

12 February 1987

Mary Durant and Michael Harwood
Box 51
Washington, Connecticut 06793

Dear Mary and Michael,

About five years ago I came across a copy of ON THE ROAD WITH JOHN JAMES AUDUBON in a local book store. It was a much-used copy that was part of a collection of bird books from an estate sale. In spite of its condition I purchased the book along with a few other works from the collection, and later that evening back at home it was the first book that I opened. It certainly did not take long for me to see why it had been read and re-read so many times.

At the time that I bought I bought your book my twin brother Scott and I were working on paintings which we hoped would become part of a special publication about birds and our home state of Texas. Our book was to be entitled OF BIRDS AND TEXAS. Both the text and the 50 color plates were to be printed in the Great Imperial Folio size of 22 by 28 inches. Although Scott and I are not wildlife painters and absolutely have no intentions of making a career of such work, we had talked about doing this kind of book since 1966. From the very beginning it had been our intent to create a book to be our personal tribute to the memory of one of our very special artistic heroes — John James Audubon. But what a book you both have produced! My brother and I were captivated from the beginning. From the very first pages came forth a flood of memories of our own past trips to Audubon country, to New Orleans, Baton Rouge, the Felicianas and Natchez and up along the Ohio to Henderson and parts north. Our first serious artistic efforts were spent in making facsimile-size copies of Audubon's birds and then bird paintings of our own. It was a delightful apprenticeship which helped us to learn many of the skills and techniques that made it possible for us to eventually pursue careers in art.

We were only sixteen or seventeen years old back in the late fifties when we made our first Audubon expeditions. Our tolerant parents let us have the family stationwagon and allowed us to head out to parts unknown, not knowing where we were bound or when we would return. I still vividly remember the car loaded with painting gear, cameras and books about Audubon and his works. Even today it is difficult for Scott or me to explain to

others: the special fascination this man and his work holds for us, but now when we are asked, I can simply say, " Read ON THE ROAD WITH JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, and you will understand. " Of all the Audubon material we have read in the last thirty years, no other book has given us a clearer portrait of the great bird artist as we think he may have been. In your final chapter as you describe your feelings in the churchyard of the Trinity Chapel — a place oddly enough which Scott and I have never visited inspite of our trips to New York City — I felt like we were really with you. There is a feeling of finality to this chapter which is still as potent to me now as when I first read it. But as you point out so beautifully, such emotional connections can hold a biographer for a lifetime. I can not begin to tell you how much pleasure your book has given us. We spent hours reading to each other while we were working on the paintings for our book, and I believe we have mentioned you and your book at least a couple of times in our own publication.

The process of getting our book OF BIRDS AND TEXAS published occupied us for about nine years. It is uncanny how often our publishing experiences paralleled Audubon's. The search for subscribers, the difficulties of seeking a printer capable of producing such a large work, the problems of financing this expensive undertaking and convincing various professionals of the legitimacy of our undertaking — all recall Audubon's travails though they, of course, pale beside Audubon's task. And yet I am proud of what we have produced. It is the largest book of its kind ever published in Texas, and I believe that it will hold its own in comparison to other contemporary books of a similar nature. The text which is printed entirely with hand-set type has been handled with skill and artistry that will compare favorably with publications from the best known contemporary printers. While our commentary to the plates makes no attempt at literary pretensions, the essay by John Graves titled " Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser, " is a wonderful piece of writing by an author who has been universally acclaimed as one of our finest prose stylists. Since our book is a limited edition, most of which has been sold within Texas so far, I really regret that more people will not get a chance to read it.

We had no idea when we began work on the project just how long it was going to take. The fact that our book went to press in 1985 — the bicentennial year of Audubon's birth — was pure coincidence. However, this is only one of a series of strange coincidences having to do with Audubon which made our publishing experience seem at times almost supernatural. You can read about these experiences in the accompanying paper that I wrote entitled " Strange Coinci-

dences. " The gist of the story concerns the discovery which Scott and I made in a small catalogue mailed out by a Philadelphia print dealer in late December 1984. The catalogue showed a small black and white illustration of a watercolor that was only attributed to J.J.A. It was a painting of boat-tailed grackles, sometimes referred to as great crow-blackbirds in Audubon's day. This was quite possibly the very picture which I had written about six months earlier in my Introduction to our book. Scott and I purchased the painting on a hunch that it was, indeed, a long-lost original Audubon painting with an extremely interesting history. It has since been authenticated by our research (outlined in my story) and by Carole Ann Slatkin of the New York Historical Society whose letter is enclosed in this package.

It still seems incredible that we should discover such a work just at the time we were publishing our own book, a book dedicated to Audubon. This picture of boat-tailed grackles is John James Audubon's very first published bird painting, and it is the only Audubon bird painting published in the artist's lifetime that still remains in private hands. It was first published by Charles Lucien Bonaparte as plate IV, volume I of his famous four-volume supplement to Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY. The story behind the creation and publication of this grackle painting concerns Audubon's frustrating first attempt to find a publisher in Philadelphia in the spring of 1824. The bird artist's experience in Philadelphia made him determined to go to Europe to seek a publisher. This story has been written about numerous times by most of Audubon's biographers, but the " discovery " of this picture sheds much new light on what actually happened and corrects errors made in the Audubon biographies. This painting is reproduced in our book for the very first time as Audubon actually meant it to be seen. It is shown in facsimile size. In a very wonderful way it unites OF BIRDS AND TEXAS with both Wilson's publications and Audubon's BIRDS OF AMERICA — the two most important 19th century publications about American birds.

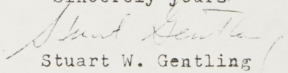
When we ran into several extremely costly delays during the printing phase of our book, delays which almost destroyed the project, we were able to get further financing to finish the book by using the Audubon painting as collateral. In a very real way, then, Audubon actually came to our rescue and saved our book! We still own the painting, but it now resides in the vault of the Amon Carter Museum where it will occasionally be on display. It is an ironic twist that this painting — the first of Audubon's published works — should be the last to find its way into the public domain.

From the moment we first read ON THE ROAD WITH J.J.A. Scott and I promised ourselves that, if we ever got our book published, we would give you a copy - an Artists' Copy. We are also giving a book to the New York Historical Society library. Accompanying this letter is a sample portfolio containing some of the text pages and color plates from the book. Even this sample can not really convey what the total ensemble is really like. The complete book weighs more than 46 pounds. To date we have sold more than half the regular edition of 500 copies. All the 25 artists' copies - each of which is remarked with an original watercolor bird study - are spoken for, with the exception of a few reserved for special people like you. We would very much like you to accept an Artists' Copy from us, because it is our way of showing our gratitude and saying thankyou for creating something very wonderful which has given us countless hours of meaningful enjoyment. Scott has already painted a remarque with you in mind. It is a painting based on a statement that Mary made in your book, and because we want it to be a surprize, you are going to have to wait until we send you your book.

We will be shipping your book to you by UPS as soon as I hear from you and know that somebody will be there at home to receive it. If you would like to call me, I can be reached at this number (I-817 738-4427) especially in the mornings before noon. You can also leave a message at my office number (I-817 332-7059), and I will get back to you.

I realize that our gift may seem strange to you, coming out of the blue like it does, especially since we have never met. However, Scott and I truly feel that we do know you. After all, we have been " on the road " together, and what better way can you get to know somebody than by taking a trip with them? Scott and I are looking forward to hearing from you. Until then I remain -

Sincerely yours


Stuart W. Gentling

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