The name of John James Audubon evokes a pioneering artist-naturalist who altered the course of American natural history with his massive, multi-volume *Birds of America*. Yet at the time of its publication, *Birds of America* caused a scandal in scientific circles with its radical departure from contemporary standards of natural history illustration and, more generally, of observation and representation. Examining the Audubon papers and a double elephant folio set of *Birds of America* held in the Beinecke Library at Yale, I discuss specific peculiarities of Audubon’s pictorial style, framing his practice within larger shifts in the ethics of representing the natural world.

My paper argues that Audubon’s images in *Birds of America* move between the modes of visual address identified by Michael Fried as “theatrical” and “absorptive,” constructing a relationship to their spectator unprecedented at the time in the annals of natural history illustration. Drawing upon Lorraine Daston’s and Peter Galison’s work on histories of scientific observation and notions of objectivity, my account attempts to identify the scandal at the heart of *Birds of America*’s visual discourse.

I contextualize these unusual features of Audubon’s illustration practice against the backdrop of an emergent proliferation of technologies and systems of vision and visuality between 1600 and 1850 that, as Giuliana Bruno has indicated, sought a more affective, embodied experience of the world. Finally, I argue that *Birds of America* reveals an ethics of scientific representation that acknowledged (in Stanley Cavell’s sense) the natural world, and so called for new modes of visualization.