

Q & A

Stephen O'Brien Jr

Chairman and chief executive officer of Copley Fine Art Auctions, Stephen O'Brien Jr grew up exploring nature and hunting from a young age. A fourth-generation sportsman with the keen eye of a collector, he launched Copley in 2005 after spending 15 years in the antiques trade. His newest project is compiling an archive on premier decoy carver A. Elmer Crowell for a planned book.

How did you first get interested in decoys?

I didn't really have a choice. "Duck" was my first word. Though I grew up in New Canaan, Conn., it felt like we lived on a farm. We tapped the maple trees in the field behind our house and made our own maple syrup. We had baby mallards and chickens, pet crows and raccoons. I hunted pheasants in our field with a bow and arrow when I was 7.

My father and my uncle hunted ducks on Long Island Sound and would hang them on the barn before cleaning them. Their silhouettes against the white barn made a lasting impression on me. These two brothers were invariably drenched when they came back, yet always laughing and smiling. Duck hunting seemed like a really fun thing to do from a little boy's perspective. It had the elements that captured my imagination: distant waters, flight, guns and adventure. Hunting and fishing still give me a thrill. Getting up early, watching the sun rise and hanging out with good friends in the duck blind or on a flats boat is about as good as it gets.

Tell us about the Elmer Crowell project you are working on and your goals for this project.

It really came about by accident. Chelsie Olney, Copley's editor for the past few years, and I had no intention of writing a book on Elmer Crowell. I was meeting with a good friend and client one day and he asked me why there had never been a comprehensive hardcover book written about the greatest decoy maker of all time. I could not answer the question. When you consider that more than 100 publications have been written about decoys, with several dedicated to individual makers, including Joseph Lincoln, George Boyd, Shang Wheeler, Ira Hudson, Charles Perdew and the Ward Brothers, it is hard to believe that there has never been a full-color, hardcover book about the "father of modern bird carving." My friend thought we should write that book, so we are. The decision was as easy as that. Antiques dealer Brian Cullity, then at Heritage Museums and Gardens, wrote an excellent publication, *The Songless Aviary*, several decades ago. It is the only publication dedicated to Elmer Crowell to date.

Can you share an interesting discovery you've made about Crowell since undertaking this project?

As a young teen Crowell began raising and employing live decoys to aid his duck hunting. Naturally

crafty and creative, Crowell devised an ingenious means of releasing the live decoys in order to draw a wild flock within gun range. The use of live decoys was so effective it was eventually banned. Decades of handling and training live decoys undoubtedly gave Crowell a great advantage when he began carving and painting wooden decoys later in life.

What is one thing most people don't know about Elmer Crowell?

The top two decoys ever sold were both carved by Elmer Crowell and each traded for over \$1 million. We sold both carvings about a decade ago. One came from the collection of Crowell patron Harry V. Long (1857–1949) and the other from Crowell patron Dr John C. Phillips (1876–1938).

Phillips and Long were both amazing sportsmen, way ahead of their time in terms of recognizing the decoy as an art form, rather than simply a hunting tool. Interested in the preservation of history, Long was an active member of the New England Historical and Genealogical Society. Phillips was a prominent member of Boston society, a pioneer of conservation and a prolific author. Around 1900, Phillips hired Elmer Crowell to manage his Wenham Lake hunting camp. Innovative by nature, Crowell began carving wooden decoys out of necessity when live decoy use was banned, and he quickly mastered the medium. Gradually Crowell's carvings became so impressive that Long and Phillips began putting them on the mantel. We are talking 1910, 25 years before Joel Barber would publish the first book on the subject, *Wildfowl Decoys*.

As to the overall decoys market, what does the market look like now, where it is heading and what has been the most noteworthy change in the last five–ten years?

The Crowell market has been amazingly steady. Elmer Crowell is one of the few makers whose decoys have been routinely sold for six figures both privately and at auction. For example, Crowell's turned-head "dust jacket" black-bellied plover will be auctioned off on July 27 at Copley's Sporting Sale in Plymouth, Mass., with an estimate of \$125/175,000. This plover is the best of the trio featured on the cover of William J. Mackey Jr's important book *American Bird Decoys*, published in 1965.

What's a typical day at work for you like?

I do not have typical days. The reason that I do what I do is because it never gets boring. My job is one giant treasure hunt in both the writing realm and the gathering of objects for auction and private sale. I get to travel, meet and hang out with some amazing clients and collectors. I feel like I learn something new every day and I am inspired by the carvings and paintings that surround me. There is no such thing as the perfect job, but mine comes pretty close.

—Andrea Valluzzo



Stephen B. O'Brien Jr appreciates the exceptional paint and feather detail on one of Crowell's finest "dust jacket" black-bellied plovers, circa 1900.

Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions



Harry V. Long preening pintail decoy by A. Elmer Crowell (1862–1952), East Harwich, Mass., circa 1900–10.