

At Copley Fine Art Auctions—

# Fine Decoys & Sporting Art Combine For \$3 Million Haul

## Auction Action In Hingham, Mass.

HINGHAM, MASS. —

On July 14 and 15, Copley Fine Art Auctions put together a 676-lot sale with several marquee decoys of impeccable provenance, some recently uncovered works by Nineteenth and Twentieth Century master carvers, including Elmer Crowell, Charles Perdew and the Ward Brothers. There was a wide selection of miniatures and decorative carvings, along with fish decoys and sporting art, which comprised about a third of the sale. Included were works by some of the best in the field, including Edmund Henry Osthaus, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Bob Kuhn, Ogden M. Pleissner, Frank W. Benson and others, providing numerous choices for buyers looking for “just that right painting.” There was also an assortment of accessories including powder tins, fishing reels and more.

There was no in-house bidding but three internet platforms were in use, with phone and absentee bids processed. Copley’s 306-page catalog included extensive descriptions and biographical information, often with anecdotes of “decoy lore” and background details of some of the paintings. The online listings include all the information from the printed catalog, plus numerous photographs of each lot. An unusual feature of Copley sales is that many lots are sold without printed estimates. These lots are sold without reserve and, as Colin McNair stated, “without a safety net.” One of these lots sold for \$11,000.

The top lot of the day, realizing \$228,000, was a circa 1850 hollow carved curlew decoy by an unknown Nantucket maker. Little is currently known about the identity of many Nantucket carvers. Stephen “Steve” O’Brien Jr, along with Chelsea Olney, with whom he co-authored a recent book on the work of Elmer Crowell, are working on a book that will provide more information on the Nantucket carvers and will change some of the current attributions. This decoy was large, 16 inches long, with a hollowed out, egg-shell-thin hull, and it was held together with small cut nails. The wings were raised and connected over the detailed tail. The paint was true to the species and in very good condition. The catalog noted that two birds by

this maker are known that had been repainted by Elmer Crowell later in their lives and speculates that the work of this carver may have been an inspiration to Crowell. This decoy belonged to Ted and Judy Harmon. A few days prior to the sale, Ted Harmon said, “I’ve owned this bird for about 40 years. I got it in Ipswich, and it’s been on my mantel ever since. I really like it, but I felt it was time to pass it along — let someone else enjoy it.”

Perhaps something like this has been said before, but Elmer Crowell carvings claimed three of the six highest prices of the sale. Crowell produced miniature carvings of 183 different species. They were sold to his regular customers, summer visitors and schools and museums for identification purposes. Some were sold in sets of 25: shorebirds, ducks and songbirds. Shorebird sets may be the scarcest. A nearly complete set, 22 of 25 shorebirds, realized \$90,000. Each was marked “A. E. Crowell Maker East Harwich Mass” in a rectangular stamp on the bottom. Included was the original typed list of the 25 birds comprising the shorebird set.

A “wing-up” greater yellowlegs mantel carving by Crowell reached \$84,000. He is believed to have produced very few carvings of this type. The bill tip was open, and the bird was preening an individual feather of tin. The plumage on the two sides of the upraised wing were painted differently, and the tail feathers were carved and painted. Related examples have been published numerous times. The third Crowell finishing in the top six lots of the sale was a circa 1912 mantel carving of a woodcock, which sold for \$72,000. Its dropped wings had carved primary feathers and true-to-life painting. This particular bird had not appeared previously in the marketplace, having

Review and Onsite Photos by  
Rick Russack, Contributing Editor  
Additional Photos  
Courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

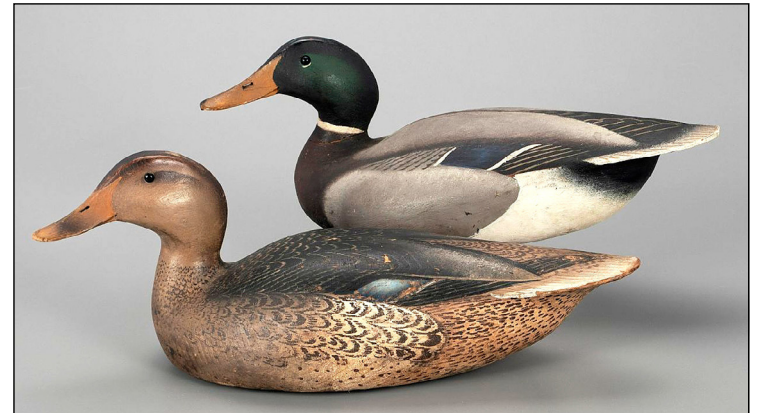
**This circa 1850 hollow carved curlew decoy by an as-yet unidentified maker from Nantucket, selling for \$228,000, was the highest priced decoy in the sale.**

been in the Eugene E. du Pont collection, which was acquired directly from Crowell.

*Bird Decoys of North America* by Robert Shaw, published in 2010, stated, “Stephen W. Ward (1895-1976) and his brother Lemuel Travis Ward (1896-1984) of Crisfield, Md., were by far the most prominent Chesapeake Bay carvers of the Twentieth Century and among the greatest and most influential bird carvers of all time.” Today’s marketplace seems to agree with this assessment.

Although there were numerous other carvers in the Chesapeake region, Ward Brothers works are the most sought-after by collectors and there were about 20 in the sale. Steve was the carver and Lem the painter. Selling for \$36,000 was a circa 1936 pair of mallards. Apparently, the drake had never been hunted over as it retained original paper labels from the retailer. A preening Canada goose by the brothers earned \$20,400. The brothers also made miniatures, which brought prices ranging from \$2,400 for a hissing Canada goose to \$1,020 for a pair of bluebills. The Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art in Salisbury, Md., features one of the world’s largest and finest public collections of decorative and antique decoys and was named in honor of the brothers.

Also bringing \$72,000, as did the Crowell woodcock, was a large curlew decoy that spent most of its life in an apartment in New York’s Upper East Side. It was made by Charles Sumner Bunn (1865-1952), Shinnecock, N.Y., about 1900. This is only the third of the few curlews by this maker known to have come to auction. In 1971, William J.



**Finishing at \$36,000, this pair of mallards by the Ward Brothers was one of several of the firm’s carvings in the sale.**



**Edmund Henry Osthaus’ 1890 oil painting of a litter of setter pups was one of several by him in the sale, and it was the top earner of the selection of sporting art, realizing \$102,000.**



**It felt like you could reach out and touch these lions painted by Bob Kuhn. The oil on canvas realized \$57,000.**



**The hunter on the right in this watercolor, “Grouse Shooting” by Aiden Lassell Ripley, is thought to be the artist, accompanied by his favorite dog, Chief. Done in 1946 for *Field & Stream* magazine, it sold for \$60,000.**



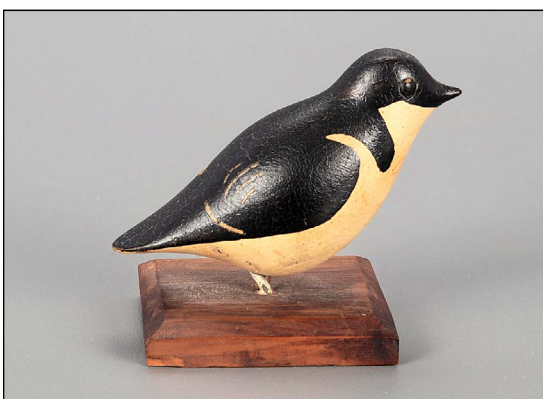
**Steve O’Brien Jr presented a talk on Elmer Crowell at the 55th Annual North American Vintage Decoy & Sporting Collectibles Show in April. O’Brien discussed his recent book on Crowell and brought some of the Crowell decoys sold in this sale to show those attending the event.**



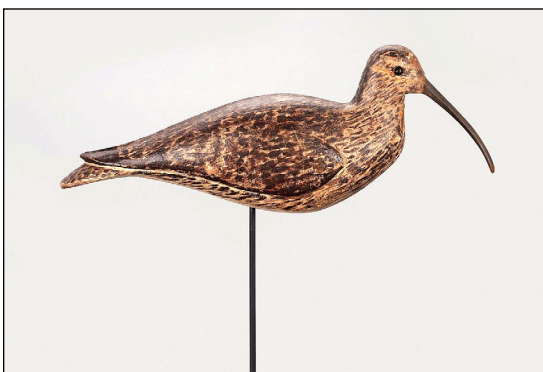
You had to see this egret decoy in person to appreciate the surface. It was pictured both in Mackey's 1965 *American Bird Decoys*, and Quintina Colio's 1972 *American Decoys*. The catalog dated the bird to about 1880, originating on the New Jersey coast. Only one comparable example is known and it's in the Shelburne Museum collection, having been acquired in 1952 from Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. The body is 45 inches long, carved from a one-inch board. It was also part of the landmark exhibition at the Whitney Museum, "The Flowering of American Folk Art" and is pictured in the catalog of that exhibit. It realized \$48,000, well over the estimate.



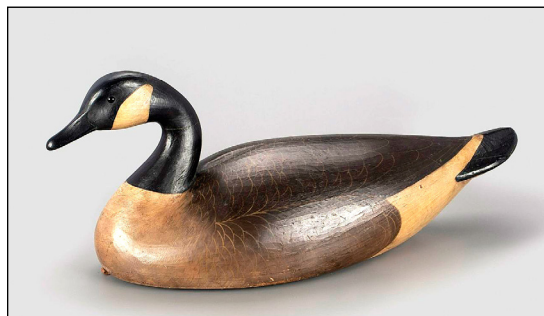
This vintage photo shows Elmer Crowell holding a "wing up" carving of his.



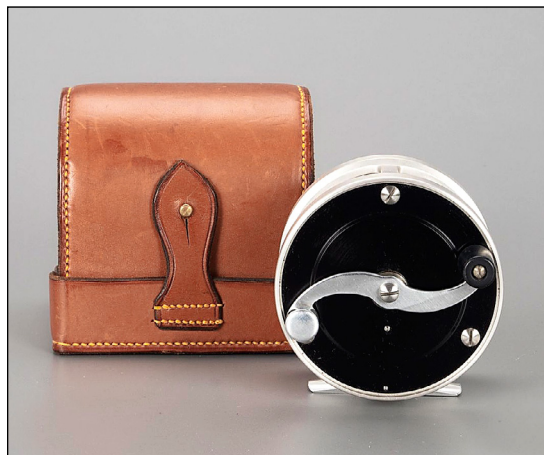
Seabrook, N.H., resident George Boyd was one of the region's prolific carvers. Dovekies, or little auks, were not native to the New Hampshire seacoast, so few were made. It came from a collection that included more than 150 Boyd carvings and sold for \$13,200



It is now known that this large curlew decoy was made by Charles Sumner Bunn, a member of Long Island's Shinnecock-Montauk Tribe. It sold for \$72,000.



Contemporary carver Mark McNair has won numerous awards for his miniature and decorative carvings. There were more than 20 in the sale, and the most sought-after was this 28½-inch-long Canada goose, signed and dated 1983, which went out for \$7,800.



Accessories related to hunting and fishing are avidly collected. This sale had a selection of fishing reels. This #300 salmon reel by New Hampshire maker Stan Bogdan of Nashua earned \$11,400.



Between the Osthause painting of setter pups and the Nantucket curlew, there's more than \$300,000 worth of art and decoys in this photo.



This early painting depicting a golden plover and an Eskimo curlew is significant in that it shows that shorebirds often fed inland where there was an abundance of the insects they sought. Dated 1861, and signed D.B. (Hill), it sold for \$21,600. A hunter can be seen on ridge behind the birds.



Sporting art included a set of eight etchings by Ogden M. Pleissner produced between 1942 and 1944. Six were done in an edition of 60, but one was limited to 15 and one to 13, so not many full sets exist. The set realized \$30,000.

Mackey, whose decoy collection was one the very best, wrote, "These decoys have the feel of real birds. His knowledge and study of the live bird and his skill with a knife transferred the block of wood. His was a unique talent not given to any other decoy makers. Nothing finer has been found ever since." The only problem with that quote is that Mackey thought the decoy had been made by Bill Bowman, and, based on his authority, several similar fine decoys have been attributed to Bowman. Further, at one time, these decoys were thought to have been made by Elmer Crowell. But recent research has established that the maker was Charles Sumner Bunn, a member of Long Island's Shinnecock-Montauk Tribe.

As in other fields of art, research is changing attributions long thought to be correct. In October of last year, Kory Rogers, curator of the Shelburne Museum, home to one of the largest decoy collections in the United States, published his findings and those of Joe Janssen and other researchers, correcting the previous attribution to Bowman. Rogers's heavily illustrated "Mistaken Identities" is on the Shelburne website (<https://shelburnemuseum.org/online-exhibitions/in-plain-sight>). It's a fascinating story. A few days before this auction, Rogers was asked about attributions in the sphere of decoy collecting. He said, "Many of the early collectors, like Joel Barber and Mackey, recognized the quality of a decoy but often had little factual information to go on about the maker. So sometimes they relied on local word-of-mouth stories and perhaps even some wishful thinking. There's been so much research done over the last 40-50 years on the decoys and the makers of particular regions of the country that much new information has come to light and we're able to correct earlier misconceptions." At least one other carving in the sale has also been reattributed. An exceptionally colorful wood duck drake, once thought to have been made by the Ward Brothers, is now believed to have been made by another Crisfield, Md., carver, Lloyd Aaron Sterling (1860-1925). It sold for \$25,200. It had sold at an online auction late last year for about \$10,000 less.

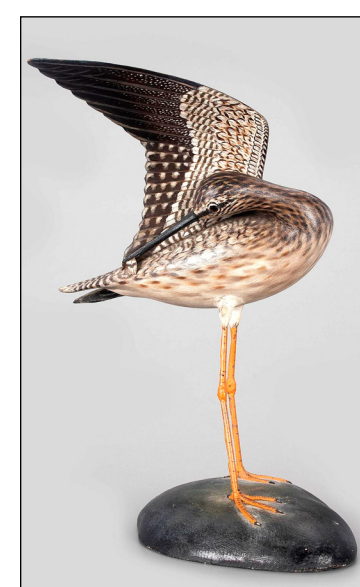
The sale included dozens of miniatures and decorative carvings.



Elmer Crowell carved 183 different species of miniatures sold in sets of 25. Twenty-two from a set of 25 shorebirds sold for \$90,000.



Created for a Remington Arms Co. advertisement, "The Critical Veteran," a large oil painting by Frank Leyendecker brought \$30,000. A rig of mason decoys is seen in boat. The ad appeared in 1919 issues of *Forest and Stream* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.



A "wing-up" greater yellow-legs mantel carving by Elmer Crowell reached \$84,000.

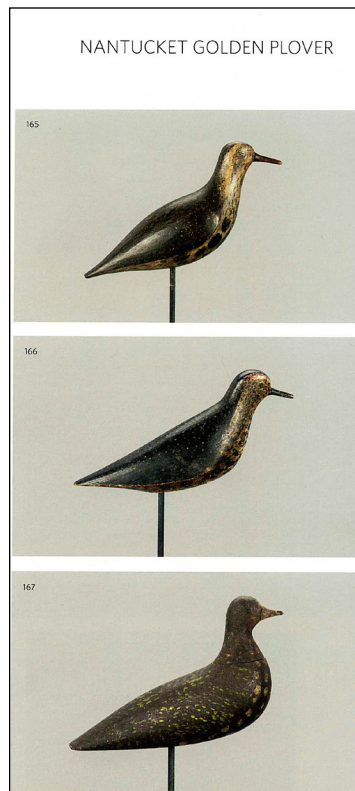


Made in 1990, this bird tree displays 11 different birds. It was made by Capeville, Va., carver Frank Finney, several of whose decorative were included in this sale. It finished at \$33,000.

Prior to the sale, Steve O'Brien and Colin McNair, decoy specialist, both remarked that the market is "hot" now for these. They fit into almost any home, and some folks who have collected them for years are taking advantage of the strong current market. In addition to Crowell miniatures, the sale offered carvings by William Gibian, Mark McNair, Alan King and many others.

Copley's sales usually include a wide selection of sporting paintings, managed by fine arts specialist Leah Tharpe. There were more than 180 works in this sale, including works by Edmund Henry Osthaus, Ogden Pleissner, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Arthur Tait, Frank Benson and others. Some of the highest prices in the sale were achieved by sporting paintings, and leading the group, at \$102,000, was an 1890 painting of a litter of seven setter pups by Edmund Henry Osthaus (1858-1928). Osthaus was a hunter of game birds, a judge at field trials and a breeder of prize-winning field dogs. His paintings reflect his love of dogs. In addition, there were four more of his paintings in the sale, all of setters, with one depicting setters on point realizing \$78,000. "Grouse Shooting," a 1946 watercolor by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969) earned \$60,000. This 1946 watercolor was part of a series of six scenes done for *Field & Stream* magazine titled "Gunning in America." Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819-1905) was one of the earliest sporting artists, and his 1878 work of pointers at work sold for \$72,000. Many of his paintings were issued as lithographs by Currier and Ives.

Not all important paintings were of dogs. A painting signed



By coincidence, Copley's catalog pictured these three golden plover decoys on the same page. Each was made on Nantucket around 1870. The maker of the one on top is unknown. W.S. Morton made the one in the center, and Charles Coffin made the one at the bottom of the page. Each shows the way different carvers depicted the same type of bird. All were from the collection of Dr William C. McMaster.

D.B (Hill) and dated 1861, selling for \$21,600, depicted two shorebirds in a field, with a hunter on a hill behind them. It showed that not all shore-bird hunting took place at the shoreline. The birds sometimes fed in fields where domestic animals had grazed, providing grasshoppers and other insects for the birds. Of a totally different subject matter, a painting by Bob Kuhn (1920-2007) depicted two lions at rest. It reached \$57,000.

After the sale, O'Brien commented that the market was strong in each category. "It was interesting to see the level of interest some of the things brought. I'm thinking of items like the Frank Finney bird tree and the Stan Bogden reel. Collectors understand the rarity of items like these. The Hunter-Doherty wood duck hen was a very rare item and sold for more money in 1989 when Charlie Hunter acquired it. I thought the Crowell mallard with the du Pont family provenance was a very good buy for someone. And with a \$3 million gross, it was obviously a strong sale for us."

Prices given include the buyer's premium as stated by the auction house. For information, 617-536-0030 or [www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com).



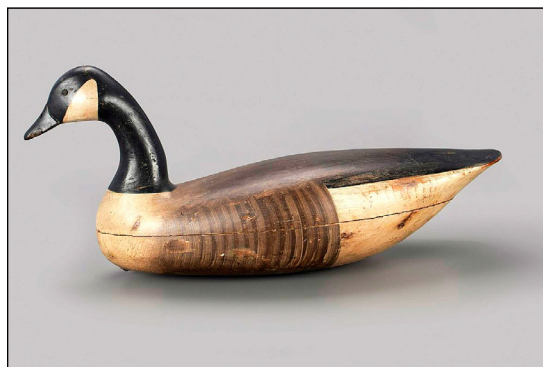
A collection of powder tins belonging to a descendant of the du Pont family, whose company had made many of them, were sold singly or in small lots. Most were in fine condition and this lot of six realized \$2,640.



Folk art collectors know Charles Hart of Gloucester, Mass., for the carved penguins he made in a variety of sizes. But he also produced fine full-size decoys, and this wood duck decoy displayed a crest including three inlays. It was 12 inches long and earned \$9,600. A 5-inch-tall pair of his penguins sold for \$2,880.



Lathrop Holmes of Kingston, Mass., only made decoys for his personal use. This black-bellied plover earned \$34,800.



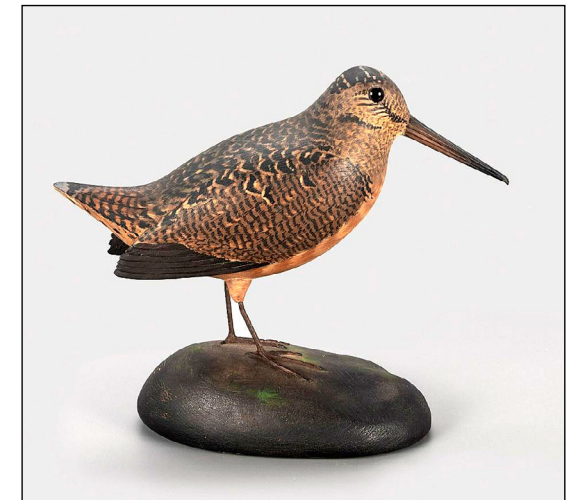
Harry V. Shourds is regarded as one of New Jersey's finest decoy makers. This Canada goose has been pictured in multiple books on the carvings of the region, so is well-known to collectors. With original paint, it brought \$54,000.



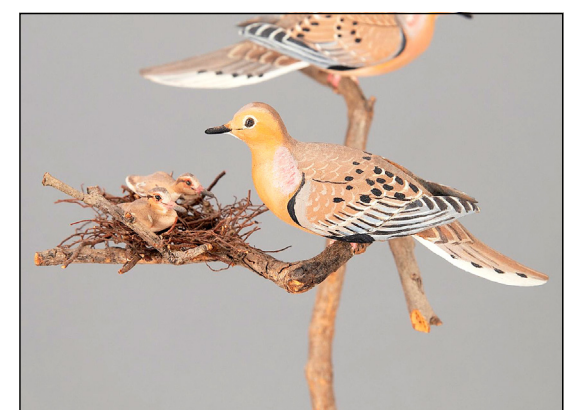
Decoy collector George Smith (left) and Copley specialist Colin McNair discuss the finer point of the Ward Brothers' 1936 mallard pair, which sold for \$36,000 in the auction. Objects from this auction were made available to collectors at a variety of locations in the months preceding the sale.



Charles "Shang" Wheeler is regarded as one of Connecticut's premier decoy carvers. This 1/3-life-size carving is 16 inches long and shows a mother swan with two 5-inch-long cygnets on her back. The mother's wings are raised to protect the young. It brought \$6,600.



One of three Elmer Crowell carvings that finished among the six highest prices of the sale was this circa 1912 mantel carving of a woodcock which sold for \$72,000.



Miniatures by Alan J. King are truly miniatures. The overall height of this dove family is 5 inches. Shown is a close-up of the babies, nest and one of the parents. There were a number of miniatures by King in the sale, with this one bringing \$13,200.



A selection of decoys and a painting on display during the preview.