

TO May 1987

On Wednesday, May 28th 1987 Sotheby's in New York is going to offer at Auction a unique painting by John James Audubon. It is a work on paper measuring 10" by 14½" depicting a pair of boat-tailed grackles perched on a simple branch. This painting was executed by Audubon in Philadelphia in 1824 as an offering to Charles Lucian Bonaparte to be included in his 1825 Supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology, the first great publication on American birds produced in this country.

This picture is a simplified version of an earlier, larger painting executed by Audubon near New Orleans in the winter of 1821. In our 1824 version the artist placed the grackles so that they overlapped each other, and he also removed the leafy oak branches and Spanish moss of the earlier picture. For added scientific emphasis Audubon added a grackle egg in the lower right corner of the sheet.

Audubon made these re-visions at the request of Bonaparte so that the work might meet the printer's specifications to insure its publication in the Bonaparte book. However, the print which appeared in the Supplement was significantly altered by another artist named Alexander Rider, and both artists shared credit for the plate. It was Audubon's disappointment over the publisher's treatment of this particular painting that convinced him to go to Europe to seek a publisher for his Birds of America.

Every Audubon biography has dealt with the artist's 1824 journey to Philadelphia and his first attempt to get his work published, but many mysteries have remained until this painting recently came to light. It has been authenticated by the New York Historical Society which owns the largest collection of original Audubons. It is thought to be the only Audubon bird painting published in the artist's lifetime that remains in private hands. The uniqueness of this particular grackle painting is further enhanced by the fact that it was owned by Charles Lucian Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon and an important pioneering ornithologist in his own right, and also by its close association with Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology. This is John James Audubon's first published bird painting.

For your convenience we are including with this letter a photo of the painting which is accompanied by a detailed description of the work and the story behind its creation. We are also enclosing a Xeroxed copy of the grackle print from the Bonaparte-Wilson Supplement and a copy of the commentary from the Sotheby catalogue. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at (817) 332-7059, or Eda Martin at Sotheby's (212) 606-7280.

Sincerely yours,

Ralph Carr, manager
Gentling Publications