

28 January 1988

Ron Tyler, Director
Texas State Historical Association
2/306 Richardson Hall
University Station
Austin, Texas 78712

Dear Ron,

Here is my proposal for a paper for the next annual North American Print Conference. Perhaps I can come up with a less pompous title, but it does seem to explain what I would like to talk about. There will be a slide presentation with the lecture, and if I can find a suitable display space, I will try to arrange an exhibition of the original paintings from OF BIRDS AND TEXAS somewhere in Austin. The pictures have never before been displayed in that city, and Austin, as you know, is the city where the entire book was produced.

Since I talked with you this morning I have decided to give the Historical Association a regular copy of OF BIRDS AND TEXAS, and I also will provide the Association with a remarked Title page with a watercolor study of a Scissor-tailed flycatcher. The value of the book is \$2,500. The value of the remarque is \$1,875. The two items can be auctioned together or separately as you wish. You will probably raise more money if the items are sold apart.

Ron, please let me know as soon as possible whether or not my paper proposal is accepted and if the possible exhibition of the original paintings is a good idea. If you have any suggestions for a place to display them, please feel free to offer them. Until then, take care.

Stuart

P.S. I am sending along an updated commentary list and some additional information which may be of help to your panel of sponsors.

Tradition and Continuity: A Modern Elephant Folio from Texas and its Curious Relationship to John James Audubon and American Natural History Publishing

This paper will consist of two parts. The first section will discuss the planning, production and promotion of what historian A.C. Greene has called, "the most stunning and prodigious book in Texas history." Entitled OF BIRDS AND TEXAS, this book was published in late 1986 as the result of an eight-year collaboration by the author, his twin brother and a team of fellow Texans including writer John Graves, master printer David Holman of Wind River Press and book binder Craig Jensen.

OF BIRDS AND TEXAS is a forty-six pound Elephant or Great Imperial Folio consisting of fifty offset color plates of Texas birds and landscapes and eighty-seven pages of text printed by letterpress with Centaur monotype. Both the color plates and text sheets measure 22 inches by 28 inches. The pages are unbound and are contained in two portfolios placed within a linen-covered box. The book is dedicated to John James Audubon whose paintings and BIRDS OF AMERICA have long been an important influence on the Gentlings.

The paper's second section will deal with the Gentlings' unusual discovery, purchase and authentication of a long lost original painting by John James Audubon. In some respects this is a follow-up of William Reese's article on Audubon and Prince Charles Lucien Bonaparte delivered in 1978 at the ninth annual North American Print Conference. This author will make a number of observations which will modify Reese's conclusions and cast more light on Audubon's frustrating first attempt to get his work published.

The painting in question is a small watercolor and pastel rendering of a pair of boat-tailed grackles which Audubon created in Philadelphia in the spring of 1824. Audubon presented it to Bonaparte in the hope of having it published in the prince's forthcoming supplement to the late Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY. Wilson's book was the first great publication on American birds produced in this country, and today both the Wilson and the Bonaparte books are generally regarded as one publication.

Audubon's grackles was published in the supplement in 1825. However, the picture that appeared as plate IV of volume one was considerably altered in the printer's shop by another artist named Alexander Rider, and Audubon thus had to share credit for the plate. This experience was so distasteful to the great bird artist that he became determined to seek a publisher in Europe. Carol Slatkin of the New York Historical Society (personal communication) pointed out to this writer that the Bonaparte plate was to have a lingering effect on Audubon. Later in 1832, while preparing a new original painting of boat-tailed grackles for plate CLXXXVII of his BIRDS OF AMERICA, Audubon created a composition that was a direct answer to the publishers of the Bonaparte supplement. This writer will illustrate the interesting evolution of Audubon's grackle paintings and offer insights on Audubon's famous Philadelphia experience not previously published.

In spite of Audubon's disappointment with the Bonaparte supplement, his boat-tailed grackles was his first published bird painting. After one hundred and sixty years it now appears for the first time in OF BIRDS AND TEXAS as he had originally intended it to be seen. From the time my brother and I first began work on our book we had planned to dedicate it to Audubon, and even six months before we discovered the grackle painting in a Philadelphia print dealer's catalogue I wrote about this very picture in my introduction to our book. We received the picture in January 1985, the beginning of the bicentennial year of Audubon's birth. This coincidence was to have major consequences for our book, because later in the year we ran into delays so costly that the entire project was threatened. It became necessary to auction the Audubon to help pay these increased expenses. Its sale at Sotheby's in New York on May 28th 1987 resulted in

the highest price ever paid for an Audubon bird painting at auction. There was also a significant amount of national publicity surrounding the sale. As one reporter put it, " Audubon literally reached out from the grave to rescue the Gentling book. " In a very real and special way the publication of the original unaltered grackle painting of 1824 in our own book corrects an old injustice and unites OF BIRDS AND TEXAS with two of the greatest nineteenth century books on American birds — Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY and the BIRDS OF AMERICA by John James Audubon.

Stuart Gentling, Ft. Worth

Note:

Slides of the color plates from OF BIRDS AND TEXAS and the Audubon research material will accompany the lecture. Perhaps an exhibition of the original paintings might be possible somewhere in Austin during the convention. The original paintings for OF BIRDS AND TEXAS belong to the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History.