

5 January 1985

Mr. Richard York
21 E. 65th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

Dear Sir:

Last week Stephanie Starr at the New York Historical Society told me that you might be able to help me officially authenticate and appraise the value of a work of art which I have purchased. It is a small painting of a pair of Boat-tailed Grackles attributed to John James Audubon. My brother and I bought this picture last year from Messrs. Don Cresswell and Christopher Lane of the Philadelphia Print Shop in Philadelphia. We have been great admirers of Audubon's work and have studied it for more than thirty years. Quite frankly, I believe that we are as familiar with his painting style and peculiar techniques as well as the dating of his pictures as most of the accredited experts. What we are not familiar with is the possible value of his work, since very few of his paintings ever appear on the market, and thus consistent sales records are scarce.

In order to determine the painting's value, it is important to keep in mind several factors that are unique to this work of art. As a work of Audubon's art it is simple and unpretentious, though it is very finely executed. Its main value certainly lies in its historical importance. If this Grackle picture is the particular work of art that Ron Tyler, Jan Muhlert, William Reese and my brother, Scott, and I think it is, it occupies a very interesting and important place in Audubon's life story. It is in fact his very first published bird painting. Even though most of the painting was redrawn by Alexander Rider for publication, Audubon still received credit for the work. (See the accompanying exhibits.) The picture was given to Charles Lucien Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon. Bonaparte was, at the age of twenty-one, already one of the most important pioneers of ornithology in both Europe and this country. He was to publish this Grackle painting in 1825 in volume one of his four volume supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology, the first great publication on American birds produced in this country. Since the Bonaparte supplement is now considered by book dealers to be part of Wilson's earlier publication, this painting provides the only link between Audubon — by far the most famous painter of birds in history — and the work of Alexander Wilson,

who is honored as " the father of American Ornithology. " Keeping in mind the fact that for 160 years this Grackle painting was considered by Audubon experts to be either lost or destroyed, its reappearance will be an important event for those scholars who are interested in this period of Audubon's life. This painting clears up a number of questions which Audubon scholars have had concerning how the picture was translated into the etched plate that appeared in the Wilson Supplement. It clearly explains how George Ord, Alexander Lawson and perhaps Titian Peale acted to remove as much of Audubon's contribution to the Supplement as possible. (See Exhibit G) It is also very important to remember that it was Audubon's bitter disappointment over the way that his artistic contribution to the supplement was handled which made him determined to seek a publisher abroad. This little Grackle painting, then, figures in a very important way in Audubon's decision to have his work published in Europe. And finally, perhaps from the standpoint of monetary value, the most important fact of all is that this painting of the Boat-tailed Grackles is the only Audubon bird painting published in Audubon's lifetime that is still in private hands. All the rest are in the New York Historical Society with the exception of his original paintings of the Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and the Black-throated Blue Warbler which are presumed to be either lost or destroyed.

We intend to give this painting to the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art some day, and I have already discussed this with Jan Muhlert, the museum's director, and with the museum's curator, Ron Tyler. I have enclosed my correspondence with Tyler and with William Reese, the book dealer considered by Tyler to be an important Audubon scholar. (See exhibits D,E, and F.). I hope that these exhibits will be a research aid to you should you decide to help us. I would like to discuss this with you at your convenience. My telephone number here in Fort Worth is 817 - 738 4427. I look forward to talking to you and hearing what you may have to say concerning this fascinating little painting.

Sincerely yours,

Stuart W. Gentling
Stuart W. Gentling

Note: Please see the following page for a list of Exhibits accompanying this letter.