

BIRD PAINTING AND TRADITION: THE GENTLINGS' ACHIEVEMENT

STANLEY ARCHER

Reprinted from BULLETIN OF THE TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
Vol. 19, No. 1 and 2, 1986
Made in United States of America

Bird Painting and Tradition: The Gentlings' Achievement

Stanley Archer

Department of English, Texas A&M University,
College Station, Texas 77843

ABSTRACT.—*Of Birds and Texas* (1986) by Scott and Stuart Gentling reproduces in full color 40 original drybrush watercolor paintings of birds found in Texas. The large (22 × 28 inch) format makes it possible to depict the birds—45 species, 86 individuals—life size. Painting in the tradition of Audubon and Fuertes, the Gentlings achieve high artistic standards. They approach the task not as naturalists or illustrators, but as artists. Every painting, including the background, is complete; many place the species within a distinctly Texas landscape or include familiar landmarks in their backgrounds. The composition is richly varied, with settings and backgrounds adapted to the birds' size and pose. Illumination is handled with subtlety, especially tone values or perceived variations in light intensity.

I. Introduction

In 1986, Scott and Stuart Gentling, twin brother artists from Fort Worth, published *Of Birds and Texas*, a major achievement in bird painting and in publishing. Issued unbound, the plates and accompanying printed texts are boxed, forming two large portfolios. The 137 pages include fifty plates printed by offset lithography by the Wind River Press of Austin, reproducing, in full color, original dry-brush watercolor paintings of ten Texas landscapes and forty bird paintings. The remaining 87 pages consist largely of commentary on the paintings and introductory matter, including a 13,000 word essay on birding, "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser," by John Graves. The original bird paintings have been exhibited at the Dallas Museum of Natural History (September–November 1986) and the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History (April–September 1987). Although three of the landscape paintings feature birds, the present study is limited to the bird paintings and, to a lesser extent, the commentaries on them. For in their depiction of Texas birds, the Gentlings draw from a long tradition of ornithological art in America and advance the aesthetic standards of the past in important ways.

The commentary accompanying each painting offers general information about the species and the artists' experiences with the bird. It often gives information about the locale, setting, or terrain in the painting. It sometimes explores, in a non-technical way, the mood of the painting. Readers will find little of scientific interest in the commentary, though the contents will strike responsive chords in birding and nature enthusiasts, and they provide valuable guidance about details of the painting.

The Gentlings' project, which required about a decade to complete, the painting alone being done during 1981–1986, had as its goal the selection of birds from all parts of the state, with no effort to include all species. Choice of species was based upon aesthetic rather than ornithological considerations. As Stuart Gentling

(1986) explained, "With all of the paintings, it was the pictorial idea as a whole and its dramatic form which dictated our choice of a bird, . . . the birds were chosen only as part of a larger scheme. . . ., the overall mood, drama, and setting are of equal importance." Thus, of the wrens, one sees only "House Wren" (Plate XXII); of the hummingbirds, only "Rivoli's" (XLII); of doves, only "Mourning Dove" (XXXI). Most of the subjects occur throughout the state and widely over the United States as well, but there are a few Trans-Pecos specialties—"Zone-tailed Hawk" (XLVI), "Acorn Woodpecker" (XX), and "Flammulated Owl" (XXXII)—and Rio Grande Valley specialties like "Lichtenstein's Oriole" (XLVIII) and "Red-billed Pigeon" (XXIX).

II. The Tradition

American bird painting first appears as a major achievement in the work of Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), whose *American Ornithology* (9 vols., 1808–1814) included 76 plates, hand-colored, depicting more than 250 species. Before Wilson, the English naturalist Mark Catesby (c. 1679–1749) studied the flora and fauna of several southeastern states and published his *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1731–1743). The work includes plates illustrating native American birds and anticipating later conventions of ornithological art, though Catesby left no lasting influence. Wilson's pioneer work incorporated extensive commentary on species observed during his journeys throughout the Eastern United States. On one such journey, in Louisville, Kentucky, he met John James Audubon. On this occasion, seeing Wilson's painting spurred the merchant Audubon to greater efforts in his avocation, bird painting.

Eventually, Audubon (1785–1851) resolved to surpass Wilson by painting all the species of North America, life-size, in their natural habitats. At first he planned a full and complete painting for each species, including background and sky as elements of the habitat. Once involved in his massive project, however, he found himself pressed for time and left most of the backgrounds incomplete. The finished paintings are primarily devoted to selected waterbirds, waders, shorebirds, and raptors. The backgrounds for these works were often done by assistants like Joseph Mason and George Lehrman, who alone produced forty, and by the engraver Robert Havell. Yet Audubon's painting of the "Goosander" (Red-breasted Merganser, plate 331) includes a completed sky and in the background Cohoes Falls along New York's Mohawk River. Toward the end of his project, which required over two decades, Audubon departed from his aim of painting one species for each plate and produced several composite paintings, like most of Wilson's. On numerous plates, he made an effort to include all color phases of the same species, as with the "Red-headed Woodpecker" (27) and "Little Blue Heron" (307). For other species, he painted several individuals so positioned as to reveal their richly varied coloration more fully, the "Wood Duck" (206) being an important example.

Among the numerous followers of Audubon, Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874–1927) achieved the greatest stature. He holds special significance for Texas birders, for approximately eighty of his paintings were chosen to illustrate Oberholser and Kincaid's *The Bird Life of Texas* (1974). A prolific illustrator who issued no separate volume of his own, Fuertes had a profound understanding of the principles of art and an intense devotion to the craft of painting. Painting in the Audubon tradition, he portrayed birds somewhat more realistically. He achieved

a high degree of accuracy in his paintings and maintained fidelity to nature in the poses of his birds. He studiously avoided endowing them with human expressions as Audubon sometimes had done. As with Audubon, few of the paintings are finished, for there is seldom a completed background. Among those that are complete, "Mallard and Black Duck" (Plate 1), "Bronzed Cowbird" (28), and "Lewis's Woodpecker" (16) are outstanding examples.

Following the era of Fuertes, bird painters have grown numerous, and most appear to have limited their endeavors to a state or region. Roger Tory Peterson (1981) has made a comprehensive survey of modern bird artists, with brief and informative assessments.

None of the successors of Audubon has approached the scope of his accomplishment in *The Birds of America*, which required eleven years (1827–1838) for publication alone. His Double Elephant Folio, with pages measuring $26\frac{1}{2} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$ inches, included 435 plates, 489 species by his reckoning, and 1,035 individual life-size bird paintings. Although he left no single work to rival Audubon, Fuertes was exceptionally prolific as an illustrator, painting hundreds of American and exotic species. In addition to the illustrations in the Oberholser and Kincaid volumes, his work is readily accessible in *Birds of America*, ed. T. Gilbert Pearson, *et al.* (1936). This work offers 106 color plates to illustrate more than 300 species, most of the plates being composites.

In their forty plates, the Gentlings have included 45 species and 86 individual birds. Like Audubon's birds, they are life-size, except for "Wild Turkey" (XVI), which was painted life-size but reduced to fit the 28×22 inch Great Imperial Folio page. For his press run of 200 copies, Audubon found 161 subscribers willing to pay \$1,000 per copy for the completed portfolio. The Gentlings' work had a press run of 500 copies, priced at \$2,500 each.

Emphatically, the Gentlings paint within a long tradition. Not only do they acknowledge this reality, they pay generous tribute, even homage, to their predecessors. Their volume is dedicated to the memory of Audubon, and their commentaries frequently note more specific debts. The pose of the "Cattle Egret" (XIII), the commentary acknowledges, was derived from Audubon. To accompany their painting of "Great-tailed Grackle" (XXXIII), they reproduce as an additional plate Audubon's "Great Crow Blackbird" from the original painting that was in their possession. Included among the illustrations in a supplement to Wilson's *American Ornithology*, it was Audubon's first bird painting to be published. They incorporate a previously unpublished commentary by Audubon on the Red-shouldered Hawk, reproducing one page as a facsimile. They acknowledge a debt to Fuertes for the composition of the "Zone-tailed Hawk" (XLVI). And they dedicate their painting of the "Rufous-sided Towhee" (XXXV) to Wilson, whose painting of the species suggested the pose for one of the two birds in their painting. It is difficult to find anything in the Gentlings' approach or technique that is entirely without precedent. Their unique achievement lies in their building on a foundation of established conventions and practices.

III. Composition

The first and most obvious point to be made about the composition in the paintings is that all are complete. None have blank spaces where sky or landscape have been omitted. Without exception, the birds fit into fully developed paintings.

Thus the Gentlings have, albeit on a lesser scale, achieved Audubon's ideal of providing completed paintings. Not all of the settings are natural, though none is unnatural to the species. For example, "House Wren" (XXII) depicts two small wrens actively exploring a pair of western boots on a porch as if seeking a suitable nesting site.

As landscape painters, the artists have made an effort to depict identifiable Texas landscapes in their paintings, in part because they see their work as not merely a celebration of Texas birds but of Texas as well. One can readily identify the rolling plains of North Central Texas, the Staked Plains of the Panhandle, and the Hill Country near Austin. Several paintings are even more specific as to locale. The Brazos River is depicted in the painting "Black-crowned Night Heron" (XXVI). In the background of "Crested Caracaras" (XXXVII), one discerns unmistakably Mission Espiritu Santo at Goliad. The "Zone-tailed Hawk" (XLVI) glides over the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend, with the boot of Boot Canyon a distinct landscape feature in the distance. And "Mourning Dove" (XXXI) stands near a dinosaur track painted from the dry, rocky bed of the Paluxy River near Glen Rose.

As for the birds themselves, the Gentlings normally follow Audubon's plan of one species for each painting. The one exception to this, their composite "Six Migrating Warbler Species" (XL), suggests a graceful concession to the rich tradition of Audubon and Fuertes. In each painting, the birds are depicted life-size, another convention established by Audubon. It is not always easily achieved, for in the "Turkey Vulture" (XI) painting the subject's folded wings overflow into the margins. The number of individuals in a painting may vary from one to seven, though the choices of number appear to rest on aesthetic rather than ornithological grounds. The paintings are not designed to present the various color phases of a species. The "Cattle Egret" (XIII), for example, is represented by a pair, both in breeding plumage. Nor do the Gentlings necessarily position the birds in such a way that the rich coloration is revealed, as Audubon did at times.

For the most part, the positions are natural for the species, yet several are stylized in accordance with tradition or aesthetic consideration. The "Zone-tailed Hawk" (XLVI) is flying with wings folded and tail feathers fanned out to reveal the striking bands. As the notes explain, this configuration is taken from Fuertes, who probably—and untypically—copied a pose Audubon used for several of his hawk paintings. The pose of the Cattle Egrets, according to the commentary, is derived from Audubon, who sometimes depicted the larger species as stately beings condescending to be painted.

Viewers expect from artists new and consequently surprising perspectives, and some perspectives in the Gentlings' collection pose a challenge. One observes that the number of birds painted in flight is unusually large. A flying bird captured by photography or painting represents frozen energy and lends drama. Fuertes painted very few birds in flight, and when he did they were seen at a distance, like the "Bald Eagle" (Oberholser and Kincaid, plate 8), possibly because viewers are not accustomed to seeing birds life-size in flight.

Audubon painted several examples of life-size birds in full flight at an indefinite height, including "Golden Eagle" (181). At times, however, his perspective creates potential problems for viewers. In several sea bird paintings, notably "Leach's Petrel" (260) and "Stormy Petrel" (270), he depicts the birds flying over a turbulent

sea without shoreline, leaving the viewer with a feeling of being stranded in the midst of a boundless ocean.

When a bird is posed on a low branch, on the ground, or on a moderately tall bush or tree, the perspective seems plausible enough, for it is at about the right level for realistic perception. To paint birds in flight, life-size, perhaps twenty-five or more feet above a landscape, is to elevate the viewer to an unaccustomed perspective. Several paintings give the impression of indefinitely high flight. Two "Sharp-shinned Hawks" (XXIII) wing their way over a marsh in early morning light, and two "American Woodcocks" (XIX) fly high over swampy ground, their comical wings frozen in space at the viewer's eye level. The combination of arrested kinetic energy and a perspective that exploits unaccustomed height and proximity to the birds creates an unusual and memorable aesthetic effect.

The rich variety of the Gentlings' composition should assure that everyone interested in bird art will find several appealing. The paintings include some with individual small birds against a picturesque or scenic landscape. Others are of large birds with limited background in view, so that the bird dominates the painting. Still others like the "Cardinal" (XII) and the composite "Six Migrating Warbler Species" (XL) include enough birds that the paintings seem vibrant with life.

IV. Illumination

The work of the Gentlings most conspicuously surpasses that of their predecessors in illumination, or the reception of light. Simply stated, any painting should have a clear and consistent source of light, and for bird painters, since the subject is normally outdoors, that light is the sun. The painter re-creates the way light strikes uneven surfaces in the painting. Fuertes (1979) understood this principle quite well, for he wrote to his pupil, George Miksch Sutton, that in each painting there is a point of brightest bright and one of darkest dark, with orderly degrees of light between these two. To depict this alteration of light intensity is one of the painter's most challenging tasks. Yet a painter cannot exactly reproduce reality; what he must attempt is an illusion that suggests reality. Fuertes, though he understood the theory, was unable to apply his principle consistently. Like almost all bird painters of the past, he confronted two problem areas that prevented excellence in this realm—the purpose and the procedure.

If the purpose is to re-create the actual coloration of a species, as Audubon did with painstaking care, then light subtleties will be largely ignored. This illustrative kind of painting serves best for field guides. It normally assumes a light source behind the viewer, distributed evenly over the bird's entire body. Since magnification reduces light contrasts, with good binoculars it is possible to view birds this way in nature. Yet anyone who has attempted to photograph them knows that in nature light seldom strikes them evenly. Audubon appeared to prefer a strong light source from behind the viewer and to the left, with the subject facing slightly toward the light. His preferred pose usually produced even lighting throughout and often resulted in a flat surface. Artists can compensate and create the illusion of three dimensions by giving great care to feather painting, achieved through an adequate knowledge of pterology. But serious artists are also inclined to give careful attention to variations in light intensity in order to achieve depth. This is one of the matters Peterson had in mind when he wrote (1981)



Plate XXV. Scaled Quail.

that he planned to adopt a more painterly manner. His painting "Puffins" (1979) demonstrates sound principles of illumination at work.

As for the procedure, as is well known, Audubon first drew the bird, then painted it. The third and fourth steps were to draw in and complete the background, steps often either ignored or carried out by someone else. From Fuertes' comments about composition, it seems probable that he followed the same procedure, first drawing the bird life-size. This procedure precludes clear initial decisions about lighting that are needed if the illumination is to be consistent. As a consequence, it is not unusual in early bird art to find that shadows in the background take a direction different from those cast by the bird. A painterly approach to the matter requires that illumination be taken into account early in the process.

It is instructive to contrast this procedure to the one used by the Gentlings. Although the paintings are genuine collaborations, their individual responsibilities were usually separable. Stuart had primary responsibility for the design and drawing; Scott for the painting. This division of effort fits their stated intent of placing the bird subject within a unified setting and of considering the painting as a whole. In this approach to the task, decisions about illumination would normally be made before any coloring is applied.

Perhaps the most remarkable element in the Gentlings' illumination is its variety, as if they chose to challenge themselves to produce the full range of lighting possibilities. Two paintings—"Mockingbird" (XXXVIII) and "Black-crowned Night Heron" (XXVI)—represent night scenes. The rest are under daylight conditions from the yellow-green light of early morning in the "Crested Caracara" (XXXVII) to the reddish twilight chosen for the "Flammulated Owl" (XXXII).

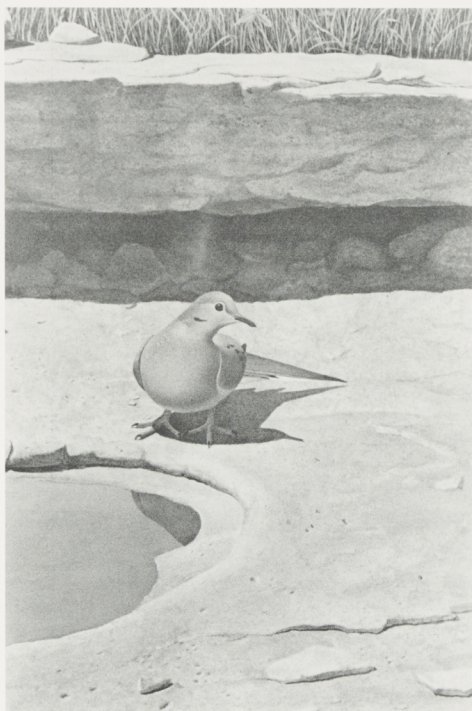


Plate XXXI. Mourning Dove (detail).

Skies in the paintings are variously portrayed as clear, lightly overcast, with broken cloud cover, with a heavy canopy, even with a rainbow. Perhaps the most remarkable lighting effects occur with the "Chuck-will's Widow" (XLV), settled atop a fence post surrounded by flowering trumpet vine, with an ominous wall cloud spawning a tornado in the distance. The dark cloud obstructs afternoon sunlight and creates the yellow-green light that one observes under similar conditions in nature.

The paintings themselves illustrate an interplay of light and shadow consistent with the source. In some of his more finished printings, like the "Whooping Crane" (226) or "Long-billed Curlew" (231), Audubon supplied shadowing, often limiting it to shadows cast by the bird's legs. Fuertes occasionally provides shadowing to indicate the light source, usually with waterbirds, shorebirds, and waders. His illustrations of "Mallard and Black Duck" (Oberholser and Kincaid, plate 1) and "Bronzed Cowbird" (28) serve as good examples of this kind of finishing, though



Plate XLVI. Zone-tailed Hawk.

as with Audubon most of his paintings reveal little attention to illumination beyond the most casual.

The Gentlings' work evinces more careful and consistent treatment of illumination, the "Mourning Dove" (XXXI) representing an excellent illustration of this technique. The painting shows a single bird standing in a dry riverbed beside a water-filled dinosaur track. The entire scene is illuminated by an intensely bright sun high overhead and slightly to the left. The bird and a low rocky ledge behind cast dark shadows against the stony riverbed.

Even more important than light and shadow contrasts is the presence of *tone values*. To explore this phenomenon in the paintings, an examination of the bird subjects is most efficient, though it applies to entire paintings as well. Depending on light conditions and on the way the bird is posed, light will strike the surface with varying intensities. To show this variation is to give a subject the appearance of a third dimension. Although he usually ignored this principle of painting,

Audubon gave it limited attention, often showing how an extended wing obstructs light falling on a bird's body and thereby makes it dimmer. One seldom finds anything beyond the most primitive *values* in Audubon, though his "Sandhill Crane" (261) shows that he understood the essentials. It is instructive, and to Audubon's credit, to compare his painting of the species with Fuertes' (Pearson, plate 24).

For the Gentlings' achievement in tone values, the "Mourning Dove" (XXXI) is again a paramount example. Intense light strikes the bird's body from above and to the bird's right side, creating bright illumination of the head, neck, back, and upper tail feathers. At its most intense point, the light forms a small iridescent spot on the bird's neck. White feathers along the tail edge are brightly illuminated, while the indirect light makes the tail feathers underneath a shadowy light gray. From the head, the natural light gradually dims as it descends along the bird's breast and belly, affecting color as well as brightness. All remains consistent with the light source.

Perhaps the most elegant achievement with illumination occurs in the painting "Scaled Quail" (XXV), where the illumination creates strong contrasts and lower light levels are handled with great subtlety. The painting shows a small covey of five aligned almost in single file, so as to reveal a side view of each. Their heads and necks extend above a ridge line slightly behind them. Light originating from beyond the ridge illuminates their upper portions, while the body parts and feet below the ridge line, partially shadowed, are almost as dark as the shaded rocky soil beneath their feet. In the distance, a bright light splashes over the desert floor and the hills beyond, creating a highly effective contrast.

Not all of the paintings reflect this subtlety in tone values. For one reason, light conditions are so varied that in each painting the situation is different. When sunlight is obstructed by clouds, shadow contrasts and variations in light intensity will be sharply reduced. When the sun is assumed to be behind the viewer, then light on the bird's body will be distributed rather evenly. The "Lichtenstein's Oriole" (XLVIII) serves as a good illustration. Three adult birds in heavy foliage are positioned so that the sun shines directly on them from above and behind the viewer, creating an even distribution on light on their bodies. To find the variation in light, one has to examine the leaves, where sunlight creates elegant interplay of light and shadow.

V. Conclusion

The Gentlings have left an enduring legacy in ornithological art. Their work, it seems certain, will reach increasingly wider audiences and will receive increasing acclaim. The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History has launched a campaign to purchase the original watercolors and has acquired most of them, an effort which will keep the collection intact and accessible to the public. In addition, again following the precedent of Audubon, the Gentlings will soon release a smaller format edition of the prints, affordable to the average person interested in art. Building upon a tradition established by legendary artists of the past like Audubon and Fuertes, Scott and Stuart Gentling have surpassed earlier achievements by bringing their individual talent and vision to the task of portraying Texas birds and landscapes.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the generous and expert assistance of the following people: Stuart Gentling, for granting permission to reproduce the paintings and for answers to numerous questions; Nancy Bandy, of The Victoria College Art Department, for helpful suggestions; and Dr. Donald Dyal, head of Special Collections at The Evans Library, Texas A&M University, for his guidance through the Kincaid Collection.

Works Cited

- Audubon, John James. 1942. *The Birds of America*. The Macmillan Company, New York.
- Fuertes, Louis Agassiz. 1979. *To a Young Bird Artist: Letters from Louis Agassiz Fuertes to George Misch Sutton*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Gentling, Scott, John Graves, and Stuart Gentling. 1986. *Of Birds and Texas*. Fort Worth, Texas. Gentling Publications.
- Oberholser, H. C., and E. B. Kincaid, Jr. 1974. *The Bird Life of Texas*. 2 vols. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Pearson, T. G. et al., eds. 1936. *Birds of America*. Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., Garden City, New York.
- Peterson, R. T., and V. Marie Peterson. 1981. *Audubon's Birds of America*. Abbeville Press, New York.