

22 December 1986

Jan Muhlert, director
The Amon Carter Museum
3501 Camp Bowie Blvd.
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Jan:

Now that we have finished the formidable job of assembling, signing and delivering all the books ordered by our subscribers to date, I am at last free to pursue the sale of our original Audubon painting. I feel somewhat awkward in approaching you about this, since, as you know, it was my original desire to give the picture to the Carter Museum eventually. It is precisely our book or rather the extremely costly delays which we experienced in getting the book published which have made it prudent and necessary for us at this time to sell the painting, recover those costs and free our project from bank control. The Carter Museum is the first institution that I have approached about this, but I have been contacted by a few other interested buyers and will soon pursue these contacts if you are not interested.

Since Scott and I are not accredited scholars or museum professionals, and what is worse — we are "local boys", it is difficult to believe that we have actually made an important discovery in American art history without leaving Fort Worth. But such is the case. Jan, try to keep in mind that this painting of Boat-tailed Grackles is John James Audubon's very first published work, and it is the only Audubon bird painting published in Audubon's lifetime that remains in private hands. It is the last and only Audubon painting in the world to possess this distinction. Please read the letter by Carol Slatkin, assistant director of the New York Historical Society, in which she discusses this painting's "great importance" and " . . . one which figured so prominently in Audubon's career, and in the playing out of American nineteenth century natural history " It is also important to remember that this picture was personally presented by Audubon to Charles Lucien Bonaparte and was for a time actually in his possession, whereas the "Bonaparte Audubon" proof plates of which the Carter is so justifiably proud were never personally viewed by Bonaparte who, before the prints had arrived in America, had left for Europe, never to return. It should be noted that this particular picture is the only painting in existence which figures in an important way in both Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY and Audubon's BIRDS OF AMERICA, the two greatest nineteenth

century publications on American birds.

Please let me know if you are interested, and I will be glad to provide you with all our research material. The story behind the creation of this picture is certainly one of the most interesting moments in Audubon's life history. It was his disappointment over the manner in which this particular grackle painting was handled by Bonaparte and his Philadelphia printer — the former publisher of Wilson's work — that made Audubon determined to go to Europe to get his work published. William Reese's article in the Carter Museum's own publication PRINTS OF THE AMERICAN WEST discusses Audubon's relations with Bonaparte and his Philadelphia experience, but Reese drew some erroneous conclusions, because he did not have the benefit of being able to see our picture. A new monograph or even a small book could be written about Audubon's experience with this painting. Even the fact that it was discovered by us in Audubon's bicentennial year and that it played such an important role in the publication of our own book, I think, further enhances the uniqueness of this painting.

I realize that discretion is important when one offers a painting to a museum. However, I think it is only fair to tell you that I plan to turn the sale of our painting over to Kelly Anderson of Coe Kerr Gallery or perhaps to Sotheby's if I am not successful with my early contacts. Peter Rathbone of Sotheby's for obvious reasons and citing the current vigor of the market in important nineteenth century American art, has tried to persuade me to test the painting at auction. He has viewed this work and believes it to be worth between \$250,000 and \$350,000.

Jan, I might be willing to make some concessions to see the work remain in Fort Worth, but necessity demands that I move with dispatch. You have shown some interest in this painting in the past, but we failed to get together after I contacted you. If you would like to discuss the picture, I would be glad to meet with you at any time. I would certainly like to hear from you one way or the other. Until then Scott and I hope that Chris and you and your entire family have a merry Christmas and a happy holiday season.

Sincerely yours,

Stuart W. Gentling