



Highly Acclaimed Work: A. Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) Preening Canada Goose. For most collectors A. Elmer Crowell is known as the Father of American Bird Carving. A master carver from East Harwich, MA, Crowell specialized in shorebirds, waterfowl, and miniatures, approaching their creation as an artist. His life-like wildfowl decoys are consistently regarded as some of the finest and most desirable. World-record-setting Preening Canada Goose decoy sold to private collector at Copley Fine Art Auctions/Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts for \$1,130,000.

Birds of a Feather

History and Artistry of Bird Decoys

Images Copley Fine Art Auction

For most of America's history, duck hunting was an unregulated activity. Many tales describe the sky blackened with vast flocks of birds migrating to the different waters of America, so dense that individual shots would take 50 or more birds down. Commercial hunting was so successful that conservationists and sportsmen were alarmed about declining wildlife populations in the late 19th century. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 made commercial hunting illegal by prohibiting the commercial sale of migratory birds.

This treaty resulted in a considerable drop in the demand for hunting decoys and the supply of ducks. Now, over 100 years later, collectors love to find mint-condition decoys from earlier periods.

Both regional carvers and large factories produced decoys. Like any other form of folk art, decoys that are the most artistically

carved and painted are the most desirable. Specimens never placed in the water or "shot over" are in the best condition, while a working factory-produced model with a lot of wear can often cost less than \$100.

Most of the decoys on the market today were made by small shops run by skilled artists and families or produced in factories after 1918. Duck and bird hunting licenses are issued seasonally to individual hunters. You can buy a 12-pack of plastic duck decoys with cable rigs for less than \$200 on the internet today. However, serious old decoy collectors must look at their bank accounts!

A. Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) is the king of decoy makers for most collectors. A master carver from East Harwich, MA, Crowell specialized in shorebirds, waterfowl, and miniatures, approaching their creation as an artist. His life-like wildfowl decoys are consistently regarded as some of the finest and most desirable. Crowell's

sleeping Canada goose decoy was part of a larger private sale of 31 decoys brokered by Stephen O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts for \$7.5 million, in what O'Brien describes as the "largest private sale of decoys ever." Crowell's barn/workshop was restored and moved to the grounds near the Harwich Historical Society and is open to the public as a museum commemorating his life and work.

Jasper N. Dodge was a high-volume commercial decoy manufacturer from Detroit, MI. Dodge began high-volume manufacturing in 1883 after acquiring machinery from the Peterson Decoy Company. JN Dodge decoys can also be very valuable, depending on the condition. Examples of Dodge decoys have sold for over \$100,000.

This art form is not limited to duck decoys—hunters also use figures of other birds. All have found favor with collectors. In addition, every region in America that

"In their heyday at the turn of the century, hundreds of decoys were often used to attract waterfowl along the major migratory flyways. When federal law curtailed migratory bird hunting after World War I, decoys evolved into a finely carved and painted art form. Many of the huge flocks are now long gone, but their likenesses—carved and painted on wood—will live on forever."

Stephen B. O'Brien Jr.
Copley Fine Art Auctions

has the presence of migratory wildfowl has usually had local makers.

Virginia has its share of carvers. Notable craftsmen include Ira Hudson, Miles Hancock, Dave "Umbrella" Watson, Doug Jester, Nathan Cobb, Jr. and family, and contemporary makers like the McNair family of the eastern shore. The prices for these products vary. Some makers are more desirable. Others produced larger quantities with less realistic detail over long careers, resulting in large volumes and lower value.

There are many great examples of "factory" decoys. In some instances, the factory connotation meant multiple carvers and painters were working under a brand name. Some factories like Mason in New York and Detroit had great artists. Mason catalogs offered premier and lesser grades of birds. A 1905 catalog offered the premier model, hollow, at \$12 per dozen, with a \$4 price increase for glass eyes. Additional



A. Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) Plover Trio. The Harmon "Dust Jacket" Plover, The Harmon Turned-Head "Dust Jacket" Plover, and The Harmon Feeding "Dust Jacket" Plover. Crowell's exquisite paint techniques laid atop the masterful sculpture create an illusion of realism unrivaled by any other decoy maker. Each of these featured shorebirds are considered to be among the finest. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions for \$1,140,000.

price points, from Standard #1 to Standard #3, took into account size, carving, paint detail, and eyes that were tacks or merely painted on. Other notable factory makers were Peterson and Stevens.

I bought a decoy for my collection at an auction in Fox Island, NY. We were working with another company that sold a 100+ acre island at auction. Originally owned by a former governor of New York, the island had 30 acres under his favorite hunting cove deeded to him to keep out other hunters. That's when I realized how dedicated hunters could be to their sport. I paid less than \$200 for the decoy.

Almost every piece of furniture and the andirons in that house were made in the factory of Gustave Stickley. We used WWII DUKW ("duck") barges to move everything off the island. I'll never forget that auction.

There's good news for those who'd like a decoy or two under six or seven figures. Internet antique shops, malls, and shows have many specimens under \$500.

Good hunting to all of you.



The Dodge Wood Duck. J. N. Dodge Factory (1883–1893), Detroit, MI, c. 1885. This is the only wood duck known to have survived in original paint from the early and esteemed Dodge Factory. Beyond its rarity, this is among the finest wood ducks and factory decoys extant. In the 1981 book *Decoys of the Mississippi Flyway*, decoy historian and author Alan G. Haid sums the bird up, writing: "A classic. The finest example known from the Dodge Factory." Sold at Copley Fine Art Auction, March 5, 2022 for \$108,000.



Virginia Swimming Brant. Many believe that Northampton County, VA, produced the finest brant decoys known. This may in part be due to a special affinity for the species that the barrier islanders showed. This early brant demonstrates all of the bold features that define the Cobb Island style, while varying from the island's standard. The curve along the back, long and deep wing cut, flared tail, pronounced lower profile, and delicate head carving produce a suite of lines that make this bird distinct from its Northampton County peers. The underside of the tail bears a "J.P." brand. The rarity of this great sculpture cannot be overstated; no closely related examples have surfaced. Given the storm-ravaged history of the area, this comes as little surprise. The form, condition, and provenance of this swimmer place it among the great unknown decoys. Old working paint with heavy gunning wear, including some age lines. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, March 5, 2022 for \$36,900.



Miles Hancock Oystercatcher. Miles Hancock (1888–1974), Chincoteague, VA, c. 1950. This oystercatcher decoy is carved out of balsa, which was popular with the island's makers after World War II. Original paint with even wear and touch-up to neck. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, July 10, 2022 for \$984.00.



Ira Hudson Hollow Hissing Goose. Ira D. Hudson (1873–1949), Chincoteague, VA, c. 1930. This grand decoy retains one of the maker's finest head carvings with an exceptionally thin neck flaring out to exaggerated full cheeks with a deep eye groove and a sharp brow. The cedar body measures over nine inches in width and is finished with the maker's best stippling on the back and lively wave-like swirls on the sides. The form and condition of this Virginia masterwork place it as one of the finest geese from the region. Original paint with even gunning wear. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, February 20, 2021 for \$44,280.

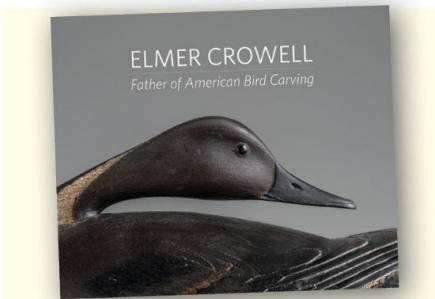
The Nathan Cobb, Jr. Feeding Curlew. Nathan Cobb Sr. sailed his family south from Cape Cod to the Eastern Shore of Virginia where they settled around 1837. The family brought with them Massachusetts decoy concepts, including German bead-glass eyes and the refined split-tail carving style adopted by Lothrop Holmes, A. Elmer Crowell, and Joseph Lincoln. Over time, the Cobbs evolved this style into one of their own with robust elements and their signature ridged backs. This stunning curlew, with its original paint, crisp clean lines, and original bill, hits the highest level of craftsmanship seen in the decoys that survived the remote Cape Cod's storm-wrecked history. Cobb curlews in any pose are highly sought after, and the running models have been among the most coveted decoys of all time. Indeed, three times they have posted auction results over \$200,000, more showings than any other maker's curlew. The rarity of this animated decoy can not be overstated; according to Southern decoy specialist William H. Purnell Jr., it is the only known Cobb curlew in a true feeding posture. Moreover, it is one of the only known feeding curlew decoys by any maker. Excellent original paint with even gunning wear. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, February 20, 2021 for \$123,000.



Doug Jester Two Bufflehead Hens. A pair of "but-terball" hens made from Jester's cottonwood supply. The smaller bird is signed by the maker. Original paint with light gunning wear. Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, July 10, 2021 for \$2,829.



The McCleery Slope-Breast Mallard Hen. The McCleery Collection catalog stated that it is "considered by some Mason enthusiasts to be one of the best by this factory." This decoy has a slightly turned head, exceptional and intricate paint, and the McCleery Collection stamp on the underside. Made in the Mason factory (1896-1924). Sold at Copley Fine Art Auctions, July 10, 2021 for \$106,400.



Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving
by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney

The most thorough publication on the Elmer Crowell to date, this 304-page book features over 420 color images, including Gavin Ashworth's stunning photography along with historic images.

Copley Fine Art Auction
Copley specializes in antique decoys and 19th- and 20th-century American, sporting, and wildlife paintings. copleyart.com



Ken Farmer Personal Collection

I bought this decoy for my collection at an auction in Fox Island, NY. Sold at Auction for under \$200.



Ken Farmer is a lifelong resident of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. Ken and his wife Jane have been avid students and collectors of Americana and Southern material culture since they married in 1974. Ken is also a musician and singer of traditional Appalachian and American Roots music. As a performer, he became interested in the songs, history, objects, and stories of his native Southwest Virginia, which led to more than 40 years in the antique business. Ken has appeared regularly on *Antiques Roadshow* as a specialist in folk art, decorative arts, and musical instruments. Ken runs an antique and fine art appraisal and consulting business that serves collectors, estates, and individuals throughout the mid-Atlantic.

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