

## 'Decoy Week' 2019 By The Numbers: 1,300 Decoys Gross \$5,260,000

By RICK RUSSACK, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Between July 23 and July 26, three decoy and sporting art auctions took place in New England; two in Plymouth, Mass., and one in Portsmouth, N.H. More than 1,300 working decoys, miniatures and decorative carvings were offered for sale. One might wonder...can the market support three major sales in four days? Yes, and few failed to sell. Are there enough quality decoys to keep the hundreds of buyers interested? The obvious answer is, again, yes. In addition to the decoys, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on sporting art and folk art. Decoys alone grossed more than \$5,260,000. (In total, the three sales grossed more than \$6 million.) Six decoys sold over \$100,000, with five of those made by Elmer Crowell. Dozens of decoys sold for more than \$10,000. For the three sales, the combined high estimates just for decoys was \$7,060,000. The combined low estimate was \$4,961,000. In all, few lots were passed and some of those have sold after the sales. Internet bidders

were active and bought more than 300 of the lots.

These statistics are based upon preliminary reports from the three companies which are (in order of the dates of the sales) Guyette & Deeter, Steve O'Brien Jr's Copley Fine Art Auctions, and Ted and Judy Harmon's Decoys Unlimited. All have been around for decades. The catalogs for the three sales were impressive, with more than 750 pages collectively and weighing eight pounds. The week could almost be called Elmer Crowell week, as more than 150 of works by the Cape Cod carver were offered. Almost all drew strong bidding and strong prices, including the highest prices of the three auctions. Honors for top price would go to three Elmer Crowell decoys, known as the "Dust Jacket Plovers" that were offered individually, but which collectively sold for \$1,114,000 with two going to one buyer. With the exception of decoys made by the Mason factory, Crowell's decoys are collected by more people than any others.

A new book by Steve O'Brien Jr and co-author Chelsie Olney, *Elmer Crowell, Father of American Bird Carving*, was available for the first time.

A word in general about the quality of the catalogs. Each catalog included not only details about the decoy being offered, but also its provenance, the literature that discussed the bird, or in some cases pictured it. The exhibition history, where appropriate was included and extensive, often multipage, biographies of the carvers were also included. There were also details concerning the consignors who had put together the impressive collections. And, of course, detailed statements of condition. Some auction houses are cutting back on printed catalogs, but these catalogs go against that trend.

Attendance at the auctions was up from last year. Many couples attended together, apparently enjoying a few days in New England. Obviously, collectors bid against one another, but most seem to have known each other and their spouses for years, so

these few days provide a way for old friends to keep in touch.

The world of decoys has been well researched for more than half a century, and in the 1930s, Joel Barber published one of the seminal works in the field, *Wild Fowl Decoys*. His collection is at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vt. Different parts of the country have different wild fowl, and so different decoys, and each of these variations has been collected, researched as to makers and variations, and dozens of books and articles have been published. Often, makers in the same parts of the United States had their own style of carving or painting decoys, and these variations have also been well researched, also with books and articles written. In addition, much of the "lore" of collecting has been documented and there are dozens of "stories" told about early collectors and makers. Many of these stories are included in the auction catalogs and some have been included in our reviews of the individual auctions.

# Guyette And Deeter Start 'Decoy Week' With A \$2.4 Million Sale

## Auction Action In Portsmouth, N.H.

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — Gary Guyette and Jon Deeter's July 23-24 sale, with nearly 500 lots, was expected to be strong and it was. It was the first of three decoy auctions that week. It also included a 50-table dealer show that ran throughout the sale as well as during the preview, the day before the auction. The total for the sale was \$2,465,239 with two decoys each bringing well over \$100,000 and dozens of decoys bringing more than \$10,000 each. The top lot, realizing \$265,500 was a pintail drake by Elmer Crowell of East Harwich, Mass. The 500 lots included duck and shorebird decoys, decorative carvings and miniatures, sporting art, fish decoys and much more. Several lots of folk art included a large Bellamy spread-wing eagle with a "Don't Give Up The Ship" banner.

ner, weathervanes and a Samuel Robb cigar store Indian. The decoy portion of the sale grossed \$2,110,000. As always, the auctioneer was Jim Julia,

who runs a fast-paced, entertaining auction, telling several "downeast tales" as the sale progressed. Having retired, Julia only calls the Guyette



The evening before the sale, Guyette and Deeter hosted a catered preview party attended by about 250 people.



The star of the sale was this pintail drake by Elmer Crowell, which sold for \$265,500. This one had been made for Stanley W. Smith of Boston and Orleans on Cape Cod. In addition to the exceptional quality was its rarity: Crowell carved very few pintails as they were not common on Cape Cod.



Review and Onsite Photos by Rick Russack, Contributing Editor  
Additional Photos Courtesy of Guyette And Deeter



All decoys are folk art, but some are more so. This "high head" drake was in the "more so" category. It had a superb crusty surface and how it was made and how it survived are a mystery that was the subject of much discussion on the floor. The maker was not positively known but it came from a well-known rig used on the Grand Kankakee Marsh in Indiana and the catalog attributed it to Herman Trinsky. It sold for \$153,000 to a Pennsylvania collector.



One the surprises of the sale was the \$126,260 achieved by this 36-inch Bellamy eagle. It far surpassed the estimate, and the fact the banner was in the eagle's beak, instead of over its head as is the usual case, probably contributed to that price.



Jim Julia back at work. Although retired, he still calls the Guyette and Deeter sales, keeping the crowd alert and entertained.



Several phone lines were in use. Third from the left is Gary Guyette and on his right is Jon Deeter.



The sale included several fish decoys, some made by Oscar Peterson, considered one of the masters of the form. His 9½-inch trout achieved \$16,520.



Decoys made on Cobb Island, Va., are popular with collectors. This running curlew earned \$38,350, although it had flaws and almost no paint.



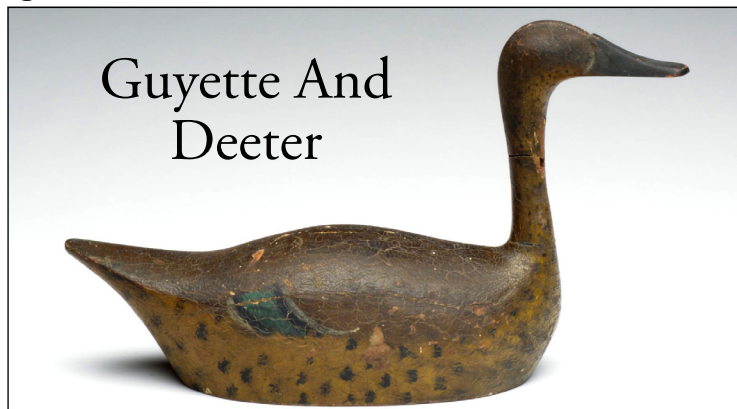
One of the higher prices of the day — \$76,700 — was paid for this swimming Canada goose made by Nathan Cobb Jr. It had a root head and raised wing-tip carving.



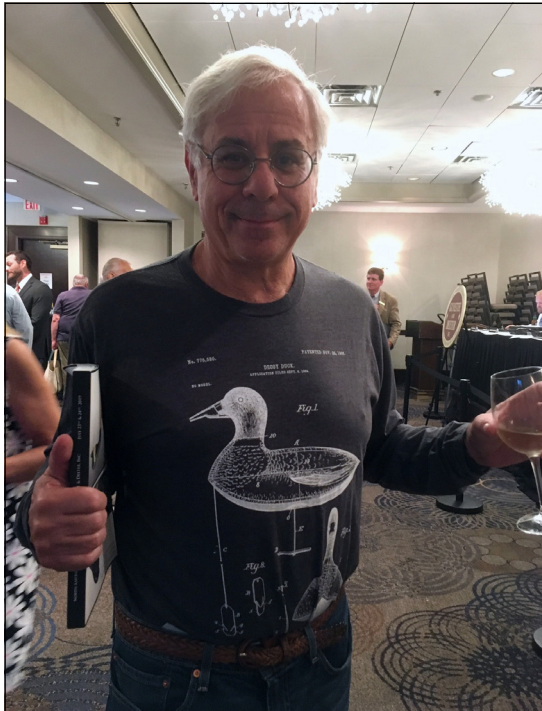
George Boyd might be New Hampshire's best-known decoy maker. He lived in Seabrook and this hollow carved Canada goose sold for \$5,900.



Perhaps one of the bargains of the day, this brightly colored game board sold for just \$1,180. Made by Frank Finney, Cape Charles, Va., each corner had a spinning counter with a bone replica of a rifle, the board itself was decorated with upland game birds, carved figures with dogs' heads were used to move around the snake-like game and it had a well-aged surface.



The mate to the "high head" drake was sold right after it was but was not quite as crusty. The two had started life together and will remain so for the foreseeable future. It went to the same Pennsylvania collector who bought the drake and he paid \$82,600 for this one.



Jeff Pressman is well known in the folk art world. He has recently started buying decoys and here proudly wears an appropriate decoy shirt. Photo courtesy Laura Beach.

and Deeter sales and on the second day of the sale celebrated his 73rd birthday with the crowd singing "Happy Birthday."

The 285-page catalog included extensive, often multipage, descriptions of many of the offerings, with biographies of many carvers and several of the consignors. Multiple photographs, including vintage photos, were included. Provenance was listed for many of the decoys, along with references to literature discussing or picturing the item in question, with a list of the exhibi-



Oscar Peterson is well known for his fish decoys. Occasionally, he made other forms of folk art. This colorful carved bird in a berry tree plaque realized \$9,440.



Illustrated in the *Index of American Design*, and attributed to Samuel Robb, the cigar store maiden had been retouched since it had been published. It did well, finishing at \$30,680.



Of the several pieces of sporting art, a gouache on board by Lynn Bogue Hunt (1878-1960) that depicted three resting wood ducks, realized \$14,750.

tions in which the decoy appeared. Detailed condition statements were noted for each lot. Unlike most auctioneers, all items are fully guaranteed to be as described, with money to be refunded if the description is not accurate. Guyette and Deeter are available throughout the preview to answer questions from prospective bidders. Jeff Pressman, a long-time folk art collector who has recently become interested in decoys, was particularly complimentary about the assistance and education he has received from Jon Deeter.

Bringing \$265,500, the highest price of the sale, was a pintail drake by Elmer Crowell. It was in original paint, signed by the maker and had detailed, carved crossed wing tips and an extended tail sprig. The decoy has been written about extensively and pictured in several books and articles on the subject. Crowell had several wealthy clients, businessmen of the period, who were avid hunters and collectors of his work. This decoy was once owned by Stanley W. Smith of Boston and Orleans on Cape Cod, who had Crowell produce custom decoys with additional carving details and paint; it is likely that he acquired this decoy directly from Crowell. Pintail ducks are uncommon on Cape Cod, so few decoys were produced for them and the catalog states that only four or five early Crowell pintails are known.

It may be unfair to award second place for highest price of the sale to two decoys that went to the same Pennsylvania collector for \$236,000. Duck decoys were often used in "rigs," attached to one another by ropes to give a more natural appearance to the decoys when floating, thereby encouraging ducks flying overhead to come in closer. One rig had been used on the Grand Kankakee Marsh in Indiana. The marsh covered a huge area and was hunted by the Prince of Wales and Presidents Harrison and Cleveland. A famous rig used on these marshes was owned by Herman B. Trinosky; it had been stored away for years until being rediscovered in 1967. Included in this sale were two spectacular "high neck" pintail decoys from this rig: a drake and a hen. Both birds had been given by Tri-

nosky to the family that helped him clean out his barn. Before the sale, Julia, along with several others, marveled at how these decoys had been made and how they had survived the rigors of hunting. They were offered separately, with the drake selling for \$153,400 and the hen selling for \$82,600. The carver has not been positively identified but the catalog attributes them both to Herman Trinosky and stated that only three of the high neck drakes are known. While decoys, in general, are certainly folk art, these two birds were exceptional, with original surfaces, especially on the drake, which any folk art collector would delight in owning. Decoys are said by many to be the earliest examples of American folk art, having been used by Native Americans for centuries.

Well-known folk art dealer and author Adele Earnest was an early collector of decoys, and one of the birds she had owned was included in this sale. It was a swan decoy, made on Hooper's Island, Md., which she "rescued." In her 1965 book, *The Art of The Decoy*, she recounts this story: She was driving in Maryland and noticed a large bonfire, being fed by a nearby farmer. She stopped to see what was happening and saw that the bonfire was burning a quantity of swan decoys. "I shrieked like a Valkyrie — and acted like one — rushed at the fire, seized one swan by its long white neck, threw it on the ground, and beat out the flames. The farmer, who was cleaning out an old barn, was transfixed and eventually accepted \$5 for the decoy." She later published *Bonfire of the Swans* and said, "the bird, although charred on the bottom, has a crusty surface that only years of use and exposure to the elements can produce." The swan that she rescued, with the charring obvious, and the crusty surface, sold for \$47,200.

Decoy collectors recognize, and are willing to pay for, exceptional examples of the work of well-regarded makers. The sale included more than three dozen works by Elmer Crowell, including a sleeping goldeneye drake by him in original paint that brought \$4,130. Crowell miniatures ranged in price from \$53,100 for an exceptional life-size blue jay to \$944 for a canvas-



Russ Goldberger was one of the dealers who set up at the show that accompanied the auction; he offered an unusual sewing bird made by George Boyd of Seabrook, N.H. They were only made for members of his immediate family and few are known. Goldberger priced it \$3,850.



An over-size eider drake from Maine, 24 inches long, went for \$44,200 even though the white areas had been repainted and it had some other minor defects.

back drake. Several factors enter into decoy valuations, including the realization that some makers made very few decoys of a particular species, some were made to special order with details not found on regular production birds, some were in unusual poses, and, of course, condition: are there repairs? Has it been repainted?

In total, this sale offered decoys by more than 150 carvers, made and used in various parts of the United States. More than two dozen examples by the Ward Brothers of Crisfield, Md., included a circa 1934 pinchbreast pintail hen, which sold for \$17,700 and a pair of canvasbacks that sold for \$1,062. There were seven examples by George Boyd of Seabrook, N.H., including a swimming Canada goose with finely painted feathers, which sold for \$59,000. Decorative carvings included six lots by William Gibian of Onancock, Va.; one of which, a pair of sickle billed curlews, sold for \$2,124. Seven carvings by Ira Hudson, Chincoteague, Va., included a rare 41-inch-long swordfish that earned \$6,195, and ten made by the Mason Decoy Factory included a rare, circa 1895 ruddy turnstone with a wooden bill, which went for \$10,030. This list could go on and on.

Folk art other than decoys did well. Although it wasn't the highest priced item in the sale, a surprise was a 36-inch Bellamy eagle plaque with a "Don't Give Up The Ship" banner held in its beak. It sold far over the \$22,500 high estimate, finishing at \$126,260. It took more time to sell than any other lot, finally coming down to a contest between two phone bidders, and with increments of \$1,000, it took four or five minutes to reach its final price. Few Bellamy eagles carry the banner in their beak, and this treatment is considered rare and undoubtedly contributed to the price.

Additional folk art of other

forms included a weathered cigar store Indian maiden, possibly made by Samuel Robb, which realized \$30,680. The figure held cigars in one outstretched hand and a brick of tobacco in the other. It was illustrated in the *Index of American Design*. Careful examination of the figure as illustrated in the 1940s publication clearly showed the areas that had been touched up.

A 34-inch running deer, or leaping stag weathervane, with original surface, attributed to J.W. Fiske, earned \$23,600, and a sheet iron rooster weathervane on a hand forged rod went to a phone bidder for \$6,068. A bargain in the folk art department may have been a unique, colorful game board made by Frank Finney of Cape Charles, Va. Each corner had a spinning counter with a bone replica of a rifle, the board itself was decorated with upland game birds, carved figures with dogs' heads were used to move around the snake-like game and it had a well-aged surface. It sold for just \$1,180.

A few days after the sale, Jon Deeter said, "There were a few surprises. Probably the biggest surprise was the Bellamy eagle finishing over \$100,000. Yes, it was a rare



A wood duck drake made by the Ward Brothers, Crisfield, Md., was inscribed on the underside, "To me, Lem Ward, this is the best wood duck my hand has ever accomplished 1968. for Gov. McKeldin for Christmas." It drew multiple bids and finally sold for \$21,240.



Adele Earnest saved this swan decoy from a fire that destroyed several others. She wrote about saving it more than once and said she paid \$5 for it. It still showed the effects of the fire and had a crusty surface. An astute buyer bought it for \$47,200.



Elmer Crowell made this life-size blue jay. It was one of two being sold during the week and this one brought \$53,100, far more than another jay that sold elsewhere for \$7,800.

Long Island carvers had their own style of carving. A rare ruddy turnstone made by Obediah Verity, Seaford, Long Island, N.Y., went out for \$35,400.

one, but it's been years, I think, since that kind of number was reached by one of those. The Crowell blue jay was exceptional. That was Crowell at his best and the other Crowell miniatures did well. Anytime we hit the kind of gross we did in this sale, we're pleased."

Gary Guyette has been in the decoy business since 1974 and began selling decoys at auction in 1984, in partnership with Jim Julia. Since 2011, the firm of Guyette and Deeter has been conducting four live auctions annually, along with weekly online-only sales. They go out of their way to make this auction a social event. A free, catered preview party the evening before the sale was attended by about 250 people. A free buffet-style



Lothrop Holmes, Kingston, Mass., made this lesser yellowlegs shorebird that earned \$9,440.



The full-sized flying least tern by Elmer Crowell had a 13-inch wingspan and sold for \$8,260.



lunch was provided both days of the sale with choices such as lobster bisque and strawberry shortcake. The 50-table dealer show is not intended to be a money maker for the firm but, as Gary Guyette said, "we think of it as just another way

to give more people more reasons to attend the auction."

Prices cited include buyer's premium as reported by the auction house.

For additional information, [www.guyetteanddeeter.com](http://www.guyetteanddeeter.com) or 410-745-0485, 410-610-1768.



This merganser hen was conservatively cataloged as "in the style of" Gus Wilson, South Portland, Maine. It was 17 inches long and bidders obviously decided it was by Wilson, as it went for \$64,900.



Several decoys made by Joe Lincoln were sold during the week. This brant with an arched back head earned \$38,350.