

Copley Fine Art Auctions, Hingham, Massachusetts

# The Sporting Sale

by Frances McQueeney-Jones Mascolo  
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art

Copley Fine Art Auctions' 17th annual sporting sale, held absentee and online July 14 and 15, brought just over \$3.1 million. With 675 lots, it was one of the company's largest sales and had about a 95% sell-through rate.

## One of the company's largest sales.

Sporting art by a vaunted group of artists and from an array of enviable collections was well received on the part of enthusiastic buyers, and several auction record prices were achieved. Decoys and sporting art seem for the most part to migrate from one collection to another, as museums and other institutions often can't outbid a determined collector.

The highlight was a hollow Nantucket curlew that sold with buyer's premium for \$228,000 (est. \$150,000/250,000), doubling the prior record for a Nantucket decoy. The 16" long bird, circa 1850, came from the collection of Ted and Judy Harmon. The carver is unknown but is considered one of the greatest carvers to make a working shorebird decoy.

Auctioneer Peter Coccoluto called the sale and took phone and absentee bids plus bids from Copley Live (Copley's app), Bidsquare, and LiveAuctioneers. For more information, see ([www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com)) or call (617) 536-0030.



In the mid-19th century, Cape Cod was experiencing forest regrowth after the 18th-century rush on wood for building and heating homes. Species such as bobwhite quail, woodcock, and ruffed grouse began to thrive and were abundant in Elmer Crowell's lifetime. This Crowell decorative woodcock, circa 1912, 10¼" long, is considered a masterwork, one of the maker's earliest and best carvings and one of his best paint applications. Its dropped wings and carved primaries only enhance its desirability. Estimated at \$70,000/100,000, the bird brought \$72,000.

Eugène Éleuthère du Pont (1882-1966) acquired the bird directly from Crowell along with the du Pont-Crowell mallard and blue jay that were also in this sale. A closely related example is illustrated in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* (2019) by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney.



Eighteen lots into the July 14 auction, a new auction record price was set when the Harmon hollow Nantucket curlew sold for \$228,000 (est. \$150,000/250,000). The price doubled the prior record for a Nantucket decoy and was the highlight of the auction. The 16" long bird, circa 1850, came from the collection of Ted and Judy Harmon. Catalog notes acknowledge the extraordinary design, execution, and refinement of the feather-light bird and its eggshell-thin hull by an unknown maker who predates A. Elmer Crowell, Fred Nichols, Charles Sumner Bunn, and the Phillips rig maker. The unknown carver is hailed as among the greatest craftsmen to ever construct a working shorebird decoy. At least two plovers by this carver are known to have been repainted by Elmer Crowell, and the direct similarities suggest that the carver was likely an inspiration for Crowell and his dust-jacket plover. Copley owner Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and author/cataloger Chelsie W. Olney are at work on a book on Nantucket decoys that is expected to be published in late 2023. Watch for more information.



This early and rare blue jay carved by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) of East Harwich, Massachusetts, has great details and bright blue feathering with wet-on-wet blending. The 8½" tall bird came from the same du Pont family collection as the Crowell woodcock and the Crowell mallard, acquired directly from Crowell by Eugène Éleuthère du Pont (1882-1966), and it had descended in his family. Estimated at \$15,000/25,000, it realized \$10,800.



The du Pont-Crowell mallard drake with a turned head by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) was commissioned by Eugène Éleuthère du Pont (1882-1966) around 1912 and had descended in his family. Although it was made as a decoy, it was never rigged for hunting and has remained in exceptional condition. It is 16" long, and its form, wet-on-wet feather blending, condition, and provenance establish it as among Crowell's very best form of the species. Made in a time when mallards were not prevalent along the Atlantic Flyway, it retains the artist's oval brand. It brought \$36,000 (est. \$50,000/80,000).



In *Steady*, this 1878 oil on canvas, 14½" x 21", by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819-1905), two setters are on point with three bobwhite quail. The painting, which brought \$73,800 (est. \$50,000/80,000), is titled and described in Tait's own register entry that he maintained between 1850 and 1904 and in the 1986 *Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait: Artist in the Adirondacks* by Warder H. Cadbury with a checklist by Henry F. Marsh. Tait was born in Liverpool, England, and arrived in New York City in 1850, likely on the influence of artist George Catlin (1796-1872). Tait maintained a studio in New York City and spent considerable time at Long Lake in the Adirondacks. Two years after his arrival, Currier and Ives began purchasing his work, and he was asked to exhibit six works in the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition. The painting had descended in a Connecticut collection and came from a New Jersey collection. One can't help considering the fate of the quail.



*Storm Warning*, this evocative bronze of a hunter rowing hard against a storm to make shelter, with his dog and his birds all nestled in his boat, was made by William J. Koelpin (1938-1996), a Wisconsin hunter and fisherman who was a celebrated artist in bronze, paint, and wood. The group is signed and dated "Wm. J. Koelpin © 90" on the base, and it brought \$24,000 (est. \$8000/10,000). It is numbered 7 of 24 and measures 27" x 12" x 11½". For some time it was thought that Koelpin had made only a few castings, but as the figures have gained in popularity, more have emerged from collections. *Storm Warning* is his most highly desired bronze. It came from a Wisconsin collection.

Koelpin enjoyed many honors in his time, including the "Best in World" award from the Ward Museum in Salisbury, Maryland. He was also named "One of America's Premier Artists" by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin.



*Setter Puppies*, this 1890 oil on canvas of seven English setter pups, 18" x 36", is signed and dated by German-American artist Edmund Henry Osthaus (1858-1928). It sold for \$102,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000). The artist, who arrived in the U.S. in 1883, served as an instructor and later as the director of the Toledo (Ohio) Academy of Fine Arts before resigning to dedicate himself to painting, shooting, and following field trials, of which he became a judge and entered his own dogs. He was a founder of the Toledo Museum of Art. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries (1896-1910), he painted every winning dog of the National Field Trial Association, of which he was a charter member. The series of portraits was published by the DuPont Company to advertise its smokeless gunpowder. The painting came from a New York collection and was published in Kay and George Evans's 1970 article "Dogs that Live Forever" in *Field & Stream*.



Lothrop Turner Holmes (1824-1899) of Kingston, Massachusetts, was considered by many as the most sophisticated of the earliest carvers of the 19th century. He carved decoys for his own use, and his birds are prized for exceptional form, great blended feather paint, and split-tail carvings. This black-bellied plover, circa 1860, was no exception; it and one other example are thought to be the only survivors of Holmes's own rig. In very fine condition and with a replaced bill, it came from the collection of William C. McMaster, M.D. Related examples have been published. Estimated at \$40,000/60,000, the bird fetched \$34,800.



*Grouse Shooting*, this 1946 watercolor by Boston artist Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969), is the fourth in a series of six prints commissioned for a *Field & Stream* series, "Gunning in America." It is signed and dated "A. Lassell Ripley © 1946." The hunter on the right in the image is most likely the artist with his favorite dog, Chief. Both dogs are keyed into the action, poised to act. The 18" x 22" watercolor is considered by many to be the most important grouse-hunting watercolor the artist produced. It brought \$60,000 (est. \$50,000/80,000).

Ripley studied in Boston with Philip Leslie Hale and Frank W. Benson, and he received the Paige Traveling Fellowship to study in North Africa, France, and Holland. The painting is illustrated in *The Art of Aiden Lassell Ripley* (2009) by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Julie Carlson Wildfeuer; in *Field & Stream* in 1947; and in *Sporting Classics*, November/December 1997. Its exhibition history includes the Coe Kerr Gallery, New York City, in 1982; *Wildlife and Sporting Art: The Masters' Show in Ligonier*, 1987; and in *Aiden Lassell Ripley: A Retrospective* at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in 2008.



This Edmund Henry Osthaus oil on canvas, *On Point*, is a detailed portrait of a pointer and an English setter poised at work. The 28" x 36" work was a late addition to the auction. It was held in a Florida collection for several generations. With an estimate of \$55,000/75,000, it brought \$78,000.



East Harwich, Massachusetts, master carver Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) created three different sets of miniature birds: 25 ducks, 25 songbirds, and 25 miniature shorebirds. His market was his own decoy customers and tourists and also schools and museums, where they were used for species identification. One of his sets of shorebirds came to Copley missing the jacksnipe (#20), the lesser yellowlegs (#24), and a spotted sandpiper (#25). Catalog notes indicate that each is obtainable. Each bird bears the "A.E. Crowell MAKER East Harwich MASS" rectangular stamp with its penciled number, and each is given Crowell's alternate name. The collection sold for \$92,250 (est. \$60,000/80,000). It is in the original wood and glass case with a mirrored back, which has prevented fading or discoloration. Alice Herrick Mumford of Dover and Eastham, Massachusetts, acquired this set directly from Crowell, and it had descended in her family. A shorebird set list and miniature songbird and waterfowl sets are illustrated in *Elmer Crowell: Father of American Bird Carving* by Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. and Chelsie W. Olney, and similar birds are illustrated in *The Songless Aviary* (1992) by Brian Cullity.



Frank S. Finney (b. 1947) of Capeville, Virginia, carved this folk-art tree with 11 different birds, each mounted on its own branch. Dating to around 1990, the 14½" tall tree is signed on the bottom. It brought \$33,825 (est. \$6000/9000).



*Mallards Gleaning the Stubble* by George Browne (1918-1958), 1951, is a dramatic scene of birds at work, and it sold for \$36,900 (est. \$30,000/50,000), the second-highest auction price for one of Browne's waterfowl paintings. The 30" x 40" oil on canvas is one of Browne's most important images. It was exhibited at Grand Central Art Galleries in 1951 when it was priced at an amazing \$700. It was illustrated in *George & Belmore Browne: Artists of the North American Wilderness* (2004) by John T. Ordeman and Michael M. Schreiber.





This pair of Nantucket golden plovers, 11" long, by Captain William J. Wyer (1822-1913), from the William C. McMaster, M.D., collection, realized \$12,000, a new auction record for the artist (est. \$5000/8000). They were carved with split tails; one bird is in a running pose. Copley sold a single Wyer golden plover in 2015 for \$2520 and sold it again in 2018 for \$3000.



This albino brook trout, 9½" long, is highly decorative, with red, green, and black markings and a distinctive large open red mouth. Attributed to James Waltham of Brainerd, Minnesota, and dated to around 1950, it sold for \$9600 (est. \$3000/5000). It came from the collection of William C. McMaster, M.D.

*Wild Chorus* by Bob Kuhn (1920-2007), acrylic on board, 14" x 30", came from a Montana collection and sold for \$57,000 (est. \$60,000/80,000). As a child Kuhn began sketching animals in the Buffalo, New York, zoo. He later studied in New York City and worked as an illustrator for wildlife and outdoor magazines, but he began to paint full time in the 1970s. Over his lifetime he made numerous trips to Africa to paint and made trips across North America.



Tuckerton, New Jersey, carver Harry Vinuckson Shourds (1861-1920) created the 23" long hollow Canada goose around 1890. It is from the Parrish rig. Hunters and collectors view the bird as one of the best New Jersey geese. Shourds's carving was unequalled, as was his paint. The bird has it all: provenance, exhibition history, and literature. It realized \$54,000 (est. \$50,000/70,000). It has been in the collections of Harry Megargee, Russ Holst, Fred Ellenberg, Jim and Deb Allen, and Donald M. Kirson.



*Netting the Catch*, 19½" x 28", by Connecticut native Chet Reneson (b. 1934) set an auction record for a watercolor by the artist when it sold for \$11,685. The fisherman reels a bonefish, while the guide is ready to net it. Reneson has made many trips to the Bahamas, where he paints.



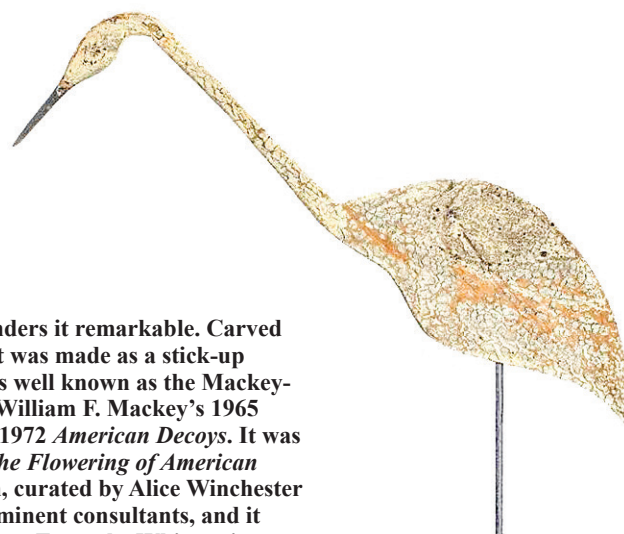
*The Christmas 'Possum* by Arthur Burdett Frost (1851-1928), gouache, 23½" x 16¼", was published as an engraving in a December 8, 1900, edition of *Harper's Weekly*, a copy of which accompanied the lot. Estimated at \$20,000/30,000, the image sold for \$43,050. It had come from the estate of Eugène Éleuthère du Pont.



The Hunter-Doherty hen wood duck by John Blair Sr. (1842-1928), circa 1870, is considered rare, as Delaware River hens are scarce. The bird is hollow, with three-piece construction, an inlaid head of two-piece laminate construction, and an uplifted tail. It retains the imprint of a Charles S. Hunter collection tag and a Doherty collection sticker. The decoy set a record price for John Blair Sr. in 1989 when it sold for \$30,250. This time out it realized \$33,000 (est. \$18,000/24,000). It was illustrated in *Decoy Magazine* in 1989, and the related drake was illustrated in 1985 in *Working Decoys of the Jersey Coast and Delaware Valley* by Kenneth L. Gosner.



*Setters on Point* is by German-American artist Gustav Muss-Arnolt (1858-1927), who was one of America's greatest dog painters. He immigrated to New York City around 1890. A gifted artist, he also served as a judge in dog shows and was a board member of the American Kennel Club. The painting brought an auction record price for the artist at Copley Fine Art Auctions' February 2018 auction, when it sold for \$33,600. This year it sold for \$48,000 (est. \$35,000/45,000), the second-highest price for Muss-Arnolt's work at auction.



The simple elegance of this 45" tall egret renders it remarkable. Carved from a 1" board and with a 16" long neck, it was made as a stick-up decoy. It has acquired heavy craquelure. It is well known as the Mackey-Colio American egret and was published in William F. Mackey's 1965 *American Bird Decoys* and Quintina Colio's 1972 *American Decoys*. It was selected for the important 1974 exhibition *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776-1876* at the Whitney Museum, curated by Alice Winchester and Jean Lipman, who were advised by prominent consultants, and it is in the accompanying book of the same name. From the Whitney in New York City, the exhibit traveled to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The bird came from the early collection of John R. Wierdsma of Nantucket, a friend of Donal C. O'Brien Jr., who acquired it from the Quintina Colio collection, which was sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1975. At Copley, the bird brought \$48,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



Rare and exceptional describes A. Elmer Crowell's wing-up greater yellowlegs, circa 1930, with its raised wing and dropped left wing tip, and it sold for \$84,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000). The 12¼" x 8" carving is signed by Crowell and identified as "Winter Yellowlegs," and it bears the rectangular stamp. The model has been coveted since its introduction in the late 1920s and has been illustrated copiously. Harry V. Long illustrates a nearly identical bird in his 1932 journal, observing that Crowell had promised him a winter yellowlegs four years previously. The bird came from the Michael Boxer collection.

Elmer Crowell's early and rare semipalmated plover with a turned head, 5½" long, a dust-jacket example in original paint, sold for \$45,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The carved clamshell base bears Crowell's hot oval brand and is stamped "CR" for the collection of photographer Carolyn Crossett Rowland. It came from the Michael Boxer collection and had sold at a Richard A. Bourne auction in August 1972.



Painted for a Remington Arms advertising series and number 4 in the "American Sportsmen" series by German-American artist Franz Xavier Leyendecker (1876-1924), *The Critical Veteran*, 1919, brought \$30,750 (est. \$30,000/50,000). The ad suggests that military veterans preferred Remington "UMC Wetproof" shotgun shells. The 36" x 30" oil on canvas came from a Massachusetts collection and was accompanied by the October 18, 1919, *Saturday Evening Post*, in which the ad appeared.



A recent discovery is this curlew carved around 1900 by Charles Sumner Bunn (1865-1952) of Shinnecock, New York. Remarkably fine shorebird decoys attributed to William Bowman of Bangor (Old Town), Maine, since 1966 have more recently been found to have been carved and painted by Bunn. Before 1966 some were attributed to A. Elmer Crowell. This 18" long curlew is one of only five models known and is only the third to come to auction. It had descended in a New York family that the catalog said "had a strong sporting heritage dating back to at least the 19th century." It was used for gunning and later was retired to a shelf in the collectors' home. Estimated at \$60,000/90,000, it sold for \$72,000. The decoy was making its first appearance in public, and only related examples have been published until now.



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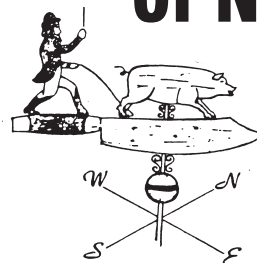
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