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A. Elmer Crowell's preening Canada goose (left) and preening pintail (right) sold for a record-setting \$1.13 million each.

To tune of \$1.13m, decoys are the real thing

Folk art collectibles reach new level

By Robert Weisman, Globe Staff | September 21, 2007 | Front Page

It's a safe bet that few people have heard of A. Elmer Crowell, but in the field of waterfowl decoys he is Leonardo da Vinci.

A pintail drake and a Canada goose carved by the late East Harwich artisan sold for a record \$1.13 million apiece this week, in a transaction that has the folk art world in a flutter.

The purchase, by an undisclosed buyer, marked the first time any antique decoy has fetched seven figures, said Boston dealer Stephen O'Brien Jr., who brokered the private sale.

Once relegated to collecting dust in barns and on flea market tables, wood-carved duck and goose decoys are now luring big-time collectors. The Crowell pair, carved between 1915 and 1917, was part of a larger \$7.5 million sale of 31 decoys.

The deal is seen as a coming of age for a genre that's taking its place beside weathervanes, carousel horses, and cigar store Indians in the pantheon of American folk art.

Crowell's birds are known for their close attention to detail, combining intricate carving of bills and tails with delicate painting of feathering patterns. "They are from a magical period when Crowell was consumed with getting the exact likeness of the species," said O'Brien, 39, one of the world's leading dealers of waterfowl decoys.

Especially prized are the heads - which aren't looking straight ahead. "The more unusual the head position, the more valuable decoys tend to be," O'Brien said.

Decoys grew more popular as demand for Americana surged after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

"There's been a push by collectors to own American tangibles, to own a part of their history and heritage, rather than stocks and bonds," said O'Brien. "It's something that people can put on their shelves and enjoy in the here and now."

Three of the best-known 20th century decoy carvers - Crowell, Joseph Lincoln of Hingham, and Lothrop



Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr. who brokered the record sale of the two carvings by A. Elmer Crowell, has about 100 decoys in his Newbury Street gallery, Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts, LLC.

Holmes of Kingston - worked in Massachusetts, dealers and collectors said.

When a decoy carved by Lincoln sold for \$205,000 in 1986, it set off speculation in the folk art world about when a decoy sale would top \$1 million. Now that the question has been answered, O'Brien said, "I don't think it's far off when we'll see birds selling for \$2 million or \$3 million."

O'Brien has about 100 decoys at his Newbury Street gallery, Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts, with price tags ranging from \$200 to \$250,000.

Duck and goose decoys date back more than 1,000 years to Native Americans, who fashioned them out of rushes and reeds. Most of the antique decoys owned and traded by several thousand collectors today were hand-carved between 1860 and 1930 by artisans along the Atlantic, Illinois River, and Pacific flyways, the routes that migratory birds travel in winter from Canada to Central and South America.

At first, the decoys were primitive pieces used by hunters to attract ducks and other birds that could be sold as delicacies to fancy restaurants in cities like Boston, New York, and Chicago.

When the Migratory Bird Act of 1918 outlawed the sale of wild fowl to restaurants to preserve species threatened with extinction, demand for decoys dwindled.

So did the cottage industry that carved decoys for the market hunters. But they continued to be used by sportsmen, some of whom also began collecting them as art.

"It took a long time for people to recognize them as true American folk art because of their role as working tools," said Jane Winchell, curator of natural history at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, which exhibits decoys. "They were in people's barns and attics."

Crowell, backed by Boston patrons John C. Phillips and Harry Long, was a transformational figure for decoy art.

"Crowell was a maker of working decoys who was so good that people begged him to make decorative decoys," said Henry Stansbury, a Baltimore collector who owns about 400 decoys, mostly of migratory birds from the Chesapeake Bay and Barrier Islands.

Like other art work, Crowell's decoys have changed hands several times among collectors looking for a return on their investment.

Christie's auction house last sold the pintail drake in 2003 for \$801,500, while Sotheby's auction house sold his Canada goose in 2000 for \$684,500. Both were records at the time.

Stansbury said the collection sold this week was in pristine condition. "They're the best of the best, all in mint condition," he said.

O'Brien would identify the buyer only as "an ardent decoy collector who saw the value in Elmer Crowell's work."

He said interest in decoys is spreading worldwide - and some have been carved in Europe - but the majority of collectors continue to be from North America.

"Your typical collector back in the 1950s was a white male aged 50 to 70, usually a hunter," O'Brien said. "Today you have a lot of women and younger collectors interested in American folk art."

And, as in many other markets, money has altered the supply-and-demand equation for decoys

"The very expensive ones are beyond the reach of average collectors," Stansbury said.