

This Dodge tackeye wigeon drake and hen decoy pair, c. 1880, were 'fat-bodied rigmates in untouched original condition, with no cracks or missing neck filler, original weights, and minor paint wear.' Courtesy of RJG Antiques.



# Antique Decoys

## Carving a Place in Collectors' Hearts

Judy Penz Sheluk

In the field, any rudimentary carving will lure birds, who are wary, but not renowned for their intelligence. But decoy carvers go far beyond the utilitarian, and produce beautiful and detailed works of folk art. Decoys have moved from the early morning fields and lakes to the collector's cabinet. No longer hunting lures, antique decoys are art – folk art of the most desirable kind, and decoy collectors are as passionately competitive as any folk art aficionado.

Not even Joe Barber, considered the pioneer decoy collector, could have predicted today's market. Of course, when he wrote his pioneering *Wild Fowl Decoys* in 1934, the Depression had the country in its grip. The bad economy, combined with the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918 (which placed strict limitations on hunting), meant that at that time most decoys were destroyed or relegated to damp boathouses, weathered barns and musty attics.

This is no longer the case, not by a long shot. In January 2007 the world auction record for a decoy was established by Guyette & Schmidt, Inc., together with Christie's, when they sold a merganser hen by Lothrop Holmes for \$856,000. Two months before, the previous world record had been realized at their November 2006 auction, when a 'dust jacket' feeding plover by Elmer Crowell of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, sold for \$830,000.



This pair of rare Mason glasseye merganser drake and hen decoys, c. 1910, featured original paint with a nice mellow patina. Courtesy of RJG Antiques.

**The earliest decoys**

Carved wooden decoys of cedar and white pine can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, carvers were making two types of wooden decoys. Floating decoys were made to loosely resemble swimming birds, such as ducks, geese and swans. Stick-up decoys were mounted on poles to represent wading shore birds, such as curlews, peeps and plovers.

By 1840, the demand for fresh waterfowl in restaurants had market hunters using 200-300 decoys per outing, and a cottage industry of American carvers quickly emerged. This consumer demand, combined with the rapid technological advancement of firearms and the introduction of decoy factories, made the extinction of several species of game birds inevitable. In response, in 1903 Theodore Roosevelt declared Pelican Island, Florida the first bird sanctuary in the nation.

Today, most wildfowl hunters are active conservationists, seeking to preserve birds and their habitats.

In 1918, the U.S. and Great Britain (then acting on behalf of Canada) passed the Migratory Bird treaty. Because it placed very strict limitations on what species, and how many of each species, could be hunted, the Treaty essentially ended commercial hunting. Hunting became for sport only. It also meant that decoys were no longer a hot commodity.

**The decoy market today**

Times have changed. In April 2007, at Guyette & Schmidt's annual spring decoy auction, 11 decoys fetched \$100,000+, 88 lots broke the \$10,000 mark, and the average price per lot sold was \$7,821. In fact, the sale, which grossed \$5,021,131, pushed the company's total sales to more than \$100 million.

**Did you know?**

In 1924, archaeologists working in Lovelock Cave, Nevada, discovered a hidden pit in the floor of the cave. Covered beneath a layer of rush matting, basketry fragments and several large stones were 11 individually-wrapped canvasback duck decoys. Made from marsh bulrush and reeds, three of the decoys were works-in-progress, and eight were realistically painted, some with feathers attached to make them appear lifelike.

Scientific data revealed that the cave was located next to Lake Lahontan, a body of water which dried out about 1,400 years ago. Further study revealed that the decoys were made around 200 A.D. by an unknown tribe of Native American Indians.

"One of the most interesting aspects of the April auction was that it contained many quality decoys that had sold at auction previously. It therefore presented a great look at how the decoy auction market is evolving," said Gary Guyette, a partner in the firm. "For example, a Crowell dust jacket style black bellied plover, purchased for \$55,000 in 1986, brought \$291,000; a Crowell dust jacket style upright plover, purchased in 1991 for \$22,000, brought \$137,000."

It wasn't just Crowell that captivated collectors. Other highlights from the sale included a John Williams ruddy duck, which established a world record for the carver when it sold for \$159,000, a cut above its 1990 selling price of \$39,600. A Walter Brady Canada goose, \$55,000 in 1990, fetched \$126,000; a Nathan Cobb curlew that sold for \$31,000 in 1991 brought \$258,000; and an Ira Hudson yellowlegs (\$23,650 in 1990) sold over estimate at \$80,500.

The decoy auction market first garnered attention when the collection of William J. Mackey Jr. was offered at public auction in 1973. At that sale, a curlew by William Bowman, circa 1880, sold for a then unheard of price of \$10,500 to Dr. Jim McCleery.

By all accounts, McCleery, who had been collecting decoys since the 1960s, definitely had an eye for the market. In January 2000, Guyette & Schmidt, in partnership with Sotheby's, auctioned the decoy collection of Dr. James McCleery for \$10,965,985. Included in the sale was the Bowman curlew. It sold for \$464,500.

"The McCleery auction was the moment when the decoy market shifted, when things began to change dramatically," said Russ Goldberger, owner of RJG Antiques and a dealer of decoys for 30 years. "It was by far the best decoy collection in existence, and it still remains the biggest



**Mason Premier mallard drake decoy, c. 1910. Condition: 'Hollow in nearly mint original condition with bright paint patterns. Small professional tail chip repair. Minor age shrinkage neck crack. Branded 'A. J. Davis.' Original newspaper wrapping is stuck to one side.'** Courtesy of RJG Antiques.

**BELOW: This Mason Premier pintail drake decoy, c. 1910. Condition: 'Hollow in excellent original condition with some paint wear on the back. Seams are tight. Tiny tail chip and roughness on tip of bill. Some factory neck and back seam filler has been replaced.'** Courtesy of RJG Antiques.



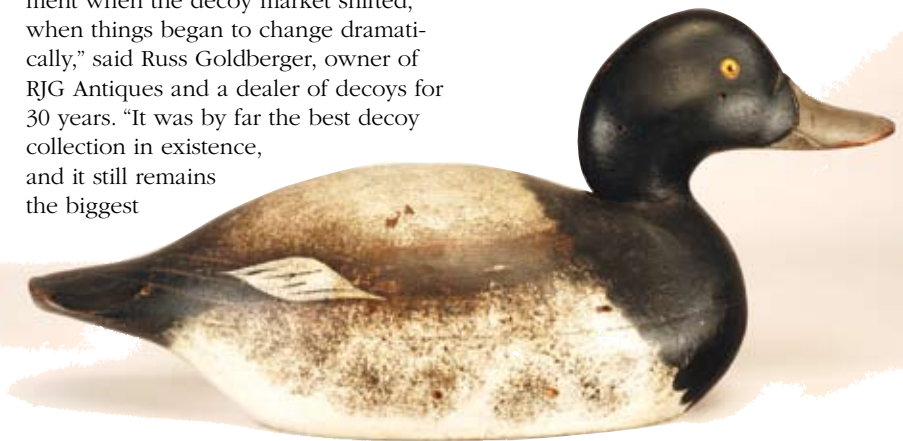
|||||  
 "for the first time, decoys were  
 broadly recognized as a legitimate  
 form of American folk art"  
 |||||

sale of decoys of all time. Before that day, most decoy collectors were hunters or former hunters. This sale attracted new blood – and wealthy patrons - to the market. For the first time, decoys were broadly recognized as a legitimate form of American folk art."

**The Mason factory**

Not all collectible decoys were produced by individual carvers such as Elmer Crowell, Lothrop Holmes, Albert Laing, Ira Hudson *et al.* "The nineteenth-century demand for decoys brought about several factories," said Goldberger. "The largest of these was the Mason Factory of Detroit (1896-1924). They advertised themselves as the 'Largest Manufacturers of High Grade Decoys in the World' and sold thousands of decoys by mail order catalogue for about a dollar a piece."

Founder William James Mason (mid-1800s-1905) and his successors would be pleased to learn that their quest for



**An untouched Mason Premier broadtail drake decoy, c. 1915. Condition: 'Hollow with tight seams in strong original paint, a couple of shot marks and a shallow one inch gouge on one side.'** Courtesy of RJG Antiques.

**World Record Breakers**

**TOP LEFT:** A record holder (for two months only), this 'dust jacket' feeding plover by Elmer Crowell of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, sold for \$830,000 at Guyette & Schmidt's November 2006 auction.

**(TOP RIGHT)** The previous record price was achieved in January 2003 when Guyette & Schmidt, Inc. in a joint effort with Christie's sold a preening pintail by Crowell for \$801,500. **(TOP RIGHT)** Courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt.

**LEFT:** The world auction record for a decoy was broken for the second time in two months when Guyette & Schmidt, Inc., together with Christie's, sold this merganser hen by Lothrop Holmes for \$856,000 on January 19, 2007. The decoy was from the collections of Adele Earnest, and George & Hope Wick. It was also pictured in the book *The Art of the Decoy*. Courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt.

quality was recognized by Dr. McCleery, and subsequently, the next generation of collectors. The current record price of \$354,500 for a factory decoy was set by a Mason Premier wood duck drake at the McCleery auction in January 2000, about ten times more than prices realized for any other factory decoy.

### Authenticity and condition

As with any high-priced collectible, an increase in value has brought an increase in fakes and reproductions sold as old, so it's important to buy only from an established dealer or auction house known to specialize in decoys. There are many methods used to 'antique' a new decoy, including tumble washing and staining. Authentically older decoys are sometimes repainted or touched up in order to improve the condition or value. Tricks of the trade include black light or x-rays (which exposes restoration), the smell of fresh cedar (indicating a new decoy) or the smell of fresh paint (indicating a new or altered decoy).

"With painted wooden objects, it's expected that they will suffer wear and tear," said Goldberger. "If a decoy is repainted, then the value will be reduced by up to 90 percent. However, some decoys are almost never found in original paint. The swan decoy, for example, is almost never in original paint, because it's white, so the owners would repaint them every year. As well, repaint by the original maker is starting to become accepted in the collecting arena, and in those cases, the decoy might retain half its value. Here, however, you need an expert who can identify paint techniques of an individual carver, much like a handwriting analyst would authenticate an autograph or document."

Other restoration is sometimes considered acceptable, although Goldberger stresses the importance of full disclosure on the part of the seller. "A tail chip, which is very common, can be fixed so it looks original, however, bill chips (common in shorebirds) are less acceptable, since the bill is considered a fundamental part of a decoy. In the end, experience is the greatest teacher. Don't be afraid to learn from those who've studied the art form for years."



**This pretty pair of oversized mallards by Bert Graves (Peoria, Illinois) fetched \$214,000 at Guyette & Schmidt's July 2006 auction. A few years ago the pair would have brought one-quarter of that amount. Courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt, Inc.**

### Resources

Guyette & Schmidt, Inc., Gary Guyette, P.O. Box 1170, 24718 Beverly Road, St. Michaels, MD 21663 410-745-0485, [www.guyetteandschmidt.com](http://www.guyetteandschmidt.com), [decoys@guyetteandschmidt.com](mailto:decoys@guyetteandschmidt.com). The world's largest antique decoy auction firm, Guyette & Schmidt holds three decoy auctions a year.

RJG Antiques, Russ & Karen Goldberger, P.O. Box 60, Rye, NH 03870 603-433-1770, [www.rjgantiques.com](http://www.rjgantiques.com), [decoys@rjgantiques.com](mailto:decoys@rjgantiques.com). In business since 1977, Goldberger is a major dealer of decoys and has a fully comprehensive and informative website. RJG Antiques also offers a selection of reference books, including many out-of-print editions.

*Mason Decoys, A Complete Pictorial Guide* - Expanded Edition by Russ J. Goldberger and Alan G. Haid (2003). This new Expanded Edition includes all of the 1993 book plus five new chapters. An autographed copy can be purchased directly from Russ Goldberger at RJG Antiques.

*Decoy Magazine*. A "must-subscribe" for anyone interested in collecting decoys, with features, auction and museum information, etc. The magazine's website also includes links to a number of collector's associations and provides a list of reference books with reviews. [www.decoymag.com](http://www.decoymag.com)

Havre de Grace Decoy Museum, 215 Giles Street, Havre de Grace, MD 21078. (410) 939-3739, [www.decoymuseum.com](http://www.decoymuseum.com).

The Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, 909 South Schumaker Drive, Salisbury, MD 21804, (410) 742-4988, [www.wardmuseum.org](http://www.wardmuseum.org).

Mason Price List, c. 1905 (price per dozen) (excerpted with permission from *Mason Decoys, A Complete Pictorial Guide* - Expanded Edition by Russ J. Goldberger and Alan G. Haid)

Premier model, hollow:	\$12.00
Challenge model, hollow:	8.00
Challenge model, solid:	6.50
Glasseye:	5.50
Tackeye:	4.75
Painted Eye:	4.00
Glasseye Snipe Shorebirds:	5.00
Tackeye Snipe Shorebirds:	3.75



**This decoy, carved by William Bowman of Long Island, New York, c. 1890, sold for \$10,500 in 1973. It was the first decoy to sell for more than \$10,000, but it turned out to be a good investment. In 2000, the decoy was re-sold at a joint auction by Guyette & Schmidt, Inc. and Sotheby's for \$464,500. Courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt, Inc.**

### Upcoming Events

Guyette & Schmidt Annual Fall Decoy Auction, November 7-8, 2007. Held at the Talbot County Community Center in conjunction with the 37th Annual Easton Waterfowl Festival (below), the auction will include approximately 600 investment quality decoys and related items.

37th Annual Easton Waterfowl Festival, November 9-11, 2007; preview November 8. Wildlife Art and Sportsman's Expo includes 12 venues throughout Easton,

featuring world-class wildlife paintings, sculpture, carvings, photos and collectible decoys. Waterfowl Festival, 40 S. Harrison Street, P.O. Box 929, Easton, MD 21601 ■

Visit the **NEW**

**www.RJGANTIQUES.COM**

Now with multiple views of every item

### New Website Features ...

- **Multiple images** help you make more informed buying decisions.
- **Improved navigation.** Find what you're looking for more quickly.
- Detailed information about services and the **benefits of working with RJG Antiques.**

### ... and More!

- **Detailed descriptions** including dimensions, condition reports, and age.
- **Credit card buying** from our secure web server.
- **Daily updates** with new items added as they arrive.
- **Money-back guarantee** on everything we sell.
- **Free shipping** on most website purchases.



MASON PREMIER MALLARD DRAKE AND HEN DECOY PAIR Ca. 1910. Hollow rigmates in outstanding original paint. Minor tail chip and neck filler restoration. Carry "A. J. Davis, St. Paul" brand. Mason at its best!! 17 1/2" long.

Our **30th** Year!



**Website Updated Daily!**  
Over 300 Antiques in Original Paint

**Russ & Karen Goldberger**  
[antiques@rjgantiques.com](mailto:antiques@rjgantiques.com)  
PO Box 60, Rye, NH 03870  
603.433.1770