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REX BRASHER:

CONNECTICUT'S GREATEST UNKNOWN ARTIST
LEFT A LEGACY OF BIRD MASTERPIECES

By Robert Miller



Top photo: Goldfinch print from *Birds and Trees of North America*, by Rex Brasher. Image courtesy of the Rex Brasher Association Inc.

Above: Elf owl print from *Birds and Trees of North America*. Image courtesy of Rex Brasher Association Inc.

Left: Rex Brasher, seated on the porch of his home, gave his address as Chickadee Valley, Kent, CT. Photo courtesy of Cynthis Carter Ayres

You can't see the ivory-billed woodpecker or the passenger pigeon, the heath hen or the Eskimo curlew anymore. They're all extinct, gone from the planet.

Rex Brasher saw them, sketched them then painted them with skill, delicacy and exactness in the early decades of the 20th century.

Today, when you see his watercolor of the passenger pigeon, with its subtle, dappled plumage, you stare in admiration—both of the bird that was and its beautiful likeness.

His ivory-billed woodpecker takes you into the southern swamps—the Great God bird, grand and startling as it used to be. (True believers still hunt the woods for it, but the federal government declared the ivory-billed extinct in October of 2021.)

In all, Brasher—an almost-Connecticut native who claimed the town of Kent as his home—painted 874 watercolors, more than twice as many as John James Audubon.

He did what he set out to do as a young man, painting all the birds listed by the American Ornithological Union and their subspecies, an effort that took 47 years of travel, walking, watching and sketching.

Then, in a herculean effort, Brasher shepherded those paintings into his monumental 12-volume *Birds and Trees of North America*.

Brasher sold 100 complete sets. Using stencils and an air brush, he hand-colored each print in every book in every set—about 90,000 prints in all.

He is Connecticut's Audubon and maybe, its greatest unknown artist.

T. Gilbert Pearson, president of the National Audubon Society from 1920 to 1934, called Brasher's paintings "the most beautiful things I have ever seen."

"When you see a Brasher bird, you have

seen the bird itself, lifelike and in its natural habitat," Pearson said.

The great problem is, it's hard to see any of this today. Rex Brasher has been stored away, out of sight.

The state owns his paintings—it bought the entire collection in 1941 for \$72,290, or about \$85 a painting. They are our heritage.

But they are out of sight at least for the present.

They had been shown on a rotating basis at Eolia, the mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford from 1953 to 1988. But when curators realized the salt air was damaging the watercolors, they removed them.

The Connecticut Museum of Natural History, headquartered at the University of Connecticut, now owns them. But the museum is a collection, including the northeast's largest mastodon skeleton, without a home. It has an office and sponsors school educational programs but lacks a building to house its collections. That may change, and Brasher's reputation with it.

Until then, they've been properly conserved at the Thomas Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. People must make an appointment to see them and can only view a few at a time.

Three Connecticut university libraries—at UConn, Yale and Trinity College—own complete sets of *Birds and Trees of North America*. But again, they are kept in the special collections departments and not on display for the general public.

Melissa Watterworth Batt, an archivist at the Dodd center—which has an extensive ornithological collection including the papers of naturalist and writer Edwin Way Teale—said that a small but regular number of people visit to see the Brasher collection.

"Bird illustrators are interested in his methods," she said. "Most people are

interested in his life story."

Some of this is due to Brasher's colossal bad timing.

He finished his work just as the Great Depression took hold in the 1930s and had to hustle to sell the 100 sets of *Birds and Trees of North America* that he managed to complete. Between the depression and the onset of World War II, the state's plans to build a Brasher Museum at Kent Falls State Park fell by the wayside.

The publication of easy-to-use field guides, most notably Roger Tory Peterson's 1934 *Guide to the Birds* also helped democratize birding. Rather than depending on large, expensive illustrations, people bought binoculars and went out to see them in the living world.

And some of it has to do with the overwhelming impression and value the public has of the nation's first great bird artist John James Audubon's work. His paintings are big and dramatic. They strike the grand chord.

As a result, Audubon wears the crown. There is the National Audubon Society. There are Audubon calendars and writing cards and tote bags.

Trinity College's Ostram and Alice Talcott Enders Ornithology collection is the second largest in the United States.

Eric Johnson-DeBaufre, director of Trinity's rare books and special collections, said there are seldom requests to see Basher's *Birds and Tree of North America*. The star of the Enders collection is Audubon's *Birds of America* with its huge Double Elephant folio prints measuring 40 inches by 30 inches.

"It's hard to compete with a Double Elephant folio," Johnson-DeBaufre said.

And yet it was a slight by John James Audubon that drove Brasher to do what he did.

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This is the family story:

Rex Brasher was born Reginald Brasher in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1869. His father, Philip, was a Wall Street stockbroker and enthusiastic amateur ornithologist who passed his love of birds on to his son.

Once, learning that Audubon was in residence in New York City, Philip Brasher made an appointment to meet the great artist. He arrived on time, only to be rudely turned away—the occupied Audubon, using a dead bird as his model, said loudly he was too busy to bother with him.

Rex Brasher heard the story and determined as a young man to avenge the insult. He would paint more birds than Audubon. He would paint them more realistically and in their natural settings. He would outdo the master.

Although he trained with Tiffany & Co. as an engraver as a teenager, and later mastered the craft of photo engraving, he was a self-taught artist. He also learned, along the way, to be a jack-of-all trades.

In his 20s, he earned enough in the engraving trade to buy a sloop, which he named “The Phalarope.” He and a friend sailed it from Maine to Florida. He later shipped out on a fishing boat and spent two years plying the waters of the Canadian Maritimes.

He played the horses and won big often enough to pay for his rambles to the American South, the Rockies and the Pacific Northwest. (Audubon never made it west of the Mississippi River.)

All these trips, paid for on Brasher’s own dime, were made to see birds, to sketch birds, and take extensive field notes on where and how they lived.

In Brooklyn, he gathered all this material and began to paint. By chance he met and befriended Louis Agassiz Fuertes—Audubon’s successor as America’s great bird painter. After seeing Fuertes’ work, Brasher went home, burnt the 400 paintings he’d completed and started over.

He knew he had to do better. He started again, destroyed his paintings a second time, and returned to the easel.

Eventually, he began to earn a reputation as an artist. He was hired to illustrate a book on the birds of North Carolina. With the \$700 he earned from the work, he bought an abandoned farmhouse in Amenia, N.Y., three or four miles west of Kent.

That town was where he bought his art supplies and socialized. In *Birds and Trees of North America* he gave his address as Chickadee Valley, Kent, Connecticut.

The house he lived in had no electricity and for the first years, no indoor plumbing. He heated it with a wood stove. He never owned a car. When he needed something in Kent, he walked there and back, accepting rides if people offered.

Along the way, he befriended people here and there. He gave them paintings as presents. He helped found the Kent Art Association.



Juliana Barrett, coastal habitat specialist and extension educator for Connecticut Sea Grant, shows the Rex Brasher prints she received after volunteering to distribute black-and-white prints to teachers when the Brasher collection was being moved out of the mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in 1988. Photo: Judy Benson

“He wasn’t a recluse,” said Cynthia Carter Ayres, vice-president of the Rex Brasher Association, whose grandparents were Brasher’s friends. “He was just very focused on what he had to do.”

In Brooklyn, and later in Amenia, his greatest supporter was his niece, Marie Brasher. She earned money when his own funds ran low, did ornithological research for him and typed up all his notes for *Birds and Trees of North America*. She lived with him and urged him on. They were partners in his great enterprise.

“She was executive secretary to the mayor of New York City,” said Janet Reagon, president of the Rex Brasher Association, formed to foster Brasher’s reputation. “She was not a slouch. She was the love of his life.”

Brasher finished his 875 watercolors in 1924, 47 years after he began the work. He and Marie began work on *Birds and Trees of North America* in 1928, completing the 100 sets in 1932, shortly before she died.

His plan was to sell the 12 volumes for \$1,200. He got 100 subscribers. When the Great Depression hit, many of them cancelled. He doubled the price to \$2,400, found new, wealthy patrons and completed 100 sets.

Brasher offered to give his watercolors to the state for free, if, in turn, Connecticut would build a place to show them. He ended up selling the state the collection to keep it intact. Brasher did show all his paintings once, in Washington, D.C., at Explorer’s Hall at the National Geographic Society in 1938. People lined up around the block to see them and the closing date of the show had to be extended to meet the public demand.

The state bought the Brasher collection in 1941. It took another 12 years before it found a place to show them at

Harkness Park. Brasher skipped the opening—he'd seen the paintings already, he said.

When the state moved the paintings out of the Harkness Park mansion in 1988, Juliana Barrett—then a graduate student, now an extension educator with Connecticut Sea Grant—spent a day volunteering there.

The museum had offered black-and-white Brasher prints to any teacher who wanted a set. Barrett's job was to sign the teachers in and help disperse the prints. When the day was done, she was rewarded with some black-and-white Brashers of her own.

"They'd been up in the attic for years," she said. "It was really fun. I had the run of the whole mansion."

Brasher died in 1960 in the Gaylordsville section of New Milford at age 91. He painted until the last years of his life when his eyesight began to fail. His last direct descendant—a grandniece—died in 2021. The Rex Brasher Association has hopes the fate of his estate—now in the New York probate court—will be decided soon.

Because he did all the work on his own, there was no institution to make sure his work would be remembered. And while he knew his own worth, he was indifferent to the commerce of art. He fell out of the public view.

That may change.

Janine Caira, the director of the state Museum of Natural History, said there are now plans under way to construct an environmentally strong "living building" at Storrs, in part to house the museum's collection.

Caira said she envisions a Rex Brasher gallery in the building—a permanent place to show his watercolors on a rotating basis.

The gallery could show how he developed as an artist, exhibiting his earlier work with his later paintings, Caira said.



Top, Melissa Watterworth Batt, archivist at the Thomas Dodd Research Center at UConn, shows an original Brasher watercolor of passenger pigeons from the Rex Brasher Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Connecticut. Photo: Judy Benson

Above, detail from the painting of passenger pigeons, one of several now extinct species Brasher saw and sketched in their native habitats. From the Rex Brasher Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Connecticut. Photo: Judy Benson

It could have natural history exhibits of birds and trees to complement his work.

"It gets better and better," she said of the way the museum, the gallery and the building itself could draw people to the Storrs campus.

There is, however, a sizable problem to surmount.

Caira said the museum will have to raise a large share of the building's construction costs through private donations. She said a fundraising campaign for it will begin this year. So, as in the past, money will determine whether people get to see Brasher's paintings.

In the meantime, the Rex Brasher Association is trying to keep the flame alive. Its website at www.rexbrasher.org has now posted digital images of many of his paintings.

Reagon, the association president—whose grandparents and parents knew Brasher—said her dream is that the New York Historical Society, which owns all of Audubon's watercolors, would hold a joint exhibition.

"Have one of Audubon's with the same bird painted by Rex," she said. "Side by side."

Inca doves, found in the Southwest, are shown in their desert habitat in this print from *Birds and Trees of North America*. Image courtesy of the Rex Brasher Association Inc.

