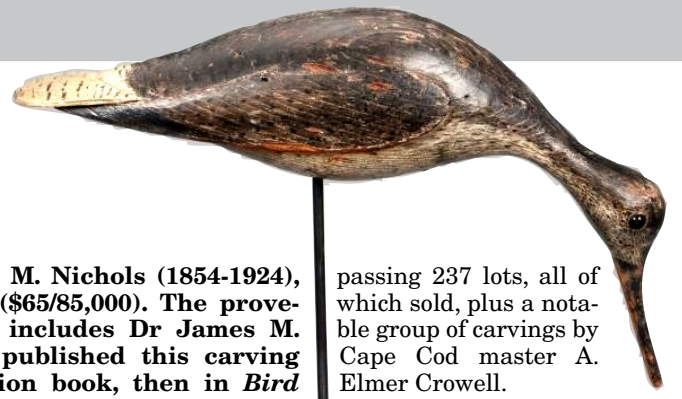


Auction Action In Charleston, S.C.

# Muller Collection Boosts Copley Sale To Record \$3.4 Million



Swan by Charles Birch (1867-1956), Willis Wharf, Va., circa 1920, sold for \$210,000 (\$150/250,000), a record for the maker and the top lot of the day. Dr Muller acquired this one, previously in the collection of William J. Mackey, Jr, and only one of a handful of working swan decoys in original paint by the maker, in 1974 at Richard A. Bourne.

Feeding yellowlegs decoy by Fred M. Nichols (1854-1924), Lynn, Mass., circa 1890, \$102,000 (\$65/85,000). The provenance of this graceful shorebird includes Dr James M. McCleery. Curator Robert Shaw published this carving twice, first in McCleery's exhibition book, then in *Bird Decoys of North America*.

CHARLESTON, S.C. — In keeping with its acute interest in the habits and habitats of waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds, the decoy field has always been strongly regional. Collectors migrate from seasonal gatherings in northern climes to the Low Country of South Carolina, where on February 15, Copley Fine Art Auctions hosted a record-setting winter sale of decoys and sporting art at the Charleston Marriott. Overall, the three-session auc-

tion was 96 percent sold by lot. As it has in the past five years, Copley timed its \$3.4 million, 533-lot auction to coincide with the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition (SEWE), which attracts more than 40,000 hunters, fishermen, dog lovers, conservationists, restaurateurs, collectors and wildlife enthusiasts for three days of exhibitions and events. Along with fine art, the firm's annual outing this year featured decoys from four single-owner collections encom-

passing 237 lots, all of which sold, plus a notable group of carvings by Cape Cod master A. Elmer Crowell.

"The decoy market is gaining momentum but is still an emerging market," said Copley chairman and chief executive officer Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr, whose meticulous catalogs contribute to the public's ever-deepening understanding of the field, and whose sales, notwithstanding record prices, always offer entry points for new collectors across a spectrum of interests.

### Muller Collection

Copley led with 42 lots assembled by the late Dr Peter J. Muller, Jr, (1928-2019), an Atlanta veterinarian who bought the best, learned from exchanges with William B. Mackey (1915-1972), and who, along with Dr James McCleery, was among the first decoy collectors to routinely X-ray his purchases. The Muller birds averaged \$35,000 each, surpassing even the average price paid for decoys in Copley's two sales of the Donal O'Brien collection in 2017 and 2018.

"Dr Muller bought the best of the best. He was always looking to upgrade, but he also had an amazing ability to pick the choicest examples. He did his homework upfront," O'Brien recollected. In Copley's stand-alone Muller catalog, the auctioneer described the 1991 road trip he took with decoy expert Henry Fleckenstein, Jr, to visit Southern collectors, among them Muller. "With Muller, the word 'gentleman' often came up," wrote O'Brien, adding that Muller "understood anatomy and he pursued decoys with laser focus like a detective. He tracked down rare examples in exceptional condition with great provenance."

Many of Muller's best birds once belonged to Mackey. He bought directly from the collector, the foremost of his era, and attended all eight Mackey auction sessions at the Richard A. Bourne company in 1973 and 1974. Among the Mackey birds in the Muller sale, top honors, at \$210,000, went to a circa



Review by Antiques and The Arts Weekly  
Laura Beach, Editor At Large  
Photos Courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

Ex-Mackey collection, this long-tail duck by Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920) of Tuckerton, N.J., circa 1890, was said to be Dr. Muller's favorite bird. Experts consider it one of the best gunning decoys from New Jersey. It sold for \$174,000 (\$80/120,000). Muller collection.



Dr Peter J. Muller, Jr, in his decoy room. Photo by Jim Edwards.



The Mackey "dust jacket" merganser hen decoy by John Dawson (1889-1959), Duck Island, N.J., circa 1915, \$90,000 (\$60/90,000). The Delaware River maker was a particular favorite of collector William J. Mackey. The second edition of his book *American Bird Decoys* features this decoy on its dust jacket, hence its name. Muller collection.



The Mackey-Gregory hooded-merganser pair by Ira Hudson (1873-1949), Chincoteague, Va., circa 1925, \$168,000 (\$150/250,000). This stylish couple belonged to folk-art collector Stewart Gregory in the 1970s. Dr Peter J. Muller, Jr, acquired them at a Richard Bourne auction in 1978. Muller collection.



The Mackey Shourds merganser drake decoy by Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920), Tuckerton, N.J., circa 1890, \$162,000 (\$80/120,000). From the Boots Mathis rig, acquired from the maker circa 1910, this decoy formerly in the Mackey collection is considered a top example from the Mid-Atlantic region. Muller collection.



Set of 25 miniature waterfowl by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), East Harwich, Mass., circa 1915, \$114,000 (\$60/90,000). Very few complete original sets of Crowell miniatures survive. Cape Cod author and Crowell friend Joseph Crosby Lincoln (1870-1944) owned this set. Private Connecticut collection.



Raised-wing golden plover decoy by Mr Webster, Nantucket, Mass., circa 1850, \$102,000 (\$60/90,000). Early collectors Donal C. O'Brien, Jr, William J. Mackey, Jr, and Adele Earnest believed that the plover from this rig were among the finest works of American folk art. Mackey and O'Brien acquired 15 of 17 examples that surfaced. Muller collection.



"English Springer Spaniel with Pheasant" by Thomas Blinks (English, 1860-1912), oil on canvas, 18 by 14 inches, \$72,000 (\$18/24,000). This painting by the self-taught artist was a favorite of noted sportsman and Hollywood fixture Robert Montgomery. Retailled by the Sporting Gallery and Bookshop of New York City in 1938, the work is an important representation of the breed from the golden era of sport.



"New England" by Percival Rosseau (1859-1937), 1935, oil on canvas, 28¼ by 34¼ inches, \$66,000 (\$30/50,000). This well-known picture by the Louisiana-born artist was reproduced as a three-dimensional print that hung in sporting goods stores as an advertising display. Private New Jersey collection.



The Dr Fritz Talbot willet by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), East Harwich, Mass., circa 1925, \$126,000 (\$40/60,000). A rare and sought-after species by the maker. Private Connecticut collection.



"Dust jacket" yellowlegs decoy by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), East Harwich, Mass., circa 1910, \$150,000 (\$100/150,000). William J. Mackey Jr chose this decoy for the cover of his book, *American Bird Decoys*, published in 1965. Crowell lavished care on the decoration of this bird with original paint with minimal gunning wear. From a private Cape Cod collection.



"Western Pheasant Hunting" by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), watercolor, 18 by 28 inches, \$48,000 (\$40/60,000). The subject matter, pheasant shooting in the West with black labs, is possibly unique for the artist. Private Florida collection.



Copley Fine Art Auctions routinely includes carvings by contemporary Virginia maker Mark S. McNair (b 1950). This wood duck decoy, 1977, doubled its high estimate to sell for \$7,800.



Acquired by a New Jersey collector at Sotheby's in the 1980s but still bearing a Vose Galleries label and in a coveted Carrig-Rohane frame, "Two Setters" by Gustav Muss-Arnolt (1858-1927), oil on canvas, 22¼ by 34¼ inches, doubled the high estimate to bring \$51,600, a record for the artist. O'Brien places the sporting artist among the three best dog painters of his era, rivaling Rosseau and Osthaus.

1920 swan decoy by Virginia carver Charles Birch.

"People forget how rare swan decoys are. Swans weren't a species that market gunners and hunters really sought, so swan decoys weren't typically in gunning rigs. They were used as confidence decoys, to lure ducks and geese. Someone with 50 to 100 canvasback decoys in his rig might have only one swan, and only a handful of swan decoys were by master makers," O'Brien explained.

**Other Single Owners**

Copley's Winter Sale 2020 catalog profiled three other singular collectors. Dr Morton D. Kramer (1926-2018) championed Chesapeake carvers and was particularly partial to works by the Ward Brothers and Oliver Tuts Lawson. Dating from about 1930, a rare green-winged teal drake by the Wards from Kramer's collection went for \$11,100. Two of O'Brien's favorite Lawson birds from the Kramer group were a flying bobwhite quail pair, \$6,000, and a yellow-shafted flicker, \$4,200. Both, said the

auctioneer, "are beautifully rendered."

Property from the estate of Alfred E. King III (1941-2019), proprietor of the Sportsman's Edge, Ltd, in New York City, contributed the oil painting "Tiger" by naturalist Bob Kuhn, \$37,200. Copley also offered the last of the holdings of William Joseph Butler, Jr, (1933-2019), a Washington, DC, lawyer and passionate collector.

**A. Elmer Crowell**

No decoy sale would be complete without a selection by Crowell, the Cape Cod carver known for his graceful shorebirds. "We tried to estimate them conservatively," said O'Brien, pleased with results. The first one up was a "dust jacket" yellowlegs circa 1910. From a private Cape Cod collection, it sold for \$150,000. "It landed where it should have," said O'Brien.

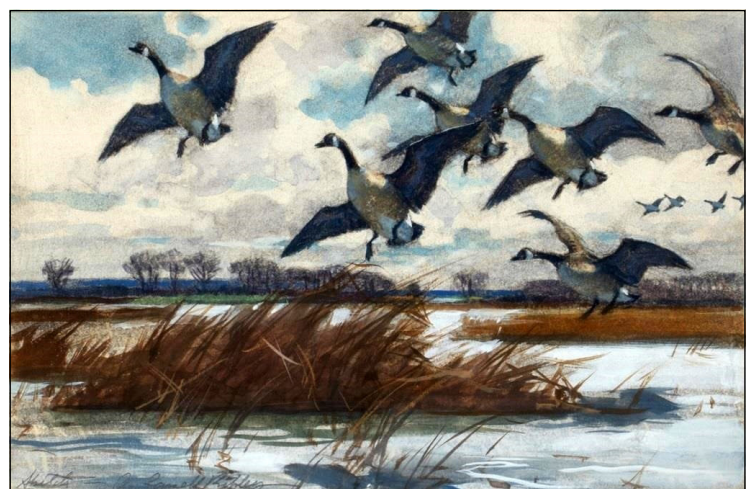
Conservatively estimated at \$40/60,000, a rare and desirable willet of about 1925 by Crowell doubled its high estimate to bring \$126,000. A circa 1915 set of 25 Crowell minia-

tures performed to expectation, selling for \$114,000.

**Fine Art**

Session II, 97 percent sold by lot, featured roughly 165 paintings, works on paper and bronzes by sporting artists. "A good number of our top painting lots hammered to bidders in the room, attesting to the combination of quality art and holding our sale in a desirable location, alongside SEWE's celebration of the sporting lifestyle," said specialist Leah Tharpe, noting new auction records for William J. Schaldach, David A. Hagerbaumer, Travis Tuck, Gary Neel, John Loren Head, John Kobald, Jerome Connolly and Walter Wilwerding, among others.

"Paintings of sporting dogs performed especially well, and there was at least one well-behaved dog who came through the auction preview," Tharpe added. Notable successes included the atypical "English Springer Spaniel with Pheasant" by Thomas Blinks, \$72,000, depicting a bird-dog with his quarry; "New England" by Percival Rosseau, \$66,000; and the record-setting "Two Setters" by Gustav Muss-Arnolt, \$51,600.



"Canada Geese" by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969), watercolor and pencil, 8-5/8 by 12-5/8 inches, \$5,400 (\$2/3,000). Private Massachusetts collection.

Distinguishing the latter is its great scale and the vitality with which the artist depicted two gun dogs in the hunt.

O'Brien and his team will be on the road attending decoy shows in Ohio, Maryland and Illinois in coming months. Copley's Summer

Sale is planned for late July in Plymouth, Mass.

Prices, with buyer's premium, as reported by the auction house.

Copley Fine Art is headquartered in Hingham, Mass. For information, 617-536-0030 or www.copleyart.com.