

BOOKMARKS

In the Manner of Audubon

Two Texas Artists Publish a Masterpiece



Every now and again, something comes along that is so fine it deserves individual attention. This is the case with *Of Birds and Texas*—artists Scott and Stuart Gentling believe there hasn't been a comparable publication in America in this century, and they're certain nothing of its kind has ever come from Texas. The Gentlings have spent the last ten years working on this tour de force, a boxed book of ten landscapes, forty bird prints, and texts, all on separate sheets of paper mea-

suring twenty-two inches by twenty-four inches. Including the heavy linen-covered box, it comes to about fifty pounds.

The prints are reproductions of the brothers' superb watercolors. On the simplest level, both men are skilled painters; one gets the impression that the pigments appear on paper exactly as they did in the artists' imaginations. But the strongest quality of their art is its variety. First of all, the brothers have completely different methods. In the

conflict of line versus color, Stuart takes the side of color. He forms objects with fields of color, blending them to create atmospheric effects. Scott is for line; his work is meticulously drawn, with thousands of tiny brushstrokes. The landscapes are individual efforts and show clearly this diversity. However, the Gentlings collaborated on most

ABOVE: In Mourning Dove, this modest bird poses beside the footprint of one of its reptilian ancestors.

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ABOVE: The surrealistic imagery of Black-Crowned Night Heron complements the bird's glumly solitary personality.

of the birds, successfully blending their remarkable skills.

The book is dedicated to Audubon, and many of the prints follow his classic formula: birds in stylized poses—lifelike but calculated for visual efficiency—on appropriate backgrounds. But the Gentlings are mature artists, and at intervals they grant themselves artistic license. Stuart painted several of the birds himself, in his softer style. Scott designed others and indulged his taste for still life and detail. Some of the prints reflect the influence of modern photography with birds in poses nineteenth-century artists could never have used. Many of the details invested in the prints are references to Texas, but inspiration comes from all over—personal experiences, Oriental art, ancient composition formulas, the brothers' own sly humor. You'll notice these details after looking at the prints ten times, or a hundred times. The fact is, even after you have seen the prints a

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ABOVE: Ben Franklin proposed this bird for our national symbol, and the Gentlings have given it grand treatment in Wild Turkey.

hundred times, you will continue to discover.

One final note about the art in this book: The brothers have not only dedicated their work to Audubon, they have also made a valuable contribution to Audubon scholarship. They recently acquired and authenticated an original Audubon painting, *The Great Crow Blackbird* (now known as the boat-tailed grackle), long thought to have been lost or destroyed. This painting was the first and only that Audubon ever published in America, and the disappointment he suffered from the experience led him to adopt his "American woodsman" persona and to seek his fortune in Europe. (Audubon was offended when the engraver altered his composition and received half credit for the work.) This painting is now reproduced in the Gentlings' book for the first time in its original form.

Of Birds and Texas is also blessed with excellent writing. There is a forward by Harry Tennison and an

essay, "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser," by John Graves. Graves calls himself a glimpse, perhaps because he's never been a serious student of ornithology. But he has an engaging style and an intriguing story to tell. The Gentlings provide commentary for the prints, and, like Graves, they have an easy, anecdotal style. Their writing is also in the form of memoirs, which give the book the personal quality that Stuart wanted to maintain.

The texts were printed by David and William Holman, who designed the book and set the type by hand. The prints were produced by offset lithography, and in clarity of detail they approach the quality of engravings. *Of Birds and Texas* is published by the Gentlings in a limited edition of 500 examples, plus twenty-five artists' proofs. The price is \$2,500. For more information, contact Ralph Carr, 902 Boland Street, Fort Worth, Texas 76107; (817) 332-7059. ♦

—Ansel Strickland

BELOW: This showy Roseate Spoonbill lingers on the coast, in spite of the coming hurricane.

