



The New-York Historical Society

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James B. Bell, Director

18 February 1986

Mr. Stuart Gentling
4801 Harley Street
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Mr. Gentling:

You can well imagine what a thrill it has been for me to be able to examine closely the picture of the Boat-tailed Grackles that you and your brother recently purchased, and to compare the picture to our two versions of the same subject by John James Audubon! From all indications it seems clear to me that your picture is indeed a later version by Audubon of the unpublished picture of 1821 owned by The New-York Historical Society. The highly distinctive style and technique, the proximity to our earlier picture, and the history of the Audubon-Rider/Lawson image provide, in my opinion, clearly convincing evidence of Audubon's authorship. The positions of the birds in your picture are essentially identical to those in our work: the difference is that in your picture, executed three years after ours, Audubon made a more visually sophisticated and complex if somewhat more crowded image than the earlier work represents. By placing the figure of the male bird in your picture higher on the branch than in the 1821 version, Audubon partly superimposed it over that of the female, producing through the form of the two birds combined (albeit through necessity) a more pictorially expressive, compact, abstract shape than the earlier image possesses.

Our 1821 picture contains some foliage and Spanish Moss (presumably painted by Joseph Mason), which, undoubtedly in the interests of expeditiousness and scientific purity, he omits from yours. Ours lacks the egg included in yours which, as you have rightly observed, was most probably included to legitimize the work as serious ornithological illustration in the eyes of the Philadelphia natural history establishment. The particular combination of media used in your picture--pencil, watercolor, ink, pastel, and eggwhite wash are, as you have already noted, characteristic of Audubon's work of this period. Our earlier picture lacks the fine pencilled detail on the feathering and the eggwhite wash apparent in yours

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(and apparent, as well, in our later picture of about 1832 which was used for the Birds of America engraving)

Your work is stylistically intermediate between our two pictures. It is smaller (our 1821 picture measures 22x17 inches unframed)--as you correctly indicate to fit in with the format of Wilson's book for which it was to serve as an engraving. In your picture, the birds' eyes are more expressive than in our earlier picture, although, interestingly, not so bright as in our later work, by which time Audubon had discovered that the Atlantic Coast Boat-tails have yellow eyes; he used these to great visual advantage! There is more iridescence apparent in your picture than in our earlier one, owing to the presence in yours of the eggwhite wash, and to a greater use of bluish pigment. In our later work, considerably more blue and green is present in the male bird, making it more iridescent still.

As to the impact on Audubon of the Lawson engraving, (and, indeed, of that whole experience) I suspect the following: In our later grackle picture, Audubon has relied not at all on his earlier versions, but has actually recreated, in an infinitely more accomplished image the Lawson engraving (itself, of course, an adulterated version of his original, which you own). It seems as though Audubon wished to make clear his preponderant expertise, and to reclaim the territory from Rider and Lawson. He has thus used the position of the male grackle in the Rider/Lawson engraving for a much more finely executed female, (complete with closed beak, as in the engraving, but unlike either of the earlier versions), and turned Lawson's open-beaked female into a calling male, reversing the position and adding the detail of the foot lifted spontaneously off the branch. He thus amply demonstrated his surpassing mastery over Lawson's engraved work.

I have shown your picture to our conservator, and she has indicated the following: certain work needs to be undertaken immediately to save the picture from further deterioration. The picture must be removed from the backing and lined with some other acid-free medium. The surface should be cleaned, but, because of the diversity of media in the picture--some friable, some water-soluble--extreme care must be taken in cleaning, and no water-treatment can be used. Our conservator confirmed that the picture must be worked on by someone extremely experienced, particularly due to its great importance. She told me that for outside work the Historical Society is now using a conservator

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from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania who was trained at the Rijksmuseum in Holland, and is as fine as anyone around. If you like, I could ask him to write a report about the picture and send you a conservation cost estimate.

On the subject of Audubon in Philadelphia, I wonder whether you are familiar with Bob Peck's article that appeared in FMR magazine in July/August 1985 on that subject. If not, I would be happy to send you a xerox copy.

I'm sure I hardly need to repeat what an impact there is when one sees all three Audubon Boat-tails next to one another and to the Birds of America engraving. The New-York Historical Society does not own three versions of any other Audubon watercolor--not to mention one which figured so prominently in Audubon's career, and in the playing out of American nineteenth-century natural history--and it is a remarkable experience to observe the phenomenon. I urge you to try to find a way to come to the Society some day with the picture and see for yourself what an impression the group of images makes. Scholarship is rendered all the richer by the discovery of this missing link in the Audubon oeuvre, and I am deeply grateful to you for providing me the opportunity to see it.

If you should find a way to come to New York, I hope that you will allow me to arrange a little luncheon for you with our Director and with Mike and Mary Harwood. I know they would all be so pleased.

If I can be of any further help with the picture, I hope that you will not hesitate to call on me.

Sincerely yours,

Carole Anne Slatkin

Carole Anne Slatkin
Assistant Director