

Copley Fine Art Auctions, LLC, Plymouth, Massachusetts

Long Decoys Sell at Historic \$4.1 Million Sale

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Copley Fine Art Auctions

In a better market time, they might have gone through the proverbial roof. Given the circumstances, the seven decoys by A. Elmer Crowell from the Harry V. Long collection, offered as part of Stephen B. O'Brien Jr.'s fourth annual sporting sale at the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on July 15 and 16, "merely" touched the skylights. Six of the seven sold, for a total of \$1,817,000 (including buyers' premiums), while during the week that followed the sale, three or four people were reportedly circling the sole buy-in, one of the two circa 1910 "dust jacket" black-bellied plovers.

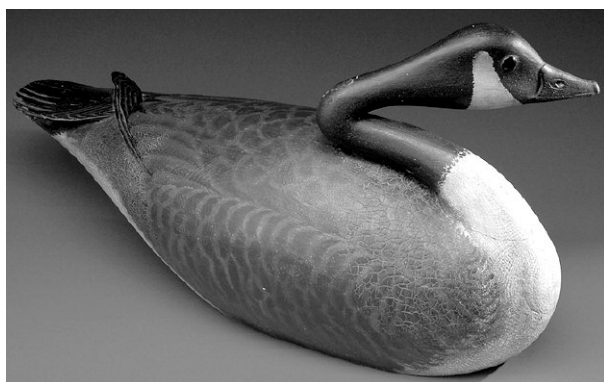
The sale—including 653 other lots of decoys, paintings, prints, and books—was the auction house's best ever, fetching \$4,159,393, a phenomenal 30% or nearly \$1 million more than last year's \$3.2 million success. Within those statistics are several others—world record auction prices for a Crowell ruddy turnstone, for a Crowell set of miniature waterfowl, and for makers John G. Tornberg, George Hinckley, and Mark S. McNair. "But I think what I'm probably most proud of is that it all happened in a tough economy," O'Brien said.

During the sale we noted, besides the Long plover, a minimal number of buy-ins. O'Brien confirmed that the sell rate was approximately 90%, with 22 of the 25 top-estimated lots of decoys and 23 of the 25 top-estimated paintings sold. "That's quite an amazing percentage in any market," he said, admitting his own surprise at the against-the-odds results. "But when I accept a consignment, I really want to have an auction. I want my buyers in the room to feel like they're there to take something home."

Indeed they did—and at every price point. "Some people have the misperception that we deal only in high-end items, but we had tons of items estimated at fifty to two or three hundred dollars," he said. "What's important is that even the lesser priced objects are quality items within those fields."

O'Brien reiterated his egalitarian philosophy in his introductory remarks at the start of the sale, before auctioneer Michael Grogan, whose own auction house is in Dedham, Massachusetts, took the podium. "We have decoys here from a hundred dollars up to wherever they go," O'Brien said. And how far would they go? That was the burning question and a cause for excitement as the bidding got underway.

During its lengthy publicity phase, decoy enthusiasts already understood that the sale would be historic. The Harry V. Long birds, made expressly for Long (1857-1949), an early Crowell patron, had never been out of the family. If one looked at maker, form, rarity,



Selling to a private collector on the phone at \$661,250, this nesting Canada goose by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) dates from the pre-brand Crowell era of 1910-12. In 1912, the year that the United States banned the sale of migratory birds, Crowell, a former market hunter, began carving full time for a living.



The same collector's agent who bought the preening pintail drake also bought the Long family's swimming black duck by Crowell for \$115,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000). On its underside is a crisp oval Crowell brand, which dates from 1912-20.



A circa 1890 black duck by Harvey A. Stevens Decoys sold for \$7475 (est. \$2000/4000). Its buyer was Jim Cullen, author of the new book *Finely Carved & Nicely Painted: The Life, Art and Decoys of George H. Boyd, Seabrook, New Hampshire, 1873-1941*.

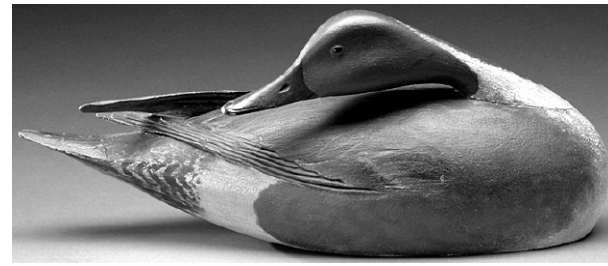
condition, age, provenance—each bird had it all.

On the day of the sale the auction room was arranged in museum style. Large white walls and pedestals had been erected with black-lettered signage in a distinguished font "The Harry V. Long Collection" and "A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952)." Displayed in those settings, along with the Long decoys, were several other key objects from the fine arts part of the sale, such as works by Andrew Wyeth, Frank W. Benson, and Edmund C. Tarbell.

In addition to a regular softbound catalog, a 95-page hardback keepsake book featuring just the Magnificent Seven was produced. It included O'Brien's biographical essay "The Life of Harry V. Long," illustrated with many photos of the apparently idyllic life that Long, the son of a cofounder of the Boston Stock Exchange; his wife, Susan Higginson Bowditch Long; and their family enjoyed on their island estate, a weekend retreat called White Head, off Cohasset, Massachusetts.

An interior shot of White Head shows two of the three extraordinary geese made by Crowell for Long. As if the exquisite birds themselves weren't enough to whet an enthusiast's whistle, the photo shows them displayed in a well-appointed interior, on a Pilgrim period chest, below an Audubon print, and between a couple of nice-looking Windsor chairs.

One of the geese, in a standing pose, is also pictured in *The Art of Deception: Waterfowl Decoys from the Private Collection of Paul Tudor Jones II* (2006). It presumably remains in Jones's hands. The other, a preening goose, was brokered by O'Brien in the famous \$1.13 million deal that matched the world record for a decoy (the other \$1.13 million decoy was the Phillips preening pintail drake) in September 2007. Now, at this sale, the third one, a nesting goose, was



Bought by a collector's agent for \$546,250, Crowell's pre-brand preening pintail drake, made for Harry V. Long, dates from 1900-10.



Two phone bidders were in on the action for the Crowell tucked-head red-breasted merganser drake from the Harry V. Long consignment, dating from the maker's pre-brand days, 1900-12. A collector from the South in the back of the room got his card up once. In the end, it went to another collector in the room at \$207,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000).



A canvasback pair by one of the Hollys of Havre de Grace sold to a phone bidder for \$155,250 (est. \$150,000/250,000). Steve O'Brien identified him as a collector from the South.



A circa 1948 turned-head feeding pintail drake by John G. Tornberg (1902-1971) of Mill Valley, California, sold to a phone bidder for \$26,450 (est. \$10,000/20,000). Provenance included the William J. Butler Jr. collection. The price was a world record for the maker, said Steve O'Brien, besting the previous record set at the sale of the Dr. James M. "Jim" McCleery collection by Sotheby's and Guyette & Schmidt on January 22 and 23, 2000.

being offered with official expectations of \$600,000/900,000. Is it any wonder, then, that the unofficial expectations of the decoy world had it at \$1 million or beyond? It seemed that even the auction house was admitting the possibility in print, given that the catalog for the first time quoted a buyer's premium of "15% of the final bid price up to and including \$1,000,000, plus 10% of the final bid price over \$1,000,000." (In previous years the 10% was applied after \$100,000.)

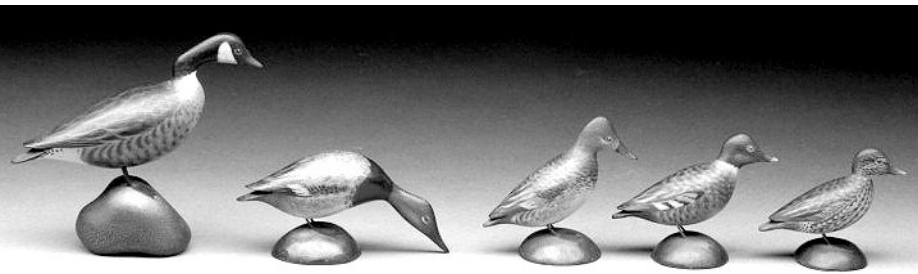
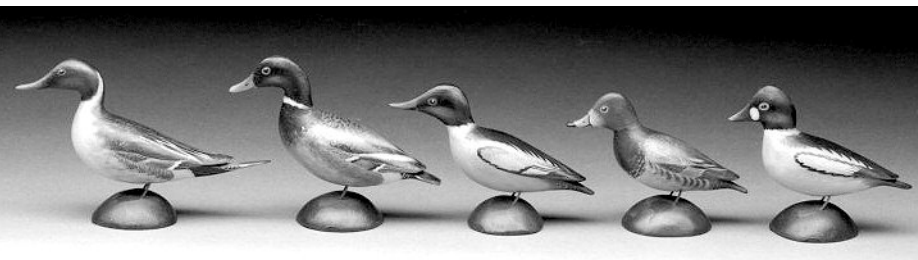
One other Long bird, a preening pintail drake, was estimated almost as strongly as the goose at \$500,000/800,000 and seemed as qualified to break the record. The drake was the first Long bird up, offered as alternating views of it were projected in a slide show on a screen. (All lots with multiple views available were presented that way.) When it sold to a collector's agent in the room for \$546,250, after only a few minutes of sparring with a phone bidder being handled by



A circa 1984 preening swan by Mark S. McNair (b. 1950) of Craddockville, Virginia, sold to a phone bidder for \$16,100 (est. \$5000/10,000).



A swan by John "Daddy" Holly (1818-1892) or James T. Holly (1855-1935) of Havre de Grace, Maryland, sold to an absentee bidder for \$54,625 (est. \$50,000/100,000). It's one of no more than five documented examples, according to the catalog, which also noted that earlier attributions of these swan decoys were given to the Hollys' fellow Havre de Grace maker Sam Barnes (1857-1926).



A complete circa 1915 set of 25 (partially shown) Crowell waterfowl carvings sold to a room bidder on a cell phone for \$92,000 (est. \$75,000/125,000). The very early custom set, originally owned by George Abercrombie Spaulding of Boston and South Carolina, came to the sale from a Cape Cod collection. At some point between they also passed through the hands of dealer Dick McIntyre of Seabrook, South Carolina. The price was a record for a Crowell waterfowl set, said Steve O'Brien.



A ruffed grouse in full strut, carved from a single piece of wood by Lem Ward (1896-1983) of Crisfield, Maryland, sold to a phone bidder for \$40,250 (est. \$45,000/55,000). According to the catalog, it is one of five made by the younger Ward brother.

O'Brien, there was a moment of silence rather than applause from the standing-room-only crowd of about 200. Never mind that the price was within the estimate and was a hefty one at that. Actively disappointed is the only way to describe the mood. Strange world!

That mood continued when the same buyer took the swimming black duck at \$115,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000); when the goose sold on the phone for "only" \$661,250; when dealer Dick McIntyre of Seabrook, South Carolina, relaying bidding action via cell phone to an unknown party, took the open bill calling yellowlegs with dropped wings at \$172,500 (est. \$150,000/250,000); and when one of the two plovers went at \$115,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000) to a man who asked to be identified only as a Tennessee collector.

Only Long's tucked-head red-breasted merganser inspired a little clapping when it sold above its \$100,000/200,000 pre-sale prediction to another collector in the room at \$207,000.

People in the hallway beyond the salesroom afterward wondered outright about O'Brien's reaction. Was he disappointed? There was no time to ask him right then, as the rest of what would be a truly successful auction was underway. Afterward, however, he told *M.A.D.*, "We were very excited to be a part of this historic sale. And we were thrilled to sell six of the seven birds for the Long family. And over the course of history these will be some of the most highly regarded decoys of all time. I will say, however, I am a little surprised that they didn't go higher. I think that the five buyers acquired at the upper echelon of the field."



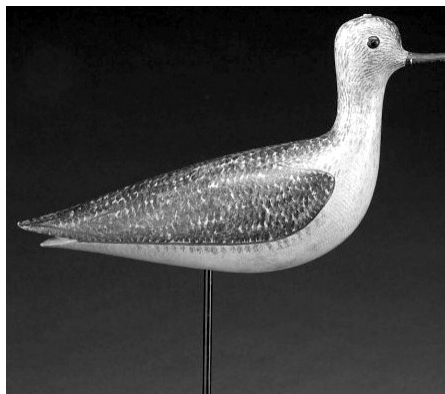
A circa 1922 life-size ruddy turnstone by Crowell from the Gary Giberson collection went up just after the consignment of the seven Long Crowells. It sold for \$80,500 (est. \$30,000/60,000) to a man who wanted to be identified only as a collector from the South. He bought several other lots at this auction and at Ted and Judy Harmon's auction (see p. 32-C). According to Steve O'Brien, the price was a world record for any Crowell ruddy turnstone. The previous Crowell ruddy turnstone record of \$76,560 was set during the October 26-28, 2007, sale at Northeast Auctions in Manchester, New Hampshire.



A "Minnow in Throat" yellowlegs by George Hinckley (1853-1929), one of only a dozen Hinckley birds known to survive, set a world record for the maker when it sold for \$20,700 (est. \$12,000/18,000) to a private collector from Maryland. According to the catalog, Hinckley of Beverly, Massachusetts, made the whole rig of 12 out of one piece of wood, showing the same original fill line. One other from the rig is in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Another is pictured in *The Magazine Antiques*, September 1989.

Summarizing the Long results in more succinct terms, he said, "We didn't hit a grand slam, but we hit a pretty good triple." As this current event recedes into history, some might even call it a home run.

On both days of the sale, a few sections of more contemporary objects were offered. These included a 23-lot collection of decoys by Mark S. McNair of Craddockville, Virginia, from the estate of Barrie and Bernice "B.C." Stavis.



The Tennessee collector who bought a Long plover spent another \$18,975 (est. \$10,000/15,000) for a circa 1920 yellowlegs by George Boyd. It was a strong price for it.



A circa 1910 life-size greater yellowlegs by Crowell from a private Connecticut collection went at \$26,450 (est. \$15,000/25,000) to an absentee bidder.



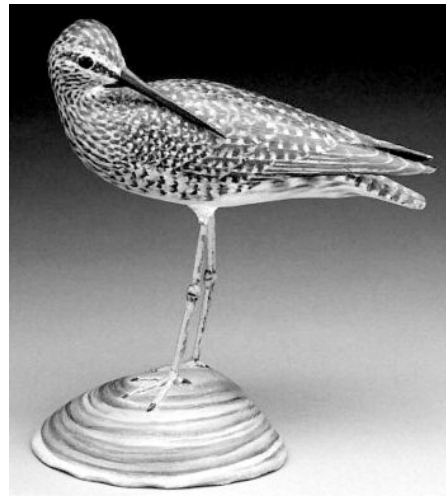
South Carolina dealer Dick McIntyre, presumably acting as a collector's agent, bought this Crowell open-bill calling yellowlegs with dropped wings for \$172,500 (est. \$150,000/250,000). It is initialed "A.E.C. 1910" under the right wing. The Long family descendants believe this decoy was no longer used for hunting and had been displayed on a family mantel by the end of the 1920's.



One of the two circa 1910 Crowell black-bellied plovers from the Long consignment sold to a Tennessee collector for \$115,000 (est. \$100,000/200,000). A second one was bought in on the same estimate, but as of this writing, its post-auction sale seemed imminent.



A circa 1910 standing hollow pintail drake by Charles Schoenheider Sr. (1854-1924) sold by phone to a private collector from the Midwest for \$37,950 (est. \$20,000/40,000). It came to the sale from the Peter Brams collection.



A circa 1940 life-size preening lesser yellowlegs in excellent condition by Crowell from a Massachusetts collection sold to a room bidder for \$26,450 (est. \$15,000/25,000).



A black-bellied plover by Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920) of Tuckerton, New Jersey, went on the phone at \$13,800 (est. \$3000/5000). It came to the sale from the William J. Butler Jr. collection.

"You should be developing relationships with makers like McNair," in the same way that the early collectors developed relationships with makers like Crowell, O'Brien had told his audience in his introductory remarks. That is what American playwright Stavis and his wife, a film producer, did, starting in the mid-1970's, when McNair was in his twenties.

At this sale the McNair decoys fetched outstanding prices, all but three going over estimates and a few substantially higher. The top McNair lot, a 1989 rig of five Nantucket-style golden plovers, sold for \$37,375 (est. \$5000/10,000) to the same collector's agent who took two of the Long collection Crowells. It is the new world record for McNair.

O'Brien is accepting consignments for 2010. For more information, contact Copley Fine Art Auctions at (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site (www.copleyart.com).



An Opal: Study of Yellow and White Light by Edmund C. Tarbell (1862-1938), a 35" x 30" oil on canvas in a Carrig-Rohane frame, sold on the second day for \$120,750 (est. \$100,000/200,000). This top painting lot is a reminder that Copley Fine Art Auctions specializes in sporting paintings but isn't limited to them. Consigned by William Brewster, whose snipe art collection was sold last year, the portrait of Lydia Hatch, sister-in-law of the artist, went to a man from Houston, who identified himself as "a collector of a lot of things."



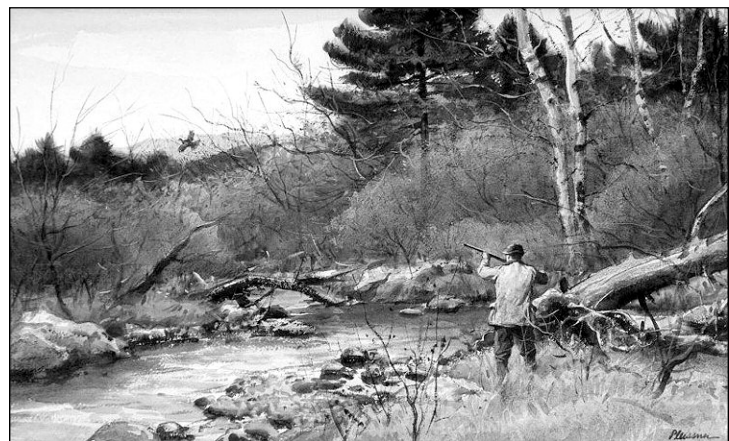
Canada Geese by Frank W. Benson (1862-1951), a 19 1/4" x 23 3/4" watercolor, signed and dated "28," sold for \$80,500 (est. \$60,000/80,000) to an absentee bidder who thwarted multiple phone bidders.



Canvasbacks by Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927), an 11 7/8" x 19" gouache on paper, went to a phone bidder who pushed the final price to a surprisingly strong \$25,300 (est. \$6000/9000).



In the Feed Patch by George Browne (1918-1958), a 10" x 14" oil on board, sold to an absentee bidder for \$34,500 (est. \$18,000/24,000).



Grouse Shooting by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), a 16 1/2" x 26 3/4" watercolor on paper, sold to a phone bidder for \$69,000 (est. \$30,000/60,000).



The sale's cover lot, *Marsh Shooting* by John Martin Tracy (1843-1893), a 20" x 14" oil on canvas, went on the phone at \$31,050 (est. \$15,000/25,000). There is a golden glow to this classic shorebird hunting scene, which also has the nostalgic quality that is so much a part of sporting art collecting.



Ogden M. Pleissner's *The Gondolier*, watercolor on paper, 18" x 28", went at \$46,000 (est. \$35,000/45,000) to a phone bidder who bought a number of other lots. "It's good to see finally some of Pleissner's non-sporting scenes start to bring some money, because historically they have taken a back seat, and he is one of America's greatest watercolorists," Steve O'Brien said.



Those are crows, not game birds, in the sky of *John Andress House* by Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009). The 1943 watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", sold for \$63,250 (est. \$60,000/90,000) to a collector who bought on both days of the sale.



Grouse and Spruce Tree by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969), a 27" x 40" oil on canvas, sold to a phone bidder for \$46,000 (est. \$30,000/60,000).



Aiden Lassell Ripley's *Grouse in the Orchard*, a 21" x 45 1/2" watercolor on board, fetched \$77,625 (est. \$20,000/40,000) from a collector in the room.

A 1989 rig of five Nantucket-style golden plovers by Mark S. McNair sold for a record-breaking \$37,375 (est. \$5000/10,000). The previous McNair record was set at O'Brien's 2008 sale, then broken two more times at this sale, before this rig topped them all.

