

Copley Fine Art, Hingham, Massachusetts

# The Johnson Decoy Collection and the Sporting Sale

by Frances McQueeney-Jones Mascolo  
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art

The annual summer feast of feathers kicked off July 9 with Copley Fine Art's two-day online sale of the Johnson decoy collection, which merited its own 140-page catalog, and the sporting sale, which continued on July 10. The sales were live-streamed from Copley headquarters in Hingham, Massachusetts, and brought a two-day total of \$4.4 million. Copley's tally for the year is over \$9.3 million, surpassing previous records. Speaking some days after the sale, Copley principal Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. told *M.A.D.* that he noticed a shift in the bidding audience, with participation from collectors, institutions, and the trade.

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The highlight was three dust-jacket black-bellied plovers, circa 1920, by Cape Cod artist Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), from the 67-lot Johnson collection. Together the Crowell plovers brought a total of \$984,000 (with buyers' premiums). The entire Johnson collection realized \$1.8 million; the 37 shorebirds from the collection averaged over \$41,000 per lot. The Johnson collection of shorebirds had been gathered by preeminent collector Linda Johnson, who is also president and CEO of the Brooklyn Public Library, a patron of the arts, and a philanthropist.

These plovers earned the epithet "dust-jacket" birds when they were the cover image of the 1997 *New England Decoys* by Shirley and John Delph. A related trio adorns the cover of William F. Mackey Jr.'s book *American Bird Decoys*, published in 1965 and updated in 1987. They account for three of the four turned-head shorebirds on the "top one hundred" decoys of *Decoy Magazine*. Since 2009, 29 lots sold at Copley have been included on *Decoy Magazine's* 100 all-time high price list.

The trio had been in the collection of Anthony Waring (1928-2021) of Swansea, Massachusetts, who claimed they were found along the Westport River after the hurricane of 1938. He was known to have scoured the Atlantic Coast for decoy discoveries and to have traded with the other top collectors of the day, including Donal C. O'Brien Jr., William J. Mackey Jr., Dr. James McCleery, and Dr. Peter J. Muller Jr., among others.

A few carvings by members of the McNair family appeared in this sale as well. Mark McNair of Craddockville, Virginia, and his sons, Ian and Colin, are all carvers of note. Mark and Ian are full-time carvers, while Colin has a day job—he is the decoy specialist at Copley Fine Art.

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



This feeding dust-jacket plover by Anthony Elmer Crowell, 11" long, is thought to be one of four such decoys. It is included in the cover image of the 1981 edition of *New England Decoys* by John and Shirley Delph. Catalog notes reveal that the Crowell feeding black-bellied plover is among the most popular decoy forms. It had been in the Anthony Waring collection; Michael and Julie Hall acquired it about 1985, and then it entered the Johnson collection in 2007. Estimated at \$300,000/500,000, the decoy sold for \$288,000.



This Waring dust-jacket turned-head plover, thought to be unique among Anthony Elmer Crowell's shorebirds for its head being turned nearly 180 degrees, sold for \$324,000 (est. \$300,000/500,000). The design required the artist to employ an applied head on the neck. The 11¼" long bird demonstrates all the features of Crowell's best shorebirds, including his matchless feathering. It retains the original paint and exhibits only light gunning wear.

Auctioneer Peter Coccoluto needed only six bids for this Waring dust-jacket skyward-gazing plover, 11" long, by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) to get to a final price of \$372,000 (est. \$300,000/500,000). It entered the Johnson collection in 2004 from the collection of Michael and Julie Hall, who had acquired it around 1985 from the collection of Anthony Waring (1928-2021) of Swansea, Massachusetts. Waring, a pioneer decoy collector and an eminent architect, viewed the birds with an artist's eye, as did the Halls and Johnson. The bird exhibits distinct character as he looks quizzically upward. In addition, it retains four pieces of shot, indicative of its time as a working bird.



Ian T. McNair (b. 1981) of Belle Haven, Virginia, created this wood duck around 2005. It has a crest that joins the back and is signed on the underside, and it realized \$2460.



Mark S. McNair (b. 1950) carved this hollow feather-light preening widgeon around 1980 and incised it "McNair / with EXTRA CARE / for / JACK CONOVER." Estimated at \$2000/3000, the bird sold for \$9225. Conover was an early and active collector.

Not only is Colin S. McNair (b. 1986) a highly regarded decoy specialist at Copley Fine Art, he is also a carver. Three of his decoys from about 2004 achieved record prices, one after the other. This long-bodied red merganser, 22" long, with influences from Maine, realized \$6150. Not shown, a 9" long preening tern, the only example by the carver, drew \$4800, and a 23¾" long cormorant brought \$5535.



When auctioneer Peter Coccoluto tried to open bidding on this Orlando "Os" Bibber long-tailed drake at \$75,000, a phone bidder jumped the bid to \$100,000. Bids proceeded upward to a final price of \$150,000 (est. \$150,000/250,000). Bibber (1882-1970) of Harpswell, Maine, who made decoys for his own use, created the 16¾" long bird around 1910. Bibber worked as chief engineer aboard steamships operating between Portland and New Brunswick, and often to Cuba, so his decoys were atypical of Maine coast birds, and the current example is second to none. It had entered the Johnson collection from a Maine collection.

Around 1928 Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) created this plump woodcock, 9½" long, which is considered one of his finest and most accurate impressions of the bird. Estimated at \$40,000/60,000, the timberdoodle realized \$92,250. It bears Crowell's signature and rectangular stamp. It came from the collection of John W. Dreyer and is published in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney.







This dovetailed dowitcher is by one of the greatest of the unknown carvers; its sinuous body and head are joined by a dovetail, allowing it to be disassembled when not in use, avoiding breakage. Four rigmates are at the Shelburne Museum, and related examples are illustrated in Adele Earnest's *The Art of the Decoy* and in *Massachusetts Masterpieces: The Decoy as Art* (2016) by Gwladys Hopkins. Estimated at \$12,000/16,000, the bird sold for \$46,125.



This pair of Massachusetts greater yellowlegs from the Johnson collection represents the best of an unknown maker's work and dates from around 1890. A related example appears as the cover image on Adele Earnest's 1965 *The Art of the Decoy: American Bird Carvings*. Estimated at \$22,000/28,000, the pair realized \$39,975.



This feeding yellowlegs by Fred Melville Nichols (1854-1924) of Lynn, Massachusetts, dates from around 1890 and sold for \$96,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000). Catalog notes describe Nichols as "among the greatest shorebird makers from any region." The 12½" long bird exhibits exceptional brushwork, retains a metal sleeve in the stick hole, and is branded "N." It also retains the original paint and some gunning wear. The bird entered the Johnson collection in 2004 from Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts (pre-Copley).



*Bob White Quail* by Titian Ramsay Peale (1799-1885), the youngest of Charles Willson Peale's remarkable progeny, sold for \$90,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The artist studied anatomy, taxidermy, and drawing and served as an assistant naturalist on several Western expeditions. The oil on canvas, 19½" x 17½", depicting a covey of quail, retains the collection label of John Eleuthère du Pont (1938-2010), a naturalist and founder of the Delaware Museum of Natural History, a philatelist, a prodigious collector, and a convicted murderer.



The O'Brien-Webster raised-wing golden plover, by an artist known only as Mr. Webster of Nantucket, sold for \$84,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000). The 9¾" long bird dates to around 1850. Eminent collectors Donal C. O'Brien Jr., William J. Mackey Jr., and Adele Earnest all acclaimed the plover from this rig as among the best work of American folk art they had ever seen. Mackey and O'Brien tracked down and acquired 15 of the 17 known rigmates. The bird came from the Franklin Folger Webster rig into the Donal C. O'Brien Jr. collection around 1968, and in 2005 it went to the Johnson collection. It has been published widely. Copley Fine Art's Chelsie W. Olney is preparing a book on Nantucket decoys for publication in 2023.



The smooth-wing golden plover decoy by Mr. Webster is from the same rig as the raised-wing example (above) and sold for \$42,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). It too came from the Franklin Folger Webster rig into the Donal C. O'Brien Jr. collection around 1968 and went in 2005 to the Johnson collection, and it also has been published widely.



In his foreword to the 1993 *Mason Decoys* by Russ J. Goldberger and Alan G. Haid, James M. McCleery, M.D., wrote, "Masons—The undisputed royalty of factory-made bird decoys." Goldberger and Haid wrote, "Mason at its best." This McCleery slope-breast mallard hen, 16½" long, made at the Mason Decoy Factory in Detroit around 1895, sold for \$96,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). McCleery's preference for Mason decoys was evident in the more than 400 Mason birds he collected. This bird came from the Dupee rig. It was found in the Horicon Marsh in Wisconsin and is considered to be one of the best made by Mason. It came from the Mark Smith collection.



The majestic-looking pintail drake from the rig owned by Herman R. Trinosky (1874-1956) dates from about 1895 and was used on the Grand Kankakee Marsh in Indiana. It sold for \$186,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000). The bird brings to eight the number of high-head pintails that have emerged since they were first discovered, when two examples cataloged as "Minnesota" sold for \$90,000 at Christie's in January 2007. Trinosky gave a hen in a burlap bag to the family that helped him clean out his barn. He chose to keep this example, which descended in his family and is in a preserved state, retaining the original paint and evidence of light gunning. The consignor is a direct descendant. Rigmates have been published widely, including by Gene and Linda Kangas with Ron Gard.

The Grand Kankakee Marsh, once the largest freshwater wetland in the Midwest, had been a rich source of waterfowl for centuries, drawing many other creatures, including all manner of hunters.



This Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) snipe with high detail and the artist's expert wet-on-wet paint, mounted on wire legs and a "stone" base, is known as the Sherer snipe and dates from about 1912. Joseph F. Sherer hunted with Crowell and with George D. Flynn, and he acquired Crowell carvings, including this example, which had descended in the family. Estimated at \$18,000/24,000, the bird fetched \$37,200.





This carved trophy Atlantic salmon was made in 1927 by Hardy Brothers, Ltd., of Alnwick, England. The plaque reads "Weight 39¾ Lbs. Length 46" / Greatest Girth 24½" / Caught Butlers Pool / Glasbury on Wye. April 8th, 1927. / By James Caird." Estimated at \$2000/3000, the trophy realized \$10,455.

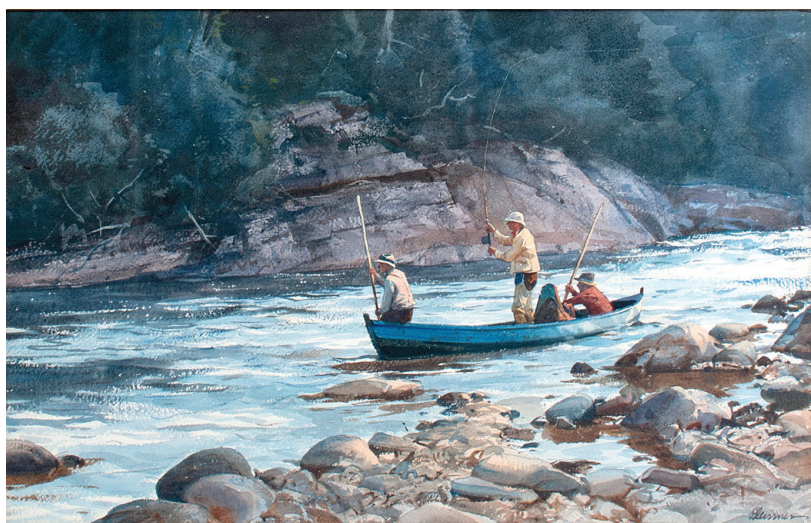


A murder of Charles Perdew-style crows, 12" x 15" each, in as-found condition, sold for \$1968. They came from the Johnson collection.



Robert Elliston (1847-1925) and Catherine Elliston (1858-1953) of Bureau, Illinois, are considered the founders of Illinois River commercial decoy carving and created this 14½" long masterwork preening mallard around 1890. Robert Elliston carved the bird, and his wife, Catherine, was the painter, one of the best of all time. Estimated at \$100,000/150,000, the mallard sold for \$100,200.

In their 2005 *Masterworks of the Illinois River: Decoys from the Collection of Thomas K. Figge*, authors Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Julie Carlson discuss this exact decoy, arguing that "hen mallards are among the finest decoys" the Ellistons produced. The decoy entered the Figge collection in 1981 from that of Walter White, an early Illinois River collector.



*Waiting for the Rise*, this 16½" x 26½" watercolor by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), is known as one of the artist's best fly-fishing watercolors. Estimated at \$50,000/80,000, the painting realized \$54,000. The painting had been in the collection of sportsman Norman B. Woolworth of Winthrop, Maine, and had descended in the family. More recently it came from a collector who had acquired it at Copley Fine Art's July 2008 auction.



## The Camp Cups Story: A Correction and a Follow-Up

by Lita Solis-Cohen

In the story about the set of camp cups cataloged as having been owned and used by George Washington that were withdrawn from Nate D. Sanders Auctions' July 29 sale (September, p. 137), the camp cups were compared with documented camp cups in museum collections illustrated in catalogs or posted online. All those owned by Washington are engraved with his crest, and most are small, weighing less than an ounce.

A camp cup made by William Hollingshead that is at the Smithsonian looks very much like the one made by Richard Humphreys that is in Yale's Mabel Brady Garvan collection. The cup at Yale, according to various publications, measures 1¼" high. It was hard to believe the cup at the Smithsonian, pictured and captioned on the Smithsonian website, is 3½" tall, as we described it in the September story.

When Bonnie Campbell Lilienfeld, assistant curator of curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, was asked to check on the size of the Hollingshead cup, she found that it is indeed a small cup, about the size of the one by Richard Humphreys at Yale, but not before the story went to press with the wrong measurements.

"I just heard back from our military history collections manager. She said the cup is in our *Price of Freedom* exhibition, and it measures 1¼" tall, top diameter is 2", bottom diameter is 1.5," Lilienfeld wrote.

Like 18th-century wine glasses, camp cups were small. In the "Sold

Archive" on the website of New York City silver dealer S.J. Shrubsole, a pair of camp cups made by Joseph Anthony in 1785 measures 1.6" high, and each one weighs an ounce. Sold at Christie's on January 20, 2005, for \$36,000 was a rare set of 12 silver camp cups with the mark of Richard Humphreys, Philadelphia, circa 1780, measuring from 1½" high to 1¾" high; all 12 together weigh 15 ounces, and all have the monogram "AWW." They were made for Anthony Walton White, a Revolutionary patriot who early in the war served as aide-de-camp to George Washington. According to White family tradition, Washington drank from one of these cups, and it was engraved on the bottom "Washington drank from this cup." Christie's catalog for the January 2005 sale stated that George Washington himself owned a pair of camp cups identical to the 12 cups, also made by Richard Humphreys, engraved with Washington's crest, and in the collection of Mount Vernon. They are not identical, however.

The two in the collection of Mount Vernon, illustrated in Kathryn C. Buhler's *Mount Vernon Silver* (1957, fig. 14, p. 38), and in Carol Cadou's *The George Washington Collection* (2006), are larger: 3½" high and 3½" in diameter. The purchase of the two matching camp cups from Humphreys was recorded in Washington's accounts on June 25, 1780. The dozen Anthony Walton White cups are like the one with Washington's crest at Yale and similar to two camp cups that match a half-dozen made for Nathaniel Green by

Joseph Edwards Jr. in Boston, illustrated by Kathryn Buhler in the catalog for the 1956 exhibition *Colonial Silversmiths, Masters and Apprentices* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

All of these small cups were made from silver hammered from an ingot and then raised and hammered over a stake, while the 12 cups with the spurious "E\*MILNE" in a rectangle mark in the Sanders sale and four cups with the "CAB" mark of Charles A. Burnett, all engraved with a "W" and the words "Camp Cup Made and Used by General Washington during the War of the Revolution," are seamed

with their bottoms let in, made from silver flattened in a rolling mill in the manner of julep cups made in the first quarter of the 19th century.

Large rolling mills that simplified the production of sheet silver were not in common use until after the Revolution. Paul Revere got his silver flattening mill in 1785, although small flattening mills were ordered from England by Joseph Richardson as early as 1760 and are among the tools in Cesar Ghiselin's estate in 1733. These are thought to be for flattening gold or silver to make jewelry or buttons.



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