

DECOYS



AS INVESTMENT

by Clarke C. Jones



Chesser decoys ©Trischa Jones

Fatigue clouds animal instinct as well as human judgment, but the old mallard should have known better. Weary from persistent, buffeting winds this wintry day in 1913, he brought his flock closer to the decoys gathered below him. Floating peacefully as they preened and fed, the wooden conspirators encouraged any flock of ducks in the area to drop into the leeward cove. Many of the decoys had been carved by the hunter himself, but a few were strays which had broken free in some storm and had drifted into the marshes and spits where he hunted. The man thought himself lucky to have a few hollow decoys made by some “fella” near Chincoteague. These were not intricately detailed, feathered decoys. To most people, they appeared to be crudely carved blocks of wood. But it was not important how these decoys looked to most people; it was what they looked like to ducks. They seemed to float better, which meant more realistically. A better floating decoy was a better tool, and that’s all a decoy was to him and anyone else who made a living out of gunning waterfowl.

A feeding chatter seductively called from one of the false ducks below, negating whatever hesitancy the lead mallard may have had. As the flock cupped their wings and dropped their feet for a landing, the roar of a ten gauge exploded from the reeds, thus eliminating the drake and two of his companions from the possibility of ever making a future instinctive mistake.

The old waterman gathered a few of his wooden decoys and their victims into his small boat. Most of the rig of 60 or so blocks he would leave behind, for he would return later that day if the wind was right and the chop not too bad. He rowed the mile and a half to his shack through the spitting sleet, which now began to cling to the weather-cracked oars and his old oilskin coat. Thirty ducks was not a bad haul for a morning’s work. Although ducks paid meagerly for the hard and often dangerous profession of a market gunner, there would be food for his family. However, most of his labors would wind up in the fancy restaurants of Baltimore and New York City.

The waterfowler docked his small boat, gathered his gun, and headed toward the warmth of his small cabin, leaving the remaining small wooden statues in his boat to fend for themselves in the freezing rain. Little did this waterman suspect that nearly 75 years later, just one of these hand-carved tools would sell for far more money than he could have dreamed.

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Above, a peek at the decoys and tools of the trade of carver Grayson Chesser. Below, an award-winning gadwall drake made of foam covered in burlap, carved by William Bruce.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, American prosperity increased and tastes began to change. Duck and oyster dishes became popular table fare north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Eastern Shore watermen and duck hunters did much to supply that demand. A well-carved decoy aided the duck hunter and such carvers as Dave “Umbrella” Watson, Ira Hudson, and Nathan Cobb were some of the finest carvers around.

In order to protect waterfowl from extinction, however, the Migratory Bird Treaty was passed in 1918 and the careers of market gunners ended, thereby reducing the need for hand-carved decoys. By the end of World War II, development of plastics made wooden decoys obsolete. Duck hunting was now a sport and not a business, and plastic decoys were much cheaper and easier to take hunting.

As a result, hand-carved wooden decoys sat for decades in attics and sheds or, sadly, were used for kindling. They became scarce, rare, unwanted, and forgotten until the art world was awakened to their value in the early

1970s. Dr. James McCleery, who later was considered one of America’s premier decoy collectors, plopped down \$10,500 for *one* decoy at an auction in 1972. With the median family income being slightly over \$13,500 at the time, paying such a price for a piece of wood was unheard of.

“Not just the general public, but experienced decoy collectors thought him crazy,” recalls Joe Engers, editor and publisher of *Decoy Magazine*. The art world never again looked at old wooden decoys in the same way. Once the waterfowl decoys became considered “folk art” by those who know the value of such things, the search for them grew quickly and quietly. The old axiom of supply and demand was about to have a tremendous effect on a previously unknown market. In 2003, an Elmer Crowell pintail decoy—auctioned by Guyette & Schmidt of St. Michaels, Maryland, in conjunction with Christie’s—was auctioned for approximately \$801,500. Four years later the same decoy was sold by Stephen O’Brien Jr., owner of Copley Fine Art Auctions in Boston, Massachusetts, for over \$1,000,000.

Past collectors of note have included singer Andy Williams and Paul Tudor Jones, the University of Virginia graduate who donated over \$30,000,000 in honor of his father to build the John Paul Jones Arena at the university.

Investing Wisely

When purchasing a grand decoy that was carved by a Watson, Cobb, or Hudson, one must first do his research. A smart collector of decoys is somewhat of a scholar. He studies all aspects of a decoy: its age, the carver, and the history of both the carver and the decoy itself. Tommy O’Conner from Tidewater would certainly qualify as an astute collector



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Above, Grayson Chesser provides details about decoy carving. Below, an original paint pintail drake by Ira Hudson, Chincoteague, circa 1910. Valued today at around \$410,000.

of decoys. O'Conner began to collect decoys after he found an old wooden one in a marsh at Back Bay and became fascinated by them. That 40-year fascination has grown to him owning, at one time, close to 1,200 decoys. "I never looked at decoys as an investment first," says Tommy. "My favorite carver was Nathan Cobb, but I collect what I like and don't collect a particular decoy because of the carver or a particular bird."

When asked which contemporary Virginia decoy carvers collectors should be on the look-out for as rising stars of the future, both O'Connor and O'Brien recommend that you look at the carvings of Mark McNair and his sons of Craddocksville, and Grayson Chesser of Sanford.

Mark McNair has been carving since the early 1970s and says he has gone from selling decoys at "...informal parking lot affairs to where, over the past few years, things have evolved toward my working through some very top-notch galleries—which has been wonderful."

Although Mark is considered a top decoy carver, he is most proud of his two sons, Ian and Colin, who are talented carvers in their own right. "They come by their abilities quite naturally," says Mark. "By that I mean, they were born to this in many ways. First off, they have God-given talents. Combine that with growing up on the Chesapeake, an inherent love of nature and the outdoors, an artist's eye, and excellent manual dexterity. Add some hard work and the rest is easy."

Nationally known Virginia carver and former Eastern Shore "Ducks Unlimited Carver of the Year" Grayson Chesser carves the decoys he will hunt over. Grayson, who also collects decoys, works as a guide during waterfowl season. He started carving around 1960. "People who hunt with me want to buy my decoys after they have hunted over



them,” Grayson explains. “For many, me included, gunning over handmade decoys takes people back to a more romantic and simpler period.” There is a distinction between a working decoy and a decorative decoy. Chesser describes working decoys this way. “A good decoy is like an impressionist painting. You don’t have to paint feathers—you paint the illusion of feathers.” Chesser further distinguishes between the two, “A good hunting decoy can be a work of art. However, a good decorative decoy may be a good work of art but not a good hunting decoy.” By that he means its technical aspects—flotation and balance, for example—may be lacking.

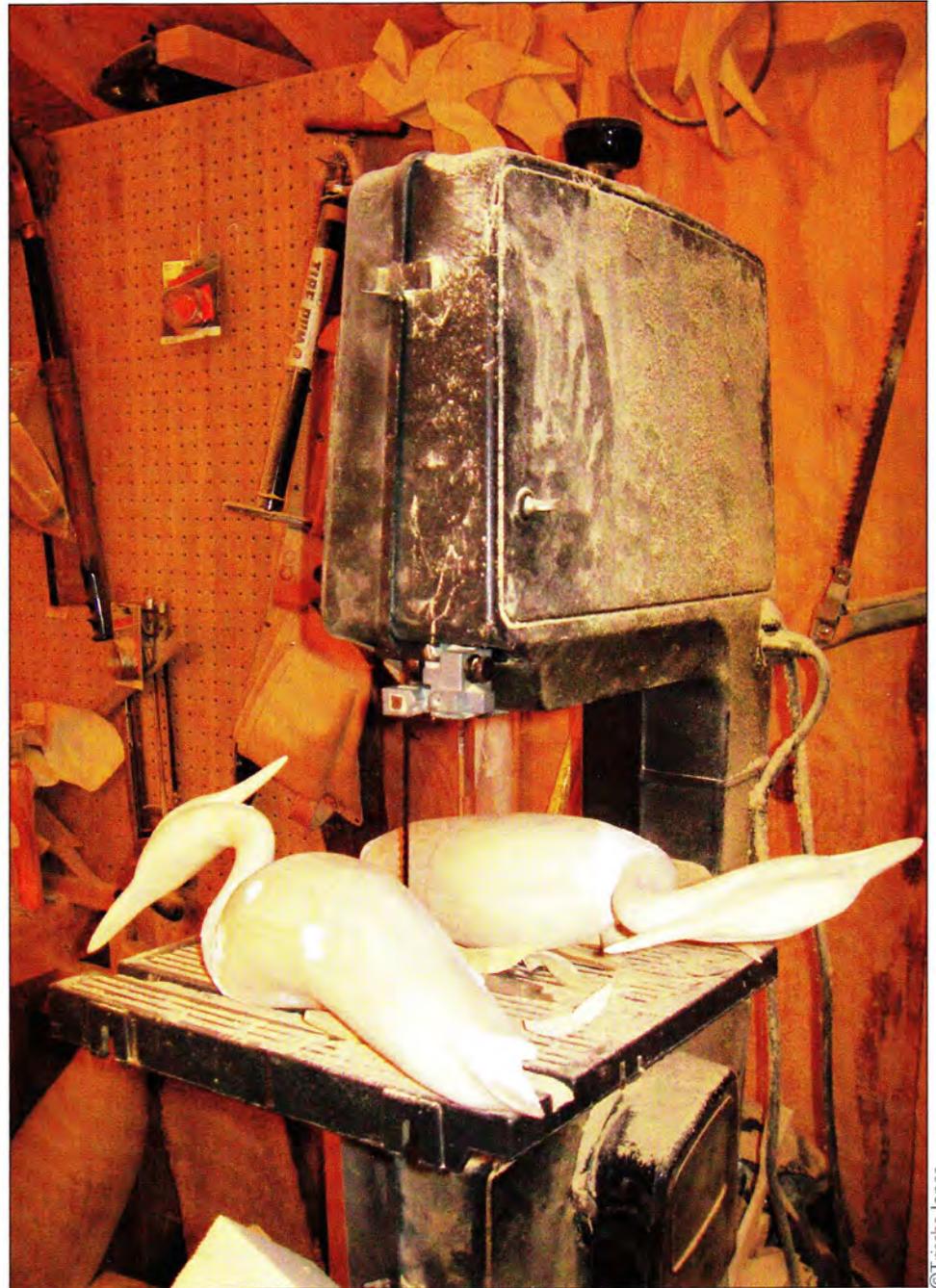
Today, contemporary decoy carving can take many forms, from interpretive, to decorative, to working. Although wooden decoys are not used as much in duck hunting as they once were, they are still used. In Accomack County on the Eastern Shore, it is estimated that there are more decoy carvers per capita than in any other place in the country. There are at least 30 carvers who earn part of their living from carving decoys.

Jim Britton of Reedville and William Bruce of White Stone have been carving decoys for decades. Jim believes one of the advantages of making traditional hunting decoys is that you do not need to invest a fortune in power tools. “You may be able to make decoys faster with a lot of equipment,” say Britton, “but that does not mean you will make them better.” For Jim, tupelo is often the wood of choice for his decorative decoys, while cedar or kiln-dried white pine is used for working decoys.

Both gentlemen can be found each fall at the Rappahannock River Waterfowl Show (www.rwfs.org) in White Stone, which will celebrate its 32nd year in 2011 according to Pat Bruce, William’s wife. “William is the co-chair of this show. The decoy contest which occurs in conjunction with the show is one of the largest and oldest wildfowl art shows on the East Coast. The contest has all classes of carvings: gunning decoys, decorative decoys, and buoy decoys—which are made from crab pot buoys.”

Tips for New Collectors

Whether collecting rare coins, stamps, fine wines, or any other forms of artwork, collecting hand-carved decoys can be a rewarding experience. Mark McNair offers a few sugges-



Two, half-sized blue herons are in the process of creation at Jim Britton’s workshop. Because herons are so wary of humans, having heron decoys around your duck blind gives other ducks/geese confidence that no people are around.

tions to the novice collector. “Purchase Adele Earnest’s book *The Art of the Decoy*. Then read it. Although it was published in the 1970s, it’s still fresh and relevant. Go to a decoy show and look around. Handle all the birds you can, especially the good ones. Resist the temptation to purchase something right away.”

There are any numbers of levels for entering decoy collecting. Find a carver whose

work you appreciate and start with one decoy. Recognize that you are not only collecting art, you are collecting history. And as with any collecting hobby, learning the history of the carver and the decoy can be almost as rewarding as owning the decoy itself. □

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.