

24 November 1989

Mr. Don Otto and the Board of Directors
The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History
1501 Montgomery Street
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Five years ago when I wrote to you expressing my delight at the Museum's decision to purchase the complete Gentling collection of bird paintings for our book Of Birds and Texas I had little thought that our future relationship just might become one of doubt, anger and distrust. When I consider that I may have offended some of the people involved in this project it is with a deep sense of regret and a great desire to restore a healthy atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation. Scott and I have always had the best of intentions in our dealings with the Museum as I think can be clearly seen by even the most casual perusal of our purchase contract. From beginning to end the terms of the contract are completely weighted in the Museum's interest with little protection or guarantees for us should we somehow incur the Museum's disfavor. Many of the contract's demands such as access to our \$60,000 worth of color transparencies of the bird paintings and the turning over of our archives, preliminary drawings and studies were freely offered as donations long before the became contract demands.

Our recent offer to reduce the total purchase price by \$31,500 was, I think, a generous gesture to help re-kindle Board interest and to get the project moving again after almost three years in which few significant new donations have been secured.

The disputed pictures of the bufflehead ducks, the snow goose and the bobwhite quail were the first three paintings created by me to become published in Of Birds and Texas. The oldest painting — the bufflehead ducks, was painted more than thirteen years ago before my major joint effort with Scott to create the bird book was actually undertaken. Technically I used the black and white prints of the pencil drawings for these subjects executed for the Junior League to raise money for their many charities. (I wrote about this in my commentary to the bufflehead plate in Of Birds and Texas, page 103.) The black and white prints thus served as a classic grisaille underdrawing which I do for all my drybrush watercolors except in these three cases where the underdrawing was already printed for me. I simply saved drawing time but not painting time. The exact same painting labors were spent on these three works as were required on all the other paintings. Anchor Printing Company here in Fort Worth assured me that the paper was good ph neutral stock suitable for publishing, and the paper has indeed held up beautifully since the first Junior League print was published in 1972. Don Otto has recently been informed by conservators that, due to the possible presence of lignin in the paper fibers, the paper might have to be treated to maintain its neutrality. These three paintings now in the Museum's possession are the first complete watercolor statements or renderings of the Bufflehead Ducks, the Snow Goose, and the Bobwhite Quail and are the very original paintings from which the color plates in "Of Birds and Texas" were published. No attempt has ever been made by us to conceal the nature of these works, and the Museum has always had the right and op-

portunity to examine all the paintings out of their frames from the time it first expressed interest in the collection in the spring of 1984. They are the original watercolors in every way and completely fulfill the specifications stated in the recital of the purchase contract. Quite frankly, I do wish I had mentioned the special nature of these works early on, but it simply never occurred to me that they were in any way less than the other paintings in the collection. Artistically, they are not.

I think it should be kept in mind that it was the entire collection, the complete set of paintings which we were selling, not individual works. The \$300,000 purchase price was divided arbitrarily by 40, the number of paintings in the collection, to arrive at a \$7,500 price per painting merely for the purpose of obtaining donations. This arbitrary value was placed on each of the works no matter what the size or labor required for each painting, no matter how simple or complex. Thus Scott's 29" by 39" watercolor of the young wild turkey cock with a value at time of sale of \$25,000 was also priced the same at \$7,500, a savings for the Museum of \$17,500 had it purchased that picture individually.

It is extremely important to Scott and me that the members of the Board believe in our good intentions and that we can restore an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and good feeling concerning the project. For this reason we propose the following:

Because the Snow Goose and the Bobwhite Quail have already been pledged to the Museum and paid for, let me donate the one remaining bird painting — that of the Bufflehead Ducks. The \$7,500 value of this work will then raise the amount of the discount we are offering the Museum to \$39,000. In addition our recent gifts of two copies of our bird book valued at \$5,000 and two sets of prints with the value of \$3,600 will increase the benefit to the Museum to \$47,600 which, I hope you will agree, is more than just a conciliatory gesture.

Scott and I will always have a special interest in preserving this wonderful collection of bird paintings intact and in Fort Worth. We have, as some Board members may know, always held the Museum in special affection and esteem from the time even before we made our first donation of our kachina doll collection to this institution in the 1950's. Our support for the Museum goes back farther in fact than our work for many other cultural institutions and worthy causes in Fort Worth.

I believe that those who know us well would be as hurt as we are to have our motives questioned and our integrity impuned. Although we are not wealthy people, we have given well over \$100,000 of mostly non-deductible art contributions to many causes and civic projects in the last two decades and in addition have volunteered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of hours of public service over the years. I have served on the boards of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, the Fort Worth Opera, Painted Spaces Inc., Intercultura and the Fort Worth Zoological Association among others, and I will continue to do so as long as I have time and energy. Don knows that I have literally been on standby to help the Museum in any way that I can — now and in the future. I only hope that the Board will act on this our latest offer in a genuine spirit of goodwill and conciliation and that we can get on with the business of making the Gentling Collection the outstanding asset for the Museum that it can be.

Sincerely yours,

Abner Gentling