was clearly already in vogue at the end of the eighteenth century, though not because of any suffering caused to the birds.

That changed in the Netherlands in 1892, when the aristocratic sisters Cécile and Elsa de Jong van Beek en Donk founded the Bond ter Bestrijding eener Gruwelmode (Society for the Abolition of Cruel Fashion). Their aim was to denounce the use of bird feathers in hats and other items of clothing. Queen Emma supported the principles of the society, which quickly attracted hundreds of members. A few years later, in 1899, the Netherlands became the first country in Europe to establish a national bird conservation organisation, the Vereeniging tot Bescherming van Vogels (Society for the Protection of Birds). Thirteen years later, all wild birds

FIG. 9
John Collet, *The Feather'd Fair in a Fright*, c. 1777. Mezzotint, 356 × 253 mm. The British Museum, London.

in the Netherlands were protected by law. How did this happen? How did this movement suddenly gain in popularity and become successful, so soon after it was established? The explanation lies in the cruel fashion mentioned above. Vast numbers of birds were being killed in order to decorate hats with their feathers; some ladies even displayed dead birds on their headwear (fig. 10): terns, kingfishers, pheasants, egrets and goldfinches. When the Society for the Protection of Birds was founded, hats like this pink and green feather version were popular, combining what was probably the head of a bird of paradise with feathers from hummingbirds and other tropical birds (cat. 24, pp. 98–99). The mounting of hummingbird wings and bird-of-paradise tails became a craze, a trend that led to the death of hundreds of thousands of birds every year. A folding fan with bright pink ostrich feathers (cat. 23, p. 97) and another with monal feathers (cat. 22, pp. 96–97) – so striking on account of their iridescent sheen – date from the early twentieth century. Opposition to this practice was just as strong as the urge to continue wearing feather hats, fans and boas; witness the satirical image of a woman wearing a yellow dress and an enormous feathered hat who smiles as she aims her rifle at several white birds (fig. 11). Two dogs with human faces bring more dead birds to the pile at the woman's feet. At the time, some believed the woman resembled Coco Chanel – the caption on the cartoon reads 'French milliner'.

Although the helmet of comic book hero Asterix, the plucky little warrior from Gaul, is decorated with feathers, Gaulish helmets with wings have rarely been found during archaeological digs. Asterix's wings are a romantic fantasy dating from the nineteenth century, just like horns on Viking helmets. The Gauls may not have worn feathers on their helmets, but history is full of examples of plumage displayed by the military. They not only gave warriors and soldiers strength, but also indicated their rank, depending on the feathers' shape, size and colour. Feathers still appear on military uniforms, usually attached to helmets as plumes.

FIG. 10
Mannequin wearing a hat with a tern.

FIG. 11
Gordon Ross, *The Woman Behind the Gun*, 1911.
Photomechanical print, offset, colour.
Library of Congress, Washington DC.

They were also used to embellish diplomats' attire, as in the case of the hat with upright white ostrich feathers that was part of an ambassador's uniform in the mid-twentieth century (cat. 19, p. 94).

Indeed, it is striking how often ostrich feathers were used throughout the centuries. Ostriches from across Africa and the Middle East were plucked bare to supply them. Nowadays, ostriches are only found in South Africa and East Africa. The South African city of Oudtshoorn grew rich in the nineteenth century from the mass export of ostrich feathers; the ostrich farms are still there today, but now the birds are mainly bred for leather and meat. The farmers, it seems, are still feathering their nests.

1 Mantingh 2022, pp. 71–72.
2 *VRT NWS* 2024.
3 We recognise that Indigenous groups from other continents have been alienated from their own heritage due to, among other things, the collecting and Christianisation practices of Europeans. It is particularly regrettable that the communities to whom these objects once belonged have little or no access to them today. These topics are very important, but outside the scope of this book.

Cat. 19

Jones, Chalk & Dawson Ltd., Headdress of Ambassador Allard Merens, c. 1945–1976. Textile, metal, feathers, 18 × 57 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. NG-1976-13-A-6.

Cat. 20

Rembrandt, *Tronie of a Man with a Feathered Beret*, c. 1635–1640. Oil on panel, 62.5 × 47 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 149.

Cat. 27

Feather costume with double mask, Cabinda, Angola, late 19th century. Wood, bird feathers, pigment, raffia, 175 × 110 × 50 cm. Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, inv. no. WM-28548.

Cat. 28

Iris van Herpen, 'Idolomantis', *Roots of Rebirth Collection*, look 17, 2021. Duchess fabric, organza, mylar foil, cotton. Atelier Iris van Herpen, Amsterdam.

Heavenly Messengers

Martine Gosselink

Whether institutionalised or popular, centred on a god or on nature, every religion, every belief system, has assigned meaning to birds. Simply because birds, given their ability to fly, move between heaven and earth and can therefore be seen as divine messengers or as the embodiment of the spiritual. Alongside magical birds, mythologies feature countless other winged creatures: the Sphinx, the wind demon Pazuzu from Mesopotamia, Canaanite demons, the monumental bull Lamassu that guarded the city gates in Assyria, flying dragons, the horse Pegasus, the three Greek harpies, the Greek goddess Nike, the Lion of Venice, and the more contemporary Falkur, the 'luck dragon' from the 1979 novel *The Neverending Story*. These fabled creatures accompany protagonists on their adventures, grant extraordinary powers and provide insight. In the Bible, Psalm 91:4–6 gives God metaphorical wings that offer shelter: 'He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.'

In the Bible, it is the cherubim and seraphim that are winged, not the angels. When the latter want to visit God in heaven, they simply climb a ladder. It was not until the fourth century that angels were given wings in Christian iconography.[1] By the time that Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) depicted Mary being accompanied on her ascent to heaven by some strapping putti and angels (cat. 38, p. 131), their winged nature had been a given for centuries. Mary rises from a stone sarcophagus towards heaven as if caught in a light-grey whirlwind, with Rubens' powerful brushstrokes adding an extra twist to the swirling column of air.

One of the world's oldest surviving religions is Zoroastrianism, whose supreme deity, Ahura Mazda, is a winged male figure. Zoroastrianism is considered to be the first religion to have developed a dualistic antagonism between good and evil. When humans struggle with themselves, they must always choose what is right, which rests on three simple pillars: good thoughts, good words and good deeds. The religion adopted existing traditions from the wider region, such as ritual singing and the cult of fire. By gradually designating the god Ahura Mazda as the sole god, Zoroastrianism became a monotheistic faith. Ahura Mazda is recognisable by his outstretched wings (fig. 1). In Iran, it is still possible to visit flat-roofed towers on which the corpses of Zoroastrians were left for the vultures. Indeed, the Zoroastrians believed that the human body, once death had occurred, could immediately be taken over by evil spirits. To prevent this from happening, the remains were exposed to natural elements – that is, to vultures. Since the 1970s, Zoroastrians, now a small minority, have been prohibited from performing this ritual in Iran.

Over the past few decades, large numbers of vultures on the Indian subcontinent have died, mainly due to unintentional poisoning by the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac,

FIG. 1
Stone-carved Ahura Mazda in Persepolis, Iran, c. 6000–4000 BCE.

FIG. 2
Gioacchino Assereto, *The Torture of Prometheus*, 1620–1648. Oil on canvas, 83 × 69.5 cm. Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai.

which is widely administered to livestock in India and Pakistan. As a result, in this area too, the centuries-old ritual of offering bodies to the birds – known as sky burial, and based on the principle of not polluting the earth – comes to a tragic end.[2]

This mummified falcon (cat. 43, p. 136) from the Ptolemaic period (332–30 BCE) of ancient Egypt served as a mediator between people on earth and the world of the gods. Millions of mummified animals have been excavated in Egypt, many with messages that the animal was intended to convey to the realm of the gods. Falcons (and other animals) were specially bred for this purpose on temple grounds; they were sold to visitors and then sacrificed by a priest. This falcon was found in an animal cemetery in Saqqara, in northern Egypt.

The ancient Egyptians believed that every human being has an immortal soul, the *ba*. When a person dies, the *ba* – usually represented in the form of a bird with a human head – is able to leave the tomb and make its way to the world of the living, but only during the day; at night, the soul is reunited with the body. Wooden statuettes, such as this one (cat. 46, p. 139) dating from the Late period (664–332 BCE), often accompanied burials, usually being placed on the lid of the coffin. The sun disc on the figurine's head may refer to the sky, the avian realm. Golden pendants in the shape of birds with outstretched wings similar to Ahura Mazda served the same function (cat. 45, p. 138). Such amulets were interpreters of the soul, moving freely between the living and the body in the tomb.

In ancient Greece, the story of how the king of the Olympian gods, Zeus, came into conflict with Prometheus, son of an earlier Titan god, proves that birds are not always positive messengers in mythology. Prometheus created humans out of clay, and gave them the talents of technology, knowledge and civilisation. In Zeus's opinion, Prometheus cared far too much about humans. When the latter stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, Zeus was furious. He had Prometheus chained to a rock where his liver was torn out by an eagle (the emblem of Zeus). The liver was seen as the soul, where intelligence also resided (fig. 2). The real torment, however, was the fact that the liver grew back every night, so that Prometheus would have to endure the eagle's brutality for eternity. Did Prometheus regret his actions? No. In political terms, you could call him a dove and Zeus a hawk: the peacemaker versus the warmonger (a parallel between these two birds, familiar from US politics but, in fact, centuries old). Eventually it was Zeus's son Heracles who freed Prometheus from his chains, with Zeus accepting this intervention.

Various cultures have stories that tell of mythical birds. We are familiar with the phoenix from ancient Egypt (and possibly elsewhere in Africa before that). The phoenix was reborn among the Greeks and Romans before reappearing, after many lives (and deaths) in the *Harry Potter* books. In classical antiquity, the phoenix is described as a bird of which there is only one specimen. When its end approaches, it ignites its fragrant nest made of myrrh and incense branches,

Elsewhere in this book, we encounter the dove as a metaphor for love. But there is more to say about this bird. Jews and Christians are acquainted with the story of Noah, who released a dove after the Flood to search for dry land. When the bird returned with an olive branch in its beak, it was a sign that land was near. Christians came to see the dove as the embodiment of the soul and the Holy Spirit. The dove appears at three key moments in Christianity and/or Christian iconography. First, when the bird announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear Jesus. Years later, when Jesus is baptised in the River Jordan, a dove descends upon him and a voice from heaven declares that he is God's beloved son. This moment marks the joint presence of the Trinity: the Father (God in heaven), the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit (in the form of the dove). Finally, there is Pentecost, a feast day on which Christians commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit. In *Triptych with the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension of Christ, and the Assumption of Mary* (cat. 40, pp. 132–133) by Lucas van Leyden (1489–1533), the middle panel shows the Holy Spirit – again in the form of a dove – giving the disciples their divine task, namely, to travel and share their stories about Jesus with the world. This is the actual beginning of the Christian Church, ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven, as seen on the left panel.

Meaning has also been attributed in Christianity to the pelican and to the goldfinch; in both cases, these stories revolve around blood. The pelican mother was said to peck open her own breast with her beak and feed her young with the blood flowing from the wound (fig. 7). She thus sacrificed herself out of love for her little ones. Although a compelling story about mercy and altruism, associated with Jesus's own sacrifice, this doesn't, of course, make it true. During the breeding season, a red spot appears on the chest of some pelicans, which was apparently seen as blood. Pelicans collect food for their young in their beaks, press it against their chest and then feed their young.[7]

FIG. 7
Pelican Piercing its own Breast (detail). Miniature from *Bestiarius*, fol. 32r, 15th century. Parchment, 252 × 180 mm. Huis van het Boek, The Hague, 10 B 25.

Sometimes, sacred connections are even easier to make, as in the case of the African jacana (family *Jacanidae*), nicknamed the Jesus bird. Because of its elongated toes, which allow it to move easily on floating vegetation, it seems as if it is, like Jesus, actually walking on water.

And why are there golden weathercocks on church towers? Because it is a crowing cockerel that awakens the faithful, just as church bells call them to church. But also because the cockerel was once adopted by the Church as a pre-Christian symbol to relate the animal to the story of Jesus's betrayal. 'Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice,' Jesus said to the apostle Peter. And so it came to pass: Peter betrayed Jesus three times out of fear of being arrested. After his third denial, he heard a cock crow and remembered Jesus's prediction. Remorse and shame followed, but Peter continued to preach the teachings of Christ throughout his life.

What about the birds in the Garden of Eden, or paradise? Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625) painted a large number of them in *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* (fig. 8), which dates from around 1615 and is in the collection of the Mauritshuis. Most striking in this picture are the exotic birds. 'The more colourful, the better', is what Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Magellan, Cortés and many other explorers and colonisers after them must have thought when they transported parrots, parakeets, macaws, birds of paradise, marabou storks and cockatoos from Africa, Asia and the Americas to the capitals of Europe. Merchant ships in the Netherlands had already been sailing to Asia and the Americas for some 20 years, but the supply of exotic animals to Europe had been going on for much longer. In Rubens and Brueghel's painting of Eden, we see an ostrich, peacocks, parrots, parakeets and toucans. Naturally, birds of paradise could not be missing either. Strikingly, Brueghel, who painted all the animals except the snake and horse, depicted the bird of paradise standing at Adam's feet. Until then, birds of paradise had been painted without legs, based on the earlier belief that these animals only ever flew and never alighted. Fauna experts in Europe were led to believe that birds of paradise were legless simply because the legs were removed from the bird skins prepared by the Indigenous inhabitants of New Guinea.

In a recent study, art historian Paul Smith has shown that all the animals depicted in *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* express the peaceful atmosphere of paradise: after their expulsion from Eden, a songbird would never again perch so nonchalantly on a branch next to a hawk. But the birds also have meanings in their own right. Some as individuals: the peacock represents temptation, the heron brings good luck, and the bird of paradise bears its metaphorical meaning in its name. Other animals have a clear meaning as a pair, such as the green birds with red heads between Adam and Eve. Known colloquially as lovebirds, their scientific

FIG. 8
Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man*, c. 1615.
Oil on panel, 74.3 × 114.7 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

name is *Agapornis* – in Greek, *agape* means love and *ornis* bird. Brueghel placed some avian pairs together, but most of the males and females are separated, making the painting a wonderful picture puzzle. See if you can spot the partners of the blue-and-yellow macaw, the white-throated toucan, the hoopoe, the great spotted woodpecker, the magpie and the bird of paradise.

Let's return briefly to the time of the pharaohs in Egypt, where the ibis also played a divine role. The African sacred ibis, also known as the Nile bird, was revered as the personification of the god Thoth, the inventor of writing, civilisation and the moon. This is why the bird is called 'sacred'. Thoth was usually depicted as a man with the head of an ibis. The bird's curved beak has been associated with the shape of a waxing moon. Ibises were sacrificed in huge numbers, mummified and buried, like the falcon. The bird is predominantly white with black legs, neck, head and wing tips. The description of the ibis in Jacob van Maerlant's *Der naturen bloeme* is rather amusing:

> All ibises are white, except those in the Egyptian city of Pelusium, which are black. Some people think the ibis and the stork are the same bird, but that is not the case, unless one wants to consider ibises as a type of stork, which no one can imagine because they have never been seen in Europe. Pliny mentions that ibises have a curved beak, while storks have a straight beak.[8]

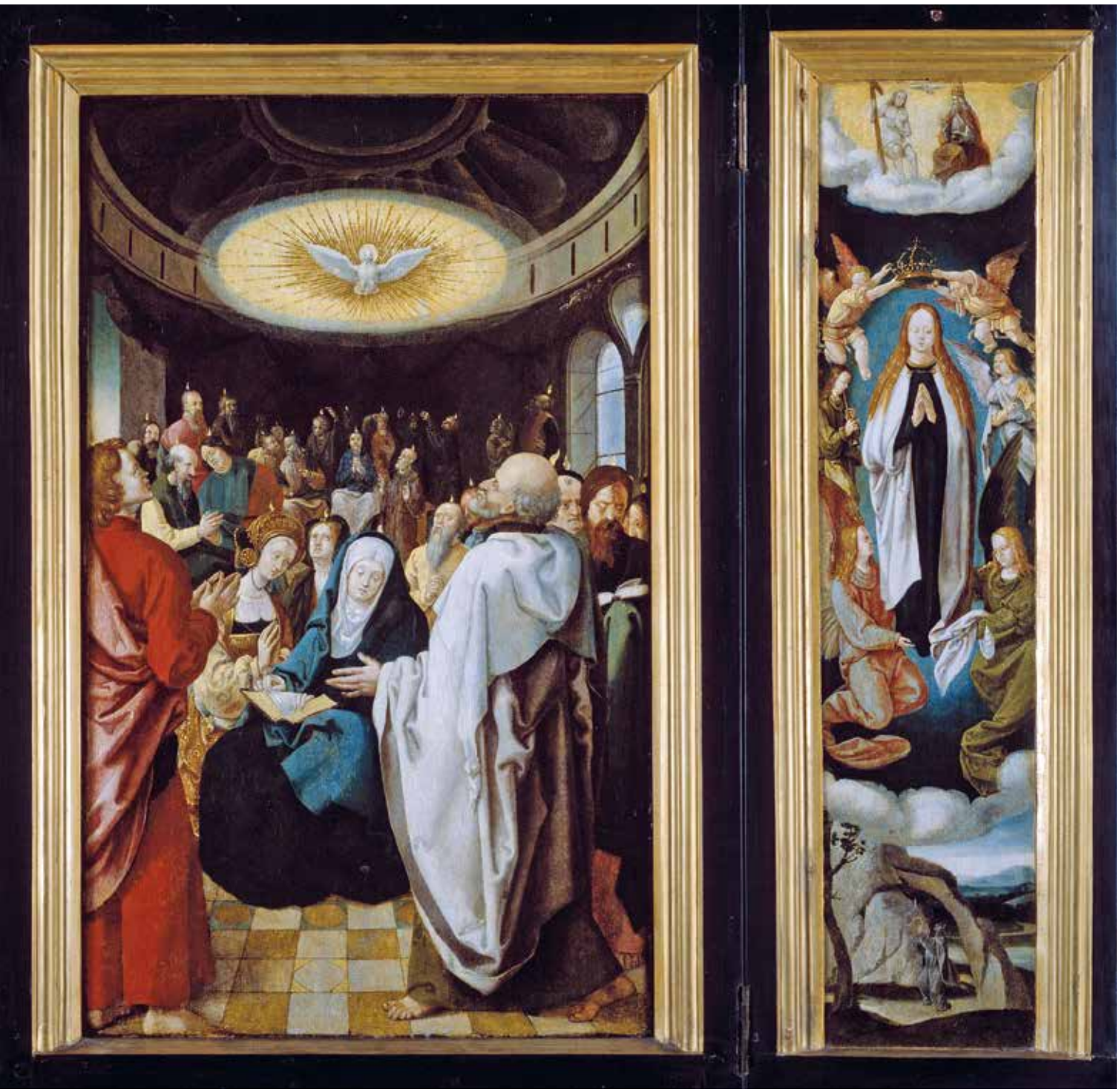
In Brazil, the scarlet or red ibis provided the feathers used by Indigenous populations to make ceremonial cloaks that were considered sacred (fig. 9). In the posthumous portrait of the English princess Mary Stuart (wife of William II of Orange) by Adriaen Hanneman (1603–1671), which hangs in the Mauritshuis, Mary is wearing a cloak made of red ibis feathers. Was she going to a fancy-dress ball, unaware of the significance of the sacred garment she had on? The cloak was most likely brought to the Netherlands by Johan Maurits, founder of the Mauritshuis, who was governor of the Dutch West India Company's colony Dutch Brazil from 1636 to 1644. Maurits was found guilty of smuggling enslaved people for

Cat. 39

Workshop of Dieric Bouts, *Virgin and Child Seated on a Turf Bench*, c. 1450.
Oil on panel, 41.2 × 29.6 cm. Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe,
Enschede, inv. no. 0046.

Cat. 40

Circle of Lucas van Leyden, *Triptych with the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension of Christ, and the Assumption of Mary*, 1525–1549. Oil on panel, 65.5 × 84.5 cm. Museum Catherijneconvent, Utrecht, inv. no. ABM s114.



Cat. 45

Pendant in the shape of a soulbird, Egypt and Nubia, 332 BCE–395. Metal and gold, 2.2 × 3.7 cm. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, inv. no. L.V.63-m.3.

Cat. 46

Statue of a ba bird, Egypt, 700–332 BCE. Wood, 15.5 × 4.8 cm. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, inv. no. L.IX.30.

Birds of a Feather

Laura Cumming

FIG. 1
Jan Weenix, *Dead Swan*, c. 1700–1719. Oil on canvas, 245.5 × 294 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague. on long-term loan to Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede.

Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all –

EMILY DICKINSON

Hope is a bird that never stays still. It darts about inside the human soul like a lark in the sky, surging upwards without cause, singing songs without knowing any words, sustained only by its buoyant lifting wings. A bird is hope embodied and the spirit of so much more. But it is also a form of daily magic. Birds have the power to leave the earth at will, rising high above us, hovering and landing wherever they wish, in treetops, on waves, far across the ocean on some other continent. They appear, and vanish, so mysteriously that our language has no adequate words for their unparalleled performance – swooping and diving, circling and gliding, fluttering, soaring, wheeling and disappearing into the blue. How to keep such a non-stop creature still: how to draw a bird, when stillness is against its nature?

The easiest way, alas, is simply to kill it. This is the mode of still life, or *nature morte* as art history mordantly calls it. Seventeenth-century Dutch art, with its infinity of sub-specialisations in every genre, has many masters of the stone-dead bird, laid out on a ledge with flowers or fruit or other once-vital creatures. Jan Weenix found fame with the most exotic birds he could acquire, shot by hunters outside his native Amsterdam. He started out with cockerel, guinea fowl and partridge, moved on to brilliant turquoise kingfishers, positioned for eye-catching effect in the foreground of these pile-ups of avian corpses, but he is most renowned for his paintings of dead swans (fig. 1).

Weenix painted many swans, each commission a boast for its wealthy owner, for it was a restricted privilege to be allowed to hunt these large birds. Nobody quite knows when the Mauritshuis masterpiece was painted, though Weenix was probably in his late sixties or seventies. Decades of study are condensed in this vision of the spreadeagled swan: the shine on its immense articulated wing, the opalescent whiteness of the breast, running from pearl to gold, the soft underside of the tail. Weenix paints what we could never see: not just the breast, but the legs that keep the water ballet afloat. For this noble bird is hung up by one foot, in order to display its majesty at full length. The neck becomes a limb, gracefully descending towards the cruel butt of a gun. Weenix adds a smaller corpse for scale, a finch the length of the swan's beak. The sight is frightful, unnatural: a stately bird rifled. The finch is given more dignity.

FIG. 2
John James Audubon, *California Condor*, 1827–1838. Hand-coloured aquatint from *The Birds of America*, vol. 5, plate 426. Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

Yet this is also a painting of awestruck knowledge. What are they, these creatures, two-limbed like us and yet nothing like us at all. Diogenes is said to have mocked Plato's definition of man as a featherless biped by turning up with a plucked chicken: 'Here is Plato's Man.' For many artists, the difference is so obviously the miracle of flight that the wings become paramount. Leonardo scrutinises the anatomy of bone and ligature to try to understand the mechanism of bird flight in his drawings (cat. 32, p. 110). Dürer's watercolour of the rainbow glory of a European blue roller's wing is equal, in all its astoundingly beautiful particularity, to the serried pennants of the wing itself (fig. 1, p. 106).

These birds are by definition dead, their wings laid out, their legs examined for backward-moving joints. The famous French-American birdman, John James Audubon, went so far as to kill and eat most of the thousands of species he painted, from bald eagles to snowy owls and even that preternaturally still bird, the heron, while travelling the continent with gun and brush. His *American Flamingo* (fig. 4), from *The Birds of America*, is an adult male spotted as Audubon passed through the Florida Keys. He captures something of its bizarre anatomy – the long twisty neck, disproportionately large bill and stick legs, the brilliant pink that will eventually turn scarlet. But the bird is subjugated to the design; perfect for what would become Audubon's most popular poster.

Hokusai's wondrous *Bullfinch and Weeping Cherry* shows pink and white flowers blossoming in brilliant cobalt space (fig. 5). There is no sense of gravity and at first the eponymous bird is barely visible, apparently hanging upside down. So giddy is this sense of floating among bright petals, the bird no help with optical orientation, that this woodblock print is sometimes displayed the wrong way up. Our eyes, and the bullfinch itself, are lost in nature.

A bird can amplify the figure in a portrait. Holbein's *Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling* features a long-nosed and somewhat sullen woman who might otherwise be unappealing. But her bony features are balanced by the soft squirrel, its tail gently covering her cleavage, her nose mitigated by the lively beak of the starling perched on a twig beside her. In Holbein's magnificent portrait of the hawkish Robert Cheseman, as sharp-beaked as the royal falcon on his arm, the bird is the counterpart of the man. His hand is so delicately restraining the bird it is more like a caress. Cheseman is supposed to have been falconer to Henry VIII, though this is disputed. Either way, the portrait speaks to his desire to be seen with this bird (cat. 12, p. 73).

Art may aspire to be bird-like – delicate, airborne – and yet remain earthbound. Brancusi aims for a sense of avian flight with his brass sculpture *Bird in Space*, which rises like a streamlined wing but gets its motion from the shifting radiance of its lightning-bright surface. Stunning as it is, and the very embodiment of aspiration, his bird remains tethered to its weighty plinth (cat. 37, p. 121).

Forever young, forever strange, no matter that we cage or tame them, birds may inspire works of art without ever quite – or entirely - alighting inside them. It is not just that early painters often worked with corpses or stuffed skins, with no sense of how their subjects moved or behaved in reality. Nor is it that poetry carries the dematerialising spirit of birds so well, from Shelley's joyous skylark (p. 183) to Dickinson's darting soul of hope. It is that art must keep a bird captive in order to capture its essence.

And perhaps that is why *The Goldfinch* of Carel Fabritius rises so high above other images, so to speak, in its peerless portrait of the little bird on its perch, so abrupt and austere, one eye glistening as it turns its head out of profile towards you, face to face in this sudden moment of noticing each other across time and space. Fabritius stills the goldfinch twice: once by showing it imprisoned by the chain around its leg, so that it can never fly away. And again within the frame, for it can never escape this painting. The beauty of Fabritius's masterpiece is in exact tension with its poignancy: the enigmatic bird, so gentle and solitary, with its flash of golden wing, its alert eye and yearning body, perhaps still full of hope, held here before you as a fellow being, captive, no longer on the wing. It is the greatest painting of a bird in all art.

FIG. 5
Katsushika Hokusai, *Bullfinch and Weeping Cherry (Uso, shidarezakura)*, c. 1829–1839.
Woodblock print from an untitled series of flowers and birds, 254 × 191 mm.
Clarence Buckingham Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Birds

in World Literature

Introduction by Simon Schama

The complicated, insistent, fateful relationship between the human and avian worlds has been registered not just in images but also in literature. So it seemed right to acknowledge that with an anthology, in both poetry and prose, drawn from cultures as distant from each other in time and place as the Latin verse of Catullus; the Tang-dynasty Chinese poetry of Bai Juyi; medieval English fable; Edgar Allen Poe's unwelcome herald of doom, the raven; twentieth-century Suriname; and Italo Calvino's analytically beautiful description of a starling murmuration over Rome (where I too witnessed that astounding spectacle). Inevitably, the choices made by Martine Gosselink and I reflect our personal tastes and enthusiasms, but we have tried our best to encompass what, quite often literally, is meant by 'points of view': thirteen of them in the case of Wallace Stevens's blackbird, but just the one predator inhabited by Ted Hughes's *Hawk Roosting*, while the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rūmī addresses a falcon directly, as does Shelley's metaphysical rapture to the skylark ('Bird thou never wert').

Some of the most intense and powerful responses to the world of birds have been registered in charged, high-voltage prose. Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* is one of the most terrifying stories of world literature, concentrating in its merciless power the fears that have fluttered through human imagination. Even more sinister than the film Alfred Hitchcock made of it, its steel-cut writing takes off in some places, wheeling malevolently over the doomed hiding places of its victims. And no anthology could possibly be complete without Rachel Carson's cautionary fable of a *Silent Spring;* prefacing her impassioned polemic against the feckless use of pesticides, this is the book that, arguably, launched the modern environmental movement.

But the literary buffet we have cooked up for you is meant less as moral nourishment (though that need not be excluded) than an invitation to feast on great writing about the inexhaustible subject of *The Goldfinch*'s winged friends and ours.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)[1]

I hope you love birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.

FROM

Thunderclap: A Memoir of Art and Life and Sudden Death
Laura Cumming (b. 1961)[2]

The first sight of The Goldfinch *is abrupt and austere. The little bird appears on its perch, so quick and alert, dark against the wall that receives its hovering shadow. One eye glistens as it turns its head out of profile towards you. You must not disturb the millisecond in which this winged creature looks straight at you, eye to eye, and yet of course it can never fly away. It takes a moment to notice the chain around its leg. So delicate as to be almost imperceptible, this chain is viciously cruel, tethering the bird to the spot. The beauty of the painting is in equal tension with its almost unbearable poignancy: the captive bird so enigmatic, a mortal being made apparent to us for all time yet forever imprisoned by the chain (and the picture frame). There is not another painting like it.*

Fabritius's goldfinch is an adult male with a soft reddish-brown head, a glittering eye and a lightning flash of yellow on its wing. It has gone as far as it can towards the edge of the ledge, and the picture. There it turns back to look at you in a frisson of noticing, and being noticed. This is no generalised bird of the sort in those days kept for pets, and then depicted in supposedly amusing paintings in which they perform the trick of drawing water from their own little well with a tiny cup on a chain. This bird has a specific force of personality, an air of solitude and sorrow, a living being looking out at another living being from its prison against the wall. This painting is a portrait....

Anyone who has ever seen goldfinches fluttering and chattering and alighting on seedheads in meadows, or watched them bumbling through the thistledown they love, will know why the word charm was chosen for their collective noun. A charm of goldfinches soars at dusk, swoops at dawn, sings upliftingly in summer trees. In flight, the yellow stripe spreads into a golden cape.... In the gallery, where the bird's shadow flitters against the white wall, the yellow stripe glows at a distance. It is painted with a long-lost colour called lead-tin-yellow, made using an oxide that produced an opaque and saturated brilliance. But lead-tin-yellow, so often used in Delft for the peel of a lemon or a woman's velvet jacket, was potentially poisonous if ingested. Nobody makes it now. It has disappeared from art and memory....

*...*The Goldfinch *is not a trick. The picture departs entirely from the optical illusion that is conventionally cited as its great achievement. With trompe l'oeil, you should not be able to see in the same instant that you come across it that the goldfinch is quite clearly made of paint. Yet this is what his masterpiece immediately and openly declares. This bird is conspicuously created out of pigment and brushstrokes and you can even count them: one for each feather on the wings, one for the patch by the beak, the amazing flash of yellow through which Fabritius has scored the end of his brush.*

These strokes are all visible, not too much strenuous colour, not too much ornithological detail: as gentle as the bird itself. The wall is a feat of shadow play; the bars of the perch, the bird's claws, the individual links of the gold chain are all painted in the finest threads of light pigment.... It is both a magnificent feat of persuasive depiction and at the same time its exact opposite; the signature conspicuously lettered on the flat surface. Fabritius sets up an illusion and undermines it all at once: the goldfinch to the life, but as a spirit of paint.

'A Little Bird'
Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837)[3]

In alien lands devoutly clinging
To age-old rites of Russian earth,
I let a captive bird go winging
To greet the radiant spring's rebirth.
My heart grew lighter then: why mutter
Against God's providence, and rage,
When I was free to set aflutter
But one poor captive from his cage!

'Sparrows in Winter'
Yang Wan-li (1127–1206)[4]

hundreds of sparrows
crowd the empty courtyard in winter
they puff in their feathers
high on the plum branches
they are saying what a fine evening this is
what a noise they make to disturb me
suddenly they disappear in a startled flock
and the world is as still as death

FROM
H is for Hawk
Helen Macdonald (b. 1970)[5]

The hawk had filled the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent.

'Hawk Roosting'
Ted Hughes (1930–1998)[6]

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Franz Kafka (1883–1924)[7]

I am a cage, in search of a bird.

'How Did You Get Away'
Rūmī (1207–1273)[8]

How did you get away?
You were the pet falcon of an old woman.
Did you hear the falcon-drum?
You were a drunken songbird put in with owls.
Did you smell the odour of a garden?
You got tired of sour fermenting
and left the tavern.

You went like an arrow to the target
from the bow of time and place.
The man who stays at the cemetery pointed the way,
but you didn't go.
You became light and gave up wanting to be famous.
You don't worry about what you're going to eat,
so why buy an engraved belt?

Chorus Hymeneal,
Or triumphal chant,
Match'd with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there
is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind?
what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be:
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest: but ne'er
knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in
such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell
of saddest thought.

Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever
should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were,
thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then,
as I am listening now.

'Split the Lark'
Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)[17]

Split the Lark
and you'll find the Music
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled
Scantilly dealt to the Summer Morning
Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood
you shall find it patent –
Gush after Gush, reserved for you –
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?

'I think (I have never known anyone like you)'
Al-Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf (750–809)[18]

I think (I have never known anyone like you)
that the hearts of women on earth are made of stone.
Let me sleep if I do not receive a visit from you
(perhaps a dream image will visit me when I sleep).
I cried to a flock of sandgrouse that passed by,
and said (and I have reason to cry):
Can you, flock of sandgrouse, lend me wings
so that I can fly to the one I love?
If not, who will convey my greetings?
Then I will thank him (lovers are grateful).
What sandgrouse would not help a lover?
(May it live in misery, with a broken wing!)

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)[19]

Nature: a place where birds
fly around uncooked.

'I Once Asked a Bird'
Hāfez (1310–1390)[20]

I once asked a bird,
how is it that you fly
in this gravity of darkness?
The bird responded, 'Love lifts me.'

'Blackbird'
Paul McCartney (b. 1942) and
John Lennon (1940–1980)[21]

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to be free

Blackbird, fly, blackbird, fly
Into the light of a dark black night

Blackbird, fly, blackbird, fly
Into the light of a dark black night

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise
You were only waiting for this moment to arise
You were only waiting for this moment to arise

'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'
Wallace Stevens (1879–1955)[22]

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

Why *BIRDS*?

Boussauw 2024
J. Boussauw, *Vogels in de cultuur*, Gorredijk 2024.

Oh, for the Wings...

Alberth 2010
S. Alberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and* Art, New York 2010.

Lewis 1957
D. Lewis, *Constantin Brancusi*, London 1957.

Rowell 1999
M. Rowell, *Brancusi vs The United States. The Historic Trial. 1928*, New York 1999.

Spear 1969
A.T. Spear, *Brancusi's Birds*, New York 1969.

Spurling 1954
H. Spurling, *Matisse the Master. The Conquest of Colour 1909–1954*, London 1954.

Stone-Ferrier 2016
L. Stone-Ferrier, 'The Engagement of Carel Fabritius's Goldfinch of 1654 with the Dutch Window, a Significant Site of Neighborhood Social Exchange,' *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8 (2016), no. 1, DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2016.8.1.5, http://www.jhna.org/index.php/vol-8-1-2016/325-stone-ferrier.

Utley 2000
G.R. Utley, *Pablo Picasso: The Communist Years*, New Haven 2000.

Who Doesn't Want to be Friends with *The Goldfinch*?

Bierens de Haan 1933
J.A. Bierens de Haan, 'Der Stieglitz als Schöpfer', *Journal fur Ornithologie* 81 (1933), pp. 1–22.

Boström 1950
K. Boström, 'De oorspronkelijke bestemming van C. Fabritius' Puttertje', *Oud Holland* 65 (1950), pp. 81–83.

Broos 1987
B. Broos, *Meesterwerken in het Mauritshuis*, The Hague 1987.

Brown 1981
C. Brown, *Carel Fabritius*, Oxford 1981.

Cats 1712
J. Cats, *Alle de wercken*, vol. 1, Amsterdam 1712.

Chomel 1743
M.N. Chomel, *Huishoudelyk woordboek*, Leiden/Amsterdam 1743.

Cumming 2023
L. Cumming, *Thunderclap: A Memoir of Art and Life and Sudden Death*, London 2023.

Van Deursen 2009
Chr. van Deursen, 'Tussen trekbank en roerlijn: Geschiedenis van de vinkenbanen in de duinstreek', in *Fitis* 45 (2009), no. 3, pp. 124–130.

Friedmann 1946
H. Friedmann, *The Symbolic Goldfinch: Its History and Significance in European Devotional Art*, Washington 1946.

The Hague/Schwerin 2004–2005a
F. Duparc, 'Carel Fabritius (1622–1654). Zijn leven en zijn werk', in F. Duparc et al., *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654*, exh. cat., The Hague (Mauritshuis), Schwerin (Staatliches Museum) 2004–2005.

The Hague/Schwerin 2004–2005b
A. van Suchtelen, 'Het Puttertje', in F. Duparc et al., *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654*, exh. cat., The Hague (Mauritshuis), Schwerin (Staatliches Museum) 2004–2005.

De Jongh 1967
E. de Jongh, *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 1967.

Van der Mark 2004
B. van der Mark, 'De Delftsche Donderslagh', *Mauritshuis in focus* 17 (2004), pp. 20-22.

Martin 1906
H. Martin, *Les miniaturistes français*, Paris 1906.

Matthey 2002
I. Matthey, *Vincken moeten vincken locken. Vijf eeuwen vangst van zangvogels en kwartels in Holland*, Hilversum 2002.

Moser 2023
B. Moser, *The Upside-Down World: Meeting with the Dutch Masters*, London 2023.

New York 2013
Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painting from the Mauritshuis, exh. cat., New York (The Frick Collection) 2013.

Noble et al. 2008
P. Noble et al., 'Het puttertje', in P. Noble, S. Meloni & C. Pottasch (eds.), *Bewaard voor de eeuwigheid*, The Hague/Zwolle 2008, pp. 146–155.

Schatborn 2006
P. Schatborn, 'Drawings attributed to Carel Fabritius', *Oud Holland* 119 (2006), pp. 130–138.

Seelig 2006
G. Seelig, 'The Dating of Fabritius's Stay in Amsterdam', *Oud Holland* 119 (2006), pp. 93–98.

Steendam 1649–1651
J. Steendam, *Den distelvink*, Amsterdam 1649–1651.

Stone-Ferrier 2016
L. Stone-Ferrier, 'The Engagement of Carel Fabritius's Goldfinch of 1654 with the Dutch Window, a Significant Site of Neighborhood Social Exchange', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8 (2016), no. 1, pp. 1–32.

Suzman Jowell 2016
F. Suzman Jowell, 'The Goldfinch's Travels. Fact and fiction', in B. Cornelis et al. (eds.), *Collecting for the Public. Works that Made a Difference: Essays for Peter Hecht*, The Hague/London/Paris 2016, pp. 72–77.

Tartt 2013
D. Tartt, *The Goldfinch,* London 2013.

Thóth-Ubbens 1969
M. Thóth-Ubbens, 'Kijken naar het vogeltje', in *Miscellanea I.Q. van Regteren Altena: 16/V/1969*, Amsterdam 1969, pp. 233–240.

Vienna 2025
L. Van Sloten, 'Rembrandt and Samuel van Hoogstraten and their Passion for Illusions', in S. Pénot et al., *Rembrandt Hoogstraten: Colour and Illusion*, exh. cat., Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum) 2025.

Wadum 2004
J. Wadum, 'Het puttertje gerestaureerd en doorgelicht', *Mauritshuis in focus* 17 (2004), no. 2, pp. 24–30.

Zwagerman 2015
J. Zwagerman, 'Het Puttertje. Carel Fabritius en Donna Tartt', in J. Zwagerman, *De stilte van het licht. Schoonheid en onbehagen in de kunst*, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 103–109.

Stilled Flight

Boethius 2009
Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, W.V. Cooper (trans.), 2009, http://www.exclassics.com/consol/consol.pdf. Accessed on 13 September 2025.

Boussauw 2024
J. Boussauw, *Vogels in de cultuur*, Gorredijk 2024.

Idema 2025
W.I. Idema, *A Historical Taxonomy of Talking Birds in Chinese Literature*, Cambridge 2025.

Van der Jagt 2022
I. van der Jagt, 'De valkerij en het veranderende beeld van de vrouw', in J.L. van Zanden (ed.), *Gevleugelde geschiedenis van Nederland. De Nederlanders en hun vogels*, Amsterdam 2022.

De Jongh 1967
E. de Jongh, 'Erotica in vogelperspectief. De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks zeventiende-eeuwse genrevoorstellingen', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 18 (1967), pp. 115–146.

Lambrecht 2022
T. Lambrecht, 'De zwarte gesel van de boer', in J.L. van Zanden (ed.), *Gevleugelde geschiedenis van Nederland. De Nederlanders en hun vogels*, Amsterdam 2022.

Martens 2010
J. Martens, 'De Valkerij', *Geschiedenis.nl*, 30 May 2010, https://geschiedenis.nl/nieuws/artikel/3195/de-valkerij. Accessed on 13 September 2025.

***Natuurhistorisch Museum Rotterdam* n.d.**
'Kluifrègâh bijgezet in expo "Dode dieren met een verhaal"', *Natuurhistorisch Museum Rotterdam*, https://www.hetnatuurhistorisch.nl/nieuws/kluifregah-bijgezet-in-expo-dode-dieren-met-een-verhaal. Accessed on 13 September 2025.

Temmerman 2020
T. Temmerman, *'Alte Schoone Ende Vremde Dieren': De blik op dieren in Bourgondische reisverslagen (15de eeuw). Dieren in de reisverslagen van Guillebert de Lannoy, Bertrandon de la Broquière, Jan Adornes, en Joos van Ghistele*, Master's thesis, University of Ghent, 2020, https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/862/696/RUG01-002862696_2020_0001_AC.pdf. Accessed on 13 September 2025.

***Wikipedia* n.d.**
'Grey heron', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grey_heron. Accessed on 14 September 2025.

The Fate of the Flightless

***Beter leven. Dierenbescherming* n.d.**
'Leghennen', *Beter leven. Dierenbescherming*, https://beterleven.dierenbescherming.nl/over-de-dieren/alle-dieren/leghennen/. Accessed on 9 September 2025.

Van der Gulden 2014
P. van der Gulden, 'Kip scharrelt al lang op het erf van de mens', *de Volkskrant*, 25 November 2014, https://www.volkskrant.nl/wetenschap/kip-scharrelt-al-lang-op-het-erf-van-de-mens-ba429edb/. Accessed on 10 September 2025.

***Immaterieel Erfgoed* n.d.**
'"Tsougkrisma"! Rode eieren tikken op Grieks-orthodox Pasen', *Immaterieel Erfgoed*, https://immaterieelerfgoed.be/nl/erfgoederen/tsougkrisma-rode-eieren-tikken-op-grieks-orthodox-pasen. Accessed on 9 September 2025.

***Nederland in cijfers* n.d.**
'Hoeveel landbouwdieren telt ons land?', *Nederland in cijfers*, https://longreads.cbs.nl/nederland-in-cijfers-2021/hoeveel-landbouwdieren-telt-ons-land. Accessed on 9 September 2025.

***Wakker dier* 2023**
'Start juridische procedure: kippen te weinig leefruimte', *Wakker dier*, https://www.wakkerdier.nl/persberichten/juridische-procedure-kippen-te-weinig-leefruimte/. Accessed on 9 September 2025.

***World Animal Protection* 2018**
''s Werelds meest gegeten vlees', *World Animal Protection*, https://www.worldanimalprotection.nl/nieuws/s-werelds-meest-gegeten-vlees/#. Accessed on 9 September 2025.

Plumage

***BBC News* 2015**
'Almost 300 years without a duvet', *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34848546. Accessed on 11 September 2025.

Mantingh 2022
E. Mantingh, 'Ik probeer mijn ganzenveer: over vogels die geschiedenis schreven', in J.L. van Zanden et al., *Gevleugelde geschiedenis van Nederland. De Nederlanders en hun vogels*, Amsterdam 2022.

Van Mensch 1978
P.J.A. van Mensch, 'Archeologie en vogels', *Het Vogeljaar* 26 (1978), no. 5, pp. 219–223, https://natuurtijdschriften.nl/pub/543078/HVJ1978026005004.pdf. Accessed on 10 September 2025.

***VRT NWS* 2024**
'Veer van uitgestorven huia-vogel geveild voor meer dan 26.000 euro in Nieuw-Zeeland', *VRT NWS*, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2024/05/22/duurste-veer-ooit-geveild-in-nieuw-zeeland/. Accessed on 11 September 2025.

Envying Avians

Kane 2002
D.D. Kane, 'Science in the Art of the Italian Renaissance II: Leonardo Da Vinci's Representation of Animals in His Works', *Ohio Journal of Science* 102 (2002), no. 5, pp. 113–115, https://kb.osu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d2fbf50c-13ab-521e-a70c-710d8a6ef1bb/content. Accessed on 24 August 2025.

***National Air and Space Museum/Smithsonian* 2013**
'Leonardo da Vinci and Flight', *National Air and Space Museum/Smithsonian,* https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/leonardo-da-vinci-and-flight. Accessed on 3 September 2025.

Schleif 2010
C. Schleif, 'Albrecht Dürer between Agnes Frey and Willibald Pirckheimer', in L. Silver and J.C. Smith (eds.) *The Essential Dürer*, Philadelphia 2010, pp. 185–208.

Toliver 2018
Z. Toliver, "Is Leonardo da Vinci the Forefather of the Animal Rights Movement?", *PETA*, 12 April 2018, https://www.peta.org/news/leonardo-da-vinci-animal-rights-pioneer/. Accessed on 24 August 2025.

The Genius of Birds

Birkhead 2008
T. Birkhead, *De wijsheid van vogels. Een geïllustreerde geschiedenis van de ornithologie*, Amsterdam 2008.

Hiemstra et al. 2023
A.F. Hiemstra et al.,'Bird nests made from anti-bird spikes', *Deinsea* 21 (2023), pp. 17–25.

***Vogelbescherming Nederland* 2023**
'Waarom zwermende spreeuwen nooit botsen', *Vogelbescherming Nederland*, https://www.vogelbescherming.nl/actueel/bericht/waarom-zwermende-spreeuwen-nooit-botsen?. Accessed on 25 August 2025.

Heavenly Messengers

***The Art Newspaper* n.d.**
'National Museum of Denmark returns sacred Indigenous cloack to Brazil', *The Art Newspaper,* https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/09/17/national-museum-denmark-returns-sacred-indigenous-cloak-brazil. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

***Beleven* n.d.**
'De vogel Milcham', *Beleven*, https://www.beleven.org/verhaal/de_vogel_milcham#. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

Hulspas 2015
M. Hulspas*, De vliegende koningin van Sheba (en haar zwempoging)*, 2015, https://marcelhulspas.nl/home/de-vliegende-koningin-van-sheba-en-haar. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

***The Guardian* 2024**
'"Our culture is dying": vulture shortage threatens Zoroastrian burial rites', *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/04/vulture-shortage-threatens-zoroastrian-burial-rites-india-iran-pakistan. Accessed on 28 September 2025.

Van Maerlant 1995
J. van Maerlant, *Het boek der natuur,* Peter Burger (ed.), Amsterdam 1995, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/maer002dern03_01/maer002dern03_01_0004.php. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

***Mauritshuis* n.d.**
'Diara Tukano', *Mauritshuis*, https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/what-s-on/museum-murals/daiara-tukano. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

Mulders 2021
H. Mulders, *De ontdekking van de natuur*, Amsterdam 2021.

***My articles* 2022**
'The Conference of the Birds', *My articles*, https://myarticles.io/the-conference-of-the-birds/. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

Riclefs 2022
N. Riclefs, 'How Angels Found their Wings', *History Today* 72 (2022), no. 12, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/how-angels-found-their-wings. Accessed on 28 September 2025.

Verduin n.d.
K. Verduin, 'Nieuws uit Afrika', https://web.universiteitleiden.nl/fsw/verduin/sofa/sofa_fen.htm. Accessed on 19 September 2025.

Lovebirds

Boussauw 2024
J. Boussauw, *Vogels in de cultuur*, Gorredijk 2024.

Cole 2010
I. Cole, 'Pablo Picasso: The Development of a Peace Symbol', *Art Times* (May/June 2010), https://www.arttimesjournal.com/art/reviews/May_June_10_Ina_Cole/Pablo_Picasso_Ina_Cole.html. Accessed on 31 August 2025.

Dalzell and Victor 2015
T. Dalzell and T. Victor (eds.), *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, London/New York 2015.

Ferriss and Young 2006
S. Ferriss and M. Young, 'Chicks, Girls and Choice: Redefining Feminism', *Junctures* 6 (2006), pp. 87–97, https://www.junctures.org/index.php/junctures/article/view/121. Accessed on 30 August 2025.

***Tate* n.d.**
'Dove, 1949, Pablo Picasso', *Tate*, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/picasso-dove-p11366. Accessed on 31 August 2025.

***Wikipedia* n.d.**
'Cock', *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cock_(slang). Accessed on 30 August 2025.

Photo Credits

Albertina Art Museum Wien, Vienna: p. 106, 170.

Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images: p. 127 (top).

Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY/ Scala, Florence - SABAM Belgium 2026: p. 21 (top right).

Biblioteca Vaticana, Vatican City, Pal. lat 1071: p. 60.

BirdLife Netherlands: p. 93 (bottom).

Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Oxford: p. 147.

Bpk/Kupferstichkabinett, SMB/Dietmar Katz: p. 107 (top).

Bridgeman Images: p. 48, 53 (bottom), 59, 125, 126 (bottom), 127 (bottom).

Bridgeman Images – Succession Brancusi – All rights reserved (SABAM) 2026: p. 18.

Clarence Buckingham Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago: p. 165.

Collection Betty and Homero Aridjis: p. 36, 155.

Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, photo Cary Markerink: p. 76.

Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam: p. 102.

Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht: p. 83.

Eet!verleden, photo Jeroen Savelkouls: pp. 80–81.

E. Meijer: 157 (middle and bottom), p. 158, 159 (bottom).

Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/ Magnum Photos: p. 28 (top), 140.

Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice – Succession Brancusi – All rights reserved (SABAM) 2026: p. 16 (bottom), 121.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence: p. 49 (right).

G.C. Heemskerk: p. 156, 157 (top), 159 (top).

Getty Images: p. 41 (left and middle), 77, 91 (top).

Greenpeace Netherlands, Amsterdam: p. 70.

Huis van het boek, The Hague: p. 128.

Image select/Alamy: p. 39 (bottom left), 146 (bottom).

Iris van Herpen, Amsterdam: p. 41 (right), 103.

Istock: p. 115.

Jan van IJken, Beesd: p. 43, 116–117.

KB – National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague: p. 126 (top).

Kenwood House, London: p. 24.

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Succession H. Matisse – SABAM Belgium 2026: p. 32.

Kunstmuseum The Hague: p. 65.

Larousse pour tous: p. 88.

Library of Congress, Washington, DC: p. 93 (top), 171 (left).

Liechtenstein – The Princely Collections: p. 49 (left).

Louise Lawler: p. 154.

Mauritshuis, The Hague: p. 16 (top), 25, 44, 45, 68, 73, 78–79, 86, 89, 91(bottom), 95, 129, 131, 142, 145, 148, 149, 160, 166–167.

Mauritshuis, The Hague, photo Fred Ernst: p. 134.

Michel Sima – SABAM Belgium 2026/ Bridgeman Images: p. 30 (bottom right).

The Morgan Library, New York: p. 46.

Musée du Louvre, dist. GrandPalaisRmn/ Marc Jeanneteau: p. 92 (left).

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid: p. 31, 37.

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid: p. 172, 174.

Museum Arnhem, on long-term loan from the Collection of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, photo Marc Pluim: p. 53 (top).

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, photo Studio Tromp: p. 20 (top), 52, 56, 72.

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. From the estate of Dr. J.C.J. Bierens de Haan/photo Studio Tromp: p. 51.

Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, photo Ruben de Heer: p. 122, 132–133.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York: p. 38 (top), 39 (top).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York/ Scala, Florence – SABAM Belgium 2026: p. 34 (left), 35, 40.

Museum Speelklok, Utrecht: p. 62, 63.

Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar: pp. 108–109.

Napishtim: p. 124.

Natural History Museum, London/ Bridgeman Images: p. 171 (right).

Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, photo Roberto Fortuna: p. 130.

Naturalis, Leiden: p. 120.

Natuurhistorisch Museum, Rotterdam: p. 66, 69.

NGF – Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH, Vienna: p. 84.

Pat de Groot: p. 168.

Pont d'Arc caves, Chauvet: p. 15.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: p. 20 (bottom), 39 (bottom right), 47, 64, 71, 74, 82, 94, 97, 98–99, 104, 111, 112, 119, 135, 144, 150–151.

Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede: p. 50, 132.

Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden: p. 27, 136, 137, 138, 139.

Royal Collection Enterprises Limited [2026] | Royal Collection Trust: p. 110.

Royal Collection Trust/© His Majesty King Charles III, 2026/Bridgeman Images: p. 38 (bottom).

RX&SLAG, Paris/New York: p. 21 (bottom), 85.

Studio Tracey Emin, White Cube Gallery, London: p. 42 (bottom), 152–153.

Succession H. Matisse/Bridgeman Images: p. 28 (bottom).

Succession Picasso – SABAM Belgium 2026/Bridgeman: p. 29 (top), 33.

Succession Picasso – SABAM Belgium 2026/Picasso Museum, Barcelona: p. 30 (bottom left).

Succession Picasso – SABAM Belgium 2026/Picasso Museum, Münster: p. 30 (bottom), 141.

Teylers Museum, Haarlem – Succession Brancusi – All rights reserved (SABAM) 2026: p. 23, 67, 161, 162, 163.

The Trustees of the British Museum: p. 92 (right), 146 (top).

Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/ Mondadori Portfolio, Milan: p. 107 (bottom).

VG Bild-Kunst, photo Juliana Schönrock – SABAM Belgium 2026: p. 34 (right).

Wereldmuseum Amsterdam/Leiden: p. 90, 96, 100, 101.

Young & Rubicam Amsterdam (now VML), Koninklijke Luchtmacht Maatschappij (KLM), Amstelveen: p. 109.

Colophon

This catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition *BIRDS – Curated by The Goldfinch & Simon Schama* Mauritshuis, The Hague (12 February – 7 June 2026)

Authors
Laura Cumming
Martine Gosselink
Stefan Hertmans
Philip Hoare
Eva Meijer
Adrienne Quarles van Ufford
Simon Schama

Translation
Patrick Lennon (NL–EN)

Anthology
Martine Gosselink
Simon Schama

Picture research
Julie Hartkamp (Mauritshuis)
Séverine Lacante (Hannibal Books)

Copy-editing
Cath Phillips

Project management
Suzan van den Berg (Mauritshuis)
Sara Colson (Hannibal Books)

Art director
Natacha Hofman

Design
Tim Bisschop

Production
Stichting Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, The Hague

Retouching
Fotorama

Printing
Printer Trento, Italy

Publisher
Gautier Platteau

HANNIBAL BOOKS

Mauritshuis

ISBN 978 94 9341 651 2
D/2026/11922/04
NUR 654

This catalogue has also been published in a Dutch edition:
ISBN 978 94 9341 652 9
D/2026/11922/05
NUR 654

Cover (front and back)
Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654.
Oil on panel, 33.5 × 22.8 cm.
Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Thanks to

Major partners
Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap
VriendenLoterij

Exhibition partners
Stichting de Johan Maurits Compagnie
Stichting Vrienden van het Mauritshuis
Lucas Fonds
Fonds 'De Opzet'
Dutch Masters Foundation
Stichting Thurkowfonds

Lenders
His Majesty King Charles III, United Kingdom
Atelier Iris van Herpen, Amsterdam
Betty and Homero Aridjis, Mexico
Bodleian Library, Oxford
Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht
Fondation Cartier-Bresson, Paris
Galerie RX&SLAG | Paris Le Marais, Paris
Greenpeace Nederland, Amsterdam
Jan van IJken Photography & Film, Beesd
KLM – Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij, Amstelveen
Kunstmuseum Pablo Picasso, Münster
Kunstmuseum The Hague
LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT (USA)
Manon Henzen, Eet!verleden, Nijmegen
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
Museum Speelklok, Utrecht
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar
Natural History Museum, Rotterdam
Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden
Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede
Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden
Studio Tracey Emin, courtesy White Cube Gallery, London
Teylers Museum, Haarlem
Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Leiden, Rotterdam