

The Philadelphia Print Shop

8405 GERMANTOWN AVENUE
CHESTNUT HILL
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19118
(215) 242-4750

DONALD H. CRESSWELL
RES. (215) 649-2354

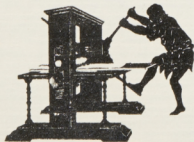
CHRISTOPHER W. LANE
RES. (215) 233-3291

Pen and Watercolor drawing attributed to John James Audubon
Signed in an engraver's script, "Drawn by John J. Audubon from Nature."
1825. 10 1/2 x 14 (full sheet laid on board which is on a
larger board). It was once framed, because a mat browning is evident
around the edge of the sheet.

This drawing is probably John James Audubon's original drawing, which
was submitted to Charles Lucien Bonaparte for his supplement to
Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology. When Audubon sent this
drawing to the publisher, it was too large for the engraver to transfer
onto a copper plate. So Alexander Rider redrew the picture for
engraving and, as was the custom, credit was given in the book to both
men. The redrawing by Rider is in the Academy of Natural Sciences in
Philadelphia. It is smaller than the present study by approximately
one inch and provides the missing link between this drawing and the
final version.

Also in the Academy is a translation of a letter from Bonaparte to
Audubon from Saratoga, N.Y. This letter is evidently answering an
angry correspondence from Audubon to Bonaparte and diplomatically
explains why the plate of the "Great Crow Blackbird" appeared changed
and with Ryder in the credits. Bonaparte says, "I have been very upset
by your plate of the Grackles, and for the part I played in it." He
explains that it was "never compared ... to nature" and that he had
received "no notes from Audubon" and that the "drawing does not match
the notes in Bonaparte's text." He goes on to explain that "later,
when the drawing was made to conform to the text, it was too big for
the binding, something that I could not believe you took the exact
measurements of, but of which the engraver convinced me of by eye, and
of which you can convince yourself in comparing your drawing with my
plate." More is worth quoting in full:

I had to put the whole, which took the length of
the plate in another position, although your
'figure' was just as big as mine, and this upset
the whole composition. Mr. Lawson wanted to do it
over again. *But aside from the fact that he was not
capable, you registered that you did not want any of
your work changed. So I decided to have made another



OLD PRINTS, MAPS AND BOOKS

drawing, and I didn't even want to engage Mr. Peale to do this. (I hope you appreciate this more). It was Mr. Rider, a well-known artist who having nature and your work before him, made the outline, after which (and Nature still) Mr. Lawson engraved the plate, which I think is one of the best plates of the work, in spite of the fact that Mr. Rider made an entirely new drawing [now in the Academy of Natural Sciences], since he took a good deal from you, having consulted your friends, particularly the good, modest LeSeur, we decided that the two names of Audubon and Rider should be together on the plate.

Here is obviously the gentleman Prince addressing the temperamental artist-naturalist. The letter tells a story that has not yet been published in such detail, although scholars have always known that something of this sort happened to Audubon's drawing. We have neither provenance nor internal evidence to conclusively prove that this drawing is the source for the first print of a bird to be published from an Audubon drawing. When asking the question of what else could it be and comparing it with other Audubon drawings in collections, we obtain a strong sense of authenticity. This drawing is reversed from the print, which is right for the source of an engraving; an artist's practice by copying an engraved plate would be evidenced by the drawing facing the same direction as the plate. The similarity of small details such as the spotting on the egg suggest careful copying that would be characteristic of an engraver copying from an artist rather than an artist copying from an engraver's work. The drawing itself is a fascinating piece, well done in its own right, and the possibilities that future research will raise about it are enticing.

