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Wildlife Art Coming to Green Bay By Dan Small

If you've ever enjoyed the beauty of a pair of mallards winging low through the fog across a marsh or big whitetail buck testing the wind at the edge of woodlot before venturing into a cornfield, chances are you'd appreciate paintings that depict these and hundreds of other outdoor scenes. Perhaps you already have a wildlife art print or two hanging on a wall in your home or office.

Whether you collect wildlife art or wish you did, you'll find a lot to like in a new book released earlier this year and an international art exhibit that will premiere in Green Bay later this month.

The book, *American Wildlife Art*, by David J. Wagner, will be featured at the upcoming exhibit, *Art and the Animal*, an international art exhibition created by the Society of Animal Artists, which makes its world debut at the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, August 30. Green Bay is the only city in the Midwest to show the complete exhibit of approximately 125 artworks. When the Neville exhibit closes on Nov. 2, about half the artworks will travel to other locations around the United States.

A number of artists will be on hand for a pre-event reception open to Neville Public Museum members only on Aug. 29, and a public reception and dinner at the exhibition opening Aug. 30. Wagner will also be there for a book signing both days and a public lecture on Aug. 30.

The exhibition will feature the work of many contemporary artists, including Robert Bateman, Guy Coheleach, John Ruthven, Kent Ullberg, among others.

Wagner's book does not focus on these contemporary wildlife artists, whose prints are often sold at fundraising dinners for conservation organizations. Instead, the book traces the evolution of American wildlife art from its origins to its current form. In so doing, it unveils the artists and traditions that have inspired artists working today.

Wagner is perhaps the ideal person to write such a book. A native of Sheboygan, he spent his youth hunting, fishing and exploring the woods, fields, lakes and streams of eastern Wisconsin's Kettle Moraine region. As a boy, he also fished north of Lake Superior and paddled the lakes of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of Minnesota. While in high school, Wagner worked at a DNR Youth Conservation Camp in Wisconsin's north woods. He enrolled at UW-Stevens Point, thinking he would seek employment in a natural resources field.

"My math and science grades changed my mind," Wagner recalls. And so, he dove into the arts.

After completing a masters degree in arts administration at Indiana University, Wagner was hired as director of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, where he developed the museum's annual *Birds in Art* exhibit into one of America's foremost exhibitions of wildlife art.

During his tenure at the Wausau museum, Wagner completed a PhD at the University of Minnesota, writing his dissertation on wildlife art prints. He has served as a juror for the federal duck stamp competition and the annual Ward World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition in Ocean City, Maryland.

Today, Wagner organizes traveling wildlife art exhibitions and lectures on wildlife art throughout the world. Robert Bateman, widely acclaimed as the greatest living wildlife artist, has called Wagner "...the number one intellectual in wildlife art, certainly in America, maybe in the world."

In researching his dissertation, Wagner conducted a survey of 150 wildlife artists. Among other questions, he asked them to name the artist who had influenced them the most. The artist most named was Bateman, followed by L.A. Fuertes and Carl Rungius. Wisconsin's Owen Gromme was named by several artists. Wagner, who had the opportunity to work with Gromme in the early years of the *Birds in Art* exhibit, considers the Wisconsin artist one of his key mentors.

American Wildlife Art is organized chronologically in three parts. Part I covers the period from Colonial times through the work of John James Audubon. Part II documents the "sporting" art of the 19th Century. Part III is devoted to 20th Century wildlife art.

In each section, Wagner reveals the fascinating connections between art and history. For instance, John White's 16th Century paintings provided Europeans with the first truly accurate portraits of New World fauna. 18th Century artist Mark Catesby documented numerous species previously unknown to science. Catesby's painting of the extinct Carolina parakeet graces the dust jacket of Wagner's book.

While discussing the role of art in documenting the widespread exploitation of our natural resources, Wagner also addresses the impact on wildlife populations of such historic events as the Lewis & Clark Expedition and the fur trade. An entire chapter is devoted to Audubon, whose lifelong mission to paint and catalog American birds is perhaps the pivotal moment in American wildlife art history.

Today's sportsmen will probably find the chapter on mid-20th Century wildlife art of greatest interest. Crediting the efforts of conservation pioneer Aldo Leopold and others, Wagner devotes several pages to the birth of the federal duck stamp program in the 1930s, which helped resurrect wetlands and waterfowl conservation and led to the development of the modern wildlife art print industry.

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution is that it gathers in one place over 300 illustrations of some of the most important wildlife art ever produced by North American artists. This collection of paintings, drawings and sculpture provides us with a comprehensive account of the origins of our wildlife art, as well as an historical record of its evolution to its present form.

Wagner will also speak at Bjorklunden vid Sjon, Lawrence University's Door County Campus, on Aug. 19 and at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in

Madison on Nov. 20. For details on Wagner's appearances, log onto www.american-wildlife-art.com. For information on the *Art and the Animal* exhibition or on membership in the Neville Public Museum, log onto <http://www.nevillepublicmuseum.org/art-animal/>

American Wildlife Art, published by Marquand Books, hardcover with jacket, 424 pages, 280 color illustrations, 30 black-and-white illustrations. Introduction by Robert Bateman. \$75.