

Auction Action In Hingham, Mass.

Copley's \$3.4 Million Total For Decoy & Sporting Art Shows Markets' Continued Strength

HINGHAM, MASS. — Copley Fine Art's March 4-5 decoy and sporting art sale got 2022 off to a good start, with a total of \$3,461,317. Coming off a strong 2021, with the firm's gross sales of \$9 million, this sale showed the continuing strength of those markets and augers well for 2022. The top lot, a pair of wood ducks by Shang Wheeler, sold for \$216,000; three other lots sold for more than \$100,000 each, and more than

75 lots sold in five figures. The 556 lots were comprehensively described in a catalog of more than 350 pages, with extensive descriptions of lots being offered, information on many carvers, artists and collectors, along with essays by Steve O'Brien on collecting miniatures, Canada geese, shorebirds, collecting wood ducks, information on the Dodge Decoy Factory and more.

In addition to sporting paint-

ings by well-known names in the field, the sale included more than 100 miniature carvings, which auction house owner, Stephen "Steve" B. O'Brien Jr, owner of the company, and Colin McNair, decoy specialist, thought was probably the largest selection of miniatures in a single sale, providing collectors with an opportunity to acquire carvings from a wide range of carvers. Elmer Crowell may have been the first to produce miniature carvings, and there were many in this sale, but collectors could also choose from miniatures from other leading makers, such as Alan J. King, Wendell Gilley and others. There were also examples by contemporary makers, such as Mark McNair, Colin's father, and Frank Finney, as well as others. Interestingly, the miniatures were presented in roughly chronological order. Elmer Crowell, it is believed, began carving miniatures when the 1918 passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act significantly reduced his market for full-

sized working decoys. It was also about this time that collecting decoys became a "thing" when Joel Barber used that term in an interview. Barber would go on to write the first book on the subject of collecting decoys in 1934, and his collection of about 400 birds forms the core of the Shelburne Museum's decoy collection, one of the largest in the United States (Shelburne has an online webinar and exhibition of Elmer Crowell decoys, with Kory Rogers, the museum's curator, narrating. They also have webinars on other decoy related subjects.)

The first day of the sale started off with more than 50 miniatures. Works by Alan J. King (1878-1963) are among the most sought-after, and the five highest prices were achieved by his works. Joe Ellis, in *Birds*

in Wood and Paint, commented "of all the carvers of miniature and decorative birds in the mid-Twentieth Century, Allen J. King was without a doubt the most gifted and versatile artist." Earning \$33,825 was a circa 1940 pair of belted kingfishers on a branch, just 3½ inches tall. Both have raised, relief-carved split wings and fanned tails. King sold many of his carvings through the upscale Crossroads of Sport, described by Colin McNair as "the place to shop for sportsmen who had everything," but kingfishers are not on King's 1938 list of 42 species available. The catalog speculates that this pair may be his only kingfishers. King's circa 1940 pair of screech owls mounted in a tree cavity brought \$20,400. King's carvings sometimes included an entire family of birds. His pair of pintails, with five ducklings, was only 2 inches tall and it sold for \$19,200.

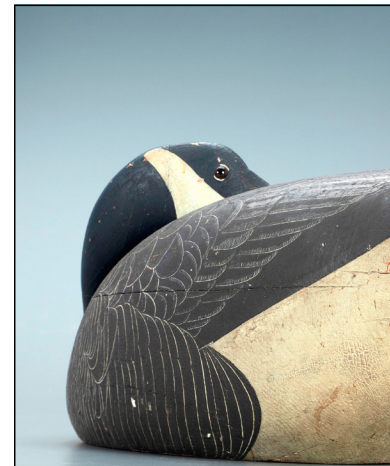
Elmer Crowell carved dozens of species of miniatures (perhaps as many as 190 different



This pair of wood ducks by Shang Wheeler, one of Connecticut's best-known carvers, was the top lot in the sale, as expected, realizing \$216,000. This pair was considered one of his finest creations and had been in the collection of Peggy and David Rockefeller and apparently had been in Wheeler's personal collection.



An oversized Canada goose decoy by Charles Safford, Newburyport, Mass., brought \$96,000. The body had been carved from one piece of wood, but eight separate pieces were used for the head and neck.



Detail of the oversized Canada goose decoy by Charles Safford, Newburyport, Mass., brought \$96,000 shown at left.

The prized lot of the wide selection of Elmer Crowell carvings was a circa 1920 pair of working canvasbacks decoys. The raised wings and turned heads show Crowell intended these to be special. Collectors agreed and the pair earned \$102,000.



This circa 1890 canvasback drake by Knotts Island, N.C., carver Lee Dudley had impressive provenance, having been in both the Mackey and O'Brien collections. It sold for \$60,000. Early decoy author Joel Barber owned Dudley decoys, which are now in the collection of the Shelburne Museum. In 1981, a panel of experts reviewing that decoy collection declared a Dudley decoy of Barber's to be the best of the collection. It sold for \$60,000.



More than doubling its estimate, reaching \$60,000, Elmer Crowell's golden plover in winter plumage displayed a split tail with incised carving detail. The base had Crowell's early oval brand.



The first 26 carvings sold on day one were by Elmer Crowell. Selling for \$55,350, well over its estimates, was a beautifully carved and painted preening dowitcher that had descended in the family of Crowell patron Randolph Payson. It had never been offered on the market previously.



Review and Onsite Photos by
Rick Russack, Contributing Editor
Additional Photos Courtesy
Copley Fine Art

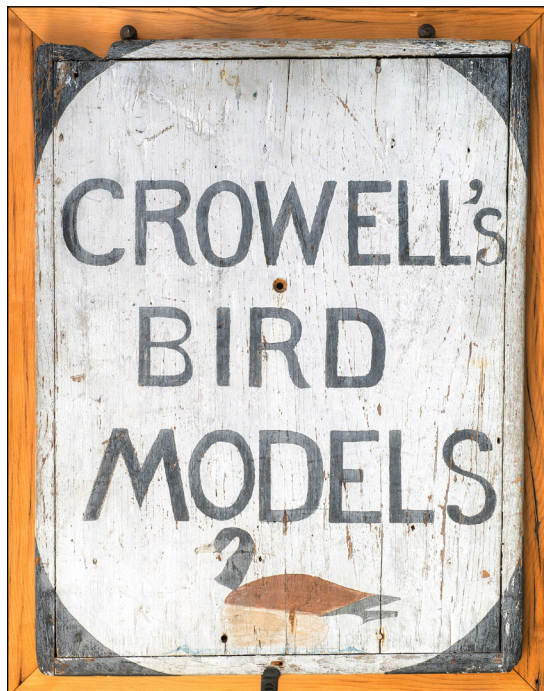
Pair Of Wood Duck Decoys Brings \$216,000



Steve O'Brien and his wife Cinnie a few days before the sale.



A remarkably detailed decorative carving of two sage grouse in courtship display earned \$9,600. The carving, by "Jim" Hazley Lancaster, Penn., was made in 1984.



A circa 1912 sign from Elmer Crowell's Cape Cod workshop. Courtesy of the Shelburne Museum, which currently has an online exhibition of Crowell's work as well as an informative webinar with Kory Rogers, the museum's curator. Shelburne has about 150 works by Crowell.



With a turned head and open beak, this calling curlew by William Gibian was an outstanding example of decorative carving by one of today's most collectible carvers. It sold for \$3,300.

species) mostly in three categories: song birds, shore birds and ducks, which he sold not only to his decoy buyers and seasonal tourists, but also to schools and museums around the United States for species identification purposes. Sometimes he sold them in sets of 25 but few original, complete sets have survived. This sale included a set of 25 waterfowl, each numbered on the base 1-25, and it realized \$33,000. Numerous other Crowell miniatures included a golden pheasant, which earned \$13,200, a miniature curlew, which earned \$8,400, and a goldfinch, which earned \$7,200. There were several more.

Leading all the Crowells in the sale was a pair of working canvasback decoys with raised wings and turned heads. The catalog described them thusly, "They are considered by some to be the finest known pair of working Crowell canvasback decoys." The pair sold for \$102,000. From the Lew Horton collection, a full-size pair of mergansers realized \$52,275. The painting shows extra care; the drake's head is turned, and both were in original paint with light gunning wear. A kingfisher, 7½ inches long, carved for the mantel, with a yellow perch in its beak brought \$33,825. An oil painting by Crowell of a

descending flock of Canada geese realized \$9,600.

The working decoys represented ducks and geese from many parts of the United States, the work of many carvers — known and unknown — and some very early examples. Provenance included birds from numerous major collections. Space constraints restrict this review to considering just a few examples, but the sale also included works by Lee Dudley, the Ward Brothers, Joe Sieger, George Boyd, Gus Wilson, the Mason factory, Harry Shourds and numerous others.

The highest price of the sale, as expected, was achieved by a pair of circa 1935 wood ducks by Shang Wheeler (1872-1949)

which sold for \$216,000. The pair was well-known to collectors, having frequently been written about and pictured and included in an exhibition of Wheeler's work. This pair was considered one of his finest creations and had been in the collection of Peggy and David Rockefeller and apparently had been in Wheeler's personal collection. Wheeler was one of Connecticut's best-known carvers. Adele Earnest, in her 1975 book, *Art of The Decoys: American Bird Decoys*, illustrated the drake of this pair and noted, "Wheeler worked from nature. He loved to watch the ducks in local ponds, especially when they were relaxing and resting. He studied their attitudes and,



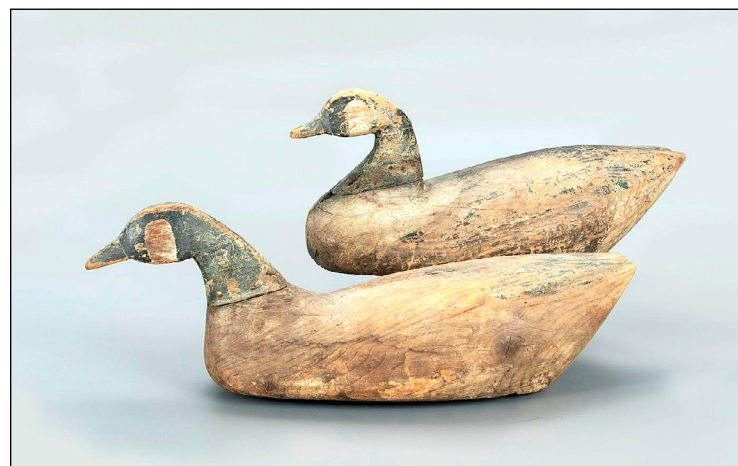
There were more than 100 miniatures in the sale. A selection was arranged in this case during the preview.



Tying for the second highest price in the sale, \$108,000, was a factory-made wood duck from the J.N. Dodge Factory, circa 1885. In *Detroit Decoy Dynasty* by Ron Sharp and Bill Dodge, the authors refer to it as "striking a regal pose, this Dodge drake wood duck is, no doubt, the finest example extant. In fact, it is the only example of this species in original paint known to the authors."



Family groupings by Alan King are collector favorites. His pair of pintails with five ducklings was only 2 inches tall and sold for \$14,400. A pair of pintails with ducklings sold for \$19,200.



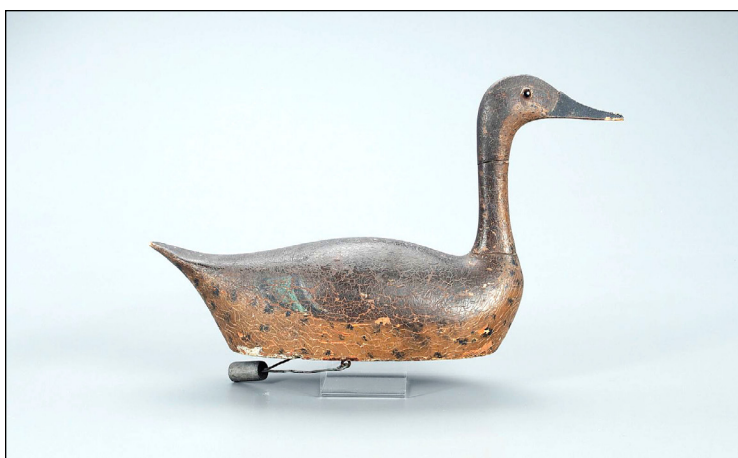
The maker of this early pair of Canada geese, one in a swimming and the other in a relaxed posture, is not known. The geese originated on Portsmouth Island, N.C, circa 1870. With a wonderful, weathered surface, the pair brought \$13,200.



A circa 1870 roothead swimming brant from Northampton County, Va., shows the influences of Nathan Cobb Sr, a famed Cobb's Island decoy maker who kept a flock of tame brants. It bears a "JP" brand, and with old working paint and heavy gunning wear, it realized \$36,000.



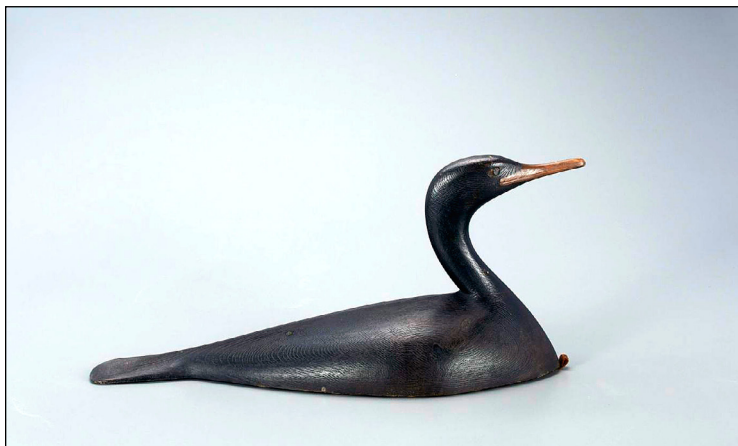
Colin McNair, decoy specialist, is a carver of decoys, as is his father and brother. He's also hunter and is shown with Barret, a friend's dog and part of a day's hunt. Photo courtesy of Eric Mulak.



The carver of this pintail hen is not known but just a few examples exist. They all come from one rig, used by Herman R. Trinosky on the Grand Kankakee Marsh in Indiana (which originally covered more than 500,000 acres). The decoys came to light only earlier this century, and they are known to collectors by the name of the owner of the rig, Trinosky. It sold for \$84,000.



Elmer Crowell's miniature carvings were usually sold singly, but he also sold some in sets of 25. A set of 25 waterfowl, each numbered on the base 1-25, realized \$33,000.



A rare species for the maker, Mark McNair, this 1989 raised-head cormorant is signed with the maker's "McNair" signature on the underside, which also bears an inscription from the artist to his early patron discussing this carving. With original paint and light wear, the decorative carving sold for \$6,600.



Ogden Pleissner's watercolor "Golden Hours" was commissioned for the Hercules Powder Company's 1953 calendar and it earned \$69,000. It was one of five works by the artist in the sale.



Copley sales often include Audubon prints. This 1837 "Falco Islandicus" pair was from the Havell edition and had been owned by wildlife artist Frank Benson. According to his family, he bought it "as a true splurge as soon as he had enough money to do so." The final price was \$36,000.

Copley's

in particular, their head positions. Then, he would go home and try to catch their gracious, fluid shapes in his manmade birds. He was a realist with a sure instinct for sculptural form." This pair reflects the qualities Ernest referred to. The catalog description of these birds runs six pages and includes an essay by O'Brien on collecting wood ducks.

Tying for the second highest priced in the sale, \$108,000, was a factory-made wood duck from the J.N. Dodge Factory, circa 1885. The company was in business a few years before the W.J. Mason company was in business. In the 1981 book *Decoys of the Mississippi Flyway*, decoy historian and author Alan G. Haid sums up this bird, writing: "A classic. The finest example known from the Dodge Factory."

The bird with which it tied for second highest price was a hollow-carved plover with extraordinary carving and construction detail by an unnamed Nantucket craftsman. This plover, with an egg-shell thin body, was similar to several of Crowell's and had a raised wing with split wing tips.

Another star of the sale, selling for \$96,000, was an oversized Canada goose decoy by Charles Safford, Newburyport, Mass. Safford carved decoys primarily for his own use. He was also a skilled furniture maker, silversmith, tool maker and leather worker. In the early 1920s he built a hunting camp on nearby Plum Island, where he lived year-round, and it was in a neighboring cabin that this and others of his decoys were found. His carving and painting was meticulous; the body of this decoy is essentially made from

one piece of wood while the turned head, in a sleeping position, had been carved from eight separate pieces of wood. The exceptional paint was actually a second paint job by Safford when the first became worn from use. His work has been praised by several authors, including well-known decoy experts such as independent scholar Robert Shaw. Safford also carved decorative miniature decoys. Fifteen of these miniature birds are owned and exhibited by the Museum of Old Newbury, and among them is a sleeping goose, with feather and wing paint virtually identical to this much larger working decoy. The catalog description is six pages long and includes an essay by O'Brien on collecting Canada goose decoys.

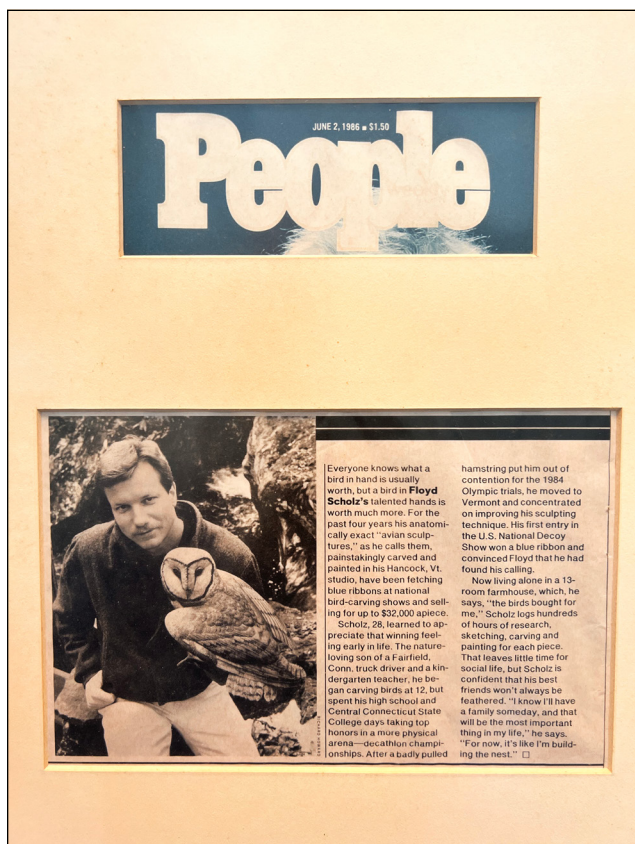
The selection of amazingly life-like decorative carvings



The catalog describing this Nantucket curlew, stated, "This is one of the earliest documented shorebird decoys that we have ever had the privilege of handling." The underside bears a label "Made and painted by W.F. Larrabee October 1842." With old working paint and moderate gunning wear, it sold for \$8,400.



According to the catalog, true working heron decoys are difficult to obtain, with decoys by known makers nearly nonexistent. This one, circa 1880, was 37 inches tall and made by William H. Southard, Seaford, N.Y. It had been owned by Adele Ernest, one of the early folk-art collector/dealers. Heron decoys were usually used as "confidence" decoys and sometimes hunted for their plumage. It sold for \$26,400.



Floyd Scholz, with the barn owl, was featured in *People* magazine. This carving won Best in Show at the US National Championships in Babylon, N.Y.



Floyd Scholz is a five-time US National Champion and a 2005 World Master's Best in Show Champion. His work is in several major museum collections. This lifelike barn owl is 33 inches tall and sold for \$26,400. He's been featured in numerous magazine articles.

was also broad, including numerous winners of prizes at national carving competitions. A pair of male ruffed grouse carved by Jim Hazeley in 1984 was especially noteworthy and sold for \$9,600. A circa 1988 flying ring-necked pheasant, 32 inches long, by Floyd Scholz, brought \$14,400. Scholz is a five-time US National Champion and the 2005 World Master's Best in Show Champion. His work is in several museums.

Copley's fine arts specialist, Leah Tharpe, put together a strong selection of sporting art with multiple examples by Ogden Pleissner, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Edmund Osthaus, Frank Benson and others. It was a work by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819-1905) that drew the most attention, realizing \$90,000. "Dog With Three Quail" was painted in 1883. Tait, one of the earliest of the sporting artists, was born in England and came to the United States in 1850. He spent a lot of time hunting and fishing in the Adirondacks and sold his first painting to Currier and Ives in 1852. Many would follow. His works today hang in numerous museums. There were five paintings by Ogden Pleiss-

ner (1905-1983). "Golden Hours" was commissioned for the Hercules Powder Company's 1953 calendar, and it earned \$69,000. His works are in more than 30 public collections.

A watercolor by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969) was inscribed "The Rock in the River" ©A. Lassell Ripley, Upper Glory Hole on the Northwest Miramichi" on a label on the back. It sold for \$39,000. Another watercolor of his, "Grouse on a Winter Morn-

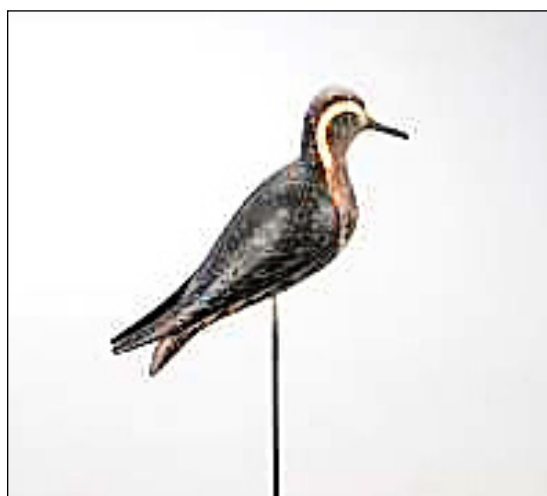
ing," sold for \$33,000.

After the sale, O'Brien said, "We were really pleased with the way it went. The market for miniatures has been hot and continued that way in this sale. There are a lot of Crowell collectors out there and we had good examples for all of them. The catalog looked good."

Prices given include the buyers' premium as stated by the auction house. For information, www.copleyart.com or 617-536-0030.



This circa 1900 painting of three setters was a gift by the artist, Edmund Henry Osthaus, to an attorney friend. The signed watercolor and gouache earned \$36,900. The artist was a dog breeder and judge, and his paintings were true to life.



The maker of this Nantucket golden plover, realizing \$108,000 and tying for the second highest price of the sale, has not been identified. It is hollow, extremely light and has a raised wing and split wing tips. The catalog has an extensive description of this decoy.



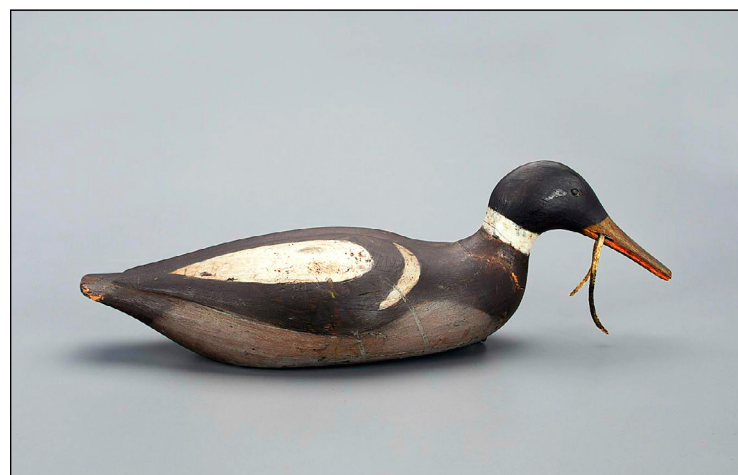
Only 3½ inches tall, this pair of belted kingfishers by Alan King may be the only ones to come to auction. Selling for \$33,825, both had raised, relief-carved split wings and fanned tails.



Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait was one of the earliest of the "sporting artists." His "Dog With Three Quail" brought the highest price, \$90,000, among the extensive selection of sporting art.



This pair of decoys made by an unidentified Nantucket carver is known as "wind-bird" willets. They are hollowed out from the bottom, with wood also removed from the neck and tail. The design ensures that the decoys will be very light and easily move with breezes, giving them a lifelike appearance. A rigmate pair was in the Linda Johnson collection. The pair has original paint and light gunning wear and sold for \$15,600.



Maine lighthouse keeper Gus Wilson made this feeding merganser drake and it sold for \$21,600. In addition to decoys, he made weathervanes and a large pair of lions, which is on display in the Brooklyn Museum.



A small portion of the paintings included in the sale.