





Ducks On Display

Old wooden decoys gathered dust for decades until, in the early 1970s, collectors began to see their craftsmanship and view them as folk art. Nowadays, some long-ago Eastern Shore carvers are posthumously accorded star status, and the finest working decoys made between 1850 and 1950 command six-figure prices.

BY CLARKE C. JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBB SCHARETG

Ducks on Display



A. Elmer Crowell's "Preening Pintail," c. 1915

Floating peacefully as they preen and feed (or seem to), hunting guide Grayson Chesser's two-dozen wooden conspirators encourage a flock of ducks to land in a marsh on Holden Creek. Hand carved from kiln-dried white pine, the decoys float differently depending on whether they're made hollow or solid, says Chesser, a Sanford, Virginia resident who's nationally known for his decoys and who is a former Eastern Shore Ducks Unlimited Carver of the Year. "You make a decoy based on the type of water you will be hunting over," he explains. "In calm water you can use a hollow type; in rough water a solid decoy works best."

Few people know more about duck decoys than Chesser, 61. He started carving decoys in 1960, and he's been collecting them for nearly as long. Tall and bearded, he's something of a Renaissance man. In addition to his carving and guiding work, he co-authored the book *Making Decoys, The Century Old Way* and now serves on the Accomack County Board of Supervisors. When you shake the man's hand, you feel you have touched a link to the past—and in a way, you have: His family has lived on the Eastern Shore, he says, since shortly after settlers came to Jamestown.

Chesser carves about 50 decoys a year, and to make a good one, he says, you need to know something about what you are creating. "All the body language of a waterfowl is in its neck and head," he says. In his

view, a good wooden decoy is "like an impressionist painting—it does not have to show all the feathers like a decorative decoy, but it must have the illusion of feathers." Not surprisingly, people who hunt with him want to buy his decoys after they've put down their guns. "For many, me included, gunning over handmade decoys takes people back to a simpler, more romantic period," says Chesser.

Perhaps it is that romanticized notion of duck hunting and rural life on the water that has sparked a boom in decoy collecting—and decoy prices—over the last 40 years. Duck and other decoys have been used in America for more 1,000 years. Native Americans fashioned duck decoys out of cattails and other reeds. In the first half of the 20th century, ducks and oysters became popular food

dishes north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the restaurant business kept busy the watermen and decoy carvers who lived on Virginia's Eastern Shore. In those days it was common for a so-called market gunner—an individual who hunted waterfowl and then sold it to food markets—to shoot several hundred ducks in a season. Some market gunners would kill that many in a week. Hand-carved wooden decoys were therefore ubiquitous.

Things changed in the 20th century, in particular after 1918, when the first restrictions of waterfowl shooting were passed. After duck-hunting limits were introduced, lots of market gunners left the business. Duck hunting then became a sport rather than a business.

After World War II, many of those who continued to hunt started

replacing their wooden decoys with plastic models, which were lighter, less expensive and easier to use. The wooden decoy became an endangered species of sorts, gathering dust in attics in sheds next to rusty sleds and old picture frames. Many were used for kindling until the art world awoke to their value in the early 1970s.

At an auction on Cape Cod in 1972, Dr. James McCleery, who later became one of America's premier decoy collectors, plopped down \$10,500 for a single wooden decoy (a William Bowman curlew) and in doing so transformed the market. At a time when the median family income was slightly more than \$13,500, that was considered an astounding price for a hand carved piece of wood. "Not just the general public but experienced decoy collectors thought him crazy," says Joe Engers, editor and publisher of *Decoy Magazine*. Suddenly, what had been nothing more than an antiquated hunting aid became perceived as something more highly esteemed—folk art.

The market for the finest wooden decoys has expanded ever since. The most valuable decoys, say experts, are those crafted by watermen in the "golden age of decoys," between 1850 and 1950. They are avidly sought by collectors. In 2003, a hand carved decoy by Elmer Crowell (1862-1951) was auctioned by Guyette & Schmidt, in conjunction with Christie's, for \$801,500. At the time, that was the highest price ever paid for a decoy at auction. Four years later, the same decoy was auctioned by Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts of Boston for more than \$1 million. That decoy, and another Crowell decoy that also sold for more than \$1 million, were part of a larger private sale of 31 decoys brokered by Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts for \$7.5 million.

In the decoy world, some deceased Eastern Shore (Virginia) carvers—among them, Dave "Umbrella" Watson, Ira Hudson, Miles Hancock and Nathan Cobb—have reached rock-star status. They carved working decoys as opposed to decorative decoys that sit on mantels. "I find their work particularly stylish," says longtime collector Charlie Hunter, who lives in Staunton. "Nathan Cobb Jr. would show a bird's head in different positions—such as a reaching head or a swimming head."

According to Engers of *Decoy Magazine*, Eastern Shore decoys are valuable because there is a "very enthusiastic" group of people who collect them. "They specialize in Eastern Shore birds, and so there is a

demand for those decoys.” He adds that others specialize in Southern decoys, into which Virginia carvings would fall.

Dick McIntyre, a decoy broker and collector in Seabrook, South Carolina, knows a lot about the late Eastern Shore carvers. He suggests that Umbrella Watson (1851-1938), who lived in Chincoteague, was the best painter of all decoy carvers. “He made very good hollow decoys and was a master craftsman,” says McIntyre. “Ira Hudson (1873-1949), on the other hand, was a sculptural master and probably made a greater variety of decoys.” And what of Nathan Cobb Jr. (1825-1905), who lived on Cobb Island? McIntyre says his decoys “probably best represent sculptural masterpieces.”

Hudson, who grew up in Maryland but moved to Chincoteague in the late 1800s, was a prolific carver. By some estimates, he crafted upwards of 60,000 working birds before his death. “He used a paint brush to paint the sides of his birds,” says Stephen O’Brien Jr., “and it probably took him all of 30 seconds to paint the sides of his Canada geese and brant. His feathering was meant to give the impression of the real thing, and he knew exactly how much detail he needed—30 seconds worth! In the same manner Picasso could boil an object down to its essence with just a few lines, Hudson did the same thing with gunning birds, which have a simple and yet refined quality about them—they really are the essence of American folk art.” O’Brien says that if Hudson’s c. 1925 hooded merganser pair ever came back on the market, they would command a price “approaching seven figures.” He adds, “There is not another pair of Virginia decoys I would rather own.”

According to Gary Guyette, the president of St. Michaels, Maryland-based Guyette & Schmidt, a number of things make decoys valuable. Among them are “the condition of the paint or whether the decoy has been repainted, the quality of the carving, and the form.” He says some decoys look more animated than others, and that is an attraction for many collectors. Others like birds that are more rounded in shape. One collector who did not wish to be named says that he seeks a decoy with “fine patination—the changes of features over time on original paint and how any old decoy ages with dignity.”

Adds Guyette, “Some carvers put

more time in making their earlier decoys. They may not have spent as much time on the later ones, when the demand for them increased and they had to carve more [birds].”

The finest decoys in the world can typically be seen at auctions held by Guyette & Schmidt and Stephen O’Brien Jr. Fine Arts. Guyette & Schmidt holds three major decoy auctions a year—selling between 500 and

collecting doesn’t have to pay a fortune for a decoy,” says Guyette. “You can still buy good decoys that will appreciate over time. It is like any investment: Do a bit of homework so you know what you are buying.”

Collector Hunter agrees. “A new collector should keep in mind that tastes change—interest shifts from one carver or bird to another. A price for a decoy is set by what two

was Nathan Cobb,” he says, “and I have hunted over a few of Grayson Chesser’s decoys. I never looked at decoys as an investment first. I just collect what I like. I don’t try to get a decoy just because it was done by some particular carver or because it is a particular bird.”

The popularity of working decoys has spawned other forms of waterfowl carving. Today there are stunning, interpretive wood sculptures, as well as decorative decoys. The decorative decoy, where the carver burns the feathers into his carving, is perhaps what most people think of when going to one of the wildfowl art shows held in Virginia. Jim Britton of Reedville, a former honorary chairman of the Havre de Grace Decoy Festival, has won many awards for his decorative carvings. He uses tupelo wood for his decoys because it doesn’t curl when the feathers are burned in.

While the economic downturn will likely hurt collector markets of all kinds, Engers asserts that the top decoys, the 9s and 10s in the decoy world, are still increasing in value. “I do not think that they’ve reached their peak.” One reason, he explains, is the “rather late” entry of folk art collectors into the decoy market. “Even in this economy, top decoys are selling, and when the economy improves, I think you’ll see prices for all decoys rise again.”

Some Virginia collectors do not think there has been much movement lately in the price of decoys under \$25,000—but most all agree that prices for decoys valued at above that threshold have been rising because of interest from folk art collectors. As collector Charlie Hunter says, “They’re creating the upward price trend.”

For veteran collectors, the guys who started buying working decoys decades ago, the market nowadays is a little nerve-racking. One anonymous collector recalls spending \$100 to buy his first decoy in the early 1970s—and having trouble sleeping afterwards. He and many other collectors have surely spent many restless nights since, watching the demand grow for these uniquely American artifacts. ●



A Grayson Chesser decoy

“My favorite carver was Nathan Cobb,” says collector Tommy O’Conner, “and I have hunted over a few of Grayson Chesser’s decoys. I never looked at decoys as an investment first. I just collect what I like. I don’t try to get a decoy just because it was done by some particular carver or because it is a particular bird.”

800 carvings at each, most of them decoys. Paul Tudor Jones II, a University of Virginia benefactor who is known to be an avid hunter, conservationist and collector, has done business with both firms. According to O’Brien, Jones has one of the finest decoy collections in the country. He says that Jones has a “terrific eye” for folk art and “understands sculpture, surface and the rarity of the bird—the three cornerstones of any great decoy collection.”

You don’t need to be extremely wealthy to become a collector. “Someone who wants to start

people want to pay.”

Tommy O’Conner of Suffolk is known as one of Virginia’s serious, knowledgeable decoy collectors. In Loy Harrell’s 2000 book, *Decoys: North America’s One Hundred Greatest*, O’Conner is cited as owning, or having owned at one time, several of the top decoys in America. O’Conner, 56, says that he began to collect decoys about 40 years ago, after he found an old wooden decoy in a marsh at Back Bay and became fascinated with them. That early fascination has grown into a serious hobby: He now owns close to 1,200 decoys. “My favorite carver