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Various Owners

Auction

Thursday, May 28, 1987 at 10:15 am and 2 pm

Exhibition

Friday, May 22	10 am to 5 pm
Saturday, May 23	10 am to 5 pm
Sunday, May 24	closed
Monday, May 25	10 am to 5 pm
Tuesday, May 26	10 am to 5 pm
Wednesday, May 27	10 am to 3 pm

In sending absentee bids this catalogue
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Cover Illustration: Lot 129

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□ 38

*John James Audubon (1785-1851)

A PAIR OF BOAT-TAILED GRACKLES

Signed in an engraver's hand *Drawn by John J. Audubon from Nature, I.I.*

Watercolor, pen and ink, pastel, graphite and egg wash on paper, mounted on board

10½ by 14 in. 26.7 by 35.6 cm.

Executed in 1824.

In April, 1824, John James Audubon arrived in Philadelphia from Louisiana, where he had spent a number of years honing his ornithological knowledge by studying and painting birds in their natural surroundings. Philadelphia at that time was the leading city of science and learning as well as the most important publishing center in the country, and it was here that Audubon hoped to find a publisher who would present his work to the public. Audubon's dream was to produce the most complete illustrated volume of American birds, presented life-size in their natural habitats, with over four hundred illustrations and his own scientific notations.

Early in his stay, Audubon met Charles Lucien Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon and a noted ornithologist who was sponsoring and underwriting the publication of a four-volume supplement to Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*. Wilson's extensive work was considered to be the finest of its kind by the scientific and literary elite, who strongly opposed this newcomer's presumptuous attempt to promote his own project. Among those voicing greatest disapproval was George Ord, Wilson's close friend and biographer. Ord was also the executor of his estate and the editor of the final volume of Wilson's *Ornithology*. He had no intention of seeing the integrity of his friend's oeuvre challenged by an "untrained amateur." Similarly, Alexander Lawson, a noted Philadelphia engraver who worked with Wilson to produce the hand-colored plates for all of his books, owned a percentage of the royalties obtained from the sales of that publication. He and Titian Peale, the primary artist working on the supplement, wanted nothing to do with Audubon.

The support of these men, among others, would have been extremely valuable to the success of Audubon's ambitious enterprise, but in the end Charles Bonaparte was the sole believer in his friend's talents. He gave Audubon the opportunity to include in his supplement an 1821 watercolor of a distinctly southern species, the Boat-Tailed Grackle, which had not been illustrated in Wilson's work. Audubon agreed to re-do this early work (now in the collection of the New-York Historical Society) to conform with Lawson's strict printing requirements for the supplement, on the condition that it would not be altered.

The present work, the second version of *A Pair of Boat-Tailed Grackles*, completed in 1824, is a far more sophisticated image than the earlier picture that had first attracted Bonaparte. The large male appears perched high on the branch, his feathers sensitively articulated in shades of blue layered with a distinct iridescence achieved through the use of graphite and eggwhite wash. His commanding figure dominates that of the warm-toned female. The open beaks of the birds no doubt allude to the artists' remark that they were "gregarious at all seasons of the year." Their joined silhouette gives the work a complexity and a sense of the abstract, while the inclusion of the realistically portrayed Grackle egg supplies the proper ornithological touch.

Although Audubon's remarkably beautiful watercolor was a worthy addition to Bonaparte's supplement, the illustration that eventually appeared in the volume was quite different. Encouraged by Ord, Lawson had another artist, Alexander Rider, alter Audubon's submission, purportedly to conform more closely with the printing format. However, Audubon recognized that Rider's changes, which incidentally produced a much stiffer, reversed image of the original, signified a deliberate attempt to minimize his contribution to the publication. The resulting engraving appears in the supplement bearing both artists' names.

Despite the ill treatment that he received in Philadelphia, Audubon became ever more determined to bring his monumental ornithological project to fruition. The unhappy experience had increased his drive to publish a book to overwhelm the scientific and artistic worlds alike. His search for a publisher finally led him to London where, between 1827 and 1838 Audubon's *Birds of America* were published by Robert Havell, firmly establishing the fame of each of the men.

A Pair of Boat-Tailed Grackles represents the significant starting point for Audubon's illustrious career as one of the world's great documentors of American natural history. It is also the only bird picture published during the artist's lifetime believed to remain in private hands.

Provenance:

Private collection, Delaware
The Philadelphia Print Shop, Philadelphia

Literature:

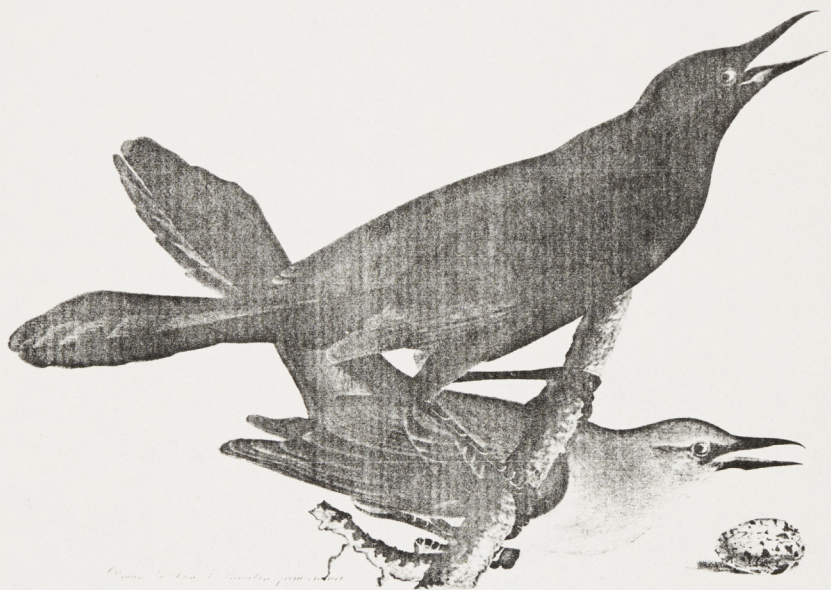
cf., Charles Lucien Bonaparte, *American Ornithology... not Given by Wilson*, (Philadelphia, 1825-1833), four volumes

cf., John James Audubon, *The Birds of America* (London, 1827-1838), p. XVII, pl. 187

cf., John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography* (Edinburgh: 1831-39) vol. 2, pp. 504-510

Scott and Stuart Gentling and John Graves, *Of Birds and Texas* (Gentling Publishers: Fort Worth, 1986), p. 87, illus.

\$200,000-300,000



Alcedo leucogaster, var. alcedo