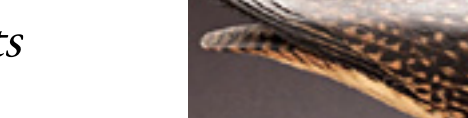


October 13th, 2011

Decoys Fly High, Art Treads Water at O'Brien's Summer Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Copley Fine Art Auctions,
Plymouth, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Copley

"A year ago, our decoy prices were soft, and our paintings were strong," Stephen B. O'Brien Jr., chairman of Copley Fine Art Auctions, observed after his firm's latest sporting sale at the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on July 21 and 22. "We had the Rungiuses and the Pleissners and the Bensons."

Indeed, last year at the same venue five wild animal oils by Carl Clemens Moritz Rungius fetched \$1,305,250 (including buyers' premiums) or about 30% of the auction's \$4,298,424 total—the young firm's best. "This summer we just didn't have the strength in the paintings," O'Brien continued. But last January at the Boston-based Copley's first sale in New York City, "We saw the decoy market tick upwards, and then we saw it continue at this sale. Two auctions don't make a trend, but there's definitely a pulse."

It's an understatement. Eighteen of the sale's 19 top-valued decoys were sold, at least three for record prices. One record-breaker and two others brought six figures. And there's more for O'Brien to crow about, if he chooses. Even a couple of the paintings made artist's records, one for Aiden Lassell Ripley, the other for William Goadby Lawrence. Of the 753 lots of decoys and paintings offered over the two days, only 14% failed to sell, and the 86% that sold brought in close to \$2.5 million. That figure isn't close to the auction house's previous totals, but, as O'Brien explained, "We've changed our model, since we have added the second [New York City] auction [in January]." Given that last winter's inaugural Manhattan sale brought about \$1.5 million, the firm still sold about \$4 million worth of property this year.

One of the records was for a canvas-covered decoy from the Roger D. Williams collection. An old squaw from a famous rig by Lothrop Holmes (1824-1899) of Kingston, Massachusetts, sold to a phone bidder for \$218,500 (est. \$150,000/250,000). At a Guyette and Schmidt sale on July 30 and 31, 2005, a Holmes old squaw from the same rig brought the previous record, \$132,250. The new record holder is the only known swimmer from the rig. A non-swimmer rig-mate, offered directly after the swimmer, made just \$74,750 (est. \$60,000/ 90,000).

A second record came with the sale of a decorative shorebird by the acknowledged master, A. Elmer Crowell, who lived and worked in East Harwich, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. The running curlew in original paint and nearly untouched condition was consigned by a family who stated in a letter that the circa 1912 carving had "been hidden away in the California foothills for over fifty years" and "never been offered for sale." Copley sold a related example on July 26, 2007, for \$186,500. At the time, it was the highest auction price ever paid for any decorative shorebird by Crowell. O'Brien also believed the price to be a probable world record for a decorative shorebird by any maker. Despite that benchmark, the Crowell that was consigned by descendants of the California family carried a conservative \$60,000/90,000 estimate, causing several bidders to hope —pointlessly, as it turned out.

Four people, three on phones, were in the game to \$190,000. After that, it was between a lone phone bidder and a presumed collector's agent in the room on a cell phone. Finally, the room bidder prevailed, taking it for a remarkable \$247,250.

A circa 1910 Crowell miniature jack curlew made a third record price, for any mini shorebird by Crowell, when it sold for \$12,650—more than double its high estimate. In outstanding original paint, it came to the sale, along with 49 other minis, from William V. Tripp III's collection. Going for nearly as much, \$11,500 on a \$4000/5000 estimate, was Tripp's mini ruddy turnstone by Crowell. Other standout sellers among the Tripp minis were a Crowell preening goldeneye drake (\$9200), a Crowell Eskimo curlew (\$7762.50), and a Crowell jack snipe (\$7762.50).

In a catalog tribute to Tripp (1938-2009), O'Brien praised the man's collecting style. Tripp never acquired a species "just to fill a hole and cross it off his list," O'Brien said. Patiently Tripp would wait for a maker's best work. After the sale, O'Brien commented, "It was nice to see other collectors respond in the same manner and appreciate Mr. Tripp's eye and [the birds'] quality."

A second group of minis at this sale did extremely well. They were the work of A.J. King of North Scituate, Rhode Island, who, trained as a jeweler, worked on a scale one-half the 2" to 6" size of his fellow artists. The minis were from the collection of Eve duPont Remer, who bought them new in the 1950's at the legendary Crossroads of Sport in New York City, and they had not been on the market since. We noticed Joseph H. Ellis of Cornwall, Connecticut, and New York City—author of *Birds in Wood and Paint: American Miniature Bird Carvings and Their Carvers, 1900-1970*—was taking a long look at them at the preview. The cover of Ellis's book shows a King family group of red-tailed hawks, the male keeping watch on a tree branch, the female with two chicks in a nest below him. It is family groups for which King is best known, and at this sale, those brought the highest prices.

The top King family group was a nesting bald eagle pair that sold for \$9487.50 (est. \$3000/5000). Close behind were a ruffed grouse with chicks that made \$8912.50 and a swan pair with cygnets that sold for the same price, each of them on a \$1500/2500 estimate.

Toward the end of the second day, a final, major Crowell went up. One of only three known of his early oval-branded decorative wood duck drakes, it sold for \$115,000 but probably could have achieved more. "The estimate [\$100,000/ 200,000] may have impacted the bidders," O'Brien mused. He said he thought that estimates on some of the major paintings had the same negative effect.

Breaking Wave, an 1883 Winslow Homer watercolor seascape, most likely of Prouts Neck, Maine, is a case in point. "We put an estimate on it that we thought would sell it," O'Brien said of its \$100,000/200,000 expectation. "Obviously the market thought otherwise." An additional negative was that, in his words, "it wasn't the freshest," having been offered at one of the Palm Beach antiques shows over the winter. It was bought in at \$85,000.

Like the Homer, a painting by N.C. Wyeth may have suffered the double jinx of an overconfident estimate and previous market exposure. (Add to that a third liability: neither is exactly sporting art, and participants in Copley sales are very focused.) Titled *One January Afternoon*, the 1915 oil on canvas was an illustration for George T. Marsh's story "The Quest of Narcisse Lablanche" published in the May 1916 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. From Wyeth it went into the collection of Grace Harding of Cleveland, Ohio, then by descent in her family. On November 22, 2002, Skinner sold it to Tripp for \$110,500. That's just too recent for exceptional results in the secondary art market. Although at the sale it appeared to have sold on the Internet for \$75,000 hammer, the buyer reneged, and it sold later for \$80,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000) to the underbidder, O'Brien said

A pair of 1926 watercolors on paper by Frank W. Benson sold in one lot on the phone for \$109,250, just squeaking past the low estimate. Titled *Hunter with Retriever* and *Hunter with Decoys*, respectively, the paintings descended in the family of Edwin C. Webster, who commissioned the works from the artist. Webster was co-founder and owner of Massachusetts Electrical Engineering Company, now Stone & Webster, one of the first electrical engineering firms in the United States. According to Faith Andrews Bedford's book *The Sporting Art of Frank W. Benson*, he and Benson (who was Bedford's great-grandfather) were hunting companions at hunt clubs like one at Swan Island, North Carolina, which both paintings reportedly depict.

Benson had family and social ties to the hunt-club life. Aiden Lassell Ripley was in a different financial situation, particularly during the Great Depression, when he switched from cityscapes to landscapes to sporting art because it was more salable. As O'Brien noted in his catalog, collectors of Ripley's oils of hunting and fishing scenes endorsed his numerous trips to the salmon rivers of New Brunswick and the quail plantations of Georgia, where Ripley, too, indulged his passion for hunting and fishing while recording material he would use in his artworks.

This sale's *Springers and Pheasants* by Ripley undoubtedly came out of that mold. A classic scene of two hunters ready to shoot flushed pheasants in an autumn corn field as their alert dogs look on, the signed and dated (1948) oil on canvas went to a phone bidder for \$97,750. No other Ripley has sold for more, according to Internet search engines, but O'Brien somewhat wistfully said: "It's funny. You set a world record, but it sells below the low estimate [\$100,000], so it doesn't feel like it." (His celebrating was subdued for another reason. He said he has heard that a Ripley sold for \$200,000, but he can't find the auction record. Anybody?)

The complete set of drypoints of Aiden Lassell Ripley, 40 of them, came to the sale along with other items from the sporting art and books collection of John E. Lennon (1936-2010). Assembled over four decades, the set is believed to be the only complete one of its kind. "Somebody got a good buy on that," O'Brien said after the prints sold in one lot for \$21,850 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Obviously, he was expecting more, but many people who participate in these sales like to hunt, period. Another hunter's trophy may not have been all that enticing.

O'Brien's sales always include some contemporary artists' works. Bidders this time liked *Blast Off*, an oil on board by Luke Frazier (b. 1970). It sold for \$5462.50, with proceeds going to the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust. They also went for Frazier's *Cat Bird Seat*, an oil on board of a bobcat that sold to a phone bidder for \$4312.50 (est. \$3000/5000). They passed, however, on Frazier's pricier fishing scene in the same medium, *Voyagers* (est. \$8000/12,000).

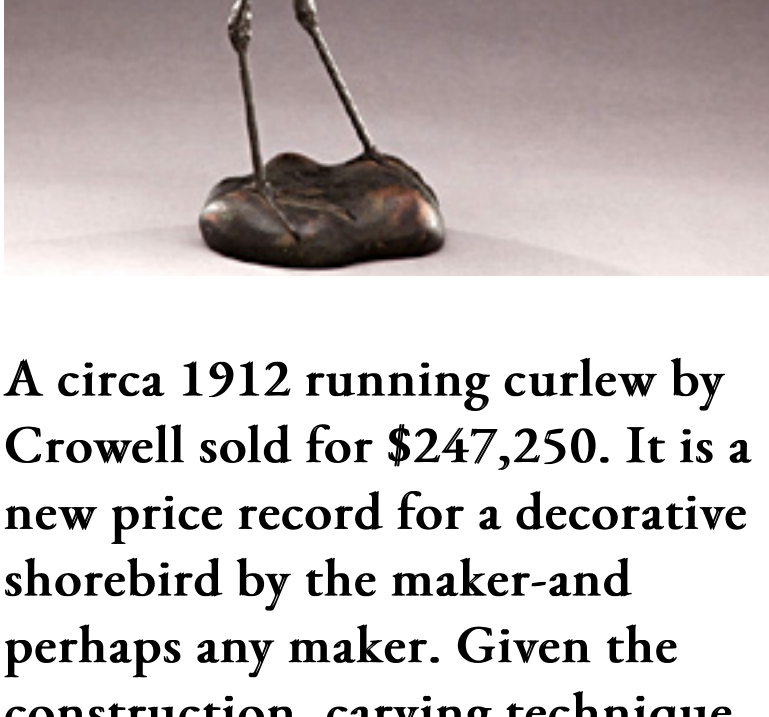
The painting by William Goadby Lawrence (1913-2002) that made the new artist's record is an oil on canvas portrait of a blue marlin partially airborne in pursuit of a school of prey. It is inscribed with "The Beginning of a Feast" and "Blue Marlin" on its reverse, and it sold for \$8050 (est. \$6000/8000). Lawrence's *Evening Sail*, in the same medium but smaller, shows a sailfish breaching. It brought \$6325 (est. \$3000/5000).

Mark McNair (b. 1950) of Craddockville, Virginia, is a contemporary decoy maker whose decoys have sold well at Copley. This time, there was a circa 1995 white weathervane of a whale by the artist that sold for \$8625 (est. \$3000/5000). He made only a few of these following a trip to Nantucket. Given this auction's outcome, he may be inclined to make more.

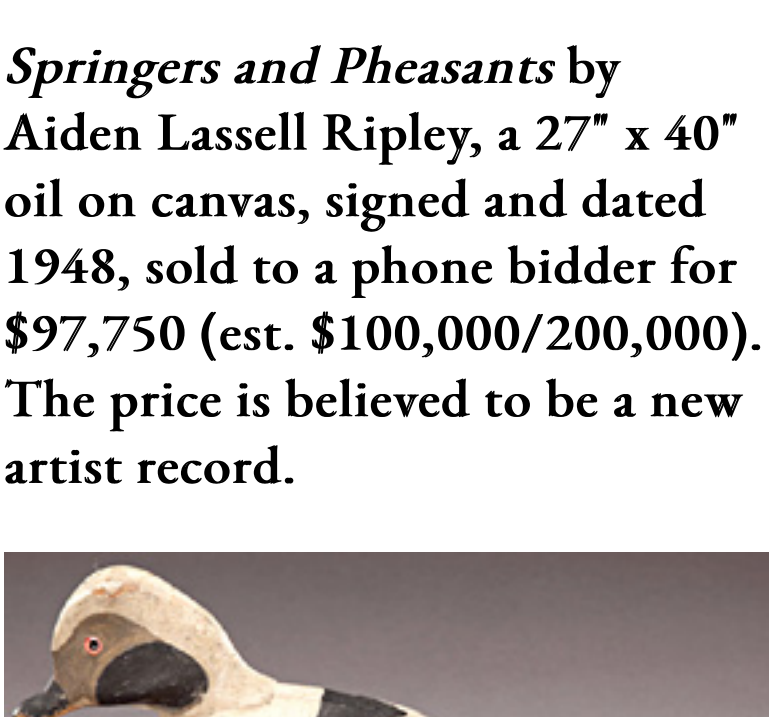
The next Copley sale is scheduled for January 16, 2012, at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola at 980 Park Avenue in Manhattan. Once again, it will be held in conjunction with a sale by Keno Auctions (www.kenoauctions.com) and designed "to kick off Americana Week," O'Brien said. For more information, contact Copley at (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site (www.copleyart.com).

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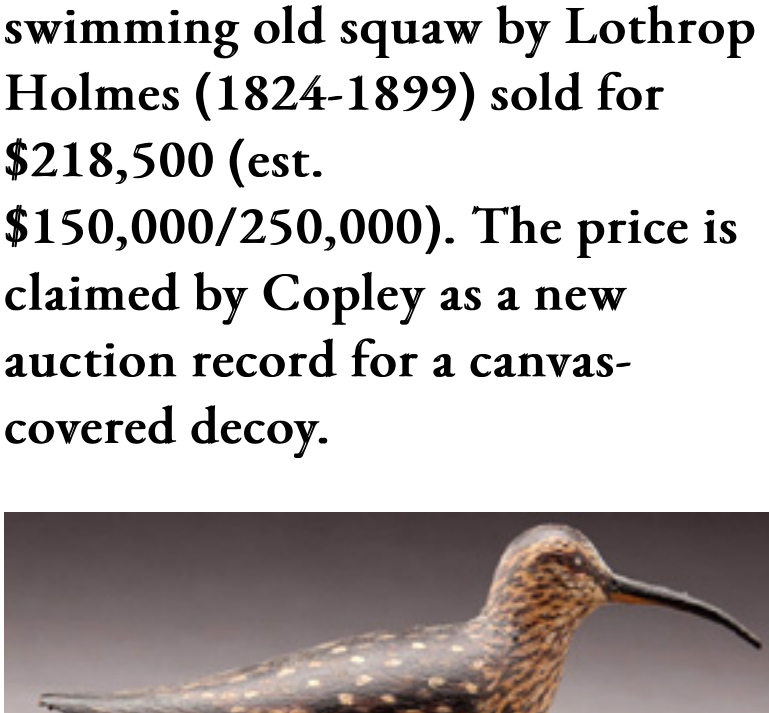
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A circa 1912 running curlew by Crowell sold for \$247,250. It is a new price record for a decorative shorebird by the maker-and perhaps any maker. Given the construction, carving technique, and paint application, it is believed to be the earliest of all known Crowell decorative curlews and likely made for one of his early patrons, either Dr. John C. Phillips Jr. (1876-1938) or Dr. John H. Cunningham Jr. (1877-1960).



Springers and Pheasants by Aiden Lassell Ripley, a 27" x 40" oil on canvas, signed and dated 1948, sold to a phone bidder for \$97,750 (est. \$100,000/200,000). The price is believed to be a new artist record.



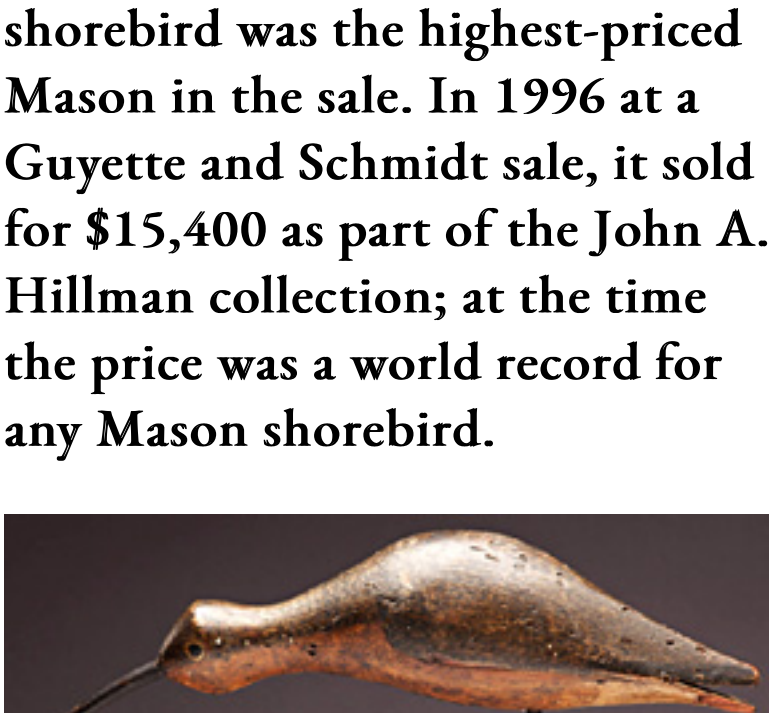
A circa 1870 canvas-covered swimming old squaw by Lothrop Holmes (1824-1899) sold for \$218,500 (est. \$150,000/250,000). The price is claimed by Copley as a new auction record for a canvas-covered decoy.



A miniature jack curlew by A. Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) sold for \$12,650 (est. \$4000/5000). It's the new price record for a Crowell mini shorebird. William V. Tripp III collection.



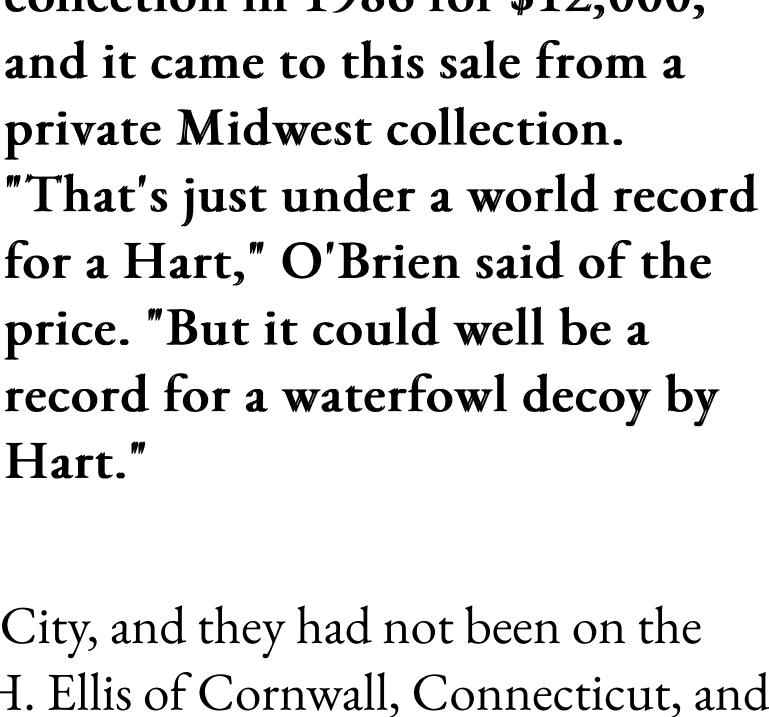
The top seller of the A.J. King miniatures was this circa 1950 nesting bald eagle pair that sold for \$9487.50 (est. \$3000/5000).



A rare Hudsonian curlew by the Mason Decoy Factory (1896-1924), Detroit, Michigan, brought \$37,375 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The circa 1910 shorebird was the highest-priced Mason in the sale. In 1996 at a Guyette and Schmidt sale, it sold for \$15,400 as part of the John A. Hillman collection; at the time the price was a world record for any Mason shorebird.



A circa 1890 feeding Eskimo curlew by an unknown maker sold for \$10,350 (est. \$3000/5000). "We didn't have any real screamer shorebirds in this sale," O'Brien said. "But there were some good mid-level [examples] like this one."



A circa 1890 Canada goose stick-up by Charles Hart (1862-1960) of Gloucester, Massachusetts, fetched \$34,500 (est. \$30,000/40,000). One of only two known, it was originally collected, along with the other one, by Dr. George Ross Starr in the mid- 1950's and is illustrated in Starr's Decoys of the Atlantic Flyway. It sold at Richard Bourne's auction of the Starr collection in 1986 for \$12,000, and it came to this sale from a private Midwest collection. "That's just under a world record for a Hart," O'Brien said of the price. "But it could well be a record for a waterfowl decoy by Hart."



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