

## **A folio edition of Catesby's gorgeous natural history, the first catalogue of North American flora and fauna**

Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*. London: self-published, 1731–1747. 20 1/2 inches x 15 inches (521 x 381 mm); 2 volumes, 272 pages plus 220 hand-colored etchings.

Mark Catesby's *Natural History* (1731–47) is the finest color-plate book on the flora and fauna of the British colonies in North America. The Suffolk naturalist (1682–1749) was Audubon's most significant precursor as artist and explorer-naturalist. Catesby was born into a genteel family and early in life was introduced to John Ray (1627–1705), a naturalist and author of many books — including *Historia generalis plantarum* (1686–1704), considered a direct antecedent of modern taxonomy. Ray inspired Catesby's interest in natural history, and the young man devoted his studies to the subject. The *Natural History* was essentially Catesby's life work, based on two extended visits to America. On his first trip (1712–19), Catesby stayed with relatives in Virginia: the seeds and specimens that he collected impressed not only his compatriots but the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus, who based 22 new species on his type material and cited Catesby's name frequently in his publications. Catesby returned to North America in 1722–26, exploring throughout the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and the Bahamas, collecting and making drawings *in situ* for his book.

Although the leading botanical draftsman of the century, G.D. Ehret, contributed two magnificent plates of magnolias to the work and assisted with eight other illustrations, Catesby etched most of the book's 220 plates himself. All of the illustrations are highly decorative combinations of plant and animal life and include the now-extinct Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratoria*) and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), presumed extinct but recently sighted in Arkansas. Catesby's large compositions usually lean in the direction of ecological correctness; however, the most memorable plates are those where he throws science to the winds and allows fish to swim through the branches of trees. Catesby's invaluable documentary record is perhaps the only study of natural history that is both whimsical and magnificent.

This superb copy from the California Academy of Sciences is bound in contemporary tan calf, with a broad gilt-tooled frame incorporating bees, foliage, birds, crustacea, fish, reptiles, and mammals. The gilt-decorated spine has raised bands forming eight compartments; a brown morocco lettering piece in the second compartment reads “CATESBY’S | NAT : HIST : OF | CAROLINA” and the volume number appears in the third. The bookplate of the California Academy of Sciences, Edward E. Hills and Florence Hopkins Hills Collection of Botanical and Ornithological Works is on the front pastedown, and a sepia shelfmark is on the verso of the front free endleaves. Mr. Hills was president of the family firm of Hills Brothers Coffee Inc. from 1935 until his death in 1959; Mrs. Hills was the niece of Mark Hopkins of the Central Pacific Railway and the eponymous hotel. The couple assembled a fine library of natural history books in the 1930s and 1940s, chiefly through the London firm of Bernard Quaritch. The collection was bequeathed to the California Academy of Sciences, of which Edward Hills had been a trustee from 1946 until shortly before his death.

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