

Copley Fine Art Auctions, LLC, Plymouth, Massachusetts

Dog Portrait and Crowell Black Duck Lead \$3.2 Million Sale

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

A world auction price record was set for Edmund H. Osthau when his outstanding portrait of a pointer with a quail in its mouth was sold at Stephen B. O'Brien Jr.'s third annual sporting arts sale, held July 23 and 24 at the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Other fresh lots of exceptional paintings and decoys put bidders in the mood to compete. The results on 235 lots of artworks and 334 decoys and shorebirds totaled more than \$3.2 million.

With the combined estimate on over 550 lots at \$2.5 million/3.9 million, the sale easily hit its mark. It also overtook the grosses of the auction house's previous two sales, \$2.3 million in 2006 and approximately \$2.6 million in 2007.

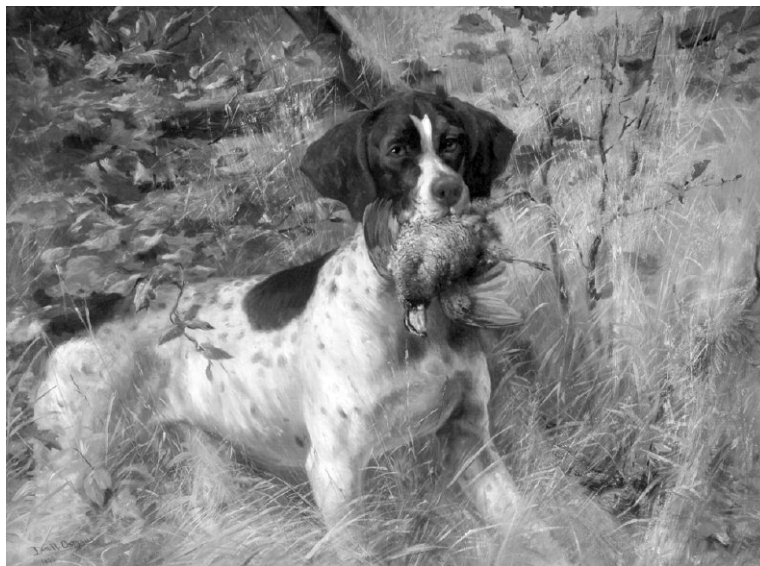
"That's a twenty percent improvement over last year," O'Brien said a week later as he set up for the Nantucket antiques show. (Besides running the annual auction, he and his wife, Cinnie, are sporting art dealers with a gallery on Boston's Newbury Street.)

"Considering the economy," O'Brien said, "I was pleased. What I'm most excited about is that virtually everything sold. We had very few buy-ins. There was a little bit of unevenness in the middle market, and as a result I think there were some pretty good buys, but I was impressed with the strength in the high-end pieces and also in items under ten thousand dollars."

O'Brien's sale was second in the lineup of three specialty auctions traditionally held in July in New England. On the two previous days, Ted and Judy Harmon's Decoys Unlimited of West Barnstable, Massachusetts, held its sale on Cape Cod. On two subsequent days, Guyette & Schmidt of St. Michaels, Maryland, held its sale in Portland, Maine. Major collectors and dealers like to attend all three, but this time, some players were absent or seen at only one or two—a sign of the times.

"Airfare, rental cars, hotel bills, restaurant meals—it's all adding up," said a collector who spent six figures at O'Brien's but none anywhere else.

O'Brien's auction house has always distinguished itself from the Harmons' and Guyette & Schmidt's by selling both art and



After a protracted phone-bidding war, *Pointer with Quail*, a 30" x 36" oil on canvas by Edmund H. Osthau (1858-1928), sold to a private collector on the phone for a record-setting \$230,500 (est. \$40,000/60,000).



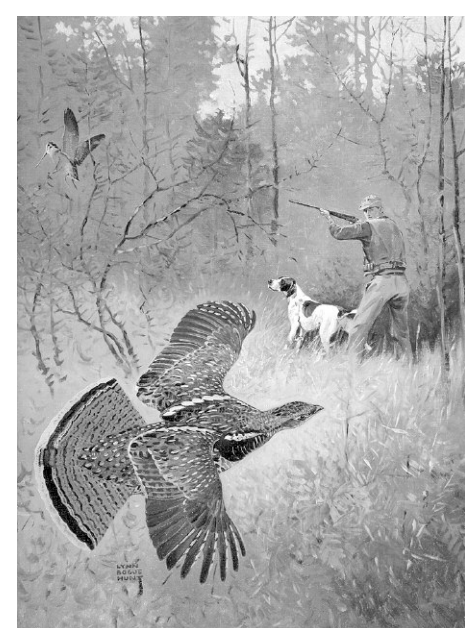
This life-size reaching black duck by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) was the sale's top bird, going in the room for \$214,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000).



Frank Benson's 1930 drypoint *Woodcock*, 11 7/8" x 9 3/4", sold to a phone bidder for \$5463 (est. \$2000/4000). It came to the sale as part of a consignment from Benson's great-granddaughter. Although Benson did an edition of 150, O'Brien said he has seen the print on the market only a couple of times in 17 years.



Frank Benson's 1918 etching *Marsh Gunner*, 10 7/8" x 8 7/8", from an edition of 150, is considered one of Benson's "Big Four" hunting portraits, along with *The Gunner*, *Old Tom*, and *Winter Wildfowling*. Another from his great-granddaughter's consignment, it went to a phone bidder at a record \$16,100 (est. \$8000/12,000).



Flushed Woodcock and Grouse, a 30" x 22 1/2" oil on board by Lynn Bogue Hunt (1878-1960), came to the sale from a private California collection. Featured on the cover of the December 1939 issue of *Field & Stream*, the painting hung in a private camp for 50 years, according to the catalog. A phone bidder bought it for \$24,150 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

birds. Interestingly, at this sale O'Brien did \$1.6 million in each category.

Obviously, the dual-content concept is producing good financial results, but O'Brien continues to tweak his format. The consensus this time was that it worked. Bidders liked having art on one day, birds on another, instead of one long day of both, back to back, or two days of a mix.

A good auction requires showmanship, but most bidders, given the choice,

would probably take speed over style. Last year, the pace of auctioneer Jay Beard, accompanied by a gyrating, hand-clapping spotter, was an agonizing 40 lots per hour. This time, guest auctioneer Michael Grogan, whose own 20-year-old auction house has general antiques sales in Dedham, Massachusetts, dispersed lots at 70 lots per hour—or lph (if I may invent a useful abbreviation for these pages).

O'Brien's catalogs continue to be

sumptuously illustrated. They are also well written, almost lovingly. O'Brien seems to delight in composing chronicles that evoke the period when the artworks and decoys were created. At age 40, he is still young, but his first hunting and fishing experiences date to his



From a private New York collection came Frank Benson's 1927 *Heading Home*, a 14 5/8" x 21 1/4" watercolor that sold for \$97,750 (est. \$60,000/80,000).



Widgeon, a 14" x 19" watercolor by Frank W. Benson (1862-1951)—A. Elmer Crowell's almost exact contemporary—went to a phone buyer at \$131,500 (est. \$60,000/80,000).



Another Edmund H. Osthau dog portrait, this time of an English setter, went to a private collector on the phone at \$60,375 (est. \$25,000/35,000). *Toledo Queen*, a 21" x 26" oil on canvas, is the original of the image made famous by the lithograph published by the Detroit Photographic Co. in 1899. It came to the sale from a private New Jersey collection.

boyhood, and he capitalizes on these as well as on his and his family's friendships with some of the greatest names in sporting art collecting.

Narrative writing ability aside, O'Brien's condition reports on the decoys are straightforward and notably thorough. (Bidders interested in artworks must ask for them.) "We try to set ourselves apart by really detailing the descriptions on the birds," he said. "That links back to not wanting to get anything back."

O'Brien positioned the art portion of the sale on the first day, perhaps to give bird bidders a breather after the Harmons' sale. (See page 46-B for that story.) Its live audience numbered about 50; twice that many came for the birds.

Top-lot bidders on both days were predominantly on the phones, usually a recipe for auction tedium, but the Osthaus record-setter, *Pointer with Quail*, produced an entertaining phone bidding war between O'Brien and his father. The painting by the German-born American sporting-dog painter opened in Grogan's book at \$40,000, the low estimate. Soon enough, the contest between son and father's bidders began. Back and forth they went for a full 15 minutes, with Grogan calling "Junior" and "Senior" (or, variously, "Dad").

"Didn't we all know it was a two-hundred-thousand-dollar painting?" Grogan asked his audience when the bidding reached that level. It proved to be the dividing line. After *filis* took it to the next increment, *père* was silenced, and the new record for Osthaus was set at \$230,500 (includes buyer's premium).

"I knew that painting was one of the best I'd seen by the artist, but I didn't have any idea it would go where it went," said O'Brien, who identified his bidder only as a private collector. As for the consignor, he was a great-nephew of 19th-century merchant George M. Brady Esq. of Detroit, Michigan, who commissioned the oil on canvas work from the artist in 1890.

O'Brien is increasingly associated with the artist Frank W. Benson. In 2006 Benson's 1927 oil on canvas *Salmon Fishing* sold for \$747,500, accounting for about a third of the entire sale's take. This sale featured over 40 Bensons in a variety of media, including many fine, rare, and early etchings consigned by two of the artist's great-grandchildren.

A Benson that came from a different source was the second-to-top painting lot in the sale. A watercolor titled simply *Widgeon*, it is believed to have been commissioned from the artist in 1926 by George de Forest Lord, an owner of the famed Blake Plantation of Hampton County, South Carolina, where it hung for many years. Consigned to the sale by a Lord grandson, it went on the phone at \$131,500.

The buyer of Benson's *Widgeon*, a private collector from the West, phoned in several wins on important art lots at this auction. One was a watercolor by Ogden M. Pleissner, *Waiting for the Rise*, a classic Atlantic salmon fishing scene dating from 1952. Consigned to the sale by the Norman B. Woolworth family of Winthrop, Maine (relatives of the five-and-dime store founder), it was the top Pleissner in the sale, fetching \$94,875.

The same western phone bidder paid \$89,125 for Aiden Lassell Ripley's *Point in the Corn*, a watercolor of a quail hunting scene on a southern plantation. "It had all the bells and whistles that southern quail hunters are looking for in a Ripley work," said O'Brien, whose book about Ripley, coauthored with Julie Carlsen, will be published soon. That price beat the record not only for Ripley watercolors but for all works by Ripley.

Point in the Corn came fresh to the market from the family of Clifford Llewelyn Fitzgerald, a New York City advertising executive, who lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, and owned the plantation pictured. Of the sale's nine Ripleys, it made the most, chased by several other phone bidders, including the usually unstoppable George Arnold of Ormond Beach, Florida.

The plantation at the time Ripley painted it, in the 1930's or 1940's, was 12,000 acres that extended from Thomasville, Georgia, into Leon County, Florida. "Thus my interest!" the collector of Florida art wrote in a post-sale e-mail. "As a point of reference, the Florida state capital, in Tallahassee, is in Leon County."

Collectors Mary Jane and John Dreyer of Ridgewood, New Jersey, were among the strongest room bidders at the sale, buying paintings and decoys, as well as the circa 1910 Tlingit salmon basket that O'Brien presented in its own separate catalog and gave a \$60,000/90,000 estimate.

Its provenance included an unnamed private collection in Seattle, Washington, Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe, the Charles and Valerie Diker collection of New York City, and dealer/designer/collector Ned Jalbert of Westborough, Massachusetts.

On May 18, an 18th-century Tlingit warrior's helmet sold for \$2,185,000 at Fairfield Auction in Newtown, Connecticut. Brought to an appraisal day benefit for a local senior center, it remains the most expensive American Indian object sold at auction.

The Tlingit salmon basket, however, was from a century later and not even close to being a new discovery. On one bid against the book, the Dreyers had it at \$63,250.

"I think it was a little too quick to bring it back on the

market," O'Brien said, "but I think in the long term it will be a good investment."

The Dreyers won several of the sale's other good buys, including Ripley's 1949 watercolor *Two Woodcock* (\$19,550), Lynn Bogue Hunt's oil on canvas depiction of buck fever, *Big Horn Rams* (\$33,350), and another Pleissner watercolor from the Woolworth family, *Duck Hunting at Dawn* (\$63,250).

"There were some good buying opportunities reflecting the uncertain times," said O'Brien. "Astute buyers picked them up. There has been a shift in both the decoy and sporting artworks market, so for the smart collector, it could be a good time."

The sale's top bird lot was not a bargain. It was a life-size reaching black duck by A. Elmer Crowell that went to a Cape Cod collector in the room for \$214,000. According to O'Brien, the circa 1912 decorative was bought in 1959 from a Minneapolis art gallery by J.B. Linsmayer, a close friend of Jimmy Robinson. Who had it before that is unknown, but its base bears the earliest oval Crowell brand and, penciled below that, a previous asking price: \$15.

Robinson was editor of *Sports Afield* and founder of the Sports Afield Duck Club, one of the world's great gathering places for migratory waterfowl, located on the Delta Marsh in Manitoba province. He made it a habit to be photographed with the many celebrity guests he entertained there, including Ernest Hemingway, Clark Gable, and Monaco's Prince Rainier. One presumes that Linsmayer was within shoulder-rubbing distance of some of them.

Never mind its celebrity associations. The duck represents a brilliant example of the master's work. O'Brien's catalog notes that, along with Canada geese, Crowell's yearly bag was almost always predominantly black ducks, and his familiarity with their anatomy is apparent in the meticulous detail, but only a true artist could have conveyed the bird's animated motion and the idea that it is a very specific individual of the species.

Gene and Linda Kangas of Creekside Art Gallery, Concord, Ohio, bought another of the sale's prominently featured bird lots, a pair of geese by Minnesota's John Tax. One is a nestled-head sleeper; the other, a watch gander, considered to be Tax's best high-headed sentinel and the tallest of all Tax sentinels. Lucky enough to get the complementary rig mates for just above the low estimate, the Kangases paid \$103,500.

They also bought a West Coast bird, an exceptional flying brant by George William McLellan, paying \$43,700, again just above the low number. Considered to be the best of the nine existing classic redwood McLellan brant decoys, each with uniquely designed movable and adjustable wings, this one retained its original brass mounting devices and original wooden carrying box.

"We prefer decoys that are readily distinguished from the crowd; made in small or very limited numbers; one-of-a-kind or one of just a few by a particular artist—in other words singular statements," Gene Kangas wrote in an e-mail after the sale, adding that he and Linda naturally gravitate toward birds that "demonstrate individual sculptural expression"—e.g., "decoys in various lifelike postures—feeders, swimmers, reachers, sleepers, nestled-heads, and watchers sculpted by carvers who developed their own personal creative sensibility.

"The John Tax geese and George McLellan brant cross the critical threshold from decoys that were once intended as merely utilitarian hunting tools into expressive folk art. Opportunities to acquire decoys with such exceptional qualities are extremely rare. We are excited to have been able to add them to our collection."

We also spoke on the phone to Gene Kangas, who, with Linda, has been collecting decoys for 40 years and written three books on the subject, along with two national decoy directories and two exhibition catalogs. Aware that market reports stressing record prices can discourage new collectors, he mentioned a few of the sale's appealing lots on the low end. There was, for example, a black duck by Charles Hart of Gloucester, Massachusetts, that went in the room at \$2300. "It had a lot of quality to it. I own the best Charles Hart in existence. I didn't need it, but it's a very nice one."

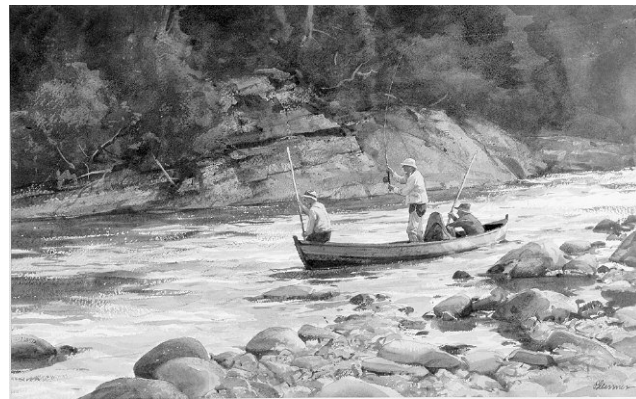
He also singled out an early "root head" decoy with a removable head that was attributed to Roger Williams (1770-1840) of Peconic Bay, Long Island, New York. If it is a Williams, somebody bought a 200-year-old decoy for \$172.50.

The swimming brant by Havelock Mill of Prince Edward Island, Canada, circa 1880, was another good buy at \$460, Kangas said.

Last, Kangas named the Ontario hollow mallard drake. An Internet buyer who calls himself or herself "good4sure" got that one for \$180.

"The fact is, there are some great decoys and great prints that can be bought for a hundred and fifty dollars today," O'Brien said, "and we will always offer them. Some of our best customers started out buying at that level, and now they have graduated to buying million-dollar items."

For more information, contact Copley Fine Art Auctions at (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site (www.copleyart.com).



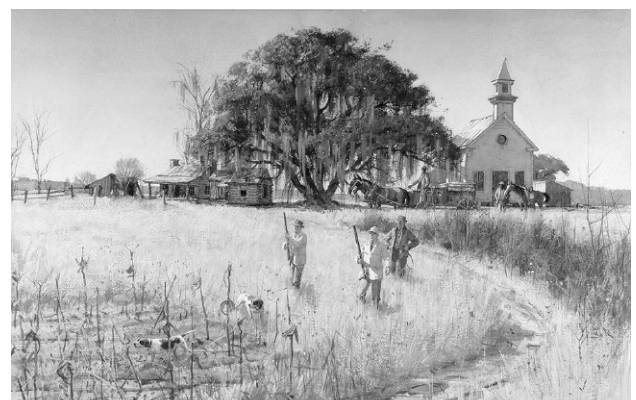
Of seven paintings in the sale by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), *Waiting for the Rise*, a 16½" x 26½" watercolor from the Norman B. Woolworth family collection, was the most successful, fetching \$94,875 (est. \$40,000/60,000). John Dreyer was the underbidder.



From Frank Benson's great-grandson's collection came this stunning 13" x 20" black-and-white ink wash of two yellowlegs and their reflections. Signed and dated "F.W. Benson '22," it went to Dr. Lloyd Griffith of Virginia, who paid \$63,250 (est. \$30,000/50,000).



Frank Benson's *Jim Crow*, from his great-grandson's consignment, sold to a room bidder for \$32,200 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The 12½" x 15¼" black-and-white ink wash was unsigned and undated, but the catalog states that the family dates it to circa 1909 and always referred to it as "Papa's pet crow on North Haven,"—i.e., the Benson summer residence on North Haven Island, Maine. That crow is pictured with Benson's daughter Elizabeth in his great-granddaughter Faith Andrews Bedford's *Frank W. Benson: American Impressionist* (1994).



Point in the Corn, an 18¾" x 29¼" watercolor by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969), sold for \$89,125 (est. \$30,000/50,000).



One of Frank Benson's earliest and rarest etchings—only five impressions were ever produced—*Reneé* is also considered to be one of his best. Dated 1912, the etching and drypoint is just 5½" x 3½". From Benson's great-granddaughter's collection, it sold to dealer John Hagan of Wellesley, Massachusetts, for \$11,500 (est. \$6000/8000).



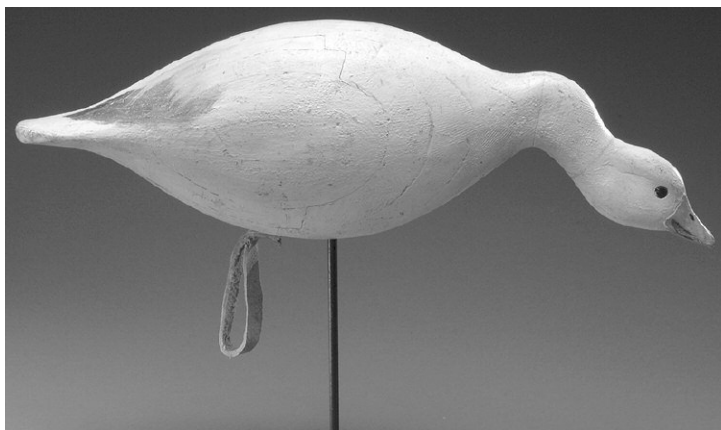
A blue-winged teal pair by Lemuel T. Ward (1896-1984) and Stephen Ward (1895-1975) of Crisfield, Maryland, sold for \$34,500 (est. \$40,000/60,000). "The Ward brothers lots all sold, but they didn't perform terribly well, showing where the marketplace is right now," said O'Brien. "The Wards, up until this past winter, have been red-hot. This result shows some volatility in the market."



A circa 1890 bufflehead drake by Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920) of Tuckerton, New Jersey, sold on the phone to a private collector from the Philadelphia area for \$52,900 (est. \$20,000/40,000).



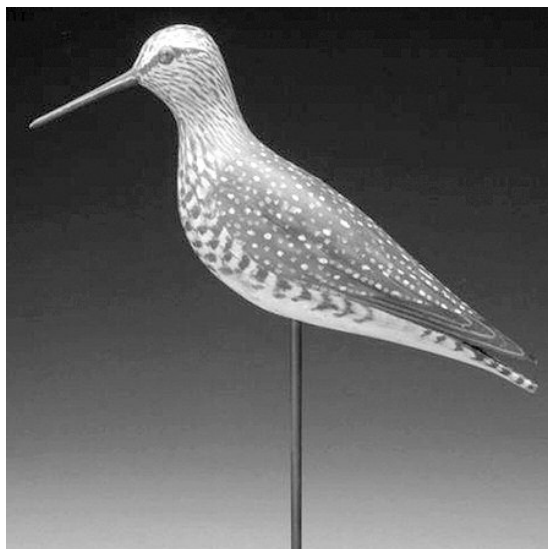
This circa 1915 Shourds hollow black duck, wrapped to cut down on paint glare for night hunting, still had much of its eel grass intact. Cataloged by O'Brien as "an exceptional, historically important" piece, it was passed at \$3500 (est. \$12,000/18,000). "I loved the bird, but obviously the bidders didn't agree," he said later with a laugh. "Somebody mentioned that it was going to do a lot of shedding over the years, leaving flecks of grass on the mantle to be cleaned up continually. It's a shame it didn't go to a museum, since it's a significant decoy by a great maker. An unusual piece that you almost never see."



This circa 1917 John Tax feeding snow goose came to the sale with the same provenance as the pair that was bought by the Kangases. It went to a folk art collector bidding by phone at \$86,250 (est. \$80,000/120,000).



An unsigned, undated ink wash from Frank Benson's great-granddaughter's collection, the artist's 25" x 19¼" *Ducks in Flight*, went to John Hagan at \$21,850 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



One of the underperformers of the sale, an A. Elmer Crowell black-bellied plover—a so-called "dust jacket" plover, since three from the same rig are pictured on the cover of William Mackey Jr.'s *American Bird Decoys* (1965)—sold to John Hagan for \$69,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000). A "dust jacket" example holds the world auction price record for a shorebird, \$830,000, achieved at Guyette & Schmidt in Maryland on November 9, 2006. This one, from a Cambridge, Massachusetts, collection, had a replaced bill; that aside, observers are noting a new softness in the shorebird market.

A circa 1910 A. Elmer Crowell willet with replaced bill sold in the room for \$19,550 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



A rare life-size ruffed grouse by A. Elmer Crowell, circa 1915, sold to Mary Jane and John Dreyer for \$32,200 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Ruffed grouse in artworks by Benson, Ripley, and William H. Foster (1886-1941) were the subject of a lecture by Robert A. Anderson that preceded the sale that morning, and the Dreyers were in attendance.



The circa 1910 Tlingit salmon basket from the Pacific Northwest Coast, 11" high x 13½" diameter at the top x 9½" diameter at the base, sold to the Dreyers for \$63,250 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



This pair of geese by Minnesota's John Tax (1894-1967), one tucked-head, the other a sentinel, went to Gene and Linda Kangas at \$103,500 (est. \$100,000/150,000). According to the catalog, they had been in the collection of John Lindgren, who co-wrote with Cliff Traff the early privately published booklet *The Last of the Prairie Carvers: Decoys by John Tax* (1970). Twenty-five years ago, they went from Lindgren to folk art collector Julie Hall. Tax was a harness maker who began to make decoys for his own use in 1917, the approximate date of this pair. By design, no two birds in the grouping were exactly alike. Tax is believed to have made a total of only 84 duck and goose decoys of various types and materials during a ten-year period.



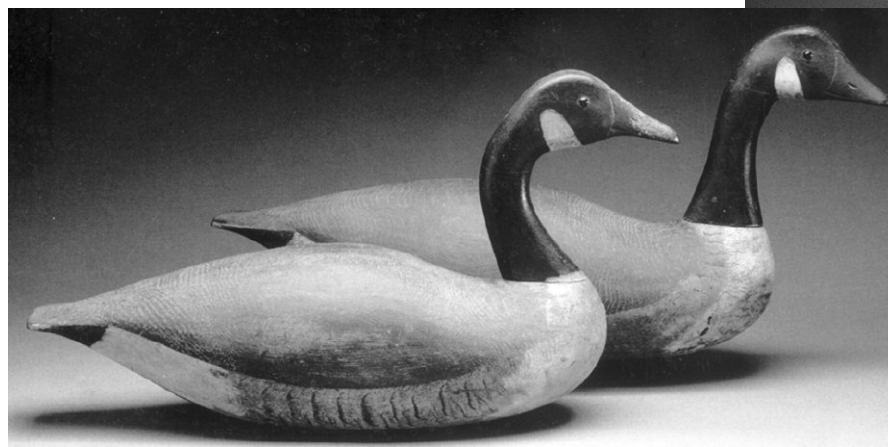
A circa 1910 A. Elmer Crowell golden plover sold to a private collector from Maryland for \$42,550 (est. \$25,000/35,000).



A circa 1890 plump sanderling by Dave "Umbrella" Watson (1851-1938) of Chincoteague, Virginia, went to a room bidder at \$10,638 (est. \$2500/3500). Its provenance included time spent in the collection of William J. Mackey Jr. and in the University Club of Milwaukee decoy collection, from which many other consignments to this sale came. The hard-to-find bird also had the right surface—original paint, lightly hit by shot—and a bill that appeared original.



A rare hollow Maine decoy by Orlando Sylvester "Os" Bibber (1882-1970) of South Harpswell sold to a room bidder for \$39,100 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The circa 1910 American merganser was from the collection of maker George V. Soule, who was mentored by Bibber. "Bibber's birds have sold well in excess of a hundred thousand dollars," said O'Brien. "It's a different climate. A few years ago, it would have brought much more."



These circa 1895 Canada geese by Joseph Lincoln were featured on the catalog's cover. They are in two different positions, one swimming, the other in a content (or pre-swimming) pose. Originally made to be used as stick-ups, they later saw duty as floaters. One of several great buys of the sale, the pair sold for \$69,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



The circa 1941 flying brant by George William McLellan (1897-1987) of Eureka, California, went to Gene and Linda Kangas at \$43,700 (est. \$30,000/40,000). It is one of only nine known birds from the rig that was constructed by McLellan with help from his wife, Olga. Considered to be one of the best, if not the best, this exact bird was pictured in the seminal *Wildfowl Decoys of the Pacific Coast: Carving Traditions of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California* (1989) by Michael R. Miller and Frederick W. Hanson.

A circa 1920 Canada goose by Joseph Lincoln (1859-1938) of Accord, Massachusetts, sold to a private collector bidding by phone for \$52,900 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Initialed "JCP" on the bottom, it once belonged to Dr. John C. Phillips (1876-1938), a conservationist who was associate curator of birds at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology. In the 1930's, Phillips gave it to Porter Perkins. More recently, it was in the Peter Brams collection. In original paint with near-mint feathering, it had minimal gun wear and a nice warm patina.



Snipe Art

The snipe art collection of William S. Brewster, featured in its own catalog, was sold in 46 unreserved lots at the end of the sale's first day. More than 100 works were chosen from the many images of snipe that Brewster has collected over the past 64 years. Made by 41 different artists, there were oils and watercolors, as well as etchings, woodcuts, bronzes, wood carvings, and even one batik. Values for single lots ran from \$23 to \$33,350.

The big price, nearly a third of the \$96,882 gross, was fetched by a 1901 watercolor by Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935), a Scottish-born ornithological artist. "This painting was carefully delivered to me in Edinburgh, Scotland, while [I was] staying at Beaulieu Castle and fishing the Beaulieu River for salmon," Brewster told O'Brien, who quoted the tale in the catalog. "It was brought up to me from London [in 1981] by a member of the nobility who was coming up to fish the same river."

Brewster's drypoint of a snipe by Aiden Lassell Ripley prompted another story, also reproduced in the catalog: "In the nineteen-fifties, I hunted partridge and woodcock with Ripley in Francistown and Hillsborough, New Hampshire. He knew the covers well. Very quiet and private man...A nice guy to be around."

"The ones we chose for the sale weren't necessarily the highest-valued ones from his collection," O'Brien said. "We put together different media, periods, countries, and presented an overview of his collection. We wanted to create a chronicle before it was broken up." To that end, the catalog, with more annotations by Brewster and an essay by O'Brien, has been published in a limited hardbound edition of 150. *The Snipe Art Collection of William S. Brewster* is available for \$40, including shipping and handling, from Copley Fine Art Auctions, 268 Newbury Street, Boston, MA 02116.



\$33,350.

