



In the midst of the foliage [the hummingbird] appeared like a piece of lapis lazuli surrounded by emeralds, for her back was of the deepest blue. Everywhere throughout Brazil this little winged gem, in many varieties, abounds.

James C. Fletcher
Brazil and the Brazilians, 1857

Martin Johnson Heade, *Cattleya Orchid and Three Brazilian Hummingbirds* (detail), 1871, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation

A close-up view of nature

Heade's painting is an intimate glimpse into a corner of nature. Precisely rendered, the flowers and birds seem to come alive.

LOOK CLOSELY TO FIND

Three hummingbirds: a Sappho Comet (green with a yellow throat and brilliant red tail feathers) and two Brazilian Amethysts (green with pink throats).

A hummingbird nest.

The Cattleya orchid, which is a bright pinkish-purple flower that is much sought after by orchid collectors and is found in the wild only in Brazil.

Moss on tree branches.

The mist of the jungle atmosphere.

IMAGINE YOU HAVE TRAVELED TO THIS PLACE

What are some sounds you might hear?

What are some things you might smell?

What is something that might feel smooth? Or rough?

How would you dress for this trip?

When the rainstorm comes, what will happen to the flower?

Where will the birds go?

1

Tell me about the artist

American painter Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904) specialized in landscapes, seascapes, and still lifes during his long career. Born in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the son of a farmer, Heade began to paint in his late teens, receiving training from a neighbor. At age twenty-four, Heade launched a career as a portrait painter and spent the next fifteen years traveling around the United States and Europe, seeking commissions. He was nearly forty years old when he encountered the windswept, rocky coastline of Rhode Island and discovered the subjects he would pursue for the rest of his life.

Heade began painting hummingbirds in 1862. He had long been fascinated by the tiny birds' quivering movements and jewel-like plumage. In 1863, he made an expedition to Brazil, the first of three trips he would make to South and Central America. Many artists and scientists of the period made similar journeys to study, draw, and document the exotic plants and animals of the lush tropical rain forests. Heade was particularly interested in Brazil's many hummingbird types, as only the ruby-throated species was found in the northeastern United States. In Brazil, he began a series of small pictures called "The Gems of Brazil," which depicts the great variety of hummingbirds in landscape settings.

In the 1870s, after his final visit to the tropics, Heade was living in New York City. There, relying on his memory as well as the nature studies made during his travels, he began to paint another series of pictures showing hummingbirds with orchids in their natural habitat. This group of works poetically combines Heade's interests in botany, birds, and landscape. The Gallery's *Cattleya Orchid and Three Brazilian Hummingbirds* is a dazzling example of one such inventive composition.

"From early boyhood I have been almost a monomaniac on hummingbirds." **Martin Johnson Heade**



Martin Johnson Heade, 1860 (detail), Courtesy of the Miscellaneous Photograph Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Martin Johnson Heade, *Cattleya Orchid and Three Brazilian Hummingbirds*, 1871, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation

3 HUMMMM . . . HUMMMM . . .

Hummingbirds got their name because their wings vibrate so quickly they make a humming noise. Their wings can beat at a rate of up to 200 times per second, and the birds can fly through the air at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour. They are the only bird that can fly backward. The smallest of all birds, hummingbirds can weigh as little as two grams (that's as light as a penny!). Since they have no sense of smell, hummingbirds find their food by sight. There are approximately 340 different kinds of hummingbirds, and because of their iridescent feathers, they are often called “gems” or “jewels.”

Heade painted hummingbirds from life—unlike some artists who preferred stuffed birds for models. Imagine how difficult it was to study such glittering, flitting creatures!



book nook

These books about hummingbirds can be found at your local library or bookstore.

It's a Hummingbird's Life

By Irene Kelly | ages 4 and up

The Hungry Hummingbird

By April Pulley Sayre | ages 4 and up

Welcome to the World of Hummingbirds

By Diane Swanson | ages 4 and up

Learning about Hummingbirds

(Dover Little Activity Books)

By Jan Sovak | ages 4 and up

Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems

By Kristine O'Connell George, illustrated by Barry Moser | ages 6 and up

A Dazzle of Hummingbirds

By Bruce Berger, edited by Vicki Leon
ages 6 and up

Hummingbirds: A Beginner's Guide

By Laurel Aziz | ages 8 and up

The Secret Lives of Hummingbirds

By David Wentworth Lazaroff
ages 10 and up

Stokes Hummingbird Book: The Complete Guide to Attracting, Identifying, and Enjoying Them

By Donald and Lillian Stokes
ages 12 and up

The World of the Hummingbird

By Robert Burton | ages 12 and up

try this!

activity



Magnificent Magnolias

In addition to painting flowers in landscapes, Heade painted still lifes from arrangements of cut flowers that he set up in his studio. Later in life, Heade settled in Saint Augustine, Florida, and was enamored with the southern magnolia. This flowering tree grows wild throughout the southeastern coastal region of the United States and can have blossoms as large as ten inches across! As with hummingbirds, Heade painted the flower again and again. He placed its cut branches upon red, brown, or blue velvet cloths, which made the soft, creamy petals and glossy leaves appear to glow.

In 2004, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative postage stamp of Heade's *Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth*, which is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art.



Design your own postage stamp

You will need:

A pad of paper

A pencil, colored pencils, crayons, and/or markers

Think about a postage stamp, which is like a small work of art that can travel all over the world.

Imagine you are an artist who has been selected to design a new postage stamp depicting a flower or bird native to the United States. (All U.S. postage stamps must feature subjects related to life in the United States.)

Study your subject carefully (either in life, a book, or on the internet) and note the colors and features that make it unique.

Experiment: make a series of drawings to try out different possible designs for your stamp. If you can, reduce your drawing on a copier to the size of a postage stamp (about an inch by an inch and a half). Your design should take into account its small size and be easy for people to identify.

left: American Treasures:
Martin Johnson Heade Stamp
Design © 2004 United States
Postal Service. All rights
reserved. Used with permission.

above: Martin Johnson Heade,
*Giant Magnolias on a Blue
Velvet Cloth*, c. 1890, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of The Circle of the National
Gallery of Art in Commemoration
of its 10th Anniversary