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Auction Action In Plymouth, Mass.



The Edmund Osthaus record-setting oil of a pointer with a quail sold at \$230,500.



The pair of John Tax laminated Canada geese sold at \$103,500.



Steve and Cinnie O'Brien go over some last-minute bids prior to the auction.



The top lot of the waterfowl carvings came as a life-size Crowell black duck mantel bird in a reaching position realized \$214,000.



"Wigeon," a watercolor by Frank Benson, went out at \$141,500.



The Crowell golden plover in breeding plumage that was in "the maker's best ocean wave paint" sold for \$43,550.



The "dust jacket" black-bellied plover by A.E. Crowell sold to a buyer seated in the front row for \$69,000.

Sporting Art Tops Copley Auction

PLYMOUTH, MASS. — The second in a weeklong series of decoy auctions, Copley Fine Arts conducted its annual sale on Wednesday and Thursday, July 23 and 24, with a fine selection of sporting materials, waterfowl decoys and related materials. Normally first among the four auctions to take place on the New England circuit every summer, Cape Cod's Decoys Unlimited beat the Boston auction house

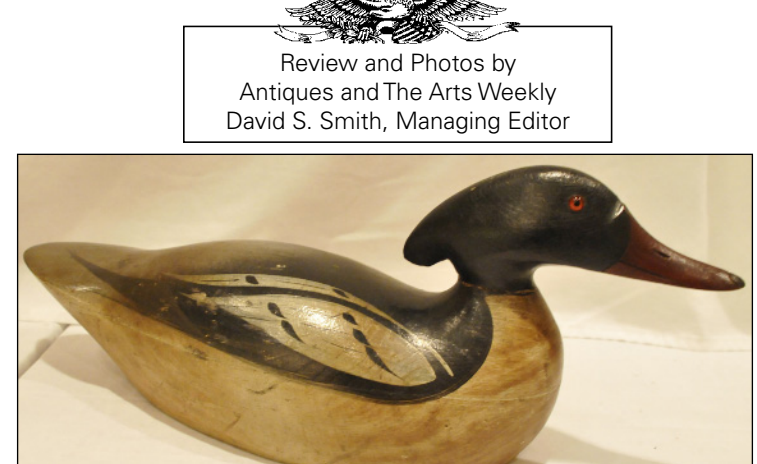
to the punch by jumping forward in the schedule by a week.

No matter, Copley stands out among the other "decoy" auctions as there is always a sharp focus placed on sporting art with both high-end and mainstream works in plentiful supply. Copley principal Steven O'Brien Jr has long been known as the "go-to" guy for artwork by Aiden Lassell Ripley, Frank Benson and

Osthaus Painting Establishes Record Price \$230,500



A bevy of Charles Hart penguins, with the largest bringing \$14,950, the single in the center \$4,600, the pair of bookends on the right \$8,050, and the two mini penguins on one base \$2,760.



A premier grade Mason merganser fetched \$37,950.

Review and Photos by
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David S. Smith, Managing Editor

first lot until the end.

The sale opened with a selection of Frank Benson drypoint prints that had been in the artist's personal collection and descended through the family to his great-granddaughter. The first of the lots to be offered was "Woodcock," an 11 7/8-by-9 3/4-inch print from an edition of 250, which sold above estimate at \$5,462.

"Rene," cataloged as being "one of the hardest Benson etchings to obtain, as only five impressions were ever pulled," also sold well above estimate at \$11,500. "Marsh Gunner," from an edition of 150, did well, too, bringing \$16,100.

The first piece of original art to be offered was a Frank Benson watercolor titled "Heading Home," depicting a homeward-bound dory under sail at twilight with a frenzy of gulls and terns about it. The lot opened for bidding at \$40,000 against the \$60/80,000 presale estimate and it methodically advanced in \$2,500 increments to \$50,000, where it advanced by \$5,000. Several phone bidders continued to plug away at the lot up to \$80,000, where the bid was cut to \$82,500. Another phone bidder hit the lot at \$85,000 with the lot hammering down for \$94,875.

"Wigeon," another Benson watercolor, was offered as the following lot. Signed and dated "F.W. Benson '26" and measuring 14 by 19 inches, it also opened at \$40,000 against a \$60/80,000 presale estimate, although bidding on the lot was much more spirited. The watercolor had hung in a South Carolina hunting lodge owned by George de Forest and it was believed to have been commissioned directly from the artist. Consigned by a member of the de Forest fami-



Steven O'Brien Jr. chats with guest auctioneer Michael Grogan prior to the sale.



An usual item in the sale was the Tlingit salmon basket with a provenance of the Ned Jalbert collection. It sold at \$63,250.

ly, the watercolor depicted two pairs of birds descending into a marsh.

Bids bounced back and forth between two clients on the telephones, with the phone bidder who bought the previous Benson claiming it at \$141,500. The same bidder also claimed "Waiting for the Rise," a 16-by-26-inch watercolor by Ogden Pleissner, for \$94,875.

The top lot of the session, Edmund Osthaus' record-setting oil of a pointer with a quail, would also be added to the same phone bidder's long list of purchases. Originally commissioned in 1890 by George M. Brady, Esq., the 30-by-36-inch painting had descended in the family and was consigned to the auction by his great-nephew.

"Pointer with Quail" reveals Osthaus at his best," stated O'Brien in the catalog. One look at the masterpiece, executed early in the artist's career, left little doubt in regard to the auctioneer's assessment. "I consider him to be among the greatest American sporting dog painters," he said. "Sometimes his earlier works seem to have so much more feeling," stated O'Brien as he stood in the empty preview gallery taking in the painting. "The dog done in a realist style against a softly toned and painted background is remarkable. His artistic talent, combined with his love of dogs, enabled him to capture the essence of the working dog while also depicting acute anatomical detail."

Estimated at \$40/60,000, the painting opened for bidding at the low estimate and climbed steadily in \$2,500 increments with several in the gallery and on the telephones getting in on the action. At \$80,000, the field narrowed to two telephone bidders, with Steven O'Brien Sr. handling one of the lines and Steve O'Brien Jr. representing the other client. Bids bounced back and forth with Junior's client advancing the bid quickly up to the point where the price doubled the high estimate at \$120,000. The tide then turned, with Senior's bidder countering at a rapid pace and Junior's client reacting methodically.

At \$135,000, auctioneer Michael Grogan asked, "Are we done?" Apparently stimulated by the finality of Grogan's query, Junior's bidder pushed on and his bids came quickly once again. At \$175,000, Junior's client hesitated and his bid was finally executed a split second prior to the hammer; the same scenario occurred at \$195,000.



"An outstanding example of American folk art by one of Maine's premier decoy carvers," was the description assigned to the Oscar Bibber merganser. In wonderful old dry paint, it sold for \$39,100.

The crowd sat in silence and awaited a reaction from Senior's bidder and as he bid \$200,000, Junior's client countered quickly at \$205,000 and ended the battle, with the Osthaus selling for a record price paid at auction of \$230,500.

Junior's client would purchase one more lot during the session, an Aiden Lassell Ripley watercolor titled "Point in the Corn" for \$89,125, that also established a record price paid at auction for the artist.

Other lots of interest included a Pleissner watercolor, "Duck Hunting at Dawn," that brought \$63,750, a Benson black ink and white wash titled "Yellowlegs" also realized \$63,750, and an Osthaus oil portrait of the setter "Toledo Queen" went out at \$60,375.

The second session of the auction, also taking place on Wednesday, featured the "Snipe Art Collection of William Brewster" and it, too, was warmly received. The top lot of the session came as an Archibald Thornburn watercolor of a snipe was sold. "Snipe in the Rushes" was cataloged as being delivered to Brewster "in Edinborough, Scotland, while staying at Beauville Castle and fishing the Beauville River for Salmon. It was brought up to me from London by a member of the nobility who was coming up to fish the same river." The colorful watercolor sold at \$33,350.

The decoy session got off to a brisk start with a contemporary Mark McNair preening black duck selling well above estimate at \$6,900. The same bidder also purchased the following McNair lot, a woodduck for \$6,325.

Today it is believed that only 12 to 15 of the birds from these early rigs exist. Bidding on the lot opened at \$40,000, with it selling to a buyer seated in the front row for \$69,000.

Another Crowell shorebird sold was a golden plover in breeding plumage that was painted with what the auction house termed "the maker's best ocean wave paint." With only minor gunning wear noted, the decoy was estimated at \$25/35,000 and it sold for \$43,550.

The top lot of the waterfowl carvings came as a life-size Crowell black duck mantel bird in a reaching position was sold. Estimated at \$80/120,000, the decorative carving was mounted on a clamshell base and marked with the oval brand. Bidding on the lot was brisk, with it selling at \$214,000.

Several carved goose decoys in the sale brought premium prices, with a pair of John Tax laminated Canada geese, one in a tucked head position and the other a sentinel, selling at \$103,500, while a Tax snow goose in a rare feeding position brought \$86,250.

A matched pair of swimming Canada geese by Massachusetts carver Joseph Lincoln did well at \$69,000, while a single Lincoln goose that displayed "Lincoln's classic bold lines and his very best paint" realized \$52,900.

A Harry Shourds bufflehead, bearing the brand of the famed Hazellhurst Club and also a stamp from the Joseph Hillman collection, was another decoy to attract a great deal of attention. "This museum-quality decoy exhibits the graceful shiplike traits that New Jersey decoy and folk art collectors covet," stated O'Brien. Estimated at \$20/40,000, the lot sold at \$52,900.

One of the more unusual lots was a California bird carved by George McLellan, circa 1941. The brant decoy in a flying position with articulated wings, termed a "famous flyer," was described in *Wildfowl Decoys of the Pacific Coast:*



"Heading Home," a watercolor by Frank Benson, brought \$97,775.



"Waiting for the Rise," a watercolor by Ogden Pleissner, brought \$94,875.



The Joseph Lincoln goose, displaying "Lincoln's classic bold lines and his very best paint," realized \$52,900



The John Tax snow goose in a rare feeding position brought \$86,250.

Carving Traditions of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California as a "masterpiece of precision." Estimated at \$30/40,000, the decoy sold at \$43,700.

Another decoy that drew the eye of collectors was an Oscar Bibber merganser in wonderful old dry paint. "This merganser is an outstanding example of American folk art by one of Maine's premier decoy carvers," stated O'Brien. The rare decoy topped its \$20/30,000 estimate as it sold for \$39,100.

A premier grade Mason merganser also did well. Cataloged as a "gunned-over bird in

excellent original and virtually untouched condition," the decoy attracted numerous bids from the telephones. O'Brien commented that when purchased new, "Mason premier grade decoys were costly and the standard and challenge grade decoys would suffice" the needs of most hunters. Accordingly, "Mason decoys of this grade and condition are true rarities." Bidding on the lot reflected the attitude, with it selling for \$37,950.

All prices include the premium charged. For further information, 617-536-0030 or www.copleyart.com.