

Six Decoys Sell For 18 Million At Copley Fine Art Auctions

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Copley's Steve O'Brien with the Elmer Crowell Canada goose from the Harry Long collection that sold for \$661,250.

The second stop on the annual series of New England decoy auctions featured a stellar selection of decoys and select sporting artwork offered by Steve and Cinnie O'Brien and their firm, Copley Fine Arts Auctions. Opening on Tuesday evening for a special preview party, the auction took place Wednesday and Thursday, July 15 and 16.

After two action-packed days of decoy auctions on the Cape, the large crowds of collectors and dealers migrated north with a sense of great anticipation. Copley had secured the consignment for a group of exquisite Elmer Crowell decoys that had been assembled at the turn of the Twentieth Century by avid sportsman and philanthropist Harry V. Long.

Close to 700 lots were offered during the two-day auction, with the first day focusing on decoys, while day two served up a stellar selection of sporting art by masters such as Ogden Pleissner, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Frank Benson, Edmund Osthaus and Lynn Bogue Hunt. The auction grossed an impressive \$4,158,929; even more impressive is the fact that \$1.8 million of that total came from the six of the seven Crowell decoys from the Long collection.

The Long birds, unknown by the vast majority of collectors, created quite a stir when they first came to light. "Just when you think you've seen it all, something comes along and knocks you off your feet," stated Crowell authority and author Brian Cullity in the catalog's foreword. Adding that while a great deal of new information has been added to the body of knowledge about the accomplishments of Crowell since the publication his reference book *The Songless Aviary: The World of A.E. Crowell and Son* in 1992; Cullity remarked "all of which help augment our understanding and appreciation of this man's talent. The revelation of this group of carvings overwhelms all previous discoveries."



The crowd waited with anticipation for the Elmer Crowell carved preening pintail from the Harry Long collection to be sold. The lot opened at \$275,000, with it selling moments later to a buyer in the rear of the room for \$546,250.

The Crowell decoys carved for Harry Long included a preening pintail estimated at \$500/800,000; a swimming black duck, \$100/200,000; a tucked head merganser, \$100/200,000; a nesting Canada goose, \$600/900,000; an open-bill calling yellowlegs, \$150/250,000; and two black bellied plovers, estimated at \$100/200,000 each.

Long, a very private and quiet collector, was born in 1857 and by age 21 had joined the Boston Stock Exchange. In 1909, married, Long and his wife purchased Whitehead, a small island off the Massachusetts coast. The couple constructed a home there, designed by Frederick Olmsted, and when completed in 1910 it was furnished with “a highboy and two wing chairs from Israel Sack, Tiffany lamps, six Windsor chairs, Paul Revere Pottery, Audubon prints and bird carvings by A.E. Crowell,” according to Harry Long’s journal from that period.

It was at Whitehead that his hunting and bird watching reached a pinnacle and also that a long-standing relationship with Crowell materialized into a bonding friendship. Long is believed to have retired his Crowell shorebirds, “honoring them with a place on his mantel,” in 1928 when the Federal Government banned the shooting of plover and yellowlegs. It is not clear when the other decoys from the rig were retired, although period photographs from 1920 show the goose displayed on top of a William and Mary bun-foot chest.

“The waterfowl decoys offered in this collection are representative of four of the primary species that Long targeted each fall along the Atlantic flyway. Because of the extremely special relationship that existed between artisan and patron, Crowell fashioned the carvings with tremendous care and they are highly advanced for the period,” writes O’Brien in the auction catalog. “The long neck of the Canada goose is gracefully coiled and turned with its extended ‘X’ shaped primaries providing perfect sculptural balance. The preening neck of the pintail arches two thirds of the way back with its pronounced primaries wrapping across the tail of the body. The racy black duck appears to be on a mission, swimming to its next destination. And, finally, the plump merganser rests content, seemingly gorged on smelt or other baitfish.”



The plump merganser from the Harry Long collection by Elmer Crowell sold at \$207,000.

Preview for the auction was extremely busy, with a special cocktail preview party conducted the evening prior to the auction. The crowd anxiously awaited the opening of the viewing room and virtually everyone in attendance took advantage of the rare opportunity to view decoys of this quality by thoroughly examining each and every one of them.

There was an air of excitement at preview the morning of the sale, and O'Brien had to ask for extra chairs to be brought into the auction room to accommodate the overflow crowd.

Copley's auctioneer Michael Grogan got the sale off to a quick start with the opening lot of the auction, an unattributed black-bellied plover, circa 1890, selling above the \$1/1,500 presale estimates at \$2,415. A feeding yellowlegs was offered shortly thereafter, selling at \$1,035. A golden plover by Joseph Lincoln was another of the opening lots, hammering down at \$6,325.

The next 20-plus lots to cross the auction block came from the collection of Barrie and Bernice Stavis and consisted primarily of Mark McNair contemporary carvings. Stavis, a distinguished American playwright, had collected McNair's decoys since 1977 and was also a close personal friend of the carver. Many of the birds carried personal notations from McNair to Stavis, such as a swan that was marked "For Barrie and Bernice on the occasion of Bee Cee's 65th birthday." The swan, estimated at \$5/10,000, did well, selling at \$16,100. A preening swan sold at \$10,925, a ring-billed gull brought \$7,475, and a pair of red-breasted mergansers went out at \$6,900.



The Elmer Crowell open bill calling yellowlegs with carved drop wings from the Harry Long collection sold to South Carolina collector Dick McIntyre at \$172,500.

The star of the Stavis collection was a rig of five golden plovers, copies of a Nantucket rig, that carried a presale estimate of \$5/10,000. Bidding on the lot was brisk, with it selling to a buyer in the rear of the room at \$37,375.

The crowd waited with anticipation and it was not long before the Long birds crossed the block. The first of the decoys to be offered was the Elmer Crowell carved preening pintail, circa 1900. Dead silence came over the room and all eyes were focused on the auctioneer as he announced an opening bid of \$275,000. Steve O'Brien hit the lot for the client he was assisting on the telephone at \$300,000 and it moved back and forth to the \$400,000 point, where the bidder that had purchased the McNair rig of plovers hit the lot at \$425,000. O'Brien's phone bidder countered at \$450,000, with the bidder in the rear of the room coming right back at \$475,000, where it hammered down for a selling price of \$546,250, including premium.

The swimming black duck was offered next and it opened on the floor at \$50,000 and bounced back and forth around the room to \$90,000. A bidder seated in the rear row of the gallery hit the lot at \$95,000 and it appeared to be ready to be hammered down when the client that had purchased the McNair rig and the pintail jumped in and claimed the lot at \$115,000.

The plump merganser was offered next and an opening bid of \$60,000 started things out with a collector standing in the rear of the room battling with a telephone bidder to \$140,000. A bid of \$150,000 came from a new telephone bidder, countered right away by the original bidder. A new bidder in the rear of the gallery jumped in at \$170,000, countered once again by the original bidder, who claimed it at \$207,000.

The "snakey-neck" nesting Canada goose was offered next, opening at \$400,000 and selling soon afterward with a single phone bid, purchased just under estimate, for \$661,250.



The pair of John “Daddy+Holly canvasbacks hammered down at \$155,250.

The open bill calling yellowlegs with carved drop wings was the next lot on the block and it opened at \$100,000 with a couple of telephone bidders getting in on the action. At \$130,000, South Carolina collector Dick McIntyre hit the lot, only to be countered by a bidder in the room at \$140,000. McIntyre hit the lot once more and claimed the shorebird at \$172,500.

A black-bellied plover was offered next and it failed to find a buyer, passed at \$85,000. The second plover opened at \$70,000 and sold to a buyer seated in the front of the gallery at \$115,000.

Copley reported that the unsold plover was the subject of attention from several collectors after the auction and a private sale was expected.

The tally for the six sold Long collection Crowell decoys was an impressive \$1,817,000.

While the plover marked the end of the Long decoys, it did not mean it was the end of the selection of outstanding Crowell birds. A decorative carving of a ruddy turnstone, estimated at \$30/60,000, was offered next and the excitement in the gallery waned little. Bidding on the lot opened at \$40,000 and progressed rapidly between two buyers in the room, selling at \$80,500. Other Crowell decoratives included a life-sized greater yellowlegs at \$26,450, a preening yellowlegs also at \$26,450, and a life-sized mallard standing “call duck” that hammered down at \$24,150.

Another highlight of the Crowells was a complete set of 25 waterfowl miniature carvings that listed a provenance of George Abercrombie Spaulding to a private collector. The near pristine set was actively bid, with it selling between estimates at \$92,000.

Decoys by other makers that did well included a pair of John “Daddy” Holly canvasbacks that listed an impressive provenance, including the Walter Bush collection, the Staten Island Museum, Bud Ward and then into the James McCleery collection. The pair of birds had been sold at McCleery’s sale at Sotheby’s in January of 2000 for \$74,000. Consigned to Copley by a private collector, the pair of birds hammered down at \$155,250.



The swimming black duck from the Harry Long collection by Elmer Crowell sold for \$115,000, going to the same buyer that purchased the preening pintail.

Another Holly decoy to capture the interest of collectors was a rare life-size swan. Elegant in form with graceful lines, these Havre de Grace swans are considered by many to be among the finest ever carved. Provenance on the lot listed the Maryland gunning rig of Captain Frank Johnson and eventually into the collection of George Gifford Jr, where it had descended in the family until consigned. The lot, estimated at \$50/100,000, sold for \$54,625.

A decorative carving by Lem Ward, with the bird posed in full strut, did well. Selling just below estimates, the rare decorative carving realized \$40,250.

One of the shorebirds in the auction to do well was a George Hinkley “minnow in the throat” yellowlegs, one of a dozen or so examples that are known to have survived. The rare decoy, estimated at \$12/18,000, sold after a spurt of bidding at \$20,700.

A Crowell yellowlegs working shorebird decoy sold at \$19,550, as did a George Boyd yellowlegs.

The second day of the auction featured a selection of artwork that ranged from Frank Benson lithographed prints and original paintings to the works of Aiden Lassell Ripley and Ogden Pleissner, two of O'Brien's specialties. Other items offered in the second session included nonsporting paintings by the likes of Andrew Wyeth and Edmund Tarbell, as well as a large assortment of fly fishing and angling leather-bound books.

The session opened with a pencil drawing, "Geese in Flight," by Frank Benson and was followed by a series of drypoints. Leading the group was an etching of an artwork that had been commissioned for a federal duck stamp that had descended in the artist's family to his great-grandson. Surpassing estimates, the lot sold for \$4,887.



The top lot of the sporting art was a Frank Benson watercolor titled "Canada Geese" that sold for \$80,500.

The top lot of the session came as a pleasing portrait of Tarbell's wife's sister was offered. "An Opal: Study of Yellow and White Light," is a 35-by-30-inch canvas in which the artist explored "the half tones in which shadows are made up of subtle color shifts instead of dull, uniform browns and beiges." Copley referred to the painting as a "signature work," stating that "Tarbell's innovative

exploration of shadow and light would go on to distinguish the artist as one of America's pre-eminent Impressionists." Estimated at \$100/120,000, the painting sold for \$120,750.

Another lot by a nonsporting artist was "John Andress House," a 1943 watercolor by Andrew Wyeth. Selling just below estimate, the watercolor brought \$63,250.

The top lot of the sporting art was a Frank Benson watercolor titled "Canada Geese" that depicts a flock of birds descending into a marsh. Purchased directly from the artist and descending in the family, the 19-by-23-inch watercolor sold for \$80,500.

Ripley's larger scale watercolor "Grouse in the Orchard," measuring an impressive 21 by 45 inches, did well, with the lot handily exceeding estimates as it sold for \$77,625.

Several works by Pleissner were also sold, with "Grouse Shooting," a watercolor measuring 16 by 26 inches, leading the way at \$69,000.

Prices include the 15 percent buyer's premium charged. For further information, 617-536-0030 or www.copleyart.com .