

walton ford: pancha tantra

Contemporary artist Walton Ford is a natural at bringing out the brutal beauty of birds and beasts, so it makes perfect sense that the first book to offer an in-depth look at his life-size watercolors takes a walk on the wild side.

Pancha Tantra, whose title is borrowed from the ancient book of animal stories that paved the way for Aesop's Fables, is designed to complement the surprise and shock of Ford's contemptuously anti-Audubon art. It does: At \$7,000, this book is not for the faint of heart. But then again, neither is Ford's parade of predators. Painted with great technical skill, the socio-politically charged work is a penetrating look at the natural world, at once amusing and disturbing.

Available as a leather-bound art edition of 100 copies that includes an original intaglio print or as a less costly collector's edition of 1,500, *Pancha Tantra's* pages, nearly the size of elephant folios, reinforce Ford's enlarged view of the world. Like its creatures, *Pancha Tantra* is a master of the sneak attack. Its sedate cover has the serious disposition of a 19th century science book. But its pages, which include 12 horizontal and four vertical foldouts, present a cast of carnivores that jump out of their jungle and go for the jugular.





An opening essay by *New Yorker* staff writer Bill Buford sets the stage for the riotous menagerie, whose ranks include a turkey placidly crushing a parrot in its claws and a pack of white wolves bloodied in battle with a buffalo. The appendix, which includes a note from Ford, offers unparalleled insight into his thought process. Ford's trompe l'oeil turns on ink as much as it does on paint. "I keep my books in wild piles and stacks in my studio," he writes. "The books provide words that transform into images." The texts that inspire Ford are as eclectic and obscure as his most endangered species. Who would have thought that the novels of Ernest Hemingway and the journals of Leonardo di Vinci would be fuel for the fires of Ford's fantasy? That turkey getting ready for its Thanksgiving dinner of parrot pie, for example, was inspired by a 1784 letter Benjamin Franklin wrote to his daughter, Sarah Bache, in which he suggested that turkey, not the bald eagle, be American's official fowl. The turkey, he wrote, is a "Bird of Courage" that will not "hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on."

Ford enthusiasts won't be surprised that the print included with the art edition is *Limed Blossoms*. In this work, a hummingbird hovers happily over a ripe red bud that looks like a lover's lips. His pals already are sucking supper's nectar. Ignorance is bliss, but if the little bird had bothered to beg, steal or borrow a copy of *Pancha Tantra*, it would have known what's in store. As the appendix reveals, Ford painted this after reading an 1881 book titled *Camp Life in the Woods and Tricks of Trapping and Trap Making*. According to its author, catching a hummingbird is as simple as chewing a few grains of wheat until they get gummy and spreading the lime into the throat of the flower. If the glue doesn't kill the flutterer, the fright will. In Ford's world, it matters not. For the bird—and the viewer—there's no turning back ■ Nancy A. Ruhling ~ Walton Ford: *Pancha Tantra*, 320 pages, \$7,000/art edition leather-bound hardcover plus print: \$1.800/