

Duck Hunters' Art — Hand-Carved Decoys

By Pamela Eyden

In the fall, when hunters go out to the Mississippi River to hunt waterfowl, and they set out their decoys, they are doing exactly what a lot of their ancestors did. Of course, most modern decoys are mass produced, usually of blown and foam plastic, while old ones were hand-carved of wood.

Decoys weren't frequently used until after the Civil War, when population and hunting pressures in the area increased. In Wisconsin, the Mississippi River, Bad Axe River and Wisconsin River became primary duck decoy-carving areas.

No one thought to collect decoys until an architect and hunter named Joel Barber happened to find an old one near his boathouse in New York.

Fascinated, he began carving, collecting and exhibiting his own works. His 1934 book, *Wild Fowl Decoys*, brought attention to the art.

Waterfowl decoys that were created as hunters' tools from 1830 to about 1950 have since become collectible American folk art, along with paintings, weathervanes, ship's figureheads and cigar-store Indian sculptures. Decoys from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Long Island were the first to be collected in the 1970s, and were known as New England Classics. Decoys from Wisconsin were virtually unknown then.

But times changed, and attention has spread to regional waterfowl decoys. According to collectors Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl of Elm Grove,

Wis., two waterfowl decoys were sold in Boston in September 2007 for \$1.2 million dollars each, breaking all previous records. Wisconsin decoys are also gaining value. A world record auction price for a Wisconsin decoy was set in July 2006, also in Boston, when a turned head canvasback drake by Enoch Reindahl of Stoughton, Wis., sold for \$74,750. Less than two years later, in April 2008 in St. Charles, Ill., that record was broken by a sleeping mallard drake by Enoch Reindahl that sold at auction for \$92,000. 🏠

All decoy photographs are ©The Bob and Kristin Lehmkuhl Collection of Wisconsin Decoys. Bob Lehmkuhl also provided information about Mississippi River decoys.



Mallard hen by Arthur Herpel of Prairie du Chien, Wis., c.1930s. The head carving and painting on Herpel's decoys show the attention to detail that is sought by collectors.



Bluewinged teal by an unidentified maker, La Crosse, Wis., c.1890. This decoy has a removable head. It is arguably one of the finest primitive folk



Preening mallard drake by Peter La Roque, Prairie du Chien, Wis., c.1940s. Peter was a Crawford County deputy sheriff, and the son of Joseph La Roque. Peter La Roque is thought to have carved with Michael Suhrada, because their styles are similar.

Right: Mallard drake by Bill Cook, Ferryville, Wis., c.1940s. Cook achieved an attractive effect in his carving through what today would be termed a "minimalist" style.



Left: Mallard hen by Joseph La Roque, Prairie du Chien, Wis., c.1890s. The La Roque families were among the earliest settlers of Prairie du Chien, coming from French Canada in 1787.



Mallard pair by Walter J. Lowry, Sr., of La Crosse, Wis., c.1930s. Lowry was a well known and respected banker in La Crosse and across the Midwest. Along with Michael Suhrada of Prairie du Chien, he was probably the most prolific carver of the Mississippi River Basin, carving over 200 decoys. The painting on Lowry's mallard hens is among the best in the country. Lowry also carved some of the finest fish decoys being collected today.



Reaching mallard drake by Theron Dodd, Prairie du Chien, Wis., c.1920s. Dodd was a gunsmith working in Prairie's Fourth Ward during the first and second quarters of the 20th century. This decoy's reaching head is rare among Wisconsin decoys, but is characteristic of a style followed on the Mississippi below Prairie du Chien down to about Burlington, Iowa.



Left, previous page: Lowhead mallard drake by Michael Suhrada, Prairie du Chien, Wis., c.1930s. Suhrada was a jeweler in Prairie du Chien. He and Walter J. Lowry, Sr., of La Crosse, were the most prolific carvers of the Mississippi Basin. Suhrada is known for his decoy heads of many different heights and attitudes, which add interest and value to collectors.

Above: Mallard pair by Ted Noel, La Crosse, Wis., c.1930s. Noel's decoys are similar in style to decoys by Walter J. Lowry, Sr.