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Book Review: Birds in Wood and Paint

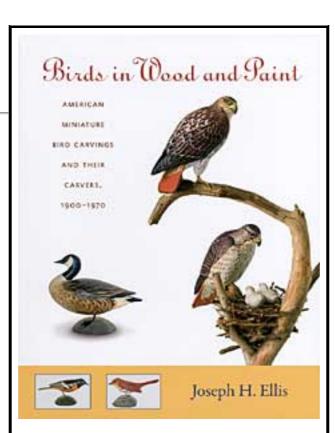
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Birds in Wood and Paint: American Miniature Bird Carvings and Their Carvers, 1900-1970

by Joseph H. Ellis
University Press of New England, 2009,
184 pages, hardbound, \$60 plus S/H
from University Press of New England,
Order Department, 1 Court Street,
Lebanon, NH 03766 or (800) 421-1561
or from the Web site (www.upne.com).



Joseph H. Ellis was a birder first and a collector of miniature bird carvings second, and that progression is everywhere evident in his important new book. Birders don't just pick a bird out of a landscape when they're out in the field. To find what they're looking for, they need to understand the whole environment in which the bird lives. That's why Ellis, who initially intended to write a book about miniature bird carvings, found it impossible to ignore the relationship between the smaller-scale birds and the same makers' full-size carvings. As a result, in addition to producing the first book about minis, he has also written what amounts to the first comparative guide to American bird carvers in general.

By being comprehensive, he also came up with an original thesis, which has to do with the development of decorative birds as opposed to working decoys. After passage of the 1918 law that outlawed market gunning, many carvers turned to other trades, while A. Elmer Crowell, Joseph W. Lincoln, George Boyd, and their less-talented counterparts continued to produce birds. Some of them were not for hunting, however; they were meant for placement on mantelpieces.

Many of these early examples of "decoratives" were just like decoys except carved and painted with extra care. Then a change occurred that led to the creation of a separate category of carvings, many of which have proven to be highly valued in the secondary market today. That crucial developmental step, Ellis argues, came when the carvers began to produce miniature and half-size birds. In his view, this, more than anything else, "set the new field of [decorative] bird carving (as opposed to decoy carving) in motion."

Ellis, a retired partner of Goldman Sachs, quickly discovered as he began to research this beautifully illustrated book that one of the difficulties he would face was "assembling sufficient examples in one place (i.e., earlier and later examples of the same species) in order to make the necessary visual comparisons." (Italics are the author's.) While some museums do have collections, they weren't sufficient for his purposes. Instead, he relied on private holdings and on auction catalogs and their reproductions, footnoting along the way the key role that commerce has played in bringing these folk artists the attention they deserve.

A case in point is the October 1977 auction by Straw and Sanders at Wentworth-by-the-Sea, New Hampshire, at which 156 of George Boyd's minis, representing 50 different species, were sold. Many were bought by dealer Winthrop Carter, who included them 18 months later, along with other Boyds, in an exhibition at the University of New Hampshire. According to Ellis, after the joint impact of these two events, the auction and the exhibit, collector interest in Boyd's minis "soared."

Boyd (1873-1941), who used a Pointillist style to create the impression of feathers with hundreds of tiny, curved strokes of paint, is one of the early makers whose reputation continues to grow. It isn't likely, however, to surpass that of the recognized father of them all, A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952). Deservedly, Crowell gets the lion's share of pages in this book, including a section devoted to deciphering all the many stamps, brands, and paper labels that he and his son, Cleon, used through the years. After all, Crowell, along with Joe Lincoln (1859-1938), is credited with being the first "to depart systematically" from carving full-size birds.

Starting perhaps as early as 1904, both men began producing minis (2" to 6") of ducks and geese that found a new market not only among sportsmen but among non-hunters as well. Crowell, for example, discovered he could sell the smaller ones more easily than full-size examples to Cape Cod tourists, who could fit multiples in a suitcase to bring home.

Besides Crowell, Lincoln, and Boyd, 11 miniaturists whose names are less familiar to collectors are also given their due by Ellis. Each life and career is sketched in its own chapter, with the "essence" of each style and output distilled, in much the way that many of these carvers distilled the "essence" of the species they were depicting.

Among them, A.J. King (1881-1963) of North Scituate, Rhode Island, having been trained as a jeweler, produced highly detailed family groups, one of which, a red-tailed hawk pair with nestlings, was photographed for the book's cover. Harold Gibbs (1886-1970) of Barrington, Rhode Island, was a marine biologist and conservationist who, like Crowell, gave most species a single, individual stance, but who, unlike any other major bird carver discussed by Ellis, fashioned the legs of his miniatures from wood. A.J. Dando (b. 1885) of Philadelphia, then New York City, specialized in waterfowl and game birds in flying form. He obviously relished "the *opportunity* to paint feather groups in fine detail and shaded colors," Ellis observes. (Italics, the author's.)

Considered by Ellis to be "one of the finest of all bird miniaturists," Dando nonetheless remains largely a mystery. What we do know about him is the result of a chance find by metal-detector enthusiast Jack Schadegg, who unearthed a metal cast and painted wood-duck head stamped with Dando's name. Over several years Schadegg pieced together what he could of Dando's personal history and shared his findings with Ellis for this publication.

Ellis's hope is that bird lovers like himself will enjoy this book as much as collectors and contemporary carvers inevitably will. For that reason, he has written it for a general readership, and that's part of its great appeal. Birds in Wood and Paint is an attractively produced fact-filled book by an expert and is also elegantly written—rara axis

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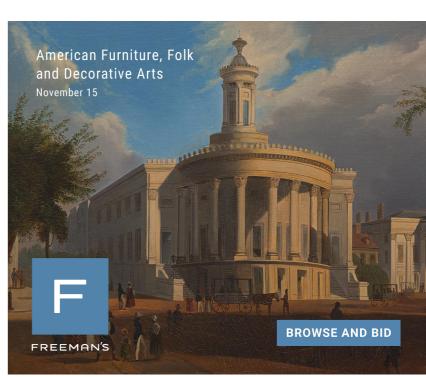
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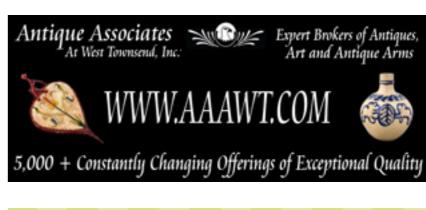
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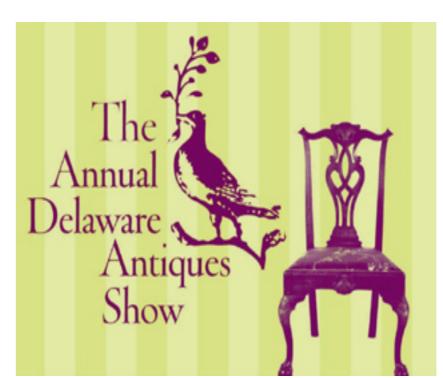
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