

12 March 1985

Dr. Ron Tyler
The Amon Carter Museum of Western Art
3501 Camp Bowie Blvd.
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Ron,

I thoroughly enjoyed our talk at the museum opening the other night. In connection with our conversation I am enclosing a few materials that might be of interest to you. One of these is a photo of the Audubon painting of the Boat-tailed Grackles which my brother Scott and I recently purchased. Also included is a zeroxed copy of the birds as they appeared in their altered form in Charles Lucien Bonaparte's supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology of 1825. Along with these two pictures I am sending you the written description which the dealer in Philadelphia mailed to us. We have only done research through our own library, but everything that we have found only seems to confirm to our satisfaction that the painting in question is indeed an original Audubon.

It seemed strange to me that in their description of the picture the dealer mentioned only the use of watercolor and pen and ink when even a casual inspection of the piece revealed the use of pastel, pencil and egg white which are the classic elements of Audubon's technique in the mid-1820's. My first impression when I looked at their photos of the painting was that the female Grackle (the lower bird) echoed Audubon's slightly earlier style — that of 1818 to 1820. I was later to learn that Audubon had painted a picture of Boat-tailed Grackles at Bonnet Carree Church above New Orleans in early January of 1821. This picture is now in the New York Historical Society. To the best of my knowledge it has never been reproduced before.

It is very probable that Audubon had this Louisiana painting with him in Philadelphia in May of 1824 when Bonaparte requested that he submit a picture of this distinctly southern species for publication in his forthcoming Wilson supplement. Since Audubon frequently reworked or copied over earlier works for inclusion in later pictures, it is quite possible that the unpublished Grackle in the New York historical society collection served as the model for our picture. It would be

fun to research this.

Though this picture is signed, the presence of the signature had very little influence on our decision to purchase this work. At first we agreed with the dealer that since the inscription was written very formally in an engraver's script and in unusual wording, it could have been written by anybody. The phrase " Drawn By John J. Audubon from nature " is extremely uncommon in Audubon's work. Our initial reservations about the authenticity of the signature, however, have been considerably modified by our subsequent research. Looking through our American Heritage books with their photographic reproductions of Audubon's original paintings for The Birds of America we found six examples of Audubon's inscribing his pictures with this particular phrase. Four of the six were dated February 1822 from New Orleans, and the remaining two examples — that of the Ringneck Plover and the Tree Swallow were painted in Philadelphia in May of 1824. Audubon's own journal records that he did our Grackle painting also in May, 1824 in Philadelphia.

I made a quick review of the inscriptions by Alexander Lawson, the printer who did the plates for Wilson's original books and Bonaparte's supplement, and though I have not seen all of them, nowhere did I encounter an example of Lawson using this phrase. Furthermore, the painting of the Tree Swallow is the only painting of a bird later to be included in his elephant folio publication which had an example of its egg added to the picture. (This egg was later left out in the Havell print) There is also an egg in his painting of Cliff Swallows, but this egg is worked as an integral element of the composition and was thus retained in the Havell engraving. I might add here that Audubon was trying to project an image of himself as a scientist to important people of Philadelphia and later in August of 1824 he was to deliver a lecture on the subject of migration or hibernation of swallows to the members of New York City's Lyceum of Natural History.

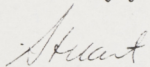
Compare the egg of the original Grackle painting with Lawson's print of the egg. Taking into account the slight difference which is the result of translating by etching Audubon's original painting and the fact that the egg is reversed in the print, the two eggs correspond so closely as to be almost identical. Since no two grackle eggs are marked in the same way, the dramatic similarity between the two is not a coincidence.

I am also including some materials concerning our forthcoming bird book which is dedicated to Audubon and which will include a facsimile reproduction of the

original Audubon painting along with our painting of the Grackles. In addition to this we are including a facsimile reproduction of the first page of a manuscript which Audubon wrote in 1830 describing the Red-shouldered Hawks from his elephant folio. It also has never been reproduced in its original form though it did appear as edited by William McGillivray in Audubon's Ornithological Biography. Scott and I would like to give one of our books to the Museum if you are interested. I have already talked to Nancy Wynn who seems pleased with the prospect.

Ron, I would like to show you our bird paintings at our office which is very near to the Museum at 902 Boland Street. Please feel free to call me at any time. My office number is 332-7059 but since I am only there for appointments, you will have better luck if you call me at home. My number at home is 738-4427. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,



Stuart W. Gentling