

Collecting Decoys: Getting Started

by

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You may have a few decoys from a hunter ancestor, or had your interest pricked by a gift of one. You may be a folk art collector or a hunter, or have no particular impetus save that decoys have caught your interest.

Collecting decoys is a fascinating hobby, full of history, beautiful things to look at, and good friends with whom to spend time. However, there are pitfalls, and many of us would have been better off if we had gotten some decent advice early on. The following are some suggestions on getting started.

Goals

You will have more fun if you think about what you are setting about to do and choose some goals early on. If you become truly passionate about the subject, you can, and likely should, change those goals after a while, but setting goals will help you to focus and instill some discipline. Lack of either is a sure way to spend a lot of money to create a mediocre collection.

You may have some trouble setting reasonable goals, though, until you know a bit more about the subject. A good first goal is to find out more about decoys and the decoy market.

What to Collect?

Over the past hundred and seventy years, there have been thousands of decoy makers who made hundreds of thousands of decoys. If you don't focus, you will be overwhelmed with the variety. It is important to focus your collecting and maintain your focus until you have either mastered that area or decided that it isn't as interesting as you first thought. Pick something, learn it well, and move on to another. Keep repeating that and you will become knowledgeable and develop a good collection.

Many people decide to build a collection of decoys from their own state or the area where they vacation or hunt. Others choose a specific species and may collect examples of those from around the country. Any of those are fine goals, but you still need to start by picking one maker or a small school. Learn it well and you can then choose another maker or school.

The most difficult way is to collect "Whatever I like, whenever I see it." It is difficult because it makes studying very hard, and studying is key to informed collecting. You can always change or expand your area of interest, but it is important to learn one well. You will save a lot of mistakes, also known as tuition.

Reading and other Studying

We are blessed with an incredible variety of decoy literature, but you don't need it all. Buy and read the major introductions plus the books which cover your area of current interest.

The surveys are useful because they will give you a sense of the history both of decoys themselves and of collecting. They also provide you some perspective on the range of decoys which are available. Even if you continue to concentrate on a small area, it is useful to know where your interest fits into the overall picture.

The earliest surveys are still among the best to begin with: Joel Barber's Wildfowl Decoys was the first, and provides an excellent introduction by the first known decoy collector. Seminal folk art dealer Adele Earnest's The Art of the Decoy and Wm. F. Mackey's American Bird Decoys should also be on every collector's reading list. While all of them concentrate on Eastern decoys, they are introductions by three of the most influential people in the field. Whatever your area of interest, whatever other decoy books you get, you should have those three.

A more recent survey, which covers the entire US and Canada and has far better illustrations, is The Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys, edited by Joe Engers. The authors provide a once over lightly for most of the important decoy producing areas, while a final chapter on collecting and caring for decoys, by former Shelburne Museum curator Bob Shaw, is a very nice plus.

Gene and Linda Kangas' book Decoys is also valuable both for the

illustrations and especially for the essays on aspects of collecting, including discussions of buying at auction and the pitfalls of fakes and undisclosed restorations. They have an excellent section on caring for your decoys, with recommendations from several museum conservators. The book is worth getting for that chapter all by itself.

A museum exhibit catalog, The Decoy as Folk Sculpture, by Ronald Swanson et al, while quite short, is thought stimulating. Swanson and Julie & Michael Hall, with whom he collaborated, are among the few people who have addressed decoys from the perspective of art history.

If you aren't interested in eastern decoys, George Ross Starr's book, Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway, may be lower priority, but he wrote a chatty book full of anecdotes about the early days of collecting from the boathouses and sheds of the hunters. It's a good read about a day which is itself pretty close to over.

If Canada is your area of interest, Traditions in Wood, a History of Wildfowl Decoys in Canada, by Patricia Fleming (ed) is a great place to start. It may be the best photographed decoy book out there. It's lovely.

Reading Alan S. Bamberger's The Art of Buying Art, (a much expanded and revised version of his 1990 Buy Art Smart) as you set out will save you from making a lot of mistakes. Bamberger is an art consultant, clearly knows the business well, and gets his points across in clear, enjoyable text.

Bamberger covers how to learn what you like, learning how to shop- including tips on characteristics of both good dealers and the ones you want to stay away from- researching makers, provenance, record keeping, fakes, auctions, and how to buy. You can access chapter summaries and an order link here: <http://www.artbusiness.com/basynop.html> This book is absolutely essential for new collectors of nearly anything. It's a 260+ page paperback, out of print now but usually multiple copies are available at www.abebooks.com. A substantially expanded and revised edition is due out in May 2007. Don't wait three years to buy it: read it now. If you take his advice to heart you will be way ahead of many more experienced collectors.

The member directory of the Midwest Decoy Collectors Association has a list of most of the books ever published on decoys. The titles are generally self-explanatory, so it is easy to figure out which cover your own area of

interest. You can get them through sporting book dealers, or through www.abebooks.com.

Subscribe to the major auction houses' catalogs and study them. Subscribe as well to at least one of the magazines. Currently there are two: "Decoy Magazine" and "Hunting and Fishing Collectibles." They will keep you up to date on what is going on, including shows and show reviews, and auction results with commentary. As you decide which decoy makers you are interested in, get the back issues which have articles about them. They also carry ads for people who will be delighted to help you.

Go to decoy shows and introduce yourself. Look at what is available and ask about it. If you are serious about learning, most people will be happy to talk during slow times, and one of the great joys of the multi-day shows is socializing. If you don't participate, you are missing a lot of the fun, and also missing out on a lot of information which never gets published.

If you get serious about decoys, you shouldn't miss the national show in St. Charles, IL, sponsored by the Midwest Decoy Collectors Association. Held yearly in April, it has the biggest selection of decoys, the biggest auction, and the most dealers and collectors of any show. It is a great place to see decoys and meet people.

Better is better than more, or: Quality is more fun than quantity

For a long time decoy collectors have referred to decoys as floating sculpture. Like fine art, there were masters and followers, some of whom eventually became masters in their own right, and many who remained followers. (A follower basically copies the master's work. Some made excellent copies, some were lousy. The better followers are quite collectible in their own right.) There were regional and local styles, and a few makers who developed their own style without influencing others.

I once came across an article which claimed that there was a trend among senior collectors of transfer ware ceramics: they were selling off hundreds of pieces accumulated over decades and contenting themselves with their 25 best. That got me thinking. Limiting oneself to a small, predetermined number is a form of discipline. A limited collection forces you to be picky, at least when you bump up against the limit. That is a good thing. Twenty-five top examples of anything is a lot.

I looked over my collection of about 60 decoys and realized that I hadn't been focused or set well defined goals. While I had a lot of nice decoys, many of them were nice because they were excellent copies by followers of some master. I decided that I didn't have the space, the budget, or the ambition to collect a definitive group by any master plus his followers. I also decided that I generally wanted only one example by each of the makers I was interested in. That isn't an iron-clad rule, but it guides me. I also decided that I would concentrate on my home state, which was already the strength of my collection.

I took all my decoys off the shelves and asked myself, If I ignore market value and which is 'best', if I could have just one favorite decoy, which would it be? I put that one back on the shelf. I next asked which I would choose if I could have only two decoys, and put that one back up.

I got up to my favorite dozen and realized that my second most valuable decoy wasn't even my twelfth favorite. Over the next few years I sold off nearly all the decoys which weren't in my favorite dozen and used the proceeds to buy fewer new favorites by masters. Now I have 25 decoys instead of 60, and they are pretty much all favorites. Tying up the same amount of money in far fewer pieces also meant that I was able to significantly improve the overall quality of my collection. The 25 take up just as much space as the 60 did, so each has a lot more room. They are better decoys, and I can see them better, so I can enjoy them more.

I am glad that I started thinking in terms of favorites instead of 'best'. There is a subtle difference there, but an important one. Thinking in terms of best almost inevitably brings into play other people's opinions, and market value. Do you want your collection to be the result of your taste, or what others think is best? For me 'favorite' is best.

Learning to See

If you start by picking a narrow specialty, you can study it intensively, and the principles you learn can later be applied to other areas. Among other lessons, all decoys of one species and sex by the same maker are not identical except for condition. There are at least subtle differences in form

and painting.

As an example, if you are generally interested in shorebirds, and know you like Joe Doaks' yellowlegs and plover, study them. Go through the books and auction catalogs and make photocopy blowups or computer scans of every one illustrated, whatever it's condition. Blow them up and study them. Ask people who know something about Doaks what they look for in a great example. If you hear things like: "A high, sharply angled forehead, a painted wing outline with a sharp angle to it, an even pattern of stippling on the wing, a slight downturn to the underside of the tail, the bill angled slightly upward", go to your study pictures and look for those attributes. Write notes directly on your print outs.

Chances are that you will find that some Doaks don't have any of those attributes, much less all. Some which lack all of them will still sell for very high prices simply because they are in fine condition.

After you have trained yourself to see those subtleties you can decide for yourself if you agree with the conventional wisdom that they are important, but until you can see them, can you have an informed opinion? Until you can see them, can you get the maximum enjoyment out of a really good one? Until you can see the subtleties, you are as likely to buy a mediocre example as a great one, and the price may be the same. Why not minimize tuition? Study before you buy.

Auction previews and decoy shows are opportunities to see and handle the actual decoys. Take advantage of them. When a Doaks shorebird goes through the auctions, study the catalog picture for those attributes, and look closely at it in the preview even if you already know it is deficient in form or condition. Make notes on what you see with the decoy in hand. Look at the paint to see what it is supposed to look like.

If the description says that half the bill has been replaced, that there is professional touch up to the paint on the sides of the head, and a minor tail chip repair, figure out how to spot them, or ask someone. You can learn as much or more from problem examples as from the great ones. You don't want to buy problems because you weren't aware of them. Learn to spot them yourself.

Three suggestions, though: don't eat a nice juicy hamburger and fries and

then handle other people's decoys without washing your hands first! Grease leaves spots which cannot be removed.

Second: pick up shorebird decoys by the decoy, not just the stand. I once saw a collector do the latter at an auction preview, and it turned out that whoever had last put it back on the stand had not gotten it on all the way. The decoy, estimated a decade or so ago at around \$10,000, fell off the stand, bounced off the table, and hit a hard floor, breaking a wingtip.

Lastly, pick up duck and goose decoys by the body, not the head. Duck hunters pick up their decoys by the head but it's a bad idea with the old ones because the glue joint between the neck and body is now fifty to 150 years old. Stressing it can break the joint and pop out paint and filler.

Form, paint, and condition

Generally, the first consideration is form, followed by the quality of the painting, and then condition. Condition is important, but not the first criterion. If the decoy started out awkwardly carved and badly painted everything else is secondary. It is also fairly unusual for the best piece a decoy maker ever made to be the one which survived in the best condition.

The older or rarer the decoy, the more likely you will have to compromise on condition. However, most decoys in serious collections are in good original paint. It is important to find out the range of condition which is available. In many cases there are no pristine examples known, while in others many examples are close to new condition. Many makers were quite prolific, and it is expensive to buy average examples of common types and then upgrade. You should aim high. Wait for a really good example.

There are at least two possible exceptions to this rule of demanding good original paint: types which simply don't exist in original paint, and decoys which are interesting for historical associations as much as their beauty.

It is hard to collect original paint mid-19th century decoys which were used in salt water. There just aren't a lot left. In those cases, look for fine form and a pleasing repaint with a good surface. Few collectors of human figural sculpture would turn down the Venus di Milo simply because the arms are missing, all the original paint has weathered away, and the remaining surface is banged up, but the Venus di Milo is a great rarity. There can be real beauty

in an ancient decoy weathered nearly to bare wood or with four or five coats of dry, crusty, paint, but you need to know where it fits in with other surviving examples. You don't normally want to buy such a piece if there are dozens in original paint.

Mentors & Dealers

It would be very helpful to find a mentor who can teach you some of the basics first hand. Sometimes that will be a friend, other times a dealer will be willing to educate you. While some charming dealers may well be the very people to beware of, working with good dealers will make a big difference in your collecting. Dealers can find things for you which you will not be able to find yourself, and their expertise can prevent you from making an expensive mistake.

When you are starting out, good dealers are an essential part of your education and collecting, and that doesn't change much after you are quite knowledgeable. Tell them you are a beginner and won't be buying immediately. They will understand and respect that. They know their subject and can teach you a lot very quickly. Just don't bleed them of information time after time and never buy anything.

Refer to Bamberger's [The Art of Buying Art](#) for characteristics of dealers you want to work with.

Display

Now that you have a few decoys, what are you going to do with them?

The key is to provide a background which lets you see the decoys, free from distractions. Patterned wallpaper may be great somewhere else, but it kills decoys placed in front of it. So does dark paneling. A relatively light, solid color makes a good background.

Give each of them as much room as possible, with a neutral background so you see them to best advantage. If at all possible, forget about putting decoys above eye level, except perhaps for an owl or something designed to be up high.

One hard to achieve ideal is to have them all on modular platforms at table

top height or lower, with room to walk all the way around them. That puts a lot of pressure on them to perform as sculpture, and even some great ones are pretty weak from above. Like many weathervanes, some great decoys are best seen only in profile. Dudley canvasbacks are truly wonderful decoys in profile, but look down on one and it fades. On the other hand, a Dudley ruddy duck isn't as exciting in profile as it is when looked down on. That's when the big cheeks and broad backs really show up. An Elliston mallard hen has a nice profile, but it would be a shame not to be able to also look down on the wonderful paint on the back. One isn't necessarily better than the others, but it is important to recognize their strengths and weaknesses when deciding where to place them.

Since most of us don't have room for platforms, what is a reasonable fallback? Some collectors have had wooden pedestals made, similar to those you see in art museums. There are several different heights so they can arrange them with the taller pedestals in back providing background for the decoys in front. The decoys in back are seen against a solid color wall. Even pushed against a wall, pedestals provide a great display without taking up a lot more space than shelves would.

Another collector had a carpenter make some shelf units from oak-faced plywood, four feet wide and 14 inches deep, with a pickled finish and adjustable shelves. The pickled oak provided a warm, light colored, slightly textured background which made the decoys stand out. The depth of the shelves allowed him to turn the decoys quite a bit so that they could be seen from different angles instead of just in profile, and he generally put no more than two on a four foot shelf. Each decoy could be seen without interference from the others, and as sculpture rather than silhouettes. A plus was that the room had windows facing north, so the light was diffuse instead of casting harsh shadows. Sharp shadows make it tough to see the form.

One tactic for improving the composition of a display is to use plexi bridges, also known as acrylic display risers. Those are the clear plastic sheets bent down at each end to form a platform. You can use the bigger ones to raise a decoy higher than another on the same shelf. Varying the height in itself can improve the composition, and it also lets you pack your display a little bit closer together. One source is University Products (www.archivalsuppliers.com), which is an archival products company, but there are others as well.

Decoy Care and Starving the Finish

All too rarely a catalog describes a fine decoy as having an "absolutely dry surface." A dry surface means paint which has never had wax, furniture polish, or any kind of oil applied to it. "Absolutely dry" is the way you should want it. Unfortunately, a great many collectors and dealers both long ago and today like to apply furniture polish to intensify the colors and to "feed the finish," so in many cases your buying options don't include the ideal.

The major problem with furniture polishes is oil, including silicone and linseed. Silicone never dries completely and attracts dirt, while linseed oil attracts dirt, turns black, and the molecules crosslink as it dries. Think of a solidified pot of spaghetti and that is dry linseed oil. Since decoy paint was generally linseed oil based, any solvent which attacks a coat of linseed oil will also attack the paint itself.

A number of years ago, a conservator at Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, VT, had the task of taking coats of linseed oil off of a group of shop figures which collectors during the 1930s and 1940s had coated with linseed oil to intensify the colors and preserve the paint. By the 1980s the oil had turned nearly black. She figured out a way to remove it, one square inch at a time. Conservators today cost around \$100-150 per hour, so it is a very expensive process, and may well still damage the surface of the paint.

Conservators for art museums usually say to leave dry paint alone. The only exception is microcrystalline paste wax. Wax is generally removable without damaging paint, and some conservators say that in a household setting, the problems with wax may be outweighed by the protection it provides against air pollutants and abrasion caused by dusting. Microcrystalline wax is less likely to turn white than regular paste wax. Soft paste waxes should be avoided as they have emulsifiers in them which can cause problems. Nonetheless, conservators generally prefer an absolutely dry surface. The colors of dry paint are more muted than those which have recently been "fed", but that is the way they should be. It's worth training your eyes to see the difference.

Museum curators and conservators universally wear white cotton gloves when handling painted objects in order to prevent skin oils from migrating into the paint and discoloring it. In most cases, simply washing your hands

before picking up your decoys is sufficient, but if you have decoys in exceptional condition or which are exceptionally valuable, you should consider emulating conservators. They know what they are doing. You can get gloves through University Products.

Dusting: The ideal is a dust-free environment, but few of us have the kind of air filtration systems to produce one, so unless you keep your decoys in glass or acrylic cabinets, dusting is needed now and then. Avoid a dust rag though. Use a soft artist's paintbrush with natural bristles. There is a reason for that. If you look at an old decoy with a relatively high power magnifier (say, about 16X or 20X), what looks to the naked eye as perfect paint suddenly has stomach turning cracks and flakes with slightly curled up corners. Every time you use a cloth to dust it, the cloth fibers catch some of those corners and break them off. You will not notice this, but it is happening and over years will indeed become noticeable. If you have decoys in great condition you will do some real damage over time. Better to use a soft brush.

If you do use glass or acrylic cabinets or cases, it is imperative that they not ever receive direct sunlight. They create a micro-climate (that is the point of using them) and sunlight falling on them even briefly will dramatically raise the temperature. You can both cook the decoys and quickly create massive mold or paint flaking problems. Cabinets are a great way to go, though. Just be aware of the hazard.

By the way, all those cracks in the paint are referred to in art circles as craqueleur and if you don't see it, either look harder or suspect you are looking at new paint. Old oil paint dries out and cracks in various patterns. Different parts of the paint will have different sizes and patterns of craqueleur, and some areas may have little or none. If there isn't any craqueleur, you should figure out why because 80 year old oil paint usually has it, even if very fine and subtle. Also, you should be aware that it can be produced artificially in new paint, so craqueleur is not a guarantee that paint is old.

Duck decoy stands are great, but can also do a lot of damage if they are misused. There are several kinds: wood or molded plastic with four prongs, and aluminum with three or four rubber tipped prongs. The plastic ones are more readily reshaped and cheaper than metal, and less noticeable than the wooden ones. You can cut the prongs to fit each decoy. If it has a flat bottom, a coping saw will shorten the prongs so that the keel weight just

clears the base, and if it has a round or V-bottom, cut the prongs at an angle so that sharp edges are not in danger of gouging the paint. Then round off the rough edges with a file. Museums add a bit of archivally stable Ethafoam to the end as further protection. The aluminum variety with padded tips is available with different prong lengths, and you may well find them worthwhile.

Light

Sunlight is the enemy of paint. Keep your decoys off of window sills, and tables or shelves which get direct sunlight even for part of the day. The ultraviolet rays in sunlight will fade the colors. It will also heat up the paint, then let it cool when the light is gone. That creates a repeated cycle of hot/cool, hot/cool which will dry out the paint, making it brittle, and will dry out the wood. When that happens, the wood will shrink slightly, the paint will try to shrink with it and will start to pop off when the wood shrinks more than the paint can.

Another problem is fluorescent lights. They have a very high ultraviolet component- much higher than incandescent bulbs. Until recently this wasn't much of a problem in houses, but now plenty of people are using the small fluorescents in lamps. Keep them away from your oil paintings, and that includes decoys. Keep them far away from any watercolors too, as those are even more susceptible to fading than oils are.

Humidity

Humidity is a problem if it is so high that it causes mold to grow, or so low that it causes wood to shrink more than the paint can. If the wood shrinks too far, the paint will start to flake off. Old paint has lost much of its original elasticity so it can't take the rigors it could when it was new. Once in a while an auction catalog will describe a decoy something like "Minor wear on the sides," when in fact what you see is flaking along the lines of the grain caused by extremely low humidity. The softer (less dense) wood between the rings shrank so much that the paint popped off.

Don't put decoys above heat vents or radiators: they are very hard on wood and paint. If you live in the North, you need to humidify in the winter. Forty to sixty percent relative humidity is about right. Brief periods of high humidity are probably less damaging than extremely low. Ten to 25% is

really tough on paint, as well as veneered furniture. Stuff starts cracking and popping off.

Fakes, Mistakes, and Undisclosed Restorations

All three are problems, and, like most such, are best combated with knowledge. If you have studied your favorite decoy maker well, you will identify most outright fakes readily enough. They just don't look right. The honest reproductions made and signed by contemporary carvers are potential problems if someone crooked removes the marks, but rarely are the repros truly identical to the real things. Still, knowledge is key. If you don't have it, you must rely on others you trust.

From time to time honest repros come out of estates and into the general antique market where they are misidentified as real and sell for significant prices. If you buy from a general antique dealer who claims something is by a famous maker, it pays to get a written guarantee of authenticity, and to immediately consult someone really knowledgeable. It's better, of course, to be able to tell on your own.

Several years ago a collector was walking around the area of Portobello Road in London, famed for its antique flea market, when through a shop window he saw what looked like a Nathan Cobb brant decoy sitting on a table about 30 feet away. Since the bulk of the Cobbs have been in collectors' hands since the 1960s, it took no stretch of his imagination to think one could have since made it's way to London. People move, people give presents. Who knows? When the shop opened he went in and looked. It was identified as a Cobb brant, and priced at 1800 British pounds or so. However, despite the lack of a maker's mark, it was by one of our better contemporary carvers. Caveat emptor.

Restorations are a more common problem, as some of the restorers are extremely good, and pieces come back on the market years after a legitimate restoration, but somewhere along the line a seller forgot to mention the fix up. Unfortunately there are people in every industry who might tell the truth if asked point blank, but would never consider volunteering it. Others will work to conceal the truth. Be sure to ask a seller if there has been any repair or restoration, and get a written guarantee for anything expensive.

Several years ago a couple of collectors went to a small brick-a-brac auction

in the basement of a bowling alley. Fortunately one had taken a pocket flashlight and a magnifying glass as the room turned out to be darker than a tomb. As advertised, there were several decoys, and one was a Mason's Factory Challenge grade pintail drake in what looked like nice original paint.

They looked it over in the dim room, and the thing seemed just a little bit too good to be true. They couldn't put a finger on it, but kept looking with the light and magnifying glass. Finally they looked at the holes in the bottom where the anchor line staple and keel weight screws had once been. With the flashlight they could see that nice fresh "original" paint went right into the holes. The entire decoy had been repainted by a good restorer. Since decoys were rigged after getting painted, original paint doesn't go into holes from rigging, or from birdshot. If the keel weight is still there, but has paint going over it, that area at least has been repainted.

Black Lights

Ultraviolet lights, or black lights, as they are popularly known, can be quite useful for detecting certain kinds of restorations. They will not tell you if a piece is completely repainted, but they will tell you if two areas of paint which appear identical really are. That lets you wonder if one section is restoration.

The reason it works is that different paint manufacturers use different formulas, formulas are changed from time to time, and different formulas react differently to UV light. I once turned a black light on a decoy which I already knew was almost entirely repainted. Most of the black areas had a matte finish, but one small section near the lower edge of the breast, while the same color, was shiny. The light left the matte paint black, while the shiny section (the original paint) lit up as screaming chrome yellow. Just so, if the black on a decoy breast stays black, but the black on the tail fluoresces a different color, you should want to explain the discrepancy. Maybe one section has been restored. Maybe the maker added a touch of something to his tail paint. If the latter, at least some of his other decoys should show the same effect when black lighted.

That's where specialization lets you study up. To use the Joe Doaks shorebird example again, if you have black lit three or four Doaks and the black areas all fluoresce the same as the others, and you light another but it reacts differently, you should ask yourself why. Maybe Doaks switched paint

brands, or maybe you have a decoy with a really good paint restoration.

The differences brought out by black lights can be very subtle, and I think the best way to learn is to experiment with decoys you know have some inpainting. It's all part of studying, and it can be a lot of fun.

X-rays

In the mid-1990s the Milwaukee Public Museum took a new look at their decoy collection. It had been assembled around 1967-68, and had largely been kept in storage since. Several collectors visited and provided their thoughts: Even in a collection that old there were one or two pieces which were universally declared to have been new or nearly new when the museum got them, despite having then been described as 19th century.

The Conservation Department X-rayed a shorebird because it had brown spots which weren't easily explained, and overall the paint didn't look right. X-ray showed it was full of dozens of large birdshot. Someone before it went to Milwaukee had filled the holes and completely re-painted it. Thirty years later the oil in the putty had bled through and discolored the paint. It is possible that the seller had been unaware of the restoration.

In another case, the head carving of the museum's Charles Walker pintail drake looked too crisp compared to that on their Walker mallards, and the paint texture on the head and upper neck was a bit different from that of the lower neck and body. Another X-ray: Someone had done a beautiful job of reheading it, attaching the new neck to the stub of the original. It was noticed because the new head was actually finer than an original. Again, there is no way to know if the seller was aware of the restoration, but the price paid was pretty stiff by the standards of the day, so the museum was probably unaware of it. Given how well done the work was, it is possible that the seller was too. Sellers don't have to be crooked to sell problem decoys. They can just make honest mistakes.

Provenance, Research, and Documentation

There are a lot of definitions of provenance, but for our purposes it means the documented history of an object's ownership. It is important because it tells you the earliest date an object existed, and that gives you a handle on the likelihood that it is real.

It does not tell you if the thing is any good or not because even great collectors have owned a lot of mediocre things along the way to developing a great collection. With decoys especially, the earlier collectors- say anyone prior to the 1970s- tended to buy entire rigs when they found them. They would keep their favorites and trade off the rest. A lot of the rest weren't very good. That's why they disposed of it, or died with basements full of stuff they hadn't sold.

Among the better kind of provenance would be a photograph in Joel Barber's book, Wildfowl Decoys, because it is quite unlikely that anyone was faking decoys in 1934. Two other great provenances would be similar pictures in Adele Ernest's The Art of the Decoy or Bill Mackey's American Bird Decoys. Appearing in 'Decoy Collectors Guide' magazine would be pretty good, too. Just remember that these would not be guarantees. Everybody makes mistakes from time to time, and sometimes they get published.

If you are lucky enough to get decoys from a primary source such as a duck hunter's descendents, ask them what they can tell you about who used it and where. Also find out if they have any hunting photos, even if they don't want to part with them. It sometimes happens that you can identify the decoy you just bought in an old photo. That photo is documentation of provenance: either offer to buy it, or at least get a copy of it for your file on that decoy.

Several years ago a collector bought a very nice mallard decoy attributed by the seller to a follower of Milwaukee decoy maker Warren Dettmann. It looked familiar to another collector who had assembled a file while researching Dettmann for an article. Among other things, he had contacted Dettmann's descendents and made copies of several photos in his scrapbooks which showed him with his decoys and decorative miniatures. There in the file was a photo of the mallard. That's provenance. The decoy wasn't a copy by a follower, it was the real thing. The new owner got a copy of the photo for his file.

Another time a couple of Wisconsin collectors bought decoys from a gentleman whose father and grandfather had hunted over them. Among them was a circa 1880 George Peterson mallard from Detroit and Holly family canvasbacks and redheads made in Maryland around 1890-1910. While none of them was choice, it was an interesting group, especially to find Susquehanna Flats decoys in Wisconsin and to know who used them and

where. It turned out that the family had been co-owners of the biggest meatpacking house in the state and had bought an island for hunting diving ducks in 1893. That explained the Hollys, which were of about that date, but perhaps not the Peterson mallard, which was earlier. One collector looked up the ancestors' obituaries in the public library and hit pay dirt with the seller's father, who had died in 1939. The obit read:

"(He) joined the (family) company in 1877...(He) used to recall that the marshes around Milwaukee's first large stockyards were some of the best duck hunting grounds in the state at the time."

"I used to keep my gun and my boots handy in the office. When I'd spot a flock of ducks I'd climb up on the roof, bag several, then push out with a dog in a skiff I had near by to pick them up. I got eleven one day," he once recalled."

That sounds like a fine day at work, back in the days you could keep a dog, a shotgun, and just perhaps a few Peterson mallards at the office, and bang away from your own roof in downtown Milwaukee without the SWAT team looking kind of squinty-eyed at you.

The collectors also looked up the location of the meatpacking plant on an 1898 Milwaukee plat map, and sure enough, it was on a canal off of the Milwaukee River. They also found the site of his old house, a short carriage ride away from the plant, sharply up hill and up wind, and suddenly realized why Wisconsin Avenue had then been the premier residential street in Milwaukee: It was close to the owner's businesses, but suffered little from the stench of the industrial valley.

So, a little time at the library paid off with a small history lesson, making otherwise fairly ordinary decoys a good deal more interesting and making sense of some of 19th century Milwaukee's social and business geography.

All went into the files on those decoys, of course, to be passed on to the next owners. While nearly all of the original paint remains on the Peterson mallard, it has a number of shot holes and is somewhat worn. It is a nice example, but not a notably fine or expensive one. What makes it special is its story. Too many good decoys have lost their stories, so if you have the opportunity to preserve a few of them, do so. Some people will pay more for them.

As you gather information on a decoy, write it down and put it in a file, even if you start with nothing more than a bill of sale and your returned check. If you have expensive decoys, be sure to photograph them and file the pictures as well so you can document the condition they are in at the time. If one has been published, add that information, and at least get a photocopy of the publication. Documentation adds interest and that adds value. Why throw away money?

If your decoy comes with an old label attached, including the label from the auction you bought it from, leave it alone. It is part of the decoy's history and is evidence of provenance. Even if you don't know whose label it is, someone else might.

During the 1990s the Milwaukee Public Museum researched some of their decoys, and old labels proved to be key in discovering early history for several of them. Some had the original collector's inventory numbers on them, that collector was still alive, and he had his records. In one case he was able to tell the museum that he had bought their Elliston canvasback- a very rare decoy with fewer than 10 known in original paint- from the Elliston's daughter in 1957.

It turned out that across town at the Milwaukee Art Museum, there was another Elliston canvasback with the same number on it. That allowed that museum to discover that it was one of the same group of decoys bought from the Elliston's daughter. A long time Illinois decoy dealer then identified the hunter's brand on the bottom as having been that of John D. Martin, a tavern owner in the Elliston's hometown of Bureau, IL, and a member of the Princeton Game and Fish Club from about 1918-1940. A third mark proved to be from an identifiable collector who had owned it during the 1960s.

Altogether, three mysterious marks identified three previous owners, including a hunter and where he had used it. The Elliston canvasback no longer existed in a vacuum: it had a history.

When you look over your decoy after bringing it home, document it's condition and toss that into the file. Photograph it and examine it while writing down notes. This serves two purposes: it lets you know later if it has deteriorated or been damaged without your knowledge, and just as importantly, it forces you to look at it closely.

Use a good light and a magnifying glass or better yet, magnifying goggles aka binocular magnifiers. Basically they are an adjustable plastic band which goes around your head and holds a pair of magnifying lenses in front of your eyes. You can wear them over glasses. (University Products has a fancy version at a fancy price in the Tools section. Many art supply shops carry perfectly good ones which are far cheaper.) Look the decoy over slowly and think about what you are seeing. Try lighting it from different angles as raking light will show things more direct light won't, and vice versa. Take notes.

As you go over it inch by inch you will see things you hadn't noticed: a pattern of tiny flakes on the left side of the head behind the eye, a touch of overpaint on the tail, restoration to a third of the filler around the neck joint (yes, you should have noticed that before buying, but this is how you learn), perhaps the right eye is noticeably higher than the left (another thing you should have picked up on before). Keep thinking and you are on the way to knowledge. And don't worry too much. You are going to pay some tuition along the way.

Conclusion

This has turned out to be a bit longer an introduction to decoy collecting than expected, and it could have been a good deal longer, but I hope that it will prove useful to you. If you haven't already, read the basic surveys, and get a copy of Alan Bamberger's [The Art of Buying Art](#) soon as it is far better than this short essay can be.

The above may seem a bit overwhelming for you, but if you take it a step at a time, you should have no great trouble. Collecting decoys is fascinating in part because it is complex, with many avenues for you to pursue. Spend time studying, set some goals, take your time, and you should have a lot of fun and manage to keep your tuition low.

Happy collecting!

Tom Bosworth
February 2007

My thanks to George Secor for critiquing early drafts. His comments improved it

immeasurably. TTB

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