

Copley Fine Art Auctions, Plymouth, Massachusetts

# Decoys and More Sold at Copley

by Frances McQueeney-Jones Mascolo  
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

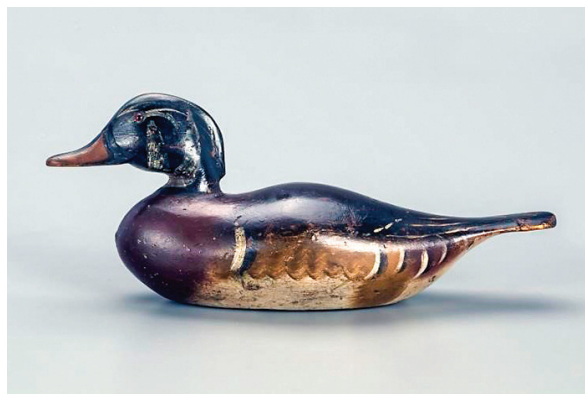
Copley Fine Art Auctions livestreamed its winter sale from Plymouth, Massachusetts, March 4 and 5. Fine collections migrated to other collections, and new records were set.

As befits the master, the first 26 lots on day one were devoted to decoys by Cape Cod carver Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), 20 of which were miniatures. Twelve paintings by Ogden Minton Pleissner (1905-1983) brought a total of \$250,246 (includes buyers' premiums). Copley also offered the 40-year collection of avid sportsman Lew Horton, who spent decades hunting on Cape Cod and Nantucket. Horton's Nantucket hollow golden plover was highly desirable and sold for \$108,000 (est. \$65,000/85,000).

The top lot of the sale was a pair of wood ducks by Charles E. "Shang" Wheeler (1872-1949). The striking pair brought an auction record for the artist at \$216,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000). The 14" long ducks, circa 1935, are considered one of the finest pairs by the Stratford, Connecticut, carver.

Copley made a change a while ago, and in lieu of previews at the auction site it instead transported various lots to out-of-town decoy shows and other similar events where prospective bidders had the time and space to take a good look at the objects of choice. The summer sale in July will also be livestreamed.

For information, check the website ([www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com)) or call (617) 536-0030.



This circa 1885 wood duck was made by Jasper N. Dodge's factory in Detroit, Michigan, one of that city's "Big Three" decoy makers; the other two are George Petersen and William J. Mason. This decoy remains the only known such example of the species in original paint from the Dodge factory. With an estimate of \$50,000/70,000, the duck brought \$108,000, an auction record for the maker. Dodge (1829-1909) and Mason had worked together at a gun shop before opening their respective factories, Dodge in 1883 and Mason in 1896. In Dodge's own catalog he described his process: using perfect pieces of kiln-dried white cedar, painted to imitate the duck, the heads attached with a hard maple dowel, and with the best English enameled glass eyes and four coats of the best paint, ground in oil, and dried thoroughly between coats. This duck has been published with encomiums in *Decoys of the Mississippi Flyway* by Alan G. Haid (1981); *Mason Decoys: A Pictorial Guide* by Russ J. Goldberger and Alan G. Haid (2014); *Guyette and Schmidt's 2002 North American Decoys at Auction*; and *Detroit Decoy Dynasty: The Factory Decoys of Petersen, Dodge, and Mason* by Ron Sharp and Bill Dodge (2009).



A pair of wood ducks by Charles E. "Shang" Wheeler (1872-1949), distinguished for their artistry and their lineage, was the top lot of the two-day auction. The striking pair brought \$216,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000), an auction record for the artist. From the collection of Peggy and David Rockefeller, the 14" long ducks, circa 1935, are considered among the finest pairs by the Stratford, Connecticut, carver. The birds were a gift from the carver's own collection to his friend Thomas C. Marshall, author with Henry C. Chitwood and Doug Knight of *Connecticut Decoys: Carvers and Gunners*. It was Marshall who after Wheeler's death inventoried the collection and brokered the sale of much of it to the Connecticut Audubon Society, which later sold it into a major midwestern decoy collection. This pair of decoys entered the collection of conservationists and philanthropists Peggy and David Rockefeller in an exchange brokered by Connecticut decoy collector, historian, and carver Donal C. O'Brien Jr. The birds were exhibited at the 1948 National Decoy Makers Contest and Exhibition in New York City as *Special Exhibit by Charles E. "Shang" Wheeler*. No less an authority than William J. Mackey Jr., in his 1965 *American Bird Decoys*, said of the artist's work: "...Wheeler carried on in the Stratford tradition to make his undying mark on modern carving.... [He] mated the best of the past with the decorative art of today's ornaments." Wheeler was a conservationist, and his worry over the state of nature led him to run for state office. As a member of the Connecticut General Assembly, he led campaigns to enact antipollution and wildlife-conservation legislation.



"Featherlight" is one word used to describe the elegant hollow plover created by a so-far unknown Nantucket craftsman around 1850. Catalog notes indicate that few such plovers have survived at all, as they are eggshell thin; most have repairs and repainting. This example is the work of an unidentified early master working when golden plover hunting on the island was robust. The catalog further describes the unknown Nantucket artist as "among the greatest craftsmen ever to construct a working shorebird decoy." The 10 1/4" long decoy came from the collection of outdoorsman Lew Horton, who hunted on Cape Cod and Nantucket. It sold for \$108,000 (est. \$65,000/85,000).



This 2" tall miniature goldfinch by A. Elmer Crowell retains the maker's faint mark and the species name, and it brought \$7380 (est. \$2000/3000). It came from a Houston collection and is illustrated in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney.



A. Elmer Crowell's circa 1935 preening dowitcher is rare, making its first foray into the marketplace at Copley and being the first preening dowitcher Copley had seen at auction. Measuring 7" long x 8" tall, it sold for \$55,350 (est. \$20,000/30,000). It was consigned by a descendent of Cape Codder Randolph Payson (1892-1971), who acquired it from the artist.



A. Elmer Crowell's exceptional 5" long miniature golden pheasant, circa 1910, with carved tail feathers and prismatic plumage is inscribed on the underside with the species name. From a Houston collection, it retains excellent original paint and sold for \$13,530 (est. \$5000/8000). It is illustrated in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney.

# AUCTION



*Snowy Owl*, 2021, by Ewoud de Groot (Dutch, b. 1969), oil on linen, 47" x 47", evinces the artist's unique combination of the traditional and contemporary, in this case verging on the celestial. Born in the north of the Netherlands, de Groot grew up in a large tidal mud flat area where he could fish and collect mussels. He is viewed as a rising star of wildlife art. Estimated at \$8000/12,000, the painting realized \$51,000.



Ewoud de Groot's *Marching Oystercatchers*, 2021, oil on linen, 43" x 43", fetched \$9000 (est. \$8000/12,000) from a museum. Copley holds a previous auction record for a de Groot painting.



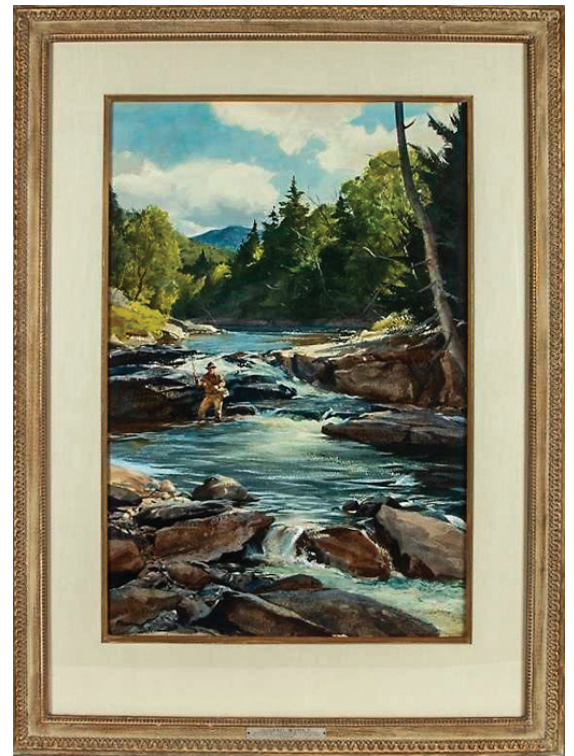
This very desirable raised-wing canvasback pair by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952), circa 1920, is exceptional for the special care he took in its making. Bidders agreed and pushed the pair to \$102,000 against the \$50,000/80,000 estimate. The pair is considered by knowledgeable observers to be the finest known pair of working Crowell canvasbacks. The 15 1/4" long birds are carved in detail, and they retain the original blended and detailed paint feathering. The pair came from the John Delph collection to the Lew Horton collection. They have been published in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney (2019), in the 1982 *Fourth Annual Exhibition of Classic Antique Waterfowl Decoys* published by the Midwest Decoy Collectors Association, and again in the *Fifth Annual Exhibition*.



The Trinosky family graceful Kankakee pintail hen, circa 1895, used on the Kankakee Marsh in Indiana, came from the rig owned by Herman R. Trinosky (1874-1956) and sold for \$84,000 (est. \$75,000/95,000). Trinosky himself set the hen aside to keep in his family, and it was consigned by the same descendant who consigned the drake that sold at Copley in July 2021 for an auction record \$186,000. This 10" x 17" hen differs from its rigmates in its height and in its uplifted tail that demonstrates a two-stage taper. Trinosky's name emerged as the rig owner and probably maker of the Kankakee pintails. At some time Trinosky gave a burlap bag of as many as seven pintails to the family that helped him clear out his barn. He kept the drake and this hen for himself. In untouched condition, the hen is the ninth and likely the last of the Trinosky pintails.



An exceptional rigmate pair of swimming mergansers, circa 1915, by Anthony Elmer Crowell. The birds appear to be racing. From the Lew Horton collection, acquired from a Crowell patron, the ducks realized \$52,275 (est. \$50,000/80,000). Each is marked with Crowell's oval brand, and a related pair is illustrated in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney. Rigmates were the cover lot of Decoys Unlimited Auctions' second annual sale in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2007.



*Golden Hours*, a 1952 watercolor by Ogden Minton Pleissner (1905-1983), is the artist at his best, painting the landscapes he loved while fishing and hunting. The 27" x 18" painting was commissioned for the Hercules Powder Company's 1953 calendar and sold at Christie's November 29, 2001, for \$47,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000) as property from the Hercules Incorporated collection. So fine is the depth of the painting that one can easily view the trajectory of the fisherman's line. Estimated at \$60,000/90,000, it realized \$69,000 at Copley. New York City resident Pleissner exhibited artistic ability and love of the outdoors early; he sold a painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art at age 27. Known and treasured for his sporting paintings, he was commissioned by the U.S. government during World War II to document the war. He trained in Miami and was then assigned to Alaska, where the climate dictated the use of watercolor as oils failed to dry easily. Most of his wartime work is held by the Pentagon. The Shelburne Museum in Vermont has a Pleissner gallery with a rotating exhibit of more than 600 works by Pleissner. Pleissner paintings have been exhibited widely in other major museums and galleries. He has been published in *The Art of Ogden M. Pleissner* by Peter M. Bergh (1984) and in "A River Running Out of Eden" by Pat Ryan in *Sports Illustrated*, May 25, 1970.



*Ruffed Grouse* by Minnesotan artist, sportsman, and conservationist David A. Maass (b. 1929), oil on board, 28" x 40", sold for \$13,530 (est. \$6000/9000). Three birds are pictured, two in flight and one perching, displaying splendid plumage. Maass has created more than 33 conservation stamps and prints and was declared artist of the year by Ducks Unlimited (five times), the National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Minnesota Wildlife Heritage Foundation.



The miniature belted kingfisher pair by Allen J. King (1879-1963) of North Scituate, Rhode Island, circa 1940, 3 1/4" tall overall, is rare and sold for \$33,825 (est. \$7000/10,000). Carved and painted and signed on the branch, the pair may be the only kingfishers by King to come to auction. The pair came from a Texas collection. In *Birds in Wood and Paint* author Joseph H. Ellis describes King: "of all the carvers of miniature and decorative birds in the mid-twentieth century...[he] was without doubt the most gifted and versatile artist." Copley's decoy specialist Colin S. McNair told *M.A.D.* the price is a reflection of the strengthening results for King and other carvers of miniatures.



*Dog with Three Quail* by the British/American artist Arthur Fitzgerald Tait (1819-1905) was the highlight of the sporting art lots when it sold for \$90,000 (est. \$50,000/80,000). The 14" x 22" oil on canvas is signed and dated 1883. The artist's register includes this entry: "I gave this as a bonus to F M Bird Canton & took it down there for a loan of \$500 June 28th/83." The picture came from a Southampton, New York, family collection, which had held it for over 70 years. It was published in *Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait: Artist in the Adirondacks* by Warder H. Cadbury and Henry F. Marsh (1986) and in *Wild Spaces, Open Seasons: Hunting and Fishing in American Art* edited by Kevin Sharp (2016).



The watercolor *Morning Flight* by Ogden Minton Pleissner (1905-1983), circa 1951, sold with an 18" x 12" color print of the image. It was commissioned by Theodore Marvin of the Hercules Powder Company. The watercolor, 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 12", and the print brought \$33,000 against the \$10,000/20,000 estimate. They had descended from the Delaware estate of Marjorie Pierson Marvin.



Bidders liked the contemporary carvings in the sale. The highlight was the Stavis preening mallard decoy by Mark S. McNair (b. 1950), which sold for \$8400 (est. \$3000/4000). It had sold previously at Copley for \$3162.50 in 2010. It is inscribed "For my friend, Barrie Stavis, from your Chincoteague vacation—1982."



*Three Setters* by Edmund Henry Osthaus (German/American, 1858-1928) sold for \$36,900 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 20" x 39" watercolor and gouache was a gift from the artist to a friend in Toledo, Ohio, where the artist was an instructor and later director of the Toledo Academy of Fine Arts. Osthaus resigned in 1893 to devote full time to painting, shooting, and following field trials, but he was among the group that founded the Toledo Museum of Art in 1901. The painting had descended in the family of the original owner and was published in "Dogs That Live Forever" by Kay and George Evans in *Field & Stream*, June 1970. It is evidence of the artist's deep affection for canines.

The sleeping Canada goose by Charles A. Safford (1877-1957) of Newburyport, Massachusetts, is serenity itself despite its substantial size, 11" x 37". In its first public appearance, consigned by the North Shore, Massachusetts, family who discovered it in their hunting cabin across the marsh from Safford's Plum Island camp, the circa 1920 goose sold for \$96,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000). Held by the consignors since it was retired from use, it was found along with three other Safford decoys. They included the Vinal Safford sleeping goose, previously thought to be Safford's only sleeping goose, which sold at Guyette & Deeter in 2017; the Safford swimming goose, which sold at Copley in 2019; and a Safford silhouette decoy. It is a surprise to many that Safford made at least two sleepers. Additionally, this example differs from the others in his Plum Island rig in that it was carved from a single block of wood, as opposed to a laminate construction, and the wing and feather paint patterns are unique, among the finest seen on any goose decoy. Safford was a man of many talents: he was a carver, boatbuilder, sculptor, toolmaker, silversmith, leathersmith, and housewright, but his passion was the bird life of Plum Island. He had worked as a market gunner, but when Plum Island became the Annie H. Brown Sanctuary of the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1936, he switched gears and became its first warden.





# DECOY MAGAZINE

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