

Copley Fine Art Auctions, New York City

Decoys Sell Well in the City

by Lita Solis-Cohen

Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

Stephen O'Brien, who calls his sporting art and decoy auction firm Copley Fine Art Auctions LLC, was first on the Americana Week calendar and held his first New York City sale on January 17 at Wallace Hall at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola at 980 Park Avenue, a convenient address between 83rd and 84th Street. He shared the space and auction crew with Leigh Keno—a good deal for both of them. O'Brien took the north side of the room for his gallery of pictures and decoys; Keno took the south side. The middle aisle was saved for the star lots of furniture and decoys.

The previews on Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. gave everyone time to get there before or after Sotheby's and Christie's

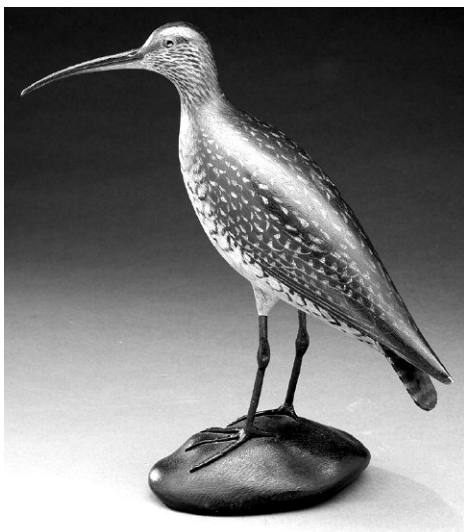
“After building collections over twenty years, it is nice to be able to sell some of those collections at auctions.”

previews, which were open from 1 to 5 p.m. Invited guests, more than 450 of them, attended the Scotch and salmon preview that began at 5 p.m. on Saturday. On Sunday, the NFL playoff games were shown on the big screen at the end of the hall that was used to project each lot during the auctions.

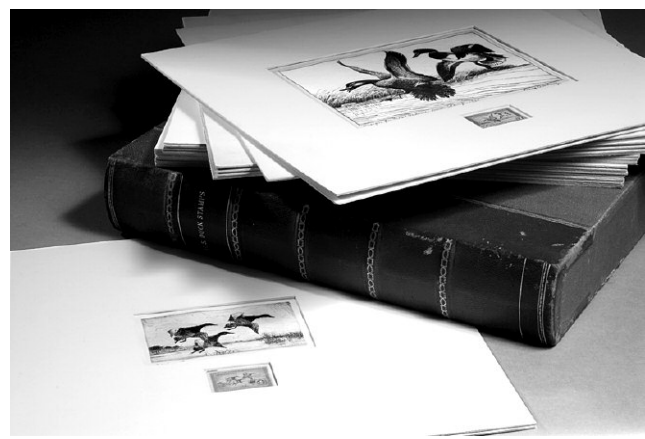
A good crowd came for the sale, and plenty of bidders flocked to bid by phone and on line on Artifact, and to leave bids with the auctioneer. It had the aspect of a country sale in the middle of Manhattan. Bidders could take a second look at a lot during the auction. Everyone seemed to know each other.

Michael Grogan, a skilled auctioneer, had trouble getting competitive bidding for sporting art, but he did fine when the decoys crossed the block. Some said the estimates for the top lots of paintings were just too high for this readjusted market. Others said the offerings were disappointing. Some paintings by the big names in American sporting art—Frank Benson, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Percival Rosseau, Ogden Pleissner, and William Harnden Foster—failed to sell.

A few Ogden Pleissner watercolors sold for their low estimates, and some works by living artists found buyers. Buyers generally seem to turn up for paintings of dogs by Edmund Henry Osthaus (1858-1928), who was born in Germany and studied art there before immigrating to the United States. Two Osthaus watercolors of setters sold for \$9200 (includes buyer's premium) and \$10,350. Etchings by



This Hudsonian curlew by A. Elmer Crowell, circa 1915, the father of modern bird carving, was carved during a period when he was transitioning between his early working decoy style and his detailed decorative style. It has detailed bill carving, black glass eyes, and an alert, slightly turned head with a delicately carved neck. The bird displays gently blended feather paint and a warm patina. Crowell's oval brand signature is on the bottom of the carved base. The catalog noted that it was carved at the same time and with the same painted detail as the running curlew sold by Copley Fine Art Auctions in July 2007 for \$189,750, the current world record for a Crowell decorative shorebird. With professional restoration to gesso on the right thigh and two toes, it sold for \$74,750 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



A set of 15 federal duck stamps and original prints from 1934-50 (1942 not included) sold for \$28,750 (est. \$15,000/25,000). O'Brien believes it is a record price. The collection included a very rare first edition of Francis Lee Jaques's 1940 design, which was reproduced in an edition of only 30. Jaques spent much of his career at the American Museum of Natural History. The early duck stamps, issued in small editions, are desirable.



This mallard drake by Joseph W. Lincoln (1859-1938) of Accord, Massachusetts, circa 1925, is probably the only full-size Lincoln mallard drake decoy in original paint known to exist. It was found several decades ago in an antiques shop in Pennsylvania. During Lincoln's lifetime, mallard ducks as a wild species were rare, and the scarcity is reflected by the infrequency of the surfacing of his working mallards in any condition. It is in original paint and finish; it has a crack in the neck that has been cleanly reset with minimal touchup and minimal wear from handling. From a private collection, it sold for \$86,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000) to a collector in the salesroom.

500 BOOTH ANTIQUE SHOW

'ANTIQUE CITY'

PHILLY EXPO CENTER AT OAKS, PA

Saturday April 9th 10 am - 6 pm

Sunday April 10th 10 am - 5 pm

Fine Toys, Trains, Dolls & Bears • Americana
Holidays • Country & Formal Furnishings
Automobilia • Folk Art • Jewelry & Watches
Fine Art • Advertising • Coin-Op * Porcelain
Pottery • Glass • Country Store • Ladies Items
Slots • Posters • Arcade • Sports • Bronzes
Postcards • Decoys • Ephemera • Militaria
Clocks • Railroadiana • Barbershop • Movies
Coke & Pepsi • Textiles • Banks • Disneyana
Comics & Original Comic Art • Jukeboxes
Black Memorabilia • Circus & Carnival
Antiquarian Books • Erotica • Television & Radio
Rock 'n Roll • Pop Culture • Autographs
Manuscripts • Decoratives • Wonders Galore

ENTER 9 AM SATURDAY WITH \$15 ADVANCE TICKET

Buy tickets at AntiqueCityShow.com or 800-822-4119

Box office opens 10 am Saturday \$12 Sunday \$8

Carl Clemens Moritz Rungius (1869-1959) sold for around \$3000, generally below estimates.

“The sale in New York was the reverse of our summer sale, when sporting paintings sold well and the decoy market seemed to be in the doldrums,” said O'Brien after the sale.

There was enthusiastic bidding for decoys. Several records were made. Collectors said there was a nice selection, and good birds sold for high prices.

A Canada goose by John Tax (1894-1967) of Osakis, Minnesota, one of only six known hollow feeding stickups by Tax, sold for \$115,000. That was nearly double its high estimate and set a new record for Tax. A pair of goldeneyes by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) of East Harwich, Massachusetts, circa 1905, from a rig owned by John Ware Willard, the grandson of Massachusetts clockmaker Simon Willard, sold for \$109,250 (est. \$40,000/60,000). In January 2000, the pair of goldeneyes sold for \$24,150 at Sotheby's and Guyette & Schmidt's auction of the collection of Dr. James McCleery.

Four of the top-ten decoy lots were created by A. Elmer Crowell. In addition to the goldeneyes, a decorative Hudsonian curlew, carved and expertly painted circa 1915, sold for \$74,750 (est. \$60,000/90,000); a golden plover fetched \$48,875 (est. \$15,000/25,000); and a rare running plover made \$37,375 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

Even though the mallard drake carved and painted by Joseph W. Lincoln (1859-1938) of Accord, Massachusetts, circa 1925, once had its neck broken and expertly repaired, a fact noted in the sale catalog, it sold for \$86,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000). A canvasback duck by Lee Dudley (1860-1942) of Knotts Island, North Carolina, circa 1890, sold for \$80,500, setting a record for a Dudley canvasback and way over its \$30,000/50,000 estimate. This bird with a sculptural fullness of form might have brought a lot more if it had not been repainted and weathered.

O'Brien called the red-breasted merganser by Levi Rhodes Truex “the finest Truex merganser to ever come to market.” With its original abstract paint with minimal gunning wear, it sold for \$37,375 (est. \$12,000/18,000) and shattered the old Truex record of \$16,100.

The first of the decoys to be sold was a great horned owl made by Herter's Manufacturing Company in Minnesota, and it started the decoy section of the sale on the right note. Estimated at \$2000/3000, it was hammered down for \$4370, a new auction record for the maker.

A few lots were neither paintings nor decoys. A large sperm whale carving by Clark Voorhees (1911-1980) sold for \$11,500, well over its \$2000/4000 estimate. Two other sperm whales by Voorhees sold for \$2070 and \$4600.

A crowd favorite was a bronze by Wisconsin artist William J. Koelpin (1938-1996) of a hunter in a boat with his dog and decoy rig fighting a storm. The last of an edition of 24, the sculpture sold for \$9775 (est. \$6000/9000).

The sale was estimated at \$1.1/2.5 million and brought over \$1.5 million with 85% of the 423 lots offered sold.

O'Brien said he and Keno will team up again next January for sales at Wallace Hall at St. Ignatius Loyola. “I have been holding sales in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in July and closing the consignments in April. Now consignors will not have to wait a year for my next sale,” said O'Brien. “It was nice to have a small one-day sale. The July sales are big ones.” Last July, O'Brien offered 900 lots in two days.

“After building collections over twenty years, it is nice to be able to sell some of those collections at auctions,” said O'Brien, explaining why he is not exhibiting at two antiques shows (The American Antiques Show and the Philadelphia Antiques Show) in order to concentrate on auctions. Copley's next sale will be held July 21 and 22 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Call (617) 536-0030 for information or visit (www.copleyart.com).



A canvasback drake by Lee Dudley (1860-1942) of Knotts Island, North Carolina, circa 1890, with heavy gunning wear, sold for \$80,500 (est. \$30,000/50,000) to a collector in the salesroom. It had been consigned by a Michigan collector and previously acquired from the Marshall collection in the 1980's.

According to the Copley catalog, Dudley decoys have been held in the highest regard by collectors of all regions from the earliest days of decoy collecting. Two seminal books on decoy collecting, William J. Mackey's *American Bird Decoys* and Joel Barber's *Water Fowl Decoys*, begin their first chapters with stories of Dudley decoys and the authors' reverence for them. Barber's particular love of Dudley decoys is further illustrated in the first three plates of his book. In 1981 a panel of experts reviewing the decoy collection at the Shelburne Museum declared the Dudley decoys of Barber to be the best of the collection.

This particular decoy is believed to have been made for Dudley's personal gunning rig. The canvasback decoys from this rig represent some of the earliest and rarest of Dudley's carvings and can be distinguished by their smooth humpbacks, lack of wing carving, and painted eyes upon the carved high-crowned heads. Birds from this famous early rig bear Dudley's original "LD" brand on the bottom. According to Barber, Lee Dudley told him that "in 1913 the whole Dudley rig had been sold to a Knotts Island club at the then prevailing price of fifty cents apiece."

According to decoy legend, this decoy was a gift from Joel Barber to Tom Marshall. Betty Marshall, however, said that the decoy came to them in a trade from William Mackey in 1957 for an Albert Laing decoy. For years Betty Marshall kept this decoy in the back window of her sedan, a logo for her real estate business.



This Challenge-grade large-model Atlantic brant in an early "snakey" head style, made by the Mason Decoy Factory, Detroit, Michigan, circa 1900, the solid body with strong swirled brush strokes and original paint with gunning wear, sold on the phone for \$6900 (est. \$4000/6000). At the McCleery sale in January 2000, it sold for \$4312.



This golden plover by A. Elmer Crowell (1882-1952) of East Harwich, Massachusetts, circa 1915, is a mantel carving with black glass eyes. Stippled, with lightly blended paint, it's carved in a walking posture perched on a rock base and has a brand on the bottom of the base. Painted in non-breeding or juvenile plumage with minor restorations to the paint, it was purchased directly from the artist and came by descent in the family to the consignor. It sold for \$48,875 (est. \$15,000/25,000) to an agent in the salesroom.



This Premier-grade canvasback drake is a rare mammoth Chesapeake Bay model by the Mason Decoy Factory, circa 1910. It has exceptional original swirled paint with minor gunning wear and an age line on the left side along the bottom. The decoy came from a private collection in Massachusetts and sold for \$9200 (est. \$8000/12,000) to a collector in the salesroom.



This feeding Canada goose by John Tax (1894-1967) of Osakis, Minnesota, circa 1917, is one of only six known "feeding stickup" Canada goose decoys made by Tax. It is hollow, vertically laminated cedar. Authors Gene and Linda Kangas wrote in their book *Decoys: A North American Survey*: "Tax's full-bodied stickup Canada and snow geese rank as his most important works. While the massive bodies of both species are similar, each decoy was endowed with a different head position, depicting either a feeder, nestled head or sentinel attitude. The heights, angles, and curves were varied on each so that no two were exactly alike, thus contributing to a more lifelike rig. Painting was sufficient to accurately depict each species; but, it is a marvelous sense of power and dynamic form that marks his field 'stick-up' as a noteworthy contribution to decoy history." This exact decoy is pictured in Alan Haid's book *Decoys of the Mississippi Flyway* and Traff and Lindgren's pamphlet *Last of the Prairie Carvers*. With original paint with even craquelure, it sold for \$115,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000) to a collector on the phone.



This Premier-grade pair of pintails made by the Mason Decoy Factory, a true matched pair in original paint with gunning wear, from a collection in Texas, sold for \$6325 (est. \$10,000/15,000) on the phone.



This pair of early full-bodied hollow-carved goldeneyes in a rare content or tucked-head posture by A. Elmer Crowell sold for \$109,250 on the phone. They are from a rig ordered by John Ware Willard, grandson of Massachusetts clockmaker Simon Willard. The backs display Crowell's raised and carved primaries and fluted tail. The slightly turned heads have subtle rasping detail, and there is soft stippled feather-work. The bottom boards have the "J.W.W." brand and the McCleery collection ink stamp. They are in original condition with minimal gunning wear, and their provenance includes Dr. James M. McCleery and the collector in Virginia who acquired the pair at Sotheby's in January 2000 for \$24,150.



This shorebird decoy by Dr. Gilbert E. Wallace (1873-1916) of Forked River, New Jersey, circa 1890, is a painted-eye yellowlegs with a chamfered split tail. It has a carved raised wing and original paint with gunning wear and sold for \$1955 (est. \$1500/2500) on the phone.



A red-breasted merganser by Levi Rhodes Truex (1860-1934) of Atlantic City, New Jersey, circa 1890, from a private Delaware collection, sold for \$37,375 (est. \$12,000/18,000). O'Brien wrote for the catalog: "The subtle-carved comb, eyes, and bill detail give this hollow carved decoy the form of a true 'classic.' The age and mellow patina of the original paint place it as the finest Truex merganser to ever come to market."

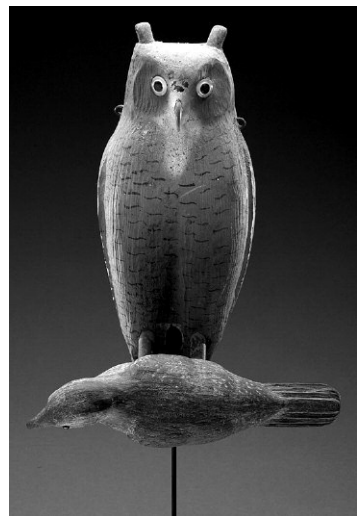


This small (17" x 28") watercolor on paper by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), *The Orchard Cover*, is signed lower left and titled also *Dorset Grouse*. It showcases Pleissner's noted ability to re-create the fleeting moment of suspense during a hunt. The hunter, grouse, and pointing dog form a dynamic triangle that lends depth to the composition. Pleissner's mastery of observation and of the watercolor medium is evident in this classic upland scene. It sold for \$46,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000) on the phone.

The Jump Shooter by Peter Corbin (b. 1945), signed and dated 1980, oil on canvas, 24" x 39 1/2", sold for \$8050 (est. \$8000/12,000). Another Corbin painting of fishermen after salmon sold for \$12,650. Corbin was in the salesroom.



Ogden M. Pleissner, *The Shore Line*, signed lower right, oil on canvas, 20" x 34", from the Thomas O'Brien collection, \$48,875 (est. \$40,000/60,000) to the phone.



A crow-hunting decoy set by Herter's Manufacturing Inc., Waseca, Minnesota, circa 1940, consisted of a Model Perfect #90 great horned owl, feather weight (balsa wood) with a bear-claw bill, and a Model Perfect #12 clutch crow, feather weight. Both were in original paint with light gunning wear, and the set sold for \$4370 (est. \$2000/3000) on the phone. The set is mentioned by Robert Shaw in *Bird Decoys of North America* (2010), p. 100.