

This monumental undertaking required eleven years of labor and resulted in one of the most spectacular publications in history. It made both Audubon and Havell famous. Even his enemies in Philadelphia had to acknowledge that the book was an incomparable publishing feat. Neither Audubon nor those who stood against him in Philadelphia forgot the reasons why he went to Europe to seek a publisher. His Bonaparte grackle painting and the ^{watercolor} supplement print were very much on his mind when in 1832 in Charleston, South Carolina he undertook a third watercolor of the boat-tailed grackles, the version which became Plate 187 of Birds of America. Carole Slatkin, assistant director of the New York Historical Society, which owns the largest collection of Audubon original paintings in the world, has offered a unique observation of Audubon's thinking as he created his third and final version of the boat-tailed grackles. She writes that, " Audubon relied not at all on his earlier versions (except to place them in an oak tree with Spanish moss) but actually recreated in an infinitely more accomplished image the Lawson engraving (the adulterated version of Audubon's 1824 painting). He used the position of the male grackle in the Rider/Lawson engraving for a much more finely executed female complete with closed beak as in the engraving, but unlike either of the earlier versions, and turned Lawson's open -beaked female into a calling male, reversing the position and adding the detail of the foot lifted spontaneously off the branch. He thus amply displayed his surpassing mastery over Lawson's engraved work. "

It has already been noted that the painting before us is Audubon's first published bird painting. (a sketch of a Ruffed Grouse was also printed on a New Jersey banknote in 1825) And Audubon's 1824 Grackles is the only Audubon bird painting published in the artist's lifetime that remains in private hands. All but two of the original paintings executed for Birds of America now belong to the New York Historical Society. The two missing works — the blue-gray gnatcatcher and the black-throated blue warbler — are lost and presumed destroyed. Carole Slatkin has also pointed out that " the New York historical Society does not own three versions of any other Audubon watercolor — not to mention one which figured so prominently in Audubon's career and in the playing out of American nineteenth century natural history — and it is a remarkable experience to observe the phenomenon. "