

STARK MUSEUM OF ART

PRESERVING, CATALOGUING, AND SHARING RARE BOOKS WITH COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE



John James Audubon (1785-1851), artist; Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878), engraver. **Scarlet Ibis**, 1837, etching and aquatint on paper, hand-colored. In *The Birds of America*, double elephant. Stark Museum of Art, 11.1.2.D.59_Scarlet Ibis

The Stark Museum of Art in Orange, Texas, was the vision of collectors H.J. Lutch Stark and Nelda C. Stark. Opened in 1978, the Stark collection is focused on “the stunning land, dramatic people, and diverse wildlife of the American West.” Allison Evans, the Stark’s Collections Manager and Registrar, used the museum’s Collections Management System, The Museum System (TMS), to accomplish their latest project: digitizing and documenting John James Audubon’s personal copy of *The Birds of America*. The project goal was to document and preserve the Audubon volumes while increasing accessibility for museum staff, researchers, and the public.

“When curators want to study a specific plate, they use TMS to find its exact location in the volumes, instead of flipping through each physical book...”

- ALLISON EVANS, COLLECTIONS MANAGER AND REGISTRAR,
STARK MUSEUM OF ART



COLLECTION OVERVIEW

- Including 1,125 objects by John James Audubon, plus 250 objects by other Audubon family members
- Five-volume set of *The Birds of America*, featuring 448 prints including 13 composite plates



RETURN ON INVESTMENT

- Increased accessibility to *The Birds of America* information for staff and researchers
- Easier exhibition and loan management
- Elimination of error when moving records
- Better preservation of folios due to reduced handling
- Improved documentation
- Ability to share collection with the public



PRODUCTS

- The Museum System (TMS)
- eMuseum



CHALLENGES

Audubon's *The Birds of America* consists of 448 hand-colored, life-size prints of hundreds of bird species made from engraved copper plates. The Stark Museum's volumes are unique, not only because they were Audubon's personal copy, but also because the plates in this volume are ordered systematically rather than in order of issue. These double-elephant folios measure a huge 38 by 25 inches, and require two to three people to turn a page or transport. Paging through the folios is a challenging task, and the possibility of damage through overuse is very real.

The Stark's Audubon volumes had never been fully catalogued, and Allison needed a way to provide better access while maintaining proper preservation and tracking. She explains, "Museum staff wanted to know when a particular book had been exhibited, for how long, and which page had been on display." Allison needed a way to document all information associated with each volume, including an accurate listing of plates, engravers, inscriptions, plate numbers, order number, and orientation.



SOLUTION

The museum hired a photographer to create high resolution images of the volumes while documenting the details of each print within TMS. Allison had previously used TMS's Inseparable Object records to document a book of fore-edge paintings and knew it would be the perfect tool to track the Audubon project. "With so much information to document, I decided using Inseparable Object records would give users the best access to information in these volumes," said Allison.

An Inseparable Object record is a special type of object association in TMS for use when an object, such as a print, is inseparable from its parent, the folio. When the folio object record is moved, the same move transaction is automatically applied to each of the prints that make up the folio, insuring an accurate and complete record of location and movement history for the work.



Photo by Hudson Connors, Jenniffer (2014), Allison Evans at the Turning the Page Event. Stark Museum of Art, Orange Texas.



OUTCOME

For Allison, the decision to utilize the Inseparable Object feature of TMS was a deliberate one:

One of my motivations in taking this approach for *The Birds of America* project was to ensure that when a folio record was moved, the associated prints moved with it automatically, eliminating human error. De-cluttering a single volume record was another motivation. With so much information in a single volume record, using the inseparable object record feature gave us a way to organize the information in a user-friendly manner.

- Allison on her use of TMS for *The Birds of America* project.

With each print's digital image and plate details recorded in TMS, Allison and her colleagues have easy access to the information they need. "When curators want to study a specific plate, they use TMS to find its exact location in the volumes, instead of flipping through each physical book," Allison explains, "then they are able to go directly to that page in the folio, saving unnecessary handling and potential damage to the volumes."

The thorough documentation of *The Birds of America* has also made it easier for curators to design exhibitions. If a curator is planning a show around the museum's collection of heron artwork, they can use TMS to find the location of each heron print in a particular volume. Additionally, they can see how many times each plate has been exhibited, which may influence future display decisions.

With the recent installation of eMuseum, the digital publishing software that integrates with TMS, Stark staff are looking forward to taking their [collection online](#) and sharing these volumes of *The Birds of America* with the public.

For institutions looking to undertake a similar project, Allison has this advice:

It's important to work with colleagues to see what type of information they want to document and how they interact with the collection information. This will help ensure that the data is relevant and usable. It's also important to create and refine your policies and standards for entering information into your Collections Management System to give interns or new employees comprehensive rules they can follow to maintain your institution's database standards.



John James Audubon (1785-1851), artist; Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878), engraver. **Passenger Pigeon**, 1829, etching and aquatint on paper, hand-colored. In *The Birds of America*, double elephant, volume II. Stark Museum of Art, 11.1.2.C.74_Passenger Pigeon