

FROM SWAMP TO SWANK

Joe Moran

Cincinnati Literary Club 4/30/18

American Airlines Magazine featured an article in its July 2000 in flight publication that I am sure peaked the interest of some of their passengers. The article was entitled, "*From Swamp to Swank*" and the subject was an auction that had taken place in New York City on January 23, 2000. It was the first auction of its kind and is one that is still often talked about today amongst collectors.

For tonight's budget I proposed the theme of high profile collections. Over the past 15 year or so I have been intrigued by how often the James McCleery Duck Decoy collection is referenced in auction catalogues and amongst other duck decoy collectors in conversations. The references are so bold that they seem to imply that if the duck decoy was not part of this collection it is unimportant.

The Jim McCleery sale of duck decoys was a monumental landmark in the art auction world. It was one man's lifelong passion to collect duck decoys. In the art world these were not a highly regarded type of collectable commodity. The \$11 million sale in 2000 of his collection forever changed that line of thought. The catchy title in the magazine article brings to the reader's attention that these duck decoys that were once stuck into mud flats have now, a hundred years later, been placed on shelves of prestigious museums.

For those of you who are unaware of the prices that these decoys are bringing at auction please keep this in mind. Stephen O'Brien of Copley Auctions in Massachusetts sold two Elmer Crowell decoys in 2007 for \$1.13 million – apiece. This was part of a sale of 31 decoys that realized \$7.5 million. Now that I have your attention, please allow me to explain the origin and history of this newly recognized form of art.

Bird decoys date back to the indigenous people of North America who made decoys for bird hunting at least 1,000 years before the Europeans settled here. One can visit the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC and see examples of these decoys. The Europeans followed the practices that they learned from the Indians when they came to America. Today duck decoys could be considered North America's only indigenous form of folk art. Although some may argue that the Egyptians created decoys around the time of the pharaohs – but as an art form it remains almost uniquely North American.

For 50 years after the Civil War the professional market gunners, using decoys, killed hundreds of thousands of birds to feed an expanding nation. The railway boom made possible the shipping of fresh meats back to retail markets. On July 3, 1918 Congress passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act curtailing the hunting of birds in such high quantity. By the 1930s, as the production of decoys for hunting purposes began to wane, the decoys that were hand-carved by hunters became to be recognized as a form of folk art.

Jim McCleery began his professional career as a Pathologist in Oklahoma City. He was a healthy 6'5 and an avid hunter and fisherman in his younger years. In his midlife he had to forgo hunting due to health issues. In 1950, while he was working as a Pathologist in a hospital, he developed a long-term illness. Three years later this sickness took a turn for the worse and he became confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life.

Jim moved his family from Oklahoma to Houston, Texas to be near a VA hospital that could offer him better treatment. Unable to hunt, Jim began the next best thing – he began to collect duck decoys. With this new hobby he could indirectly engage in his passion for hunting and could still converse with sportsmen who were also collectors. Jim purchased his first duck decoy in 1963 and continued collecting avidly until his death in 1999.

Jim first made the collecting map in early 1973 when he purchased a Bowman Curlew for \$10,500 from the William J. Mackey Duck Decoy Sale held by Richard A. Bourne Auctions in Hyannis, Massachusetts. This was a world record price and the first time a decoy had attained a 5-figure sales mark.

Jim continued for the next 26 years to collect the masterpieces of the duck decoy world. Keep in mind that these were times before the internet and while the collector was living with a severe disability. If he saw a decoy that he wanted he would ignore the naysayers and pay

unheard of sums of money for it. His collection at the time of his death in 1999 numbered nearly 400 decoys. The announcement of his death and the decision of the family to sell at auction rocked the duck decoy collecting world.

The James M. McCleery collection was sold in January 2000 in New York City in collaboration with Sotheby's and Guyette and Schmidt. It was a seminal event in the history of decoy collecting - bringing for the first time worldwide attention to the collecting of duck decoys as works of art. Guyette and Schmidt had long been established in the duck decoy field, but Sotheby's was new to this field and wanted to introduce its folk art constituents to this new art form.

“This was the first time that Sotheby's had joined up with another auction house to sell anything”, according to Dale Guyette of Guyette and Schmidt. At the time, Guyette and Schmidt's sales were \$4 million annually vs Sotheby's \$1.6 billion. Up to this point duck decoy collectors had been collecting pretty much amongst themselves, and the outside world was largely indifferent. In hindsight Sotheby's was wise to collaborate on this sale since afterwards what was then a little known area of the collecting field had made its mark. Decoys were now selling for the prices similar to those of more traditional decorative arts such as Remington bronzes or Tiffany lamps.

The press was in full force including; The New York Times, Boston Globe, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Houston Chronicle, Forbes, Wall

Street Journal, The London Times, Maine Antique Digest, Antiques and the Arts Weekly, Decoy Magazine --- and yes even American Airlines in its flight magazine. Nearly 1,000 prospective bidders came to the sale. The auction showroom was packed; even the noted actor Richard Gere was spotted in the crowd.

Ron Gard, of Dallas, Texas was a close friend and the primary advisor to Dr. McCleery for his collecting interest. Robert Shaw of Shelburne, VT curator of the Shelburne Museum of Folk Art, which is known for its collection of decoys was also an advisor to Dr. McCleery. About two years ago I attended the Texas Gun Collectors show in Forth Worth. By chance, I ended up having dinner with Ron Gard and then reconnected with him the next day at the gun show. Since that time we have kept in close contact and I had the wonderful opportunity to see his decoy and folk art collection in Dallas, Texas last year.

The McCleery sale became the measuring stick for decoy collections for the next seventeen years. The auction realized nearly \$11 million on a presale estimate of \$5-6 million. The Bowman Curlew that Jim McCleery purchased in 1973 from the Mackey estate for \$10,500 realized \$464,500 27 years later. The Preening Elmer Crowell Canada Goose carved in 1917 realized \$684,500 including the buyer's premium. James McCleery purchased it for \$65,000 10 years prior to selling it in 2000. This decoy sold to an anonymous buyer represented by a Boston dealer named Stephen B. O'Brien, Jr. who I referenced earlier in this paper. Stephen O'Brien later went on to form Copley's Sporting Auctions of Massachusetts. Overall, 98% of the lots sold with only 13

of the 600 plus lots failing to find buyers. Unsold items were mostly low end lots and shot shell boxes placed at the end of the sale.

Will this sale ever be beat? We could find out as early as this year as Copley Auctions of Boston, Massachusetts proceeds with part III of the Donal C. O'Brien, Jr. collection of Important American Sporting Art and Decoys. Sessions I and II in 2017 of this three part sale realized \$4.8 million so far. Nineteen world records were achieved in 2017. The average price of decoy per lot was \$27,000. Donal C. O'Brien Jr. Collection Session III will take place in two months, July 19, 2018. We will see if there is \$7 million dollars worth of decoys in the final session that could possibly eclipse the McCleery sale.

Ron Gard, came up with the idea of compiling numerous articles from before and after the McCleery auction into a scrapbook which he presented to Dr. McCleery's two daughters. These newspaper clippings later evolved into a hardbound book The McCleery Auction by Ron Gard and Robert Shaw. Ron Gard presented a signed copy of this book to me during my visit with him in Texas.

In his book he summed up what heaven would be like for his fellow collector and friend James McCleery. The man who was confined to a wheelchair for 46 years gets back to the wilderness to enjoy his collection of decoys as they were originally intended to be used. These are Ron Gard's words:

People have debated the afterlife since the beginning of time. I would like to think I know where Jim is now. I can see him standing very tall at the edge of the water under a glorious sunrise with his dog at his side. Overhead are hundred of ducks, geese and shorebirds, all beckoned by the most magnificent spread of waterfowl decoys ever assembled. Elmer Crowell, Lem Ward, Nathan Cobb, William James Mason and all the other great decoy makers are watching from above, smiling with pride that their decoys were picked by this giant of a man with the discerning eye.