

Under the Radar:

Undervalued Vintage Decoys

by Gene Kangas & Stan Van Etten

This very rare original-paint loon was misidentified as a merganser in the catalog which was the reason that I was able to buy it so cheap and that no one else noticed it.



Various discussion groups, both formal and informal, at decoy shows and auctions during the past few years have addressed the issue of the dramatically escalating prices of the relatively small group of elite, vintage decoys that sit atop the "Most Desired List" of some serious collectors.

Longtime collectors as well as new enthusiasts have made comments and voiced such questions as the following:

"I can no longer afford to collect the vintage decoys that I want."

"Are all the quality old decoys now beyond the reach of ordinary collectors?"

"I guess I will have to refocus my collecting and concentrate on birds by contemporary carvers."



This Ward pinch-breast pintail hen was once a derelict. I bought it at auction in the mid-80s and did pay over \$1,000 for it. The old gentleman who consigned it told me after the auction that he as hunting many years before and saw it floating down the river. He was prepared to shoot but when it did not fly, he rounded out and picked it up. It had

been on his mantle until the auction, and he could not believe it had sold for so much money even though he had always thought it was wonderful. It is one of my favorite decoys. It has very little paint, a chipped tail, and a broken bill; but it has so much spirit and life and magic that sometimes when I look at it, I can almost hear the Ward brothers speaking to me; and I know no one else could have created something so lasting and beautiful.



This virtually paintless decoy was made by the Ward brothers and is signed on the bottom; "Lem Ward - 1918." The auction catalog said it was a pintail hen, but I think it is probably a mallard hen.

Descriptions by Ron Gard:

All were bought at auction and, with the exception of the Ward pintail, were purchased for under \$1,000; some for under \$100.



I bought these "bookshelf decoys" for under \$100 each. They have nice form and can be used for decoration in rustic situations and even as bookends.

"Are there high quality antique decoys out there that have not been hyped in the media that can still be bought for reasonable prices?"

"How can a beginning collector compete with high-end investor type collectors?"

The track record of certain elite decoys in recent years has cast a spotlight on the comments and questions cited above. "Investment quality" decoys whose market value has doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled in a short span of years have left the average collector in a quandary as to what course he/she should take going forward.

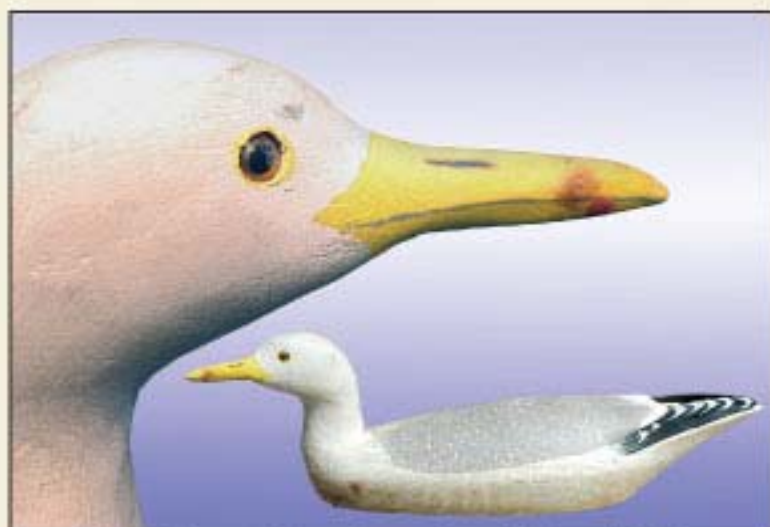
But there are a number of available options for collectors with limited resources to pursue — options that can be both productive and worthwhile:

1 - Focus on carvers whose names are not on everybody's "Top 50" list. There are dozens, even scores, of North American carvers who made great decoys but whose names are all but unknown to many collectors.

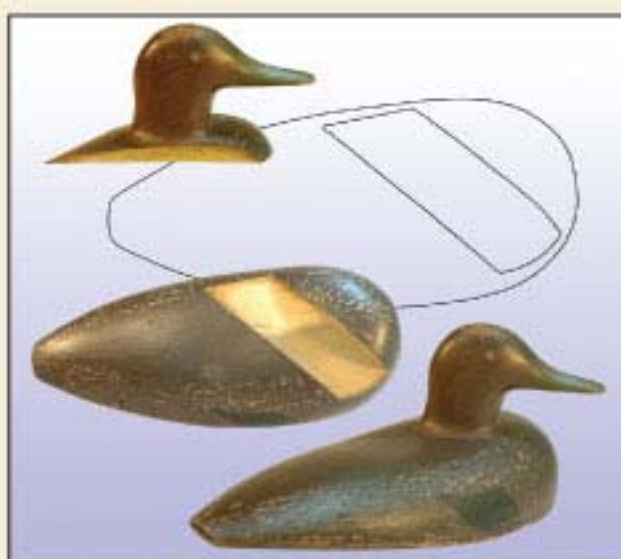
2 - Pick a geographical region or area that produced decoys that you like and study up on it. Read a book (or books) on the



I bought this Ira Hudson decoy at the Roy Bull Auction. With no paint, it's difficult to say what species it was originally. It was in a box with seven other decoys, and I believe I bought the whole box for \$100.

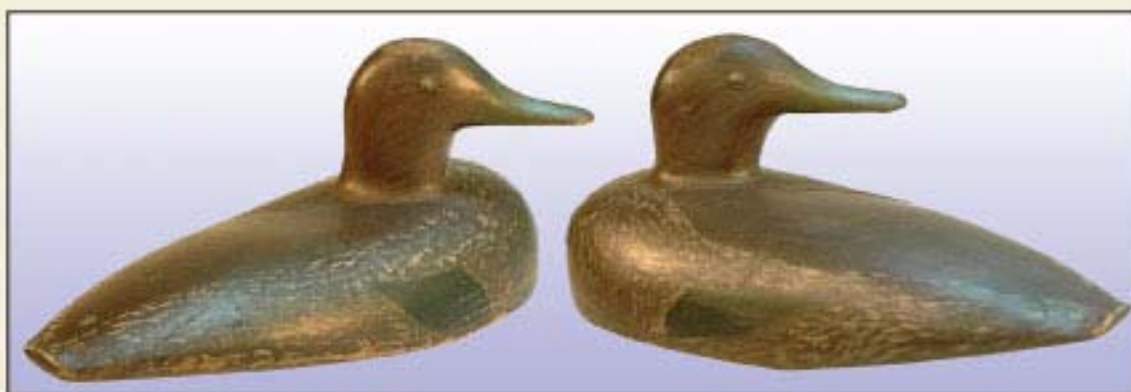


George Soule of Freeport, Maine made countless cork decoys for L.L. Bean. By contrast, this is a rare all-wood herring gull by him, weighted and used for hunting. Its head reaches slightly forward and the black and white wing tips are carved in deep but sturdy relief. (Kangas Collection)



Pair of unique teal by an unidentified maker from Maine. Each has a deeply cut neck seat set 45 degrees against the body's centerline. (Kangas Collection)

These small teal "look" off to the side, forward and back, facilitated by their unusual construction technique.



carvers of that region. Most regions had one or two (or even three or four) carvers who became famous and whose decoys sell for very high prices today, but these "Greats" had peers, fellow carvers, and students whose work in many cases was comparable to that of their now-famous colleagues. How many times have you heard veteran collectors discussing a particular decoy at a show or auction where the conversation went like this:

Well, it certainly looks like a "So and So."

"Yes, but look at the tail again. Don't you think it could be a 'This or That?'"

If longtime collectors are often uncertain as to the identity of look-alike decoys, how can one expect less experienced collectors to detect

the difference between birds from the hands of "famous" and "less famous," or even "not famous at all," carvers? And if the differences are so difficult to detect and the similarities (of style, technique, and quality) so abundant, then why the great differential in market price between the decoy attributed to a "famous" maker and the one assigned to a "less famous" carver?

A case in point: Most collectors with any knowledge of Illinois River decoys can call the names of Robert Elliston (1849-1915) and Charles Perdew (1874-1963); they are two of the "Giants" of Illinois River decoys. But what about important, though less well known, Illinois River carvers such as Stephen Lane (1842-1900) and William "Billy" Shaw (1849-1927)? Joe French has written

about the difficulty of differentiating their carvings. He said:

"During the early days of collecting in Illinois, there was a good deal of confusion in deciding whether a decoy was made by Steve Lane or Billy Shaw, friends and both residents of Lacon, Illinois. Both used the same style body conformation; and though there was definite similarity, they were often a different size. I was fortunate enough to own one of each from the same rig.

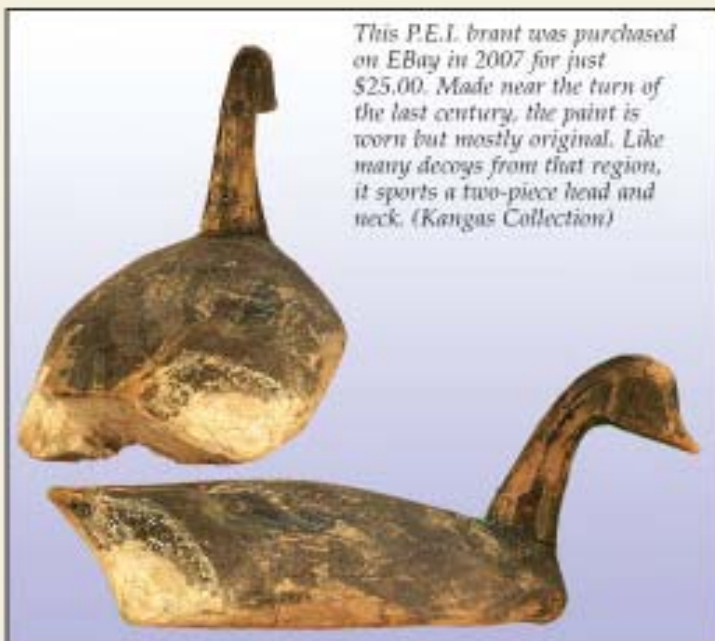
"From the side it is hard to tell the difference if you only have the decoy of one carver in hand. But if you have the decoys of both carvers side-by-side, you can pick out the differences. The easiest way to see the difference is the front view which clearly shows the shape of the heads. I always thought of Billy's heads being like a



"Pappy" Kidwell of California fashioned this feeding pintail drake to add a suggestion of realism to the rest of the rig. This decoy has inserted wing tips and a long hardwood sprig tail. (Kangas Collection)



This black duck, attributed by the previous owner to Wayne Cross of Tancook Island, features an exaggerated back-preening head and neck. (Kangas Collection)



This P.E.I. brant was purchased on EBay in 2007 for just \$25.00. Made near the turn of the last century, the paint is worn but mostly original. Like many decoys from that region, it sports a two-piece head and neck. (Kangas Collection)



Larry Kirack of California carved this high-neck brant in the 1940s. It is simple and elegant. (Kangas Collection)

squirrel with its cheeks bulging because of a mouth full of acorns."

The point here is this: How many collectors know about Stephen Lane or "Billy" Shaw? yet both were excellent carvers. Moreover, they lived in the same general time-frame as Elliston and Perdew and in the same geographical area. The major difference in the market value of their decoys today is influenced by in the fact that the two Illinois River "Giants" have had an endless stream of publicity over the past thirty-plus years, and the other two carvers have not.

3 - Don't demand pristine condition. Of course no serious collector wants to collect decoys that look like yesterday's firewood, but we need to remember that we are collecting *antiques* — *working* antiques, at that. Old decoys that have grace of form and that are structurally sound deserve consideration. A reasonable amount of missing original paint, lost in their service to a hunter, should not be a disqualifying factor. Indeed, "old working repaint," if skillfully executed and applied many years ago, can add a special bit of historical appeal for some collectors. One can find many examples of "name brand" vintage decoys in much less than pristine condition that have sold at auction in recent years for six-figure amounts. Who is to say that there are not many "non-name brand" vintage decoys in less than pristine condition that will sell for high-dollar amounts in years to come?

4 - Don't overlook quality decoys made by unknown carvers. We don't mean "unknown" here in



Illinois River, hollow-carved pintail drake by unidentified maker, c. first-quarter 20th century. Purchased in 2008 for under \$500. (Kangas Collection)



D.W. Nichol of Smith Falls, Ontario was the creator of this American merganser hen. Made circa the 1940s, it is a low head solid-bodied working decoy distinguished by its delineated comb. (Kangas Collection)

the sense of "not famous." We merely mean to say that the name of the carver of a particular decoy is simply *not known*, not currently identified. Not a big deal. Most of us probably don't know the names of our four great-grandparents. Most carvers who made decoys a hundred years ago were not known outside of their local communities; most did not advertise their work; and there were no books or magazines that paid

special attention to, or kept records of, decoy makers. Remember, it's the *decoy* that counts. A good one can stand on its own merit; it does not need a "name-brand" carver pedigree to make it desirable and valuable.

5 - Consider decoys that are "folky" and different. Decoys that are "folky" and different are not automatically good (or better). "Folky" does not automatically

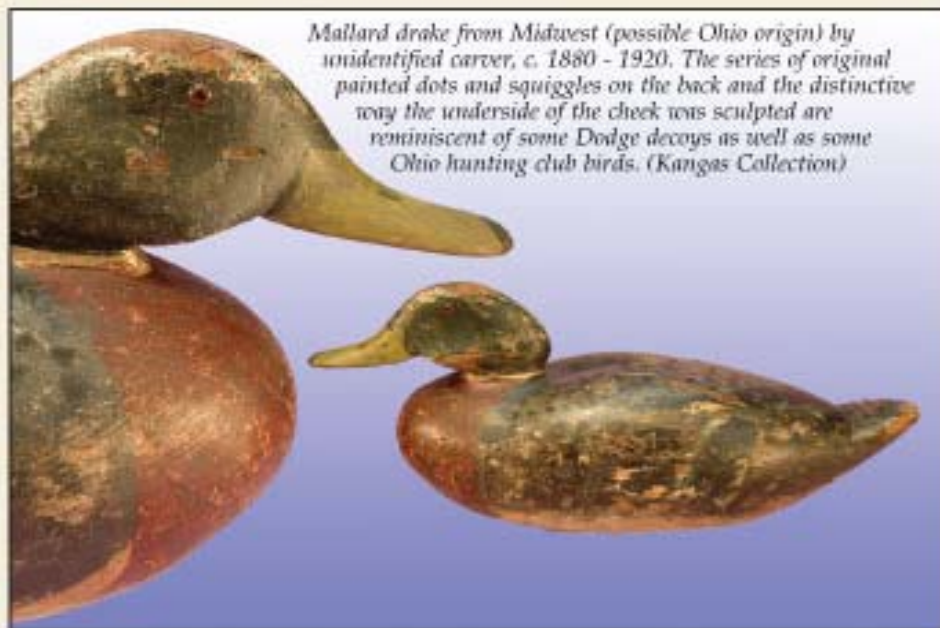
equate to primitive or crude, and "different" does not necessarily equate to "weird" or "strange" or "unrealistic." But we have all seen decoys that demand our attention because the carver did something *different* with them. They have a distinguishing "attitude." They have an unusual pose, perhaps exaggerated or understated anatomical aspects. Such decoys have not been the mainstay of traditional collections, but they have been receiving much more attention recently among many collectors. Some "folky" decoys have a creative edge that enables them to be appreciated as "art" and allows them to transcend the merely utilitarian.

General considerations

Some collecting alternatives have been overlooked and remain underexposed. The decoys of certain North American regions have not yet fully realized their inherent values. The Canadian Maritime Provinces, for example, have many underrated and undervalued sculptural representations. Preening geese, racy mergansers, and a plethora of full-bodied stick-ups originated there. On the opposite edge of the continent, West Coast brant present exceptionally diverse choices.

In fact, every historical decoy producing region includes makers who fashioned noteworthy lures. Some are not "big name," highly publicized, carvers whose decoys bring record prices; yet some were incredibly creative. Countless intriguing examples exist, like root heads and other oddities, waiting discovery amongst eccentric folk art decoys. New and exciting discoveries are still occasionally made. Good advice might be: "Don't look in the same direction as everyone else. Question prevailing trends. Do your own homework."

The few engaging and relatively inexpensive "Under the Radar" decoys pictured with this article demonstrate the multiplicity of available options. They include old warriors prominently displaying evidence of years of service, sculptural exaggerations, and other appealing expressions. Several of the decoys pictured were acquired for



Mallard drake from Midwest (possible Ohio origin) by unidentified carver, c. 1880 - 1920. The series of original painted dots and squiggles on the back and the distinctive way the underside of the cheek was sculpted are reminiscent of some Dodge decoys as well as some Ohio hunting club birds. (Kangas Collection)

less than \$1,000 within the past five years, some for less than \$100.

A cursory review of books featuring Folk Art reveals decoys that often exhibit little-to-no paint, multiple layers of paint, and/or flaking paint. Obviously, a different preferential perspective exists in this realm. Experts in the field of "flat art" do not frown upon multiple coats of paint by Rembrandt and others. They are intrigued by them. Master artists like Rembrandt frugally re-used old canvases to save money while utilizing existing materials. Nevertheless, the repainting of decoys seems problematic to many of today's collectors.

Recently, veteran decoy collector Ron Gard of Texas, newly appointed Senior Consulting Specialist for Folk Art at Sotheby's in New York, shared with us some of his thoughts about unusual decoy "finds" that he has made over the years:

"To call them 'derelicts' might be a bit of an overstatement and not quite accurate. I think discovering them requires a 'good eye' or just realizing that something has value before other people do. It's having the judgment to buy *what you like* and not be swayed by what's popular, and it's also not being overly concerned about pristine condition since sometimes worn or missing paint and parts is much more interesting. After all, some decoys which could be called derelicts have sold

for thousands of dollars."

Ron has spoken in a positive way about decoys which visibly exhibit their years of service. Essentially, that means existing dings, scrapes, scratches, chips and flakes constitute an important part of the honest factual story of a working decoy. They are part of its total charm and play a significant role in helping determine its authenticity. "Derelict" decoys were all once pristine; however, they now display their own individual history. Every distinct surface mark provides evidence of their level of use.

Ron also mentioned enjoying the mix of battle-scarred working birds and pristine mantel birds on the shelves of his collection. Such sophisticated appreciation requires personal confidence based upon knowledge and experience, and it allows a person to search "under the radar" to discover often overlooked treasures.

The cyclical challenges of economic difficulties force realistic considerations of collecting for personal satisfaction. While some collections might be forced to become stagnant, recessions often provide bargain potentials. One decoy dealer recently indicated that he was "looking for great decoys that had temporarily fallen below market values."

One particular area to pay attention to includes recent discoveries. Years of public promotion and frequent featured auction appearances

certainly helped to enhance the monetary values of most "name" makers. However, as decoys by previously unidentified or lesser known carvers emerge, they will probably do so at relatively low introductory values. Remarkably exceptional decoys, however, are not constrained by that concept — for example, the two pairs of high-head pintails by the same unknown carver which recently sold at auction. The pair of hens sold at Christie's for \$90,000, and the hen and drake sold at Sotheby's for \$169,000. One pair was discovered in Minnesota and the other in Indiana, and no other birds by this unknown carver were known until these recently came to light.

Vigorous new searches to discover hidden rigs or to locate forgotten dusty collections can provide lucrative opportunities to not only acquire, but also to sell and trade. Today is an ideal time for each of us to reevaluate our short and long-term collecting goals as well as our methods of adding and subtracting decoys to and from our collections.

No doubt record prices will continue to be reported for the elite decoys that have been established as the "most desirable" over the past twenty to forty years; they have proven their market value as they have repeatedly "come to market." But these gravity defying prices have to do with a relatively small percentage of the total number of decoys bought and sold each year. Today, interesting and affordable collections can still be thoughtfully created by collectors of average financial means. Many "under the radar" decoys are out there waiting to be discovered by informed collectors who dare to "look beyond the label" — especially in cases where there is no label. □

Hunting & Fishing Collectibles Magazine invites readers to submit quality photographs of decoys which are representative of ideas expressed in this article. A brief factual description of the decoy should be included. Submissions will be considered for a new "Under the Radar" pictorial feature which will appear in future issues. In keeping with the concept, decoys should have a relative current value of \$1,000 or less.