

# The Treasure of the Sierra Manhattan

by Robert Arbib

And they were there all these years, unknown to us! Hidden away in a dark vault, underground in the remote, unknown island of Manhattan. A treasure beyond price, buried from view for half a century, the fragile evidence of their reality the yearly bank vouchers and receipts, duly filed and forgotten in the company archives, fading even in the memories of its oldest employees. Thirty original watercolors by the master painter Louis Agassiz Fuertes, never reproduced, never before on public view! Thirty simply stunning portraits by the bird artist many consider to be the finest this continent has yet produced. It was as if a Spanish galleon laden with gold doubloons had been unearthed in New York harbor. But more exciting, because these paintings, their brilliant colors preserved in a half-century of darkness, would instruct, inspire, and delight us for more years than ever a cache of golden coins.

Much has been written about the genius of Louis Agassiz Fuertes. About his early childhood talent for drawing and his love of nature. About his student days at Cornell University, with atrocious grades in academic



p. 114 Bald Eagle, 115 Swallow-tailed Kite, 116 above Short-eared Owl, below Snowy Owl, 117 above Screech Owl  
below Gyrfalcon, 118 Rough-legged Hawk.



courses and straight A's in art. About his "adoption" by Elliott Coues, the eminent ornithologist, and Abbott Thayer, the color theorist of bird art, both of whom perceived his extraordinary promise early, fostered it and helped him advance towards a prodigious, productive career. A career as teacher, explorer, ornithologist and above all artist — in which he illustrated magazines (foremost among them our parent *Bird-Lore*), journals, reports, pamphlets, books, canvases, walls, and pieces of paper, until his untimely death in 1927. Reviewing his work today, one can trace his development through the years: the later works, such as the plates for the *Forbush Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States* (1925) and the exquisite series of 32 plates of *Abyssinian Birds and Mammals* (1926-27) show Fuertes in full mastery of his art. It was from this period of the full flowering of his development — the mid-twenties — that the "new" birds of prey paintings have come.

What is there about Fuertes that sets his work apart? To me the difference between this master and so many others (including





some who are fine painters and justly famous) is simply this: others create pictures, some of them handsome, some of them flawless portrayals of their subjects, but pictures. *Fuertes created living birds.* The something special about a Fuertes painting is life — his subjects are alive — so real, so natural, so true in every aspect and posture that they almost leap from page or painting. You are in their living presence and they are poised for flight, to soar or pounce or flee. They look at you with eyes of curiosity, or fear, or untamed ferocity. Walk into a gallery of assorted bird art and you have no trouble spotting the Fuertes from across the room: these are the birds that are breathing, singing, moving — filled with living tensions and excitement.

The story of these thirty paintings is — in the end — a satisfying one. Their genesis was in the tremendous popularity, for decades, of miniature picture cards, popularly called trading cards. These were produced in myriad quantities for millions of American children, to be bought, swapped, won or lost in games, collected, and treasured as objects of art and education. In subject they ranged from base-





ball heroes to birds. One of the many producers of trading cards was the conservation-minded manufacturer of baking soda, Church & Dwight Co., Inc. of New York. Over the years since 1888 it had distributed literally millions of cards to several generations of children. Each of the 2" by 3" cards had a portrait on one side; a text on the reverse, and on the bird cards, the message "For the Good of All, Do Not Destroy the Birds."

In the early 1920's, Charles T. Church, then a senior officer of the family owned company, an active conservationist, prevailed upon his friend Louis Fuertes to create a new series of bird cards for the company. Fuertes agreed to produce ninety paintings, thirty of songbirds, thirty of gamebirds, and thirty of birds of prey, and he did so between 1923 and 1925. The paintings were reproduced in color as cards by the Forbes Lithograph Mfg. Company of New York; the songbirds were pro-

duced first. The earliest cards were packed directly in each box of baking soda. By the mid-twenties, they were issued in packets of 15, for 10¢. It was never a boxtop promotion and the cost of printing and mailing was absorbed as a contribution to conservation by the company. The gamebird cards were duly produced, and over the years, until 1966, millions of the sixty cards were distributed. In fact, the requests for them continued long after the company ceased advertising them, in 1946.

As for the birds of prey, the best of all, these thirty paintings were never issued as cards. It was decided by the company that the birds, their prey often shown bleeding in the talons, might offend the young collectors and even hurt the cause of raptor conservation.

The paintings themselves languished almost forgotten for years in the company's vaults until 1975, when the company decided that, with a better understanding of the role of predators in nature, the third and last Fuertes series could be published. Seven of the thirty are shown here. The first set of ten cards is available from the company (35¢) plus proof of purchase of any Arm and Hammer product. Two additional sets are to follow.

It must be remembered, in looking at these paintings (the unframed originals are 7" by 11") that they represent somewhat simplified, graphic portraits. The reason is obvious: Fuertes was painting for extreme reduction in size; he knew that when his work appeared on cards 2" by 3" much of the fine detail of feathers, or of intricate backgrounds, would be lost. The paintings thus are a kind of Fuertes shorthand; they should be viewed — the originals — from a distance for best effect. And yet they will stand close scrutiny, for at any distance the Fuertes magic — the capturing of the living, breathing bird, is tangible.

One final welcome note: the company has announced that it will lend the originals for exhibit to responsible museums and other institutions. Requests should be addressed to Church & Dwight, Two Pennsylvania Plaza, New York, NY 10001.