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Plover Trio Stars in Sporting Sale

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Copley Fine Art Auctions, Plymouth, Massachusetts

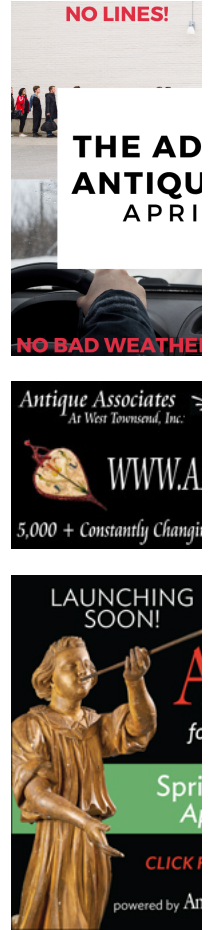
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

Everything was in place for a booming sporting art sale at Copley Fine Art Auctions on July 25 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and no one was disappointed. The sale brought over \$3 million. A large part of that was the \$1,140,000 (includes buyers' premiums) realized from the sale of three plovers by Anthony Elmer Crowell known as the Harmon "dust jacket" plover trio. The plovers had been collected by Ted and Judy Harmon of Decoys Unlimited, who were instrumental in rescuing, relocating, and restoring Crowell's workshop from East Harwich, Massachusetts, to the grounds of the Harwich Historical Society, where it is now a museum.

The sale was drawn from a wide range of important decoy and sporting art collections, so exhaustive that the list of them took up an entire page in the catalog. The catalog itself, as are those published for sporting art auctions by Guyette & Deeter and Decoys Unlimited, is a definite keeper, with detailed descriptions of the objects and the makers.

One of the collections was that of Dr. Morton D. Kramer (1926-2018), whose relationship with the Ward brothers inspired a 60-year collecting pursuit. The second part of the Kramer collection will be sold at Copley's winter sale in Charleston, South Carolina, in February 2020.

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Four works by Arthur Burdett Frost (1851-1928) were offered from the collection of Henry M. Reed, author of *The A.B. Frost Book* (1967 and 1993). Frost's 1885 watercolor and gouache *Fall Woodcock Shooting*, 13½" x 21½", was the highlight when it sold for \$78,000 (est. \$70,000/90,000). Reed, who owned dozens of Frost paintings, acquired this one from the John T. Dorrance Jr. collection, which was sold at Sotheby's in 1989. Reed's works by Frost in the Copley sale had descended in his family.



The stars of the sale were three plovers carved by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) that are known as the Harmon "dust jacket" plovers. They had been collected by Ted and Judy Harmon. The term "dust jacket" refers to their similarity to three plovers selected by William J. Mackey Jr. for the cover of his 1965 book *American Bird Decoys* and three shown on the dust jacket of *New England Decoys* (1990) by John and Shirley Delph.

The birds were sold in association with the Harmons' company, Decoys Unlimited, of which Copley's decoy specialist Colin McNair said, "It's been great working with someone with whom you used to compete." The trio merited their own 52-page catalog that recounted their history and creator, and described Ted Harmon as "one of Crowell's greatest collectors and modern day supporters." Ted and Judy Harmon were instrumental in rescuing, relocating, and restoring Crowell's workshop from East Harwich, Massachusetts, to the grounds of the Harwich Historical Society, where it is now a museum. The Harmons acquired these three birds separately around 1977. Sadly, after 40 years together, the trio has been separated, although they are headed to very fine collections.

The turned-head plover, from the collection of Roger Bacon, realized \$396,000 (est. \$250,000/450,000) from one of five phone bidders. The feeding plover from the trio brought \$420,000 (est. \$300,000/500,000) from another phone

buyer. The Harmons had acquired it from the Seymour "Sy" Rapaport collection. The same bidder bought the straight-head plover for \$324,000 (est. \$180,000/240,000) and paid \$174,000 (est. \$50,000/70,000) for a 1910 open-bill calling decorative yellowlegs (not shown) by Crowell from the Harry V. Long collection. That bird was one of many that Long, a collector from Boston and Cohasset, Massachusetts, had commissioned from Crowell, whom he identified as a national treasure. It had remained in the Long family until now. Mascolo photo.



On Point, Up Hill a 24"x 36" oil on canvas scene of three handsome dogs by the German-born artist Edmund H. Osthaus (1858-1928), sold for \$28,800 (est. \$30,000/50,000). It came from the Minnesota collection of Jim and Diane Cook.



The Ward brothers, Lemuel T. (1896-1984) and Stephen (1895-1976) of Crisfield, Maryland, created this classic 16½" long canvasback hen in 1936. It retains its original paint, and the bill and the tail are intact. From the Morton D. Kramer collection, it sold for \$27,600 (est. \$30,000/50,000).



Returning Home, a 1903 watercolor by A. B. Frost, also titled ***End of the Day's Shooting***, 12½" x 8½", sold for \$14,400 (est. \$6000/9000). It was published in a 1903 portfolio of the artist's work and was also published in ***Scribner's Magazine***. Henry M. Reed had acquired it from a Florida collection, and it descended in his family.



Covey of Quail by Edmund H. Osthaus (1858-1928), a 24" x 36" oil on canvas, realized \$48,000 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The painting was from the collection of hunter and sportsman John E. Veneklasen of Grand Rapids, Michigan.



Western artist Harry Curieux Adamson (1916-2012) painted *Afternoon in Butte Sink, Spring*, this 18" x 28" oil on canvas depicting birds in the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex in California. Estimated at \$9000/12,000, it sold for \$39,000.



Duck Hunting, 18" x 24", an evocative watercolor by Ogden Minton Pleissner (1905-1983), came from a private collection and sold for \$22,800 (est. \$20,000/40,000). Mascolo photo.



This swimming goose by Charles A. Safford (1877-1957) of Newburyport, Massachusetts, is one of only a few Safford geese known to survive, as such birds spent entire seasons in the marsh. This example, considered the best Safford swimmer known, came from a private collection. It brought \$60,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000). The bird's construction sets

it apart; the head and neck are two joined pieces on the neck seat, and a number of laminated layers are applied on five planes around the axis of the body's core block.



This 17¼" long humpback pintail drake by the Ward brothers, a singular bird made around 1925, sold for \$72,000 (est. \$70,000/100,000). The Ward brothers, Lemuel T. (1896-1984) and Stephen (1895-1976), of Crisfield, Maryland, had produced highly desirable decoys since their teens. The bird is signed "L.T. Ward – Bro. / Crisfield, Md. / 1930." The date may have been added later, as the bird is thought to have been made earlier. The bird retains the Morton Kramer brand. Ward brothers' humpback pintails retaining their original paint are among the most prized decoys. A decoy closely related to this one is in the collection of the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. This example, known as the Earnest-Purnell humpback pintail drake, had not been sold for over 40 years. Previously in the collection of Adele Earnest and then William H. Purnell Jr., it entered the collection of Dr. Morton D. Kramer in 1978.



Five phone bidders flew after this black duck by East Harwich, Massachusetts, carver A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952). The black duck is known as his signature species. The carving and the paint on this example are meticulous. From the Morton D. Kramer collection, the bird brought \$14,400 (est. \$14,000/18,000). It is illustrated in the 2019 book *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien and Chelsie W. Olney, published by Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts, LLC.



Long Island, New York, carver, author, historian, and collector George W. Combs Sr. (1911-1992) is said to have carved his first stool at the age of eight. Descended from a family of hunters, guides, and gunners, he carved this 26" long pintail with a 25" wingspan at around age 24. It is considered the finest flying gunning decoy known. It descended in his family and sold for \$37,200 (est. \$50,000/70,000). Few flying decoys have survived, as they were far more complex to make and transport than floating examples. A plaque on the base reads "Captain George W. Combs Sr.," and the bird is signed "G.W. Combs, Sr. 1935."



This 11¾" long high-crest hooded merganser showcases the considerable carving skills of Samuel R. Hutchings (1894-1995) of Jones Falls, Ontario, Canada. It is hatched and cross-hatched and retains the Roger Young collection mark. It sold for \$25,200 (est. \$25,000/35,000).



An interesting specimen is this circa 1900 "John Duck" canvasback by William Heverin (1860-1951) of Charlestown, Maryland. Such birds were painted and rigged to be used as marking buoys for sink box rigs, and few survive. This 15½" long red-painted bird sold for \$840 (est. \$500/800).

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