



HOME

A NOTED LOTHROP HOLMES PLOVER GLIDES TO \$144,000 AT COPLEY SALE



The star of the sale was the McCleery-Holmes plover, which sold for \$144,000. It was carved by Lothrop Holmes, circa 1880, and had been part of the collection of Dr James McCleery, which grossed more than \$10 million in 2000, by far the record for a decoy collection. It was purchased by dealer Russ Goldberger, bidding for a client.

PLYMOUTH, MASS. — Copley Fine Arts' July 22 sporting sale, put together by Steve O'Brien Jr and his team, included several high-quality sporting paintings and numerous decoys. Leading the sale was a plover decoy by Kingston, Mass., carver Lothrop Holmes, which achieved \$144,000.



One of the stars of the sale was a widgeon drake by John Blair Sr of Philadelphia. Decoys of this form are considered “classic Blairs” and represent some of the finest carvings of the Philadelphia school of carvers. It realized \$90,000.

Leading the sporting art selections was a watercolor by Andrew Wyeth going out at \$63,000. Eleven decoys finished in the five figures, and 16 artworks also finished in five figures. The top ten decoy lots, in total, sold for \$468,000, and the top ten fine arts pieces, in total, brought \$285,600. The well-attended sale grossed \$1,417,752. There had been numerous left bids, several phone lines were in use and internet bidding was available. Lynn, Mass., auctioneer Peter Coccoluto kept the sale moving briskly. A decoy show and sales area was open the day of the preview and during the auction.

Prior to the sale, *Antiques and The Arts Weekly* had a conversation with Steve O'Brien Sr about decoy collecting. The elder O'Brien was instrumental in the formation and development of his son's company. O'Brien Sr said he collects folk art and baskets, along with decoys. “We grew up in a family that hunted and fished, going back to my grandfather who lived on Long Island. When I started collecting decoys, we weren't as concerned about who made it as today's collectors are.”

“Most important was the form and next in importance was the condition of the surface. Maker was the distant third component of desirability. Accuracy of the painting and construction, as compared to a real bird was crucial. Most decoy collectors are hunters, and they know what a particular bird should look like. The decoys that most closely resemble the real bird will, to me, always be the most desirable.”

Jumping into the conversation, O'Brien Jr said that he fully agrees with his dad. “Being a hunter and a fisherman really helped me learn and understand form. It's the first thing we look at when evaluating a decoy. I owe a lot to dad.” He also agreed with his father's statement about most decoy collectors being hunters or fishermen. “Just a little while ago, I was taking some bids from a client who is in Montana trout-fishing.” Carrying the thought about condition a little further, he commented on the importance of having Colin McNair, decoy specialist, as part of his company. “Colin's been with me about nine years, and his background as a carver enables him to spot repairs and restorations that other people might miss.”

The McNair family includes three skilled carvers creating bird and large fish decoys. Mark McNair, father of Colin and Ian, is one of the premier carvers today, and several of his carvings started the auction which began with works by contemporary carvers. A pair of feeding yellowlegs by Mark McNair (b 1950) brought \$5,400, a gadwall drake reached \$3,000, and a 48-inch sperm whale fetched \$4,500. Mark has been carving for about 45 years and both sons have been carving for about 25 years.



A circa 1920 preening mallard by Illinois River carver Bert Graves had been painted by Catherine Ellison. According to the catalog, “many in the decoy collecting field, consider this to be the finest Graves decoy ever to be offered.” It had been illustrated in three decoy books and came from the well-regarded collection of Gene Konopasek. It went to a phone bidder for \$75,000.

A large bluefin tuna by Colin McNair sold for \$3,600, a record for the carver. Both Colin and Ian sold their first carvings while still in grade school. Colin said, “Learning to work with wood came along with everything else like learning to read, write and ride a bike.” Both were homeschooled, and thus had plenty of time for woodworking and by the time they were in high school they were selling at decoy shows and that continued through college.

In addition to the McNair carvings, birds by other contemporary carvers also did well. A pair of pintails by Robert “Bob” White (b 1939) reached \$2,280, and his oversized mallard drake earned \$1,920. Several carvings by another of today’s premier carvers, William Gibian (b 1946) came next and a calling Hudsonian godwit finished at \$1,080.

The top lot of the auction was a decoy known as the McCleery-Holmes plover, which sold for \$144,000 — so far the top price for a shorebird this year. Carved by Lothrop Holmes, Kingston, Mass., circa 1880, the decoy had been owned by the legendary decoy collector Dr James McCleery. When the McCleery collection was sold in 2000, it grossed more than \$10 million, still a record for a decoy auction. The decoy had been published in five separate decoy books, including *Call To The Sky-The Decoy Collection of James M. McCleery, M.D.*, 1992. In addition to the impeccable provenance, the catalog entry stated, “This bird features everything that seasoned collectors look for in a Massachusetts shorebird, including a renowned maker,

impeccable provenance, rarity, exceptional form and paint, and stellar condition.” It was purchased by Russ Goldberger, bidding for a client.

Commenting later, Goldberger said, “The decoy market is alive and well. There appears to be particular strength at the higher end where committed collectors are willing to pay for the best examples. Internet bidding appears to have displaced eBay as a source of less expensive decoys. After all, some auction houses provide guaranteed descriptions which give some confidence when you cannot handle the birds. Encouragingly, we are seeing some new collectors who are often driving the market. Decoys by Elmer Crowell continue to remain the gold standard; the best Mason decoys seem to always do well.”

Echoing his sentiments was Don Kirson, a collector from Maryland. Kirson’s approach to collecting is different than most others in that he does not collect the work of a single region or carver. He tries to collect truly outstanding decoys, regardless of who made them or where they were made. “I think the market is starting to get back to 2004 levels. There seems to be an influx of new, younger decoy collectors. Harmon sold the Lincoln “hisser” for \$299,000. I know that the person who bought the Laing black duck for \$97,750 in this auction is a new collector.” Kirson keeps a folder of photographs on his phone of birds that he would eventually like to own. He bought one of those birds, made by the Stevens Brothers. Harvey Stevens, and his brother worked in Weedsport, N.Y. Kirson said, “I’ve been watching that bird for over ten years since it sold for \$42,500 in 2006. I was the underbidder then but I was finally able to get it this time.”

Selling for \$90,000 was a widgeon drake by John Blair Sr of Philadelphia, circa 1880. It was a “classic” Blair, having the construction details known to have been used by Blair. Blair was a wheelwright and carriage maker who, after retiring, spent much of his time hunting and fishing, making his own decoys. This example was in fine original paint, with even gunning wear and had been owned by Don Kirson.



Andrew Wyeth’s watercolor, “Terns on Little Green Island, Maine, 1940,” was inscribed by the artist: “For Bess with warmest greetings, Betsy and Andy.” It was included in two publications on Wyeth and exhibited in New York in 1995. Its final price was \$ 63,000.

Finishing slightly behind the widgeon was a preening mallard drake, circa 1920, by Bert Graves from the Konopasek collection. It had been painted by Catherine Elliston, who worked for the Graves Decoy Company. Graves' decoys were expensive in their time, selling for \$75–\$100 a dozen to wealthy sportsmen and sporting goods stores. Considered to be one of the finest Graves decoys because of its original paint, form and fine condition, it achieved \$75,000, believed to be an auction record for a single Graves decoy.

A very fine North Carolina widgeon decoy by Lee Dudley, circa 1890, earned \$34,800. Dudley decoys were a favorite of Joel Barber and the first three plates of his 1954 book, *Wild Fowl Decoys* picture Dudley decoys. A Dudley decoy at the Shelburne Museum, in 1981, was voted the best of the museum's collection. Gus Wilson (1864–1950) was a boat builder, and lighthouse keeper along the Maine coast in addition to being an outstanding carver of decoys, weathervanes, decorative birds and big cats. A pair of tigers he carved is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. A preening eider drake of his was included in this sale and it realized \$27,600.

A group of about 15 decoys deaccessioned from Long Island's Southold Historical Society were sold. The historical society focuses on the North Fork of Long Island and decided that these decoys, from the South Fork, did not meet its geographic criteria. The decoys had been acquired from a single owner in 1965. Specific makers were not known, but they were of fine form and surface and all found new homes. A particularly nice gull decoy led the group, finishing at \$21,600, well over its estimate. Gull decoys are rare as they were only used on the Atlantic coast as confidence decoys. Only one related example is known and it is pictured on the dust jacket of George Starr's *Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway*. Also from the historical society, and going well over the estimate was a black duck drake, with raised, serrated, wing carvings and original paint. It earned \$11,400. Several of the birds from this consignment sold to the same bidder, so a part of the collection will remain intact.

Sporting art was a major component of the sale, and several paintings were among the top-grossing lots of the day. An Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009) watercolor, "Terns on Little Green Island, 1940" went out at \$63,000. It depicted a lobsterman, four pot buoys in the foreground of a small Maine coastal island and a number of terns in the sky. The painting had been given as a gift by the artist and was inscribed "For Bess with warmest greetings Betsy & Andy." Bess lived in Connecticut and was a summer resident of Rockland, Maine, and a friend of the artist and his wife. Also doing well was a watercolor by A.B. Frost (1859–1928) titled "Grouse Shooting in the Rhododendrons." The painting was the original watercolor reproduced by the Derrydale Press in a set of four Frost etchings, published in 1933–34. Frost was an avid outdoorsman, as well as one the outstanding illustrators of his time. The watercolor achieved \$57,000.

Also crossing the block were several limited edition etchings by Frank Benson (1862–1951), who summered in New Hampshire, was an active fisherman and produced hundreds of works with hunting and fishing themes. Prices ranged from \$3,600 for "Old Tom," a portrait of a hunter

with his shotgun and a duck he had shot and a beach in the background, to \$300 for a scene showing a pair of mallards taking off or landing in a marsh. Edition size of both was 150.

A watercolor by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896—1969), depicting two wild turkeys in a pine tree, doubled its estimate, reaching \$30,000. Probably not surprisingly, there were several paintings of hunting dogs, some at work with hunters, and some portraits of, presumably, favorite dogs. One of the highest prices was achieved by a 1901 oil painting of two setters at work by Gustav Muss-Arnolt (1858—1927). The painting had been commissioned by Samuel Henry Vandergrif, a wealthy Pennsylvania oil man and breeder of English setters. The painting achieved \$19,200, more than double the estimate.

There were more than 467 lots in the sale and 90 percent sold. O'Brien said, "Several of the decoys in the sale were outstanding examples of a carver's work, like the Holmes plover and the Blair widgeon. Some have never been sold at auction before. We were within estimates for most of the lots. The sporting art offerings were strong, and as of August 1, Terry Vose, formerly co-president of Vose Galleries, will be joining us. He's extremely knowledgeable in Hudson River paintings, as well as American Impressionism and post Impressionism. His expertise and contacts will add another dimension to our company. All in all, we're very pleased with the results of the sale. We had a good turnout and some great stuff found new homes."

All prices reported include the buyer's premium.

For additional information, www.copleyart.com or 617-536-0030.



Three generations of the O'Brien family — Steve O'Brien Sr is on the right, Steve O'Brien Jr is on the left, and his wife, Cinnie, is between the two. The children are Henry (at left) and Brooks.



The salesroom was full as auctioneer Peter Coccoluto got the sale underway.



Decoys were neatly displayed and being checked out during the preview.



Four generations of the McNair family of carvers, including 95-year-old great-grandfather Mervin Roberts in the front center, with Colin and Kate McNair on the left, next to his brother Ian and his wife Rebecca, their sister Delana Tompkins and her two children: 8-year-old Currituck and 5-year-old Olivia Chesapeake, with Mark McNair and his wife Martha on the right. Perhaps it says something about the family's interests that the two children are named after well-known duck hunting locales. The bluefin tuna on the wall above the family was carved by Colin and it sold for \$ 3,600, a record for his carvings.



Byron Bruffee and Laurie McPhee were set-up at the decoy show, offering a group of miniatures by James Ahearn, who died in 1963. The examples they offered were ones that Ahearn had kept as samples of his work and were some of his best.



Having been discussed in seven decoy publications, this widgeon hen was well known to collectors. It had been carved by Lee Dudley, from Knott's Island, N.C. Joel Barber, in *Wild Fowl Decoys*, illustrates Dudley birds in the first three plates in the book, and in 1981, a Dudley decoy was voted the best decoy in the collection of the Shelburne Museum. This example earned \$ 34,800.



“Grouse Shooting in The Rhododendrons” by A.B. Frost was one of two Frost watercolors in the sale. Frost illustrations appeared in numerous magazines and more than 100 books. He was an avid outdoorsman who spent his summers fishing, rowing and hunting. This painting finished at \$ 57,000.



Audubon prints got the sale off to a good start. Lot 1 was an 1836 edition, elephant folio hand colored engraving of shoveller ducks which realized \$ 5,400, more than twice its estimate.



Aiden Lassell Ripley's watercolor, "Gobbler and Hen Turkey," was one of three Ripleys in the sale. The final price was \$ 30,000.