

STRANGE COINCIDENCES
OR
THE UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE AUTHOR'S RECENT DISCOVERY OF
AN IMPORTANT LOST AUDUBON PAINTING

Discovery and Purchase

Our discovery of a painting of boat-tailed grackles by John James Audubon in late December of 1984 was a most unusual coincidence. In fact this discovery was part of a series of coincidental occurrences that have ultimately played an important part in my life and that of my twin brother Scott. At the time we first encountered this picture we were about to begin the publication of a monumental new book of our own entitled OF BIRDS AND TEXAS. We had planned for our book to be truly in the grand tradition of Audubon's own publication, BIRDS OF AMERICA, and in fact we had already dedicated our Great Imperial Folio size ^{work} book to Audubon when we first began ~~work on~~ the project nearly eight years before. A Great Imperial Folio measures 22 inches by 28 inches. To the best of my knowledge no art book of this size has ever been produced in the history of Texas publishing, and I do not know of any twentieth century American bird books that can match its format.

You can imagine our excitement when we first spotted this picture, a small black and white illustration in a Philadelphia print dealer's ^{Catalogue} which arrived in the Saturday afternoon mail. The catalogue only attributed the work to Audubon, maintaining that it might possibly be the original painting from which a print was made that appeared in Charles Lucien Bonaparte's 1825 supplement to Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY. Wilson's nine volume edition, the last part of which was published postumously nearly twelve years earlier, was the first great publication about American birds produced in this country. Both the Wilson work and the Bonaparte supplement were printed in Philadelphia, and it is definitely known that Audubon gave a painting of boat-tailed grackles to Charles Bonaparte in the Quaker City in the spring of 1824. This painting apparently disappeared shortly after its publication, and for one hundred and sixty years it was thought to be either lost or destroyed. The catalogue also described the painting as being executed only in watercolor and in pen and ink. However, as a student of Audubon's paintings for more than thirty years, I knew that his working techniques of the middle 1820's frequently included the use of pastels, egg-white for a kind of varnish and fixative, and occasionally graphite pencil.

Although eastern art dealers are rarely in their galleries on late Saturday afternoons, I took a chance and called anyway. As luck would have it, the dealer, who usually closed early on Saturdays, had come back into his shop to retrieve something he had forgotten. He later told me that if I had not contacted him at that particular time, I most likely would have lost my chance to get the picture, since later that day he was contacted at home by a very interested buyer. He had just mailed out his catalogues by bulk mail, and he thought it extremely unusual that I received my mail so quickly, since I lived halfway across the country, and it was still the holiday season. I was the first person to call him about this possible Audubon painting which was at

that moment unframed, wrapped in tissue and stored in a nearby cabinet. When I questioned him about the presence of pastel, egg-white and pencil, he brought the picture to the phone and seemed genuinely surprized to see that these media were, indeed, present on the paper. Scott and I decided to buy the bird painting immediately with the clear understanding that we had seven days in which to inspect the work and return it if we were not satisfied. To his credit the dealer genuinely believed that the painting was an original Audubon, but he felt that he could not conclusively prove it. It took Scott and me no more than one full day of searching through our own library to convince ourselves of the authenticity of the picture. Though the painting was signed in an inscription at the bottom, we felt that we could not rely on this for our verification. Audubon's unique use of pastels, and the sure and elegant lines of his drawing were powerful clues to Audubon's authorship.

Research: the Eggs and Inscriptions

By the time our newly purchased painting arrived in Fort Worth we had acquired a copy of the boat-tailed grackle plate which had appeared in volume one of the Bonaparte supplement. Several possible links between the print and the painting became immediately apparent. In our painting the artist had included in the lower right hand side of the page an illustration of a grackle egg. The print also had an egg illustration, but in this case the egg was reversed and was in the lower left corner of the page. The inscription at the bottom of the print read Drawn from Nature by John J. Audubon & A. Rider. The inscription at the bottom of our painting written in a very formal handwriting read Drawn by John J. Audubon from nature. In spite of the substantial changes made between the print and the painting, it was easy enough to see that the two were obviously related. (see the accompanying exhibit) But how to prove this relationship conclusively?

The egg illustrations gave us the most graphic clue. In spite of the alter-

ations carried out while transferring the original bird drawing to the Bonaparte supplement print, the grackle egg in the print, though turned around and placed on the other side of the plate, was exactly the same image as the egg in the painting. The peculiar speckling on the surfaces of both egg shells was identical. They had been transferred from one work to the other intact. Grackle eggs share something in common with human finger prints — no two eggs are speckled or marked alike. Not being a bird person, my Philadelphia print dealer friend was unaware of this vital fact. In his bird paintings Audubon rarely depicted eggs, but when he did so, he always included them as an integral part of the composition. However, many of the plates of the Wilson and Bonaparte books do have scientific illustrations of eggs added willy-nilly to any available space in the picture. Our researches through every one of Audubon's original paintings for his famous BIRDS OF AMERICA revealed only one clear example of his including a scientific egg illustration in his work. It is a picture of a pair of tree swallows in flight which he completed for plate 100 of his book. Scott was pleasantly surprised when he turned to the picture and read the inscription in Audubon's handwriting at the bottom, Drawn by John J. Audubon from Nature Philadelphia May 17th 1824. We could not have wished for a better piece of evidence linking our painting and the Bonaparte print with Philadelphia and the year 1824. Audubon's own journal of that year records that he gave a painting of boat-tailed grackles to Charles Bonaparte in Philadelphia in May of 1824. Some of Audubon's biographers have thought that it was a new picture, while others were certain that it was a painting of boat-tails which an earlier journal mentions him doing in January of 1821 just above New Orleans during his famous flatboat journey down the Mississippi River. The original 1821 grackle painting is in the New York Historical Society collection and has never been published. What also made the swallow picture so exciting to us was the exact word order of Audubon's inscription. I have already pointed out that our grackle painting

also bears the inscription, Drawn by John J. Audubon from Nature. The use of this exact wording is very rare in the artist's writing. He usually wrote, Drawn from nature by John J. Audubon. In all of our research through every one of the 433 surviving original paintings completed by Audubon for his BIRDS OF AMERICA, we discovered only seven examples of his use of the words, from nature, at the end of the inscription. Four of these paintings were completed in New Orleans in early 1822, and the remaining three were painted in Philadelphia in April and May of 1824! Though not absolutely conclusive, this evidence indicated that our grackle painting was most likely done in Philadelphia at the same time as the tree swallow picture, the only other Audubon water-color which also contains a sample egg.

Stylistic Considerations

I can remember that one of my first remarks to the print dealer during my initial Saturday afternoon telephone call concerned the drawing style of the female grackle -- the lower bird shown crouching and in strict profile. Keeping in mind that the catalogue had assigned the date of 1825 to our picture, I remarked to the dealer that the female looked to me as if it had been drawn in an earlier style, recalling his bird paintings of 1819 or 1820. The upper bird was depicted in a three-quarter view, a more sophisticated pose that revealed the amazing improvements that the bird artist had made in his drawing style between 1820 and 1825. Since there was an earlier unpublished grackle painting at the New York Historical Society, it seemed perfectly logical to Scott and me that Audubon had re-painted this distinctly southern species especially for the Bonaparte supplement, superimposing one bird over the other to fit the smaller format of the Bonaparte book. He then added the egg illustration to enhance the scientific aura of the work. For us, then, the obvious painting style, the handling of the egg illustrations in both the original painting and

the print, and the wording of the inscriptions which links our grackle picture to Audubon's bird paintings of 1824 had to be more than just coincidence. These details are the kind of persuasive evidence that scholars, collectors and art detectives hope for.

Signature

There was, however, a problem for Scott and me which had to do with the actual handwriting on our painting. This writing, executed in a formal engraver's script, does not resemble Audubon's usual writing style. Although William Reese, a well-known Audubon authority, claims that he knows of other examples of Audubon's use of this kind of writing style, we believe that the artist's original inscription and signature was probably trimmed off the work when it was in the printer's shop and was re-written in another hand, copying precisely what Audubon had originally written. Now that our grackle painting has been officially authenticated as a genuine work by Audubon — and a very important work at that — we are delighted to know that much of our detective work has been confirmed by the New York Historical Society. Please see the letters of Carol Slatkin and William Reese which accompany this essay.

Strange Coincidences

It was certainly a sufficiently interesting coincidence that we who have long been interested in Audubon's work were able to spot one in a catalogue that was literally sent to us from out of the blue and that we received the work into our hands in January 1985 — the bicentennial year of Audubon's birth. What makes the coincidence even stranger is that we were working on a book about birds that was dedicated to John James Audubon. When Scott and I first began work on our book many years earlier, we had no idea that our publication would be going to press on Audubon's two hundredth birthday. What seems even stranger still is the fact that when I wrote my introduction to OF BIRDS AND TEXAS, giving a brief history of American bird books, I happened to mention

this very grackle painting and its connection with the Wilson and Bonaparte editions. But I wrote this introduction more than six months before we discovered the painting! When I received his catalogue I was not one of the Philadelphia print dealer's customers. In fact my name was put on his list without my knowledge by my older brother living in North Carolina who had just purchased some botanical prints from his shop. In my introduction I wrote that one of the Bonaparte supplement's chief claims to distinction today was that " . . . this publication contained a work by a then unknown artist. It was a single plate, the picture of a pair of boat-tailed grackles, and the artist was John James Audubon. " Though nothing close to the value of a fully authenticated painting by Audubon, our picture was still expensive, and we would not have been able to afford it without the money which we had raised from the pre-publication sales of our book. This was probably the most fortuitous coincidence of all.

What did happen to Audubon in Philadelphia?

Why was Audubon's original painting so extensively altered in the image that finally appeared in the Bonaparte supplement? In a letter written to mollify a very angry Audubon, Charles Bonaparte claimed that, in spite of the artist's efforts to reduce his 1821 version of the grackles to a more compact image to fit the format of the book, the new picture was still too large. It had to be re-drawn. Since Audubon was no longer in Philadelphia, Bonaparte had to employ another artist, in this case Alexander Rider, to make the appropriate alterations. Now that Audubon's painting has come to light, a different story can be deduced which confirms in a very interesting and graphic way the celebrated conflict which Audubon had with the scientific and publishing establishment in Philadelphia when he first tried to get his bird paintings published there. This story is told in our book beginning on page 87, titled " The Great Crow Blackbird " which is the name by which boat-tailed grackles were often called in Aud-

ubon's day. When the actual painting is compared to the print which appeared in Bonaparte's book, it becomes clear that there was a deliberate attempt to erase Audubon's unique, sophisticated artistry — a style which would inevitably stand out from the other works in the book. It is well-known that several powerful men, including the printer Alexander Lawson, had vested interests in Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY and the Bonaparte supplement. Publicly, these men considered Audubon to be little more than a nuisance, a backwoods upstart without scientific credentials. Privately they could see that, whether or not Audubon's birds conformed to their standards of scientific purity, the bird artist's paintings did have a charm and an appeal that could overshadow the books upon which they had lavished so much of their time and money and had established their reputations. As soon as the thirty-nine year old Audubon had arrived in the city after a long journey from Louisiana he began opening his portfolios of bird paintings to show his work to anyone who would look. He was not very tactful in expressing his opinions of other artists' work, and his critical comments on the drawings in Wilson's volumes began to offend some listeners in very exalted circles. Usually sensitive to social situations, the American woodsman, as he was beginning to refer to himself, was strangely unaware of the fact that newcomers, regardless of their talents, always have a difficult time getting their work recognized by the establishment. This was especially true in Audubon's day when there were fewer avenues by which a newcomer could establish a reputation.

Lawson told Audubon to his face that he did not like his work and that he would not publish it. However, Charles Bonaparte, the wealthy twenty-one year old nephew of Napoleon who was spending some time in this country with his uncle Joseph, the exiled king of Spain, had taken a liking to his fellow Frenchman. He promised Audubon that he would include one of his works in his forthcoming supplement, and since he was financing the enterprize, he was going to have his

way no matter what Lawson and others thought. Bonaparte apparently underestimated the resentment harboured against Audubon by many of Wilson's most influential supporters in Philadelphia. It is Scott's and my belief that Bonaparte was finally forced to attempt a compromise by which a bird plate would be included in the supplement which would be based on a painting by Audubon, but that it would be completely re-drawn to conform to the style of the other illustrations in the book. Audubon, of course, would receive credit, but it would be a credit that he would have to share with another artist. Lawson and others would be satisfied, and the public would not get a chance to see Audubon's real abilities in the supplement. There would also be the very strong implication that Audubon's work had to be "corrected" to make it fit for a proper scientific publication. As a compromiser Bonaparte was caught in the middle of this conflict. He tried to put the best face on the whole affair, but there really was very little that he could do about it. Bonaparte personally had too much already at stake to offend the Philadelphians who were supporting his supplement. Audubon was deeply wounded by the whole experience. There was certainly no denying that he got the message from the Philadelphian establishment. He was a nobody. And he would remain a nobody as long as the scientists and publishers of Philadelphia — the leading scientific publishing city in America — wished him to remain that way.

Audubon was so angry at the unjust manner in which he and his painting of the boat-tailed grackles had been treated that he decided to give up trying to have his birds published in this country. He began to turn his ambition and his attention to the great publishing centers of Europe. The bird artist's experiences in the City of Brotherly Love have been written about in most of his biographies, but until this little picture re-appeared, none of the stories concerning this critical period in Audubon's career could reveal exactly what

happened nor why memories of this time in his life rankled him for the rest of his days. Robert Peck's recent bicentennial article in the elegant FMR Magazine (July, August 1985) offers much new information, while at the same time does not even mention the Grackle painting. Scott and I are delighted to be able to publish John James Audubon's boat-tailed grackles in our ~~OF~~ ~~BIRDS AND TEXAS.~~ ~~It~~ is published for the first time in its original form and in facsimile size. We hope that by doing so, not only will our publication be enhanced, but we will also be correcting an old injustice. It should be kept in mind that this unpretentious little picture is Audubon's first published work, and it is the only Audubon bird painting published in his lifetime that still remains in private hands.

Audubon Comes To Our Rescue

The Audubon painting was to have one last, but very crucial part to play in our lives, especially in the production of our book. Though we had hoped to complete the printing for OF BIRDS AND TEXAS by the middle of 1985, we ran into several costly delays which finally threatened the very existence of our project. Work was halted for lack of funds, and just when things were looking quite hopeless we finally received official word from the New York Historical Society, establishing beyond a doubt the authenticity of the boat-tailed grackles. The Society is the recognized authority on Audubon paintings, since it owns and maintains all of Audubon's original paintings for his BIRDS OF AMERICA as well as countless animal paintings, earlier works and studies of all kinds. With this authentication in hand we were able to re-finance our project and complete the publication of our book.

Conclusion: Spiritual Connections

Whether or not one believes in fate or kismet or some other kind of cosmic destiny, it is still difficult to explain away the series of unusual coincidences which have brought us closer to one of our artistic heroes, a man who has been

dead since 1851. Scott and I can quite honestly say that the reason why we are artists today can be traced directly back to our boyhood interests in Audubon's works and our early attempts to copy them nearly thirty years ago. I remember that we first discussed the possibility of doing a large book about birds as early as 1966, and even at that time we were determined to dedicate such a book to John James Audubon. The fact that years later when I actually began writing the introduction to our book and I happened to mention a long-lost Audubon painting by name, months before I knew that the painting existed, is odd enough. But to suddenly discover this very picture on the eve of Audubon's bicentennial birthday and at a time when proceeds from early subscribers to our book which honors Audubon enabled us to purchase it — all these coincidences make a wonderful story. To have that lost Audubon painting later come to our rescue to help finance the completion of our own book, further enriches the story. In a very real sense, then, Audubon has participated in the creation and actual publication of OF BIRDS AND TEXAS. Scott and I are confident that our book will stand on its own as a very special 20th century book. But our chance discovery of this important lost painting does confer an added uniqueness to what we have done. It is the only painting in the world which still could connect OF BIRDS AND TEXAS in a spiritual way with the two greatest books on American birds published in the 19th century, Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY and the BIRDS OF AMERICA by John James Audubon.

Stuart Gentling

The End