

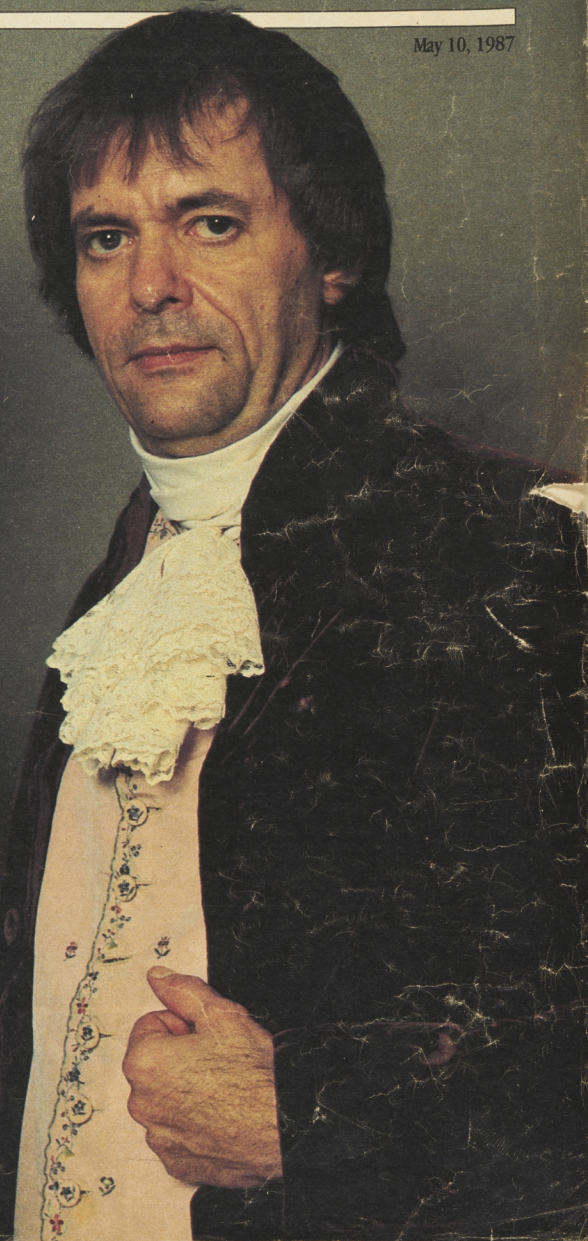
DAILY LIFE MAGAZINE

The Daily

May 10, 1987

Flights of Fancy

*The curious and artistic world of
the brothers Gentling*



FEATURES

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

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The Gentling twins have been Fort Worth curiosities since their childhood. As adults, the artists continue to draw attention. Writer Steve Blow visited the brothers, who recently finished one major project — a book on Texas birds and landscapes — and have begun work on another. On the cover: Stuart, left, and Scott Gentling in outfits from their antique clothing collection. Stuart wears a coat copied from an early 1800s American coat the brothers wanted to purchase but could only persuade its owners to lend so a replica could be made. Scott is dressed in a 1795 French ensemble of knickers and doublet. Photograph by David Woo.



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OF BIRDS AND TEXAS

Gentling Graves Gentling



A person wearing a tan jacket and blue jeans stands with their back to the camera, looking at a large, detailed diorama of two white birds with red legs and beaks, possibly egrets, in a naturalistic setting with reeds and water. The diorama is housed in a wooden frame.

Flights of Fancy

Artists Stuart and Scott Gentling are untethered explorers who find adventure in nature, history and the absurd.

By Steve Blow

Hmmm, where to begin with these Gentling twins? With their massive new bird book, the one historian A.C. Greene calls "the most stunning and prodigious book in Texas history?" Or should we talk about their next project, the artistic reconstruction of an Aztec empire? Or maybe the guillotines and pheasant farms of their youth? Or the curious aspects of their twinship, their shared art and passions and maladies?

Let's begin this way: When Stuart Gentling greeted me at the door of their art studio in Fort Worth, I apologized for being a few minutes early. And he said, "Oh, I know, you're just anxious to interview the boy geniuses."

He was being sarcastic, but a little truthful, too. At 44, Stuart and Scott Gentling are hardly boys anymore. But there is still something of the precocious child in these twins who share a house and a studio on Fort Worth's West Side. Something a little fascinating. Something a little irksome.

"Scott and I come off to a lot of people as intellectuals," Stuart says. "I think we have above-average intelligence. There's no doubt about that. But there's something else. The subjects we're interested in are things nobody knows anything about. There's nobody to call our bluff."

Depending upon how you look at it, the Gentlings (that's pronounced with a hard g) are mildly eccentric geniuses, or they are overgrown kids who have managed something even Peter Pan couldn't do: making their play pay. Their uniqueness is an adulthood capacity for childlike fascinations. Indeed, most of their interests today are precisely that — childhood fantasies unforsaken.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID WOO

Stuart, left, and Scott Gentling with their landmark book, *Of Birds and Texas*. "You've heard of coffeetable books?" Scott asks. "This book is a coffee table."



The Gentlings' latest adventure is a monumental collection of bird paintings and landscapes, *Of Birds and Texas*. "The only way to describe it is in superlatives," Stuart says. "It's the biggest, the heaviest, the most expensive . . ."

" . . . The worst headache," deadpans Scott.

It quickly becomes clear that Stuart is the booster in this partnership; Scott is the dry-roasted one. "You've heard of coffeetable books?" Scott says. "This book is a coffee table."

The 46-pound art epic was inspired by, dedicated to, and, in an eerie way, financed from the grave by the most famous of wildlife artists, John James Audubon. It was Audubon's work that inspired the Gentling brothers, while still boys, to a lifetime of art.

Stuart, in his own dramatic way, tells the story in the book's dedication: "One Saturday afternoon in the fall of 1956, while browsing through the bird books in the small library of the Fort Worth Children's Museum, I came upon a copy of the Macmillan edition of John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*. I was hardly able to contain my excitement as I thumbed through the book. All I could think about was getting home as quickly as possible to show the book to Scott. My twin brother and I were 13 years old at the time, and though we were familiar with a few of Audubon's pictures, neither of us was prepared for the overwhelming visual impact of a book containing all 435 reproductions of his famous birds. Today there is no doubt in our minds, as we look back at that afternoon nearly 30 years ago, that this first encounter changed our lives forever."

Stuart did take the book home and began sketching copies of the birds. "I would draw the things and Scott, who knew lots of painting techniques from



Stuart Gentling, above, and a print of the John James Audubon painting which helped finance their book, *Of Birds and Texas*. The painting, purchased for \$18,000 but later authenticated and valued at up to \$350,000, is at Sotheby's in New York City awaiting auction. The landscape, upper right, and bird portraits are from the Gentlings' book, which was inspired almost 30 years ago by Audubon's work.



building little railroad models, would take over and finish the pictures while I started another one," Stuart says. "We never thought of ourselves as artists. We had been drawing dinosaurs and building model railroads for years. We were doing art without calling it art."

The children were well known on Fort Worth's well-to-do West Side. Their father, an anesthesiologist at the Mayo Clinic, moved his family to Fort Worth in 1948, and they were immediately accepted into the West Side social circle. And though their older brother and younger sister were also exceptionally bright, it was the 5-year-old twins who soon became the audacious darlings of society.

"They were different, let's put it that way," says their mother, Barbara Smith, who still lives in Fort Worth. (Their father died in 1976.) "They have been busy little bees since the day they were born."

Dinner guests at the Gentlings' home during the 1950s always insisted on a tour of the twins' bedroom. "People bugged me to death about it. I was horrified," Mrs. Smith said. The bedroom — the *sanctum sanctorum*, Stuart calls it — was a chaotic workshop reflecting the boys' varied pursuits: Scott's model railroads, Stuart's corre-





Scott Gentling, who paints sitting on his bed, works on a reproduction of a 16th century mural from the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. The figures at the bottom of the painting, shown below, represent women who were deified after dying in childbirth.

spondence-school taxidermy, pet shrikes for falconry, a box of silkworms, incubating ornamental pheasant eggs, plus whatever passing fancy had struck them.

Among their many childhood projects was a home-built, sputnik-inspired rocket. Working along with neighborhood friends, they constructed a three-stage rocket using black gunpowder as a propellant. They managed several successful launches before the can of powder ignited and sent them to the hospital. "It burned all their hair off. They looked like they were in the stage production of *The Mikado*," says their mother.

That project was followed by construction of a working, 750-pound model of a Civil War cannon. And then a 19-foot-tall guillotine. "Complete with scaffolding. It would cut right through 2-by-4s," Scott recalls. And then, in high school, the twins and some friends had a pheasant farm, with a dozen species of ornamental



pheasants. At the time, it was said to be the largest private ornamental pheasant collection in the state.

Although they continued their painting in high school, neither of the brothers considered art a career possibility. When they graduated, both headed for Tulane University. But within the year, Scott decided to pursue his art and was accepted in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Stuart stuck it out at Tulane as a political science major, although he spent much of his time painting. He graduated from Tulane and enrolled in law school at the University of Texas. "I hated law school from the very first day. I could tell instantly I had made a very big mistake. My first week there I applied to the art academy." He stuck with law school that year but was in Philadelphia the next fall. And the two brothers have been earning a living, though meager at first, as artists ever since. Neither has ever held anything more than a

summer job.

Today, they conduct business from their gallery and studio near Fort Worth's museum district. Stuart handles most of the selling, although there is little involved since willing buyers are always at hand. The gallery is open only by appointment.

The real creative work is done in their home, a jumbled, jam-packed hideout that is a grown-up extension of their boyhood bedroom. (Neither brother has married. "No one would have us," Stuart says, deflecting the subject with the usual quip.) Visitors are admitted to the house most grudgingly. "One friend says our house looks like a Comanche war camp," says Stuart. A worktable fills the living room, covered with odds and ends such as a shrunken head, a skull and a flintlock pistol. "I think this looks just like Jesse Hubbard on *All My Children*," Scott says, lifting the shrunken head. Scott's harpsichord fills one corner of the room (he plays and composes on it, and on the violin). In the other corner is the mounted head of a leopard that Stuart shot in India "in my pre-conservation-consciousness days."

A couple of thousand books are stacked and shelved throughout the house. Dead birds in paper cones are in the kitchen freezer. The dining

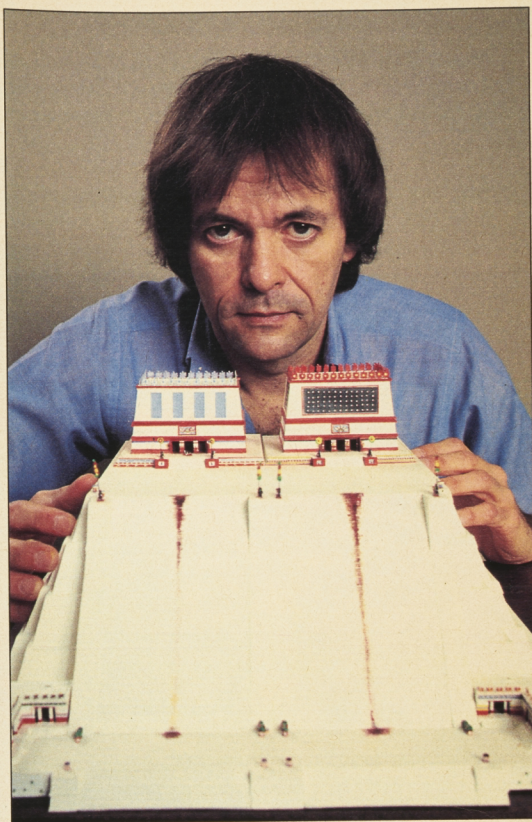
room is Stuart's studio, although the disarray attests that he has, of late, primarily been a book publisher, spending more time promoting than painting. Scott, as he always has, paints in his bedroom sitting cross-legged on the bed. On this particular day, an Aztec temple is emerging in intricate detail on the paper in front of him while a KERA-TV documentary plays half-watched across the room.

The brothers' realistic, highly detailed portraits and landscapes, reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth's work, have garnered them an avid band of regional patrons. Donald Vogel, whose Valley House Gallery carried Scott's work for several years, says: "He's the only artist I ever had where I had complete sell-outs of his exhibits. In his second show, I had a complete sellout in 10 or 12 minutes.

"They just reek of talent in all directions," Vogel says. "They could paint on the same picture, and you couldn't tell where one began and the other left off."

In fact, though they rarely collaborate on a painting, their art is virtually indistinguishable. Scott says there is a difference, however. "That's easy. I'm better than he is."

"That's true," Stuart replies, "but he had better watch out because I'm



Scott Gentling and his model of the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire. The model is so exact it includes blood (from sacrifices) painted on the steps and tiny, intricate murals detailed on inside walls.

gaining on him."

The brothers are unsure what to call their style of art. They don't like the term realism. "I don't consider myself a realist, and I don't know any painter who is," Scott says. He finds it easier to say what he isn't. "I always say I'm not contemporary enough for the Fort Worth Art Museum, not Western enough for the Amon Carter Museum and not dead enough for the Kimbell."

"When Scott and I are criticized for our works, it's always that we are too tied down by the model in front of us," Stuart says. "A lot of people think that realism is an outmoded, conservative fashion of painting, that we have a lack of imagination." By now, a touch of defensiveness is creeping into his voice. "It takes a lot of imagination to

build a realistic world out there to your private concept. Abstract expressionism has its own difficulties, but everybody is an expert when it comes to realism. They say (and here he slips into a Texas twang): 'Why, that sunset ain't right,' or 'That tree don't look like no elm tree.' With abstract expressionism, it's anybody's guess."

In *Of Birds and Texas*, the brothers became even more conservative in their work, striving for a classical, romanticized look that pays considerable tribute to Audubon. It galls them that a San Antonio critic called some of the bird poses "stiff." "We wanted to reflect a stylized, sort of classy and elegant look," Stuart says.

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Stuart began talking about doing a bird book 20 years ago. Ten years later, after a bird-watching expedition to South Texas, he got serious about the idea. But Scott, never as enthralled with ornithology as Stuart, resisted. "I was against it. I hadn't painted birds in 17 years. I said, 'I'm a fine artist now, Stuart.'"

As happens often in their ventures, however, Scott eventually took Stuart's inspiration and expanded on it. Stuart originally had envisioned a most classic approach, painting the birds on a white background. Scott insisted that the paintings include landscape backgrounds. "The title of the book is *Of Birds and Texas*, and the Texas part is just as important," Scott says. Also at Scott's insistence, the book was expanded from 25 paintings to 50 — 40 birds and 10 birdless landscapes.

Beginning the paintings in 1977, they put most of their other work aside, which meant forsaking most of their income as well. They traveled the state — one spur-of-the-moment trip

covered 2,100 miles — in search of birds and vistas and inspiration. In the studio, they worked from mounted birds loaned by museums and from frozen carcasses donated by friends. And they quickly fell back into the creative partnership they had established as 13-year-olds copying Audubons: Stuart drew the birds and Scott painted them.

For a time, it looked like the project might never be completed. First, there were financial problems. "A lot of people think Scott and I are wealthy. We're not," Stuart says. The book was initially financed by what he calls a "labyrinthian" scheme that included escrowed deposits from some of their longtime patrons. But costs continued to escalate — from a projected \$250,000 to a figure finally exceeding \$500,000.

In the midst of the work, personal misfortune struck. And true to the nature of their twinning, it befell them almost simultaneously. The Gentlings discovered they had cataracts, and as their vision grew worse, they were

forced into an even closer, interdependent relationship. Stuart gave up his apartment and moved into Scott's house so they could help each other through a series of eye operations and convalescent periods.

Scott had surgery first and discovered that because of the yellowish tint of the cataracts, the hues in his completed paintings were wrong. "I had to repaint about 20 pictures," he says. Stuart has had only one of his eyes operated on. He is virtually blind in the right eye and has trouble with depth perception. "When I'm working, sometimes I can't tell when the tip of the brush touches the paper. It's hard," he says. He hopes to have surgery on his eye in the next few months.

But it was also in the midst of the bird project that a fortunate, almost eerie turn of events assured that the book would be completed. One Saturday afternoon, Stuart was nonchalantly flipping through a Philadelphia art dealer's catalog that had come in the mail that day. "I turned the page and

— bingo — there was a painting of boat-tailed grackles. My eyeballs stood out on their stems. I didn't even have to look at the listing to see that it was by Audubon."

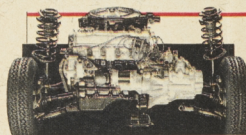
The catalog said only that the painting was "attributed to Audubon," and the relatively inexpensive \$18,000 price clearly reflected that the dealer was not certain of its authenticity. But based on his knowledge of Audubon's more subtle techniques — the use of pencil to detail individual feathers, for example — Stuart called the dealer that same afternoon and virtually authenticated the painting by long-distance. The Gentlings bought the painting that day.

"This painting had been lost for 160 years. It's a major discovery at a time we're doing a bird book dedicated to Audubon. Now isn't that weird? It's such a coincidence," Stuart says.

It was also a financial boon. Once the painting was officially recognized, (Continued on page 26)

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FLIGHTS OF FANCY (Continued from page 21)

its value was appraised at \$250,000 to \$350,000. And after several years of limping along with barely enough capital to finance their bird book, the long-lost Audubon suddenly became the collateral needed to comfortably finance the completion of the project. Despite its sentimental value, the Audubon will be sold at auction in New York later this month to pay off debts accumulated during the project. "It was a painful decision, terribly painful," Scott says.

With Audubon's help, however, 10 years after it was begun, *Of Birds and Texas* was finally finished last year, complete with a casual, almost breezy, running commentary by the Gentlings and a loving reminiscence of birds and birders by Texas author John Graves. So far, some 340 of the 525 copies printed have been sold. The price: \$2,500 per copy. Purchasers include almost every major library in the state. T. Boone Pickens bought a copy. Trammell Crow bought 10, planning to give them as gifts. (Scott has painted two commissioned portraits of Crow.)

Stuart says the massive size of the book, great imperial folio format, was intended as homage to Audubon and his famous, even-larger, double-elephant-foliosized *The Birds of America*, completed in 1837. But Stuart also candidly admits that the size was chosen as a way of attracting attention to what might otherwise have been a soon-forgotten work. "I did this for the pleasure it brings my friends and creditors," he says.

In fact, *Of Birds and Texas* is apparently a landmark publication, believed to be the largest book ever printed in Texas. Each sheet measures 22-by-28

inches. Unlike conventional books, the pages are not bound but are boxed in two linen-covered volumes. It may be the only book that comes with reading instructions. The printing was done virtually single-handedly

*So far, some 340 of the
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by David Holman of Wind River Press in Austin.

Exactly what makes the book such a feat of fine printing is something perhaps only other printers can fully appreciate. Holman's father and fellow printer, William Holman, tried to explain it. "It sounds so simple, yet it is most difficult, to run a letterpress page to a high standard during the morning and then go to a two-color Heidelberg offset and run large, complex four-color process plates during the afternoon. And a two-color Heidelberg is much more difficult to run than a four- or five-color press where you have two pressmen and color control on all four units in one pass."

Historian Greene, in the newsletter of the Center for Texas Studies at North Texas State University, puts it more simply: "The color printing is breathtaking, superior to any renderings ever done in the United States and measuring up to or surpassing even the fin-

est process work done in the Netherlands or Japan."

The project has brought the brothers full circle; the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History has purchased, and now has on exhibit, the brothers' original bird paintings. It was in the same museum almost 30 years ago, then known as the Fort Worth Children's Museum, that the brothers found the Audubon book that inspired their careers.

Now, like restless boys, the brothers are plunging into their next project — a series of paintings recreating the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan exactly as it appeared in the year 1519, the year it was conquered by Cortez. "I enjoyed doing the birds, but this is my real love," says Scott, who has spent the last seven months working on an intricately detailed model of Montezuma's palace for the city. The model contains more than 400 rooms and is detailed down to the point of murals on interior walls — "just a little fanaticism," Scott says.

Aztec history has been a fascination of the twins since they were boys. Stuart traces it back to a series of *Mandrake the Magician* cartoons on the Aztecs. "Then we went to a movie in 1952 or '53, it was an old Cornel Wilde movie, a terrible movie called *Treasure of the Golden Condor*. It was about treasure hunting in the ruins in Guatemala.

"Excuse our lack of modesty," Stuart says, "but Scott and I have studied it for 25 years and I think we could do, literally, the definitive visual history on Tenochtitlan." Based on their research, the brothers plan to do approximately 50 paintings of the city,

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ranging from sweeping vistas to narrow passageways. The paintings will then be incorporated into a book — a conventional-sized book, they hasten to say — titled *One Reed Year*, which was, in Aztec timekeeping, the year of Cortez's conquest.

"If you don't know anything about the subject, you can't imagine how exciting it is. It's never been depicted before," Stuart says. "It's one of the great adventure stories of all times. You talk about Alexander the Great and Odysseus and the sacking of Troy and all the mythic things that happened. This is almost on the same level, a confrontation of two completely alien cultures, and it happened only 450 years ago, which is nothing in human history. And it happened so close."

They hope to complete the book by 1992 — the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World. Scott says the real impetus for the Aztec project came when he read *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of Cortez's expedition members. "It's all based on a simple urge to see what it looked like," Scott says. "I want to give the viewer an impression of what it was like to see this city. Not a Cecil B. De Mille production, but what it

The brothers' collection of antique clothing includes several examples of rare footwear. Shown here (from top to bottom): English shoe with wooden heel from the 1670s, early Renaissance Tudor shoe circa-1500, and two Roman sandals, both from the 1st century. In between the Roman sandals is a new sandal (shown on foot) Scott made so he could see how the Roman footwear looked and felt on the feet.

actually was like."

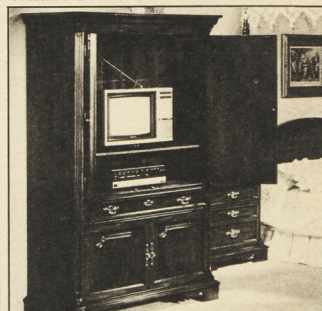
The desire to see a bit of history as it really existed is a recurrent theme in the Gentlings' pursuits. A portrait of Mozart, their favorite composer, hangs in their studio. Scott painted it after the brothers conducted more than two years of research. "Scott and I literally studied every available likeness of Mozart, paintings and descriptions, for two years to try to figure out what he looked like. Time and time again he was depicted as kind of a china doll character. We're convinced that's pretty much what he looked like," Stuart says, pointing to the portrait of a rather homely, narrow-shouldered man. "Notice he had a slightly hollow complexion. He had liver problems and eventually died of a kidney ailment."

Similarly, the brothers have an 18th century clothing collection that grew from their passion to touch history. Says Stuart: "Back in the 1960s I was doing some reading about the 18th century, and I began wondering, 'What did people really look like? I mean, what did they *really* look like?'" And hence, the clothes closets in their home brim with a collection of more than 60 garments from the 1700s.

The brothers' strange symbiosis of talents and passions is something they can't explain. Although identical twins in their interests, they are very different in some ways. As fraternal twins, they don't bear much physical resemblance to one another. There are personality differences as well: Stuart is outgoing and easygoing, Scott is quieter, sometimes temperamental. Stuart frets about his weight and jogs most mornings. Scott keeps a Marlboro 100 lit most of the time. "When Scott feels the impulse to exercise, he sits down until the feeling goes away," Stuart says.



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In 1974, Stuart Gentling designed a mural for an exterior wall at Dickies, a work clothes manufacturer in downtown Fort Worth. The design was part of a project called "Painted Spaces" involving several artists.

And yet, intellectually and artistically, they are almost one. The more you try to differentiate them, the clearer it becomes that their creativity is inexorably intertwined. "People ask me all the time, 'What's it like being a twin?' " Scott says. "I always say, 'I don't know. What's it like *not* being a twin?' We've always been close. Our interests are just like that," he says, holding up parallel fingers. "It was Stuart who sparked most of my interests. He even started painting before I did. But I always finished his paintings. It's always been that way."

"I'm not sure what ESP is all about, but we certainly have a very intuitive sense," Stuart says. "We can be working in the same room with our backs to each other, working in complete silence for maybe an hour, then we'll start whistling the same tune at exactly the same time. Usually a Mozart something or other. It happens with regularity."

The key to their closeness, he says, may be that they never allowed sibling or professional jealousies to wedge between them. "A lot of people find it extremely odd that Scott and I don't have any interpersonal rivalry in our painting. There's never been any. And one reason is that so much of our creative activity has been shared," he says. "There's no career jealousy. I hustle Scott's work as hard as I hustle mine. And Scott doesn't hustle at all."

And as for the source of the intellectual energy that was evident even as children, the Gentlings have little insight to offer. "Other children weren't geniuses," Stuart says, lapsing into his only-partly-in-jest self-mockery. "Other children were *boring*," Scott says.

Later, in a moment of seriousness, Stuart adds: "Our parents were wonderful. They didn't push us or pressure us, but they had tremendous tolerance."

Which may be the key. Mrs. Smith says there was no magic to her formula for raising

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children. "I followed Mark Twain's philosophy," she says. "Somebody asked Mark Twain how he raised his children. He said, 'Find out what they want to do and let them do it.'"

And if the twins seem a tad self-absorbed, a bit irksome, well, that's part of the lesson, too. "I realized early on that you can get pretty screwed up by concentrating on what everybody thinks you ought to do," Stuart says. "Everyone likes to please. I like people to like my work. But getting on that treadmill to please other people can kill you. Once you've achieved their pleasure, where's yours?"

Steve Blow is a staff writer for The Dallas Morning News.