

# Copley's Sporting Sale Grosses More Than \$3 Million, Including 'Dust Jacket Plovers'

## Auction Action In Plymouth, Mass.

PLYMOUTH, MASS. — On July 25, Steve O'Brien Jr's Copley sporting art auction offered more than 540 lots, including decoys, sporting art and folk art. It was the second of the three decoy auctions conducted by different firms on consecutive days in late July. The Copley sale resulted in some of the highest prices of the week, was 88 percent sold by lot at the end of the day and grossed more than \$3 million. That may increase as some of the 75 or so of the lots passed at the auction may sell in ensuing days. Decoys accounted for \$2,550,000 of the gross, and the sporting art portion of the sale grossed just over \$400,000. Vintage hunting firearms and miscellaneous lots account for the balance. About 150 bidders registered online and about 80 placed bids. At times, four or five phone lines were in use and there were numerous absentee bids.

Copley was offering three of the week's outstanding shorebird decoys, known as "The Dust Jacket Plovers," which were made by Elmer Crowell, circa 1900, in an unusual

arrangement. What made this offering unusual was the fact that the three decoys were owned by Ted and Judy Harmon, who were conducting their own decoy auction the following day in the same facility. The three were sold separately, two going to one phone bidder, and collectively realized \$1,114,000, by far the highest price of the three sales. The term "Dust Jacket Plovers" goes back to the fact that William Mackey's seminal book on decoy collecting, *American Bird Decoys*, published in 1965, pictured three plovers in various poses on the dust jacket of his book. Another book, published in 1990, *New England Decoys*, by John and Shirley Delph, also illustrated three plovers on the dust jacket.

Harmon's set of three, different from each of the above, is well known, having been published and illustrated in several books and articles on decoy collecting and Elmer Crowell, as well as having been included in several exhibitions. Many consider these decoys to be among the finest American decoys, and the best ever cre-



A pair of life-size flying canvasback ducks by the Ward Brothers sold for \$15,600. Each was signed and dated by Lem Ward.



Elmer Crowell made this open-bill calling yellowlegs decoy in 1910 and it has never before been offered at auction. That, together with the unusual pose and the fine condition, pushed the price to \$174,000.



A humpback pintail drake by the Ward Brothers, once owned by Adele Earnest, was one of the decoys that were part of the Kramer collection. Kramer had a close relationship with the brothers and this drake realized \$72,000.

ated by Elmer Crowell. Brian Cullity, in *The Songless Aviary, The World of A.E. Crowell & Son*, stated, "They are the three supreme creations of Elmer Crowell and represent the finest in decoy carving and painting. The deeply carved feathers and boldly sculpted bodies are finished with blended feather patterns, unique to the Crowell hand." They have been in the Harmon collection since 1977. Individually, the classic straight-ahead plover sold for \$324,000, the turned head plover brought \$396,000, and the feeding plover sold for \$420,000, the highest price of the week's three sales. Copley produced a separate 48-page catalog for these three decoys.

In an email about a week before the Copley auction, Ted Harmon wrote, "I love these three plovers and really did not want to sell them. They're special to me. I found the first two 40-plus years ago. I had tickets

to a Red Sox game back then with my two sons and the night before the game I got a call from a dealer friend who was offered them by Roger Bacon of Exeter, N.H., the noted Pilgrim furniture expert. So, I had to get up early the next morning and drive to New Hampshire to look at them with my boys. Long story short — they were spectacular, and I purchased them and, I think, a blue jay by Crowell. I hid them under a blanket in the trunk of my car and handed the keys to a valet driver at Fenway Park and prayed he wouldn't smash the car up or take the birds. Not very likely he would take the birds. A short time later I got a call from Sy Rappaport. He and his lovely wife, Susan, had picked up a feeding dust jacket plover in Maine or New Hampshire somewhere that was probably with the first two at one time. Thankfully, they called me, and I purchased it

as well and so the three have resided with me since then. If they come home to roost and no one but I love them, I will hardly be crushed."

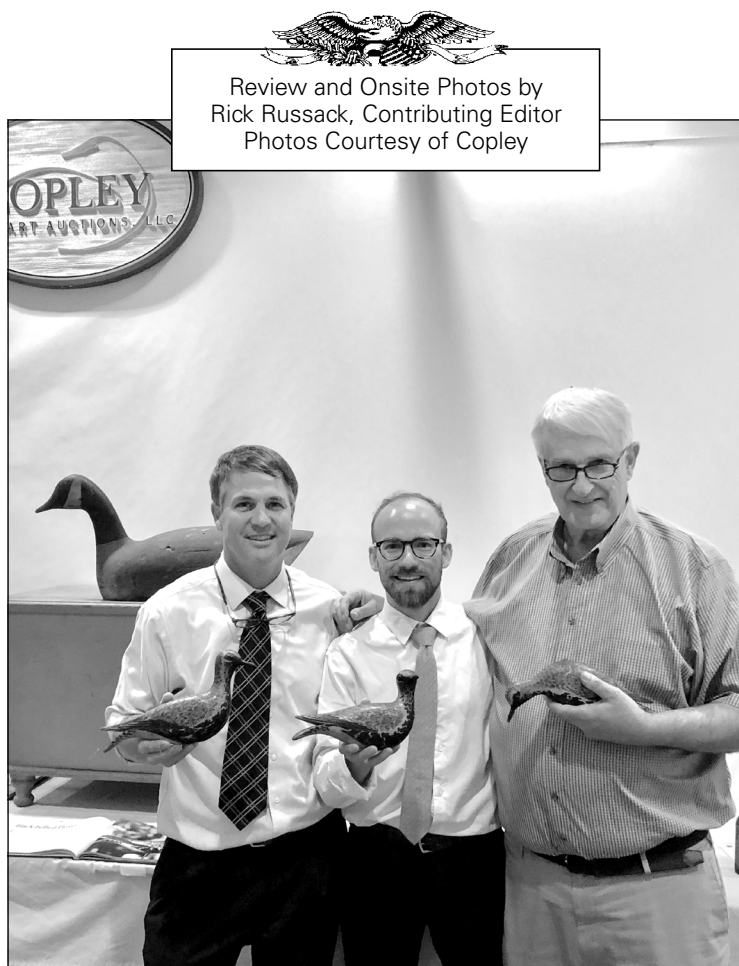
Brian Cullity talked about Crowell a few days before the sale. "Elmer Crowell went into the decoy business about 1913 and birds like these three, showing his mastering of the art form, certainly were not among the first birds he created. He was a very prolific and accomplished carver, able to make his miniatures in just a few minutes. He was about 50 years old when he started, having been a cranberry farmer before that and an active hunter, accustomed to hunting over live decoys. Using live decoys was becoming a very controversial subject and legislation was under discussion at both state and federal levels. Use of live decoys was first restricted and eventually prohibited. Many hunters, anticipating the eventual prohibitions against live decoys, started using carved decoys, appropriate to the species they were hunting and appropriate to the landscape." Crowell's son, Cleon, worked with his father but his father's carvings are considered superior.

For the last two years, Steve O'Brien Jr and co-author Chelsie Olney, had been working on *Elmer Crowell, Father of American Bird Carving*, a new book about Elmer Crowell, and it was available for the first time at this auction. The book features the collection of Thomas Evans Jr and has more than 420 illustrations, many in full color depicting Crowell's decoys and carvings. The book chronicles Crowell's life, background, how he worked, his early patrons and more. It is available from the Copley website.

Several important decoys came from the collection of the late Dr Morton Kramer, who started collecting decoys in 1960 when he came across a decoy made by the Ward Brothers of Crisfield, Md. That was the first of many Ward Brothers' decoys that he collected, many bought directly from the carvers, who became good friends with the Kramer family. Kramer, who became their personal physician, wrote about the Ward brothers, Lem and Steve, in 1988 and said, "When we started, about 1960, old Ward Brothers decoys in



Charles Safford worked on Plum Island, near Newburyport, Mass. This laminated, sleeping Canada goose was 31 inches long and is one of the few known to exist in original paint. It brought \$60,000.



A trio of decoy lovers holding a trio of plovers. Shown here, left to right, are Steve O'Brien, Colin McNair, Copley's decoy specialist, and Ted Harmon, who, with his wife Judy, owned the three Crowell plovers. Photo courtesy Steve O'Brien.



The salesroom was nearly full as the sale got underway.

Review and Onsite Photos by Rick Russack, Contributing Editor  
Photos Courtesy of Copley



There was a good-sized crowd examining the decoys and art about to be offered for sale.

original paint were about \$20–\$25 and new miniatures were \$20 a pair. My wife, Carol Sue, and I became good friends with the Ward family. Steve did the carving and Lem did the painting. He was a born artist and there was greater detail in his decoy painting than any other decoys produced in this time period.” (The Copley catalog devotes four pages to the Kramers and two pages to Kramer’s writings on the Ward Brothers.)

Topping the group of Ward Brothers decoys was a hump-back pintail drake that had been pictured in several books and articles. Kramer had owned it for about 40 years, and this was the first time it had ever been offered at auction. It sold for \$72,000. It had excellent provenance, having once been owned by Adele Earnest and showed even gunning wear with just minor touchups to some flaking. A related example is in the Museum of American Folk Art. A classic 1936 canvasback hen by the brothers sold for \$27,600. Quintina Colio, author of *American Decoys*, wrote, “The famous decoy contest in 1948 was held in the Grand Central Palace, New York City, sponsored by Schaefer Brewing Company and the winner was the Ward Brothers, from Crisfield, Md.”

The Kramer collection also included several Long Island shore birds by John Dilley and Obediah Verity. A running plo-



A 1904 ink wash by Frank W. Benson, “Canada Geese,” sold to a phone bidder for \$10,200.



An oil on Masonite work, “The Hyde Park Bridge, Vt.” by Eric Sloane, with a fisherman in the foreground, earned \$2,040.



Ira Hudson, Chincoteague, Va., built boats, built his own home, was an oyster fisherman and a well-respected carver of decoys. His bufflehead hen, with an excellent provenance, earned \$31,200.



One of the most prominent makers of shore bird decoys on Long Island was John Dilley. This split-tail willett, was, according to the catalog, most likely made by Dilley, although it is difficult to be 100 percent certain. It sold for \$19,200.



Peter Coccoluto calls the auction for Copley and sets a fast pace. He also owns and operates Concord Hill Auctions in Georgetown, Mass.



The Kramer collection included this multi-barrel punt gun, used to shoot birds on the water. Made about 1880, probably not many survive today. This one sold for \$6,600.



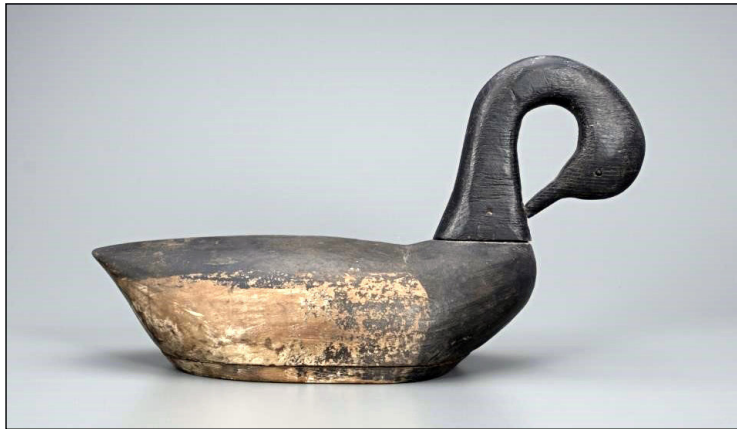
Several phones lines were in use throughout the sale. Colin McNair, Copley’s decoy specialist, is third from the left, and to his right is Steve O’Brien Jr, chairman and chief executive officer of the company.



Samuel Hutchings lived to be more than 100 years old but is remembered for the decoys he made as a teenager. This merganser went out for \$28,800.



One of Connecticut's outstanding decoy makers was Charles "Shang" Wheeler. An inscription on the bottom of the gull indicates that Wheeler made it as a wedding gift for his friend Horace Merwin. It realized \$27,600.



Made about 1920 on Long Island by H.O. Kruger, this breast preening brant earned \$1,920. It was signed by the maker and in original paint.



"Fall Woodcock Shooting" was one of several works by Arthur Burdett Frost that came from the collection of the author of the first book on Frost. It earned \$78,000.



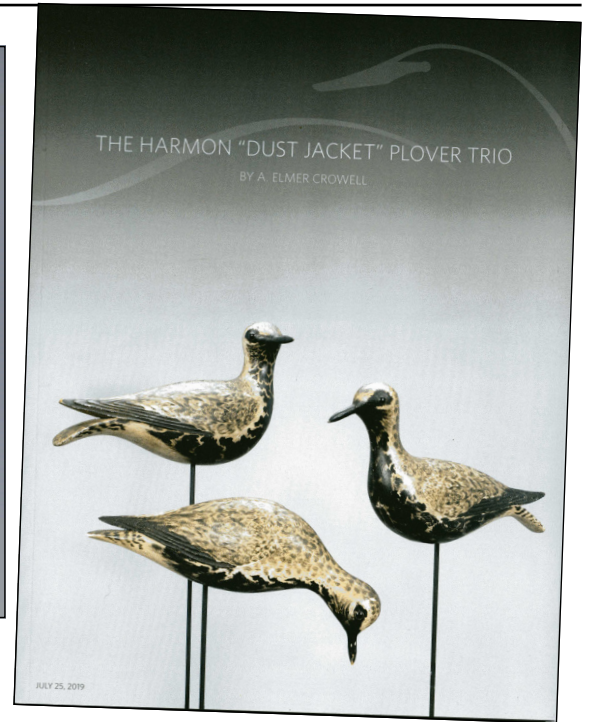
Gus Wilson, a lighthouse keeper in Portland, Maine, made this eider hen. In original paint, with even gunning wear, it reached \$24,000.



Two paintings by Edmund H. Osthaus were offered. "Covey of Quail" sold for \$48,000.



Finishing at \$37,200, this full-size flying pintail decoy was made by Captain George W. Coombs Sr.



Copley produced a separate 48-page catalog for the Harmon trio of "Dust Jacket Plovers," which were made by Elmer Crowell. They were the stars of the week, collectively earning \$1,114,000. The turned head plover on left sold for \$396,000; the classic straight ahead pose on the right sold for \$324,000 and the feeding plover sold for \$420,000. They have been together since 1977, and seller Ted Harmon hoped they would stay together. They did not; two went to one buyer and the third went to another buyer.

ver by Verity sold for \$19,200. It had excellent provenance, having been owned by two other well-known collectors: Russell B. Aitken and William H. Purnell. Only two examples are known in this pose and it featured deeply carved heart-shaped wings, incised eyes and displayed the maker's best feathering. A calling golden plover by Verity reached \$21,680. Not all birds by Verity brought five-figure prices. A running red backed peep went for \$2,280. Two shorebird decoys by John Dilley, another Long Island master, sold for \$19,200 and \$16,800. When referring to Dilley shorebirds in *American Bird Decoys*, Mackey stated, "There is no question that the detailed, stylized painting is unsurpassed. They are beautiful examples from the hand of a fastidious workman."

The Mackey collection is generally regarded as one of the best assembled. The collection was sold in the 1970s, in a series of five auctions conducted by Richard Bourne, on Cape Cod. The set of catalogs from that auction are probably in the libraries of nearly every serious decoy collector, and the mark of the Mackey collection on the base of a decoy is considered a validation of the importance of that particular decoy.

Another region with a rich decoy carving heritage is the

Eastern shore of Virginia. Decoys made by Nathan Cobb and his family on Cobb Island, Va., have been collected by several major collectors, including Mackey, who stated, "the Cobbs were determined to produce the best decoys possible, and their excellent work served the needs of both the Nineteenth Century hunter and the modern collector." A hollow black duck by Nathan Cobb Jr realized \$16,800.

Contemporary carvings were included in this and other sales during the week. One of the most respected of the contemporary carvers is Mark McNair from Craddockville, Va. Copley offered numerous examples of his work, several of which were from the Kramer collection. Most sought-after was a large hollow eider with a mussel in its beak that realized \$4,500. Not far behind was a pair of pintails, which earned \$4,200, and just behind that was a presentation set of four doves, in a box specially made for Kramer, which reached \$3,998.

More than 90 lots of sporting art, coordinated by Copley's fine art specialist, Leah Tharpe, began the sale. The selection included a group of works by Arthur Burdett Frost (1851-1928), some of which had come from the collection of Henry M. Reed, author of the first book on Frost, published in 1967. The third lot in the sale was a watercolor and gouache "Fall Woodcock Shooting," done by Frost in 1885. Reed acquired the painting in 1989 at the auction of the collection of John F. Dorrance Jr. Reed paid \$85,250 for it, which was the record price for the artist until 2015. At this sale, it realized \$78,000.



Leah Tharpe is Copley's fine art specialist. She earned her master's degree in the history of art from the Courtauld Institute in London, after graduating magna cum laude from Princeton University with a degree in art and archaeology. She supervised the sporting art segment of this auction.



Works by several contemporary carvers were included. Mark McNair is one of the most respected of that group, and several were in the Kramer collection. His feeding curlew with split and raised wing tips, realized \$1,680.

The next lot, "Grouse Shooting," done by Frost in 1895, earned \$34,800. "Covey of Quail" by Edmund H. Osthaus (1858-1928) realized \$48,000. "Duck Hunting," one of three works by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), went to a bidder in the room for \$22,800, and another, "Fishing on The Battenkill," went for \$15,600. There were also a variety of works by Frank Benson (1862-1951). "Canada Geese" an ink wash, signed and dated 1904, brought \$10,200 from a phone bidder. Works by several other artists were included in the sale and details are on the website.

Interestingly, the decoy market has been fairly consistent over the last few years. Steve O'Brien said that *Decoy Magazine*, which publishes annual statistics on sales at decoy auctions, shows that over the last five years, total auction sales have averaged about \$11 million. In 2008, when other portions of the Americana market softened, decoy sales were even higher.

About this sale, O'Brien said, "I thought the Crowell market was strong — we had those four great examples. I was a little surprised that the Ward Brothers birds from the Kramer collection brought less than I thought they would. I think this is really a good market to be selling into." When asked about the possibility of future sales perhaps being conducted in Portsmouth, N.H., around the time of the other sales, O'Brien, said "We're exploring that possibility. I think it would make it easier for our buyers."

Prices cited include buyer's premium as reported by the auction house.

For more information, 617-536-0030 or [www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com).