

HALIAEETUS LEUCOCEPHALUS:
An Iconographic Meditation inspired by Sabra Crockett's *EMPEROR* of 2025.
By Art Historian Brenda Edgar, September 25, 2025

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As in the title, tonight I'll use, and attempt to pronounce reasonably well, the Latin binomials for three species of birds. I chose to do so because I knew the bird people would appreciate it. I can't imagine another setting in which an Artist, an Art Historian, and a Bird Enthusiast could all learn from one another—in fact, it sounds like a setup for a joke! So thanks to the brilliant Sabra Crockett, for inspiring all this, and to Dan Pfalzgraf, excellent curator and 'professional dot connector,' for bringing us all together tonight. And, Skål to Carl Linnaeus, and to Latin, the universal language of ancient Rome, of medieval Christianity, and of science, for being the connective tissue of tonight's talk.

Our story begins all the way back in Classical Antiquity, and we've only got about 15 minutes, so buckle up and let's get crackin'!

In both **Greek and Roman mythology**, the Eagle was the messenger and companion of Jupiter (aka Zeus), king of the gods, often shown carrying his thunderbolts. (It didn't have a name, so it's just called Aquila, which is Latin for Eagle [aquiline = 'eagle-like'].) It was also in the form of an Eagle that Jupiter abducted the beautiful youth Ganymede, in order to make him his cupbearer on Mount Olympus. When Aquila tortured Prometheus by pecking out his liver, Hercules killed him and sent him into the stars, where he became the constellation Aquila.

In the 2nd century BC, when Rome was still a Republic much like the USA, the Eagle became the symbol of the **Roman Republican** military, to symbolize that they had the divine protection and favor of Jupiter.

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But when Rome became an **Empire** bent on world domination, Aquila became more than Jupiter's pet. It evolved into a potent symbol of the divinity of the Emperor himself, and the overwhelming might of his Imperial military.

In a sculpture on the narrow ceiling of the triumphal Arch of Titus in Rome, a monument celebrating the Emperor Titus's destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Aquila carries the Emperor's soul to the Heavens, where he will live forever as a God.

Aquila also continued to perch atop every battle standard in the Imperial Roman armed forces. No longer did it invoke the protection of Jupiter; now it stood for the unbreakable will of a Man who claimed to be Jupiter's equal.

In **Medieval Europe**, the Eagle was found in every bestiary, which is like a medieval encyclopedia of animal lore, especially popular in the 12th and 13th centuries in Northern Europe. These manuscripts were often lavishly illustrated with bright, colorful, entertaining images, often with resplendent gold leaf, the same material that makes many of Sabra's paintings so dazzling.

The text of the bestiary entry for AQUILA (Latin was the international language of Medieval Europe, as it had been in ancient Rome, so it's 'Aquila' here, too) tells us that the Eagle has very clear eyesight, so powerful that it can look directly at the sun without damage. Everything in the bestiary is also given a Christian religious interpretation. This preternatural vision, we're told, is why the Eagle represents Christ, for he alone can gaze directly upon God the Father and see his true form.

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The bestiary entry continues: when an Eagle's eyes grow dim with age, it flies up to the sun, and then dives into a fountain three times. This restores its eyesight and makes it young again. This story is an allegory for Christian baptism, in which a person is spiritually reborn.

There's one last Aquila story in the medieval bestiary—I wonder if this has any basis in truth: the Eagle puts its newly hatched chicks to a harsh test, holding each one up to the sun. If the fledgling can look into the sun without squinting, the parent accepts it. If it blinks or looks away, it is cast out of the nest. This is related to the entry on the Coot, which raises the rejected Eaglets as its own. Any truth to any of that?

Aquila is also a symbol of St John the Evangelist, and is often shown in art whispering into his ear as he writes his gospel, a beautiful symbol of divine inspiration.

The **Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires**, although both were Christian, both also claimed to be the true successors of the pagan Ancient Roman Empire. Echoing Ancient Rome, they also used Aquila as an Imperial symbol, now loaded also with positive Christian symbolism. At times, each empire used a double-headed Eagle to symbolize the dual nature of their authority over both church and state.

Although none of these Imperial Eagles was probably meant to represent a specific species, various scholars have suggested two possible candidates anyway: the Golden Eagle (***Aquila chrysaetos***) due to its prevalence in Italy, or possibly the Eastern Imperial

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Eagle (***Aquila heliaca***) due to its visual similarity to the symbolic birds. (Binomial nomenclature is also in Latin!)

In 1782, the young **USA** chose to use the Ancient Roman battle standard, with the Eagle as its focal point, as the basis for the Great Seal of the United States (although the Eagle wouldn't officially be named the national bird until 2024!)

Now why would this newborn democracy choose such a potent symbol of Empire? It's true that the Eagle was a symbol of Rome during its Republican days also, but in the many centuries since, its meaning had become inseparable from Empire.

But the Founding Fathers had studied the Ancient Greeks and Romans well and deeply. They wanted to build upon the greatest parts of this venerable and remote Golden Age, and learn from its mistakes. Yes, the Athenian democracy had ultimately fallen, and the Roman Republic lost the plot and went off the rails. But the Ancients had invented civilization, and high culture, and representative government, and they remained the best and most inspiring models for the USA.

So it's no surprise that, when deciding on an architectural style suitable for this great experiment in democracy, the founding generation chose Neoclassicism, a hodgepodge of elements and principles culled from Ancient Greek and Roman sources. Thanks to Thomas Jefferson and countless other architects, the American architectural landscape would be dominated by Greek columns and pediments, and Roman arches and

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domes, which to them were all symbolic of the fact that the Ancients had invented Democracy.

(Despite its enduring popularity, neither the Neoclassical style, nor any other style, has ever been mandated by the American government, until now: the current administration has issued executive orders requiring that Federal buildings be Neoclassical in style.)

Like the Neoclassical style, the Eagle was chosen for our country, despite the historical baggage it brought with it. In part because it is a very impressive animal: distinctive, strong, independent, and free; and in part because it represented the noble ideals of the Roman Republic, despite what happened later.

But also, this time, it wasn't a generic Eagle. It was identified as a specific species: ***Haliaeetus leucocephalus***, the unmistakable Bald Eagle, indigenous only to North America. Not Aquila. Different genus altogether.

(You probably know the story about Benjamin Franklin and the bald Eagle....?)

But the Ben Franklin story has elements of both fact and myth. In a letter to his daughter, he complained that the Eagle in the original designs for the Great Seal looked more like a turkey, and then talked about how the turkey is actually a more noble animal than the Bald Eagle. He did NOT say he preferred the turkey as a national bird.)

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Beginning in 1804, **Napoleon Bonaparte**, Emperor of the French, King of Italy, and Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, adopted the golden Roman Eagle as a symbol of his Empire and its military (that's Aquila, NOT *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).

The statement made by Napoleon's choice was: we're not doing what the Americans are doing, never mind what I said during the Revolution; we are now the true heirs to the Roman Empire, and we will manifest their goal of world domination.

In the 20th century, the Eagle also became the symbol of **the German Nazi party**. It too was inspired by the Aquila, Ancient Roman symbol of Empire and War, but it was stylized and modernized, and it clutched a swastika in its talons, the symbol of the supremacy of the Aryan race. Aquila had gone to the Dark Side.

Although Aquila is burdened with its track record of warmongering and even genocide, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* has always been a symbol of democracy and liberty, the exception to the rule of Eagle symbolism.

And the Bald Eagle meant all the same things when Joe Biden finally made it the official national bird of the USA just last year, as it had meant in 1782: an icon of strength, independence, and freedom.

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Sabra Crockett's
glorious painting

EMPEROR looms over the
global ecosystem of this
exhibition; it stands alone
at front and center, to
rather chilling effect, and
its title makes us wonder:
does the Bald Eagle still
mean the same thing?

Will *Haliaeetus*
leucocephalus continue to



represent what makes America exceptional, or will it take on the meaning of its Aquila
cousins, becoming just another symbol of Empire and Global Conquest?

The *EMPEROR*, regal, massive, dangerous, and proud, rests on the carcass of a dead
tree. He gazes, Christlike, directly into the Sun, not down upon us, his subjects, his viewers,
the vulnerable Eaglets. As we crane our necks to look up at him, the stiff, heavy drapery of
absolute power, which looks an awful lot like a gilded brick wall, slowly eclipses our view of
the clear blue sky. Until all we can see is the *EMPEROR*.

Is the window closing? Will we be able to breathe? Can we still get out?

Thank you.