

Copley Fine Art Auctions, Hingham, Massachusetts

# Copley's Best Winter Auction to Date

by Frances McQueeney-Jones Mascolo  
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

Each time out Copley Fine Art Auctions outdoes itself. Its winter sale is normally held in Charleston, South Carolina, in conjunction with the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition. It was held virtually this year February 19 and 20 from Copley's headquarters in Hingham, Massachusetts, with Peter Coccoluto at the podium. True to form, the winter sale beat its own record this year, just shy of \$5 million (including buyers' premiums). The live-streamed 600-lot sale was 98% sold by lot and attracted the greatest number of bidders in the company's history, including a sizable group of new bidders. Of interest is the relative youth of many of the artists and carvers.

The sale began with a second offering of 40 decoys from of the collection of Dr. Peter J. Muller Jr. It was a white-glove sale, as was session one at the Copley 2020 winter sale in Charleston. Session two brought a total of \$1,131,400.

## A sizable group of new bidders.

Copley devoted a separate catalog—like most Copley catalogs a “keeper”—to the Muller collection, including a 24-page biography. Louisiana born and bred, Muller (1928-2019) developed an early interest in wildlife along the bayous—including snakes, which he enjoyed a brisk business selling from his locker to his classmates, until the inevitable shutdown from school leaders. It comes as no surprise that he became a veterinarian, establishing the Briarcliff Animal Clinic in Atlanta, now operated by the third generation of Mullers.

In coastal Georgia Muller took to hunting waterfowl and from there to decoys. He began with southern birds but expanded his field quickly. As a passionate collector, Muller became friends with the major figures in the decoy field, including William J. Mackey Jr. He bought freely at the four sessions of the sale of Mackey's collection at Richard A. Bourne Co. in Hyannis, Massachusetts, in 1973 and 1974. This year at Copley, those decoys found homes in other collections.

An oil on canvas painting by Frank Weston Benson of redhead ducks flying brought the highest price of the two-day sale. *Redheads in Flight*, painted in 1916, brought \$270,000 (est. \$250,000/450,000).

Another collection of note in the sale was 80 lots from the William Kemble du Pont (1938-2020) collection, which represented Copley's third white-glove sale in recent years. Du Pont wore many hats, including conservationist, antiquarian, and hunter. His collection, which included two rare punt guns, realized \$410,000 (est. \$192,000/288,000).

For information, visit the website ([www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com)) or call (617) 536-0030.



Copley is a reliable source of desirable sporting art, and the top lot of the two-day sale was *Redheads in Flight* by Frank W. Benson (1862-1951), which brought \$270,000 (est. \$250,000/450,000). The 36¼" x 45" oil on canvas is signed and dated 1916 and recalls the artist's visits to the Long Point Company on Lake Erie in Ontario, Canada, for duck hunting. Benson first visited the place as the guest of his good friend and hunting companion Boston surgeon Arthur T. Cabot (1852-1912). Benson discovered North Haven, Maine, in 1901 and purchased a home there. His colleague at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, sculptor Bela Pratt (1867-1917) visited, and he too acquired a house; Pratt's assistant Frederick Warren Allen (1888-1961) visited and bought a house there around 1914. Over the years Benson's house passed out of the family. In 2011 Allen's grandson Peter G. Allen acquired Benson's summer home, Wooster Farm, and now keeps it as a living museum as a tribute to Benson. Allen had acquired *Redheads in Flight* at Copley's July 2014 auction for \$360,000.



From the collection of Peter Muller, the Mackey Cobb feeding brant, 21" long, by Nathan F. Cobb Jr. (1825-1905) of Cobb Island, Virginia, dates from around 1880 and will henceforth be known as the Muller Mackey Cobb feeding brant. It was from the rig of Nathan Cobb's son Elkanah B. Cobb and is branded "E.B. COBB." It also retains ink stamps for William J. Mackey Jr. and Dr. Peter Muller. It had sold in the first session of the sales of the Mackey collection in 1973 to Ray Egan, from whom Muller acquired it in 1978. Cobb gave the bird an inletted root head and an arched neck that differentiates it from most of his feeding decoys, which are usually in a straight configuration. He also gave it German glass eyes, which he ordered specially for his carvings. The bird, with exceptional paint, has been published extensively. It is of note that Nathan Cobb Sr. maintained a flock of brant at Cobb Island. The family originated the Cobb Island style of carving, which is the subject of a book at press that will feature all of Muller's Cobb decoys. Estimated at \$100,000/150,000, the brant decoy realized \$186,000.

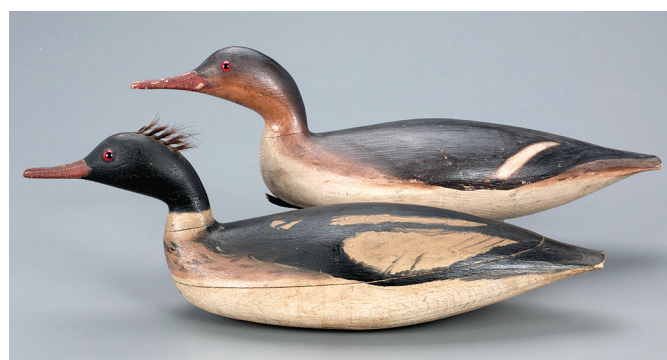


This circa 1880 feeding curlew, 12½" long, by Nathan F. Cobb Jr., with its precise Cobb Island tail cut and signature "V" feathering, retains the carver's incised "N," original bill, and original paint. It had belonged to William J. Mackey Jr., from whom J. William Middendorf II, the 62nd U.S. secretary of the navy, obtained it privately. The curlew next entered the collection of Ray Egan and then went to the Muller collection. It sold for \$120,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000). Like the Cobb feeding brant, the Cobb feeding curlew has been published extensively. Southern historian and collector William H. Purnell Jr. described the bird as one of the only known feeding curlew decoys by any maker, a rarity.



The circa 1932 Purnell Muller Ward canvasback pair, 7¾" x 16½", by brothers Lemuel T. (1896-1984) and Stephen (1895-1976) Ward of Crisfield, Maryland, ranks at the top of the very best canvasbacks. Each is signed and dated in ink by the brothers, and each retains the "P" brand for their friend and eminent and longtime collector William H. Purnell Jr. The pair of decoys has an extensive publication history and sold for \$129,000 (est. \$50,000/80,000).

This pair of hollow swimming mergansers, 19¼" long, by Daniel Lake Leeds (1852-1922) of Pleasantville, New Jersey, sold for \$55,200 (est. \$30,000/50,000), an auction record for the carver. In *Classic Shorebird Decoys: A Portfolio of Paintings* (1971), the pair was described by William J. Mackey Jr.: "They stand on their own unique merit and have little in common with their New Jersey contemporaries." Birds from the rig were acquired subsequently by Bud Ward, Jim Cook, and Dr. Peter Muller. Muller acquired the drake adorned with a horsehair crest in 1976, and 15 years later he was able to acquire the hen, reuniting the pair.





The Kinnaman running turnstone decoy by Charles Sumner Bunn (1865-1952) of Shinnecock, New York, or William Bowman (1824-1906) of Bangor, Maine, and Lawrence, New York, is described in the catalog as "alert" and is considered exceedingly rare. It dates from around 1900; its eyes are of German bead glass, its underside retains Robert Lawrence's "R.L." brand, and it has a dropped thigh and two stick holes. From the Robert Lawrence rig, the bird entered the Robert Kinnaman collection and then went to the Muller collection. Estimated at \$20,000/30,000, the decoy realized \$45,600.



This reaching yellowlegs, 12½" long, by Charles Sumner Bunn (1865-1952) of Shinnecock, New York, or William Bowman (1824-1906) of Bangor, Maine, and Lawrence, New York, was the prized possession of noted Long Island dealer Bud Ward, from whom Muller had acquired it. Dating from about 1900, it retains the original paint and a dropped thigh, and the bill has a partial replacement. The yellowlegs decoy brought \$50,400 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



The bobwhite quail pair by East Harwich, Massachusetts, artist Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) is considered rare as it may be the only example of a full-size double-mount bobwhite pair by Crowell. The male, 8" long, stands watch as the female, 7½" long, inspects an intricate caddisfly. Both birds have wet-on-wet feather blending, which illustrates their intricate plumage. The bottom of the base is signed and dated 1938 and bears Crowell's rectangular stamp. The catalog includes a clip from the *Cape Cod Standard-Times* of August 23, 1940, recounting Crowell's wonderment as he observed a covey of quail landing on water, having been duped by reflections of the bank in the water. The birds sat, seemingly in disgust, as Crowell rowed out and retrieved them. Estimated at \$40,000/60,000, the bobwhite pair brought \$221,400. The pair had sold previously at Eldred's in July 2020 for \$25,000.



*Pointer with Quail* by German/American artist Edmund Henry Osthaus (1858-1928) depicts a dog at work. The oil on canvas, 27" x 36", is signed and dated 1890. The painting was commissioned by George M. Brady of Detroit, Michigan, and descended in the family until it sold at Copley's July 2008 sale for \$235,750 into a Florida collection. This time, estimated at \$150,000/250,000, it brought \$180,000. Osthaus is considered one of the greatest American sporting dog artists. He arrived on these shores in 1883 and accepted commissions from the National Field Trial Association, the Vanderbilt family, and J.P. Morgan. He served as a field trial judge and later showed his own setters and pointers.

Anthony Elmer Crowell carved and painted this woodcock around 1912, at a time when the species was plentiful on Cape Cod where he lived. According to catalog notes, it is one of his earliest and best examples, with his finest paint application and wooden legs. There is a related example from the collection of Dr. John H. Cunningham, who was an early patron of Crowell along with his friend Dr. John Charles Phillips. This bird realized \$90,000 (est. \$50,000/70,000). Steve O'Brien of Copley Fine Art Auctions told *M.A.D.* that he would love the opportunity to compare this woodcock with that from the Cunningham collection. Like many of the lots in the auction, this American woodcock, a.k.a. timberdoodle, hokumpoke, bogsucker, or Labrador twister, is well published.



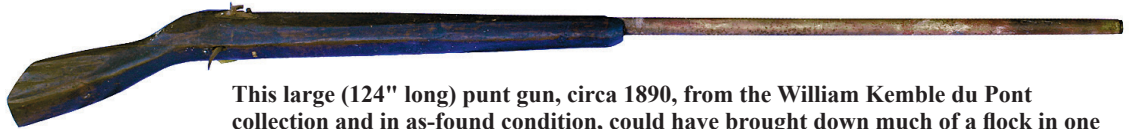
*Goose Hunter* by Salem, Massachusetts, native Frank Weston Benson (1862-1951) came from an area collection. The 20" x 30" oil on canvas is signed and dated 1937, and it sold for \$69,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000).



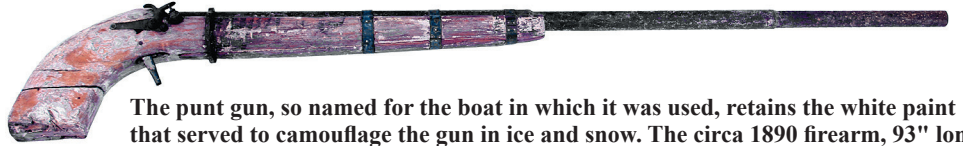
*Jimmy's Pool on the Restigouche*, 1938, by Ogden Minton Pleissner (1905-1983) captures the thrilling moment a salmon breaks water at the end of a fisherman's line in a pool along the Restigouche River, which runs between Quebec and New Brunswick. One guide prepares to net the fish; the other steadies the canoe. Pleissner, who was born and raised in New York City, grounded himself thoroughly in the outdoors. The river was dotted with elaborate fishing camps, but Pleissner would spend a week camping along it. In 1932 the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased one of his paintings; at 27 he became the youngest artist with artwork in the collection. This oil on canvas, 24¼" x 36¼", bears the label of Sportsman's Edge, Ltd., New York City, and had come from a Pennsylvania collection. It was highly desired and elicited a cascade of bidding, bringing \$240,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000), the second-highest price at auction for Pleissner.



Robert F. Kuhn (1920-2007) painted *Ten Point Buck with Does* in 2000. The acrylic on masonite, 22" x 33", is also titled *Young Buck with Doe*. It came from a Montana collection, and it sold for \$84,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000).



This large (124" long) punt gun, circa 1890, from the William Kemble du Pont collection and in as-found condition, could have brought down much of a flock in one shot. It sold for \$7200 (est. \$5000/8000).



The punt gun, so named for the boat in which it was used, retains the white paint that served to camouflage the gun in ice and snow. The circa 1890 firearm, 93" long, 1- to 2-gauge, is rare and would have been used for winter market hunting until the passage of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Hunters would use a punt with a single paddle to sneak up silently on the flock. From the du Pont collection and in as-found condition, the gun sold for \$14,400 (est. \$3000/5000). A related gun adorns the dust jacket of the 1971 *The Outlaw Gunner* by Harry Walsh.



This preening curlew by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) from the collection of William Kemble du Pont (1938-2020), conservationist, antiquarian, and hunter, is considered, according to catalog notes, one of the best decorative to enter the market. At 11" tall x 9" long, the bird is exceptionally graceful, completed by Crowell's wet-on-wet paint. It is signed and dated 1941 in cursive and bears Crowell's rectangular stamp. The decoy sold for \$60,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000).

This New Jersey curlew by William Stiles of Tuckerton, New Jersey, is rare and dates from around 1900. It has Stiles's signature bill tip and retains the original paint. It is 13" long and bears a museum code on the underside. It was part of the Walter L. Bush collection, which was donated to a New York City museum in 1953. Little is known about Stiles, who was from a Tuckerton family of baymen and oyster planters. The curlew brought \$8400 (est. \$1500/2500).



Known as the Mackey Hudson flying merganser, this decorative carving by Ira D. Hudson (1873-1949) of Chincoteague, Virginia, has been prized by its owners, most recently by collector William K. du Pont (1938-2020). The circa 1935 carving, 17½" long x 22" wide, is considered among Hudson's best, a tribute by William J. Mackey Jr., a previous owner and author of *American Bird Decoys*. The bird holds a fish in its open mouth. It is thought to have been painted by Hudson's son Delbert. The merganser decoy was sold in Richard A. Bourne's 1973 auction of the Mackey collection. Widely published, it brought \$46,800 (est. \$10,000/15,000). It will be known as the du Pont Mackey Hudson flying merganser.



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