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September 17th, 2008

# Dog Portrait and Crowell Black Duck Lead \$3.2 Million Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Copley Fine Art Auctions, LLC, Plymouth, Massachusetts

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A world auction price record was set for Edmund H. Osthaus when his outstanding portrait of a pointer with a quail in its mouth was sold at Stephen B. O'Brien Jr.'s third annual sporting arts sale, held July 23 and 24 at the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Other fresh lots of exceptional paintings and decoys put bidders in the mood to compete. The results on 235 lots of artworks and 334 decoys and shorebirds totaled more than \$3.2 million.

With the combined estimate on over 550 lots at \$2.5 million/3.9 million, the sale easily hit its mark. It also overtook the grosses of the auction house's previous two sales, \$2.3 million in 2006 and approximately \$2.6 million in 2007.

"That's a twenty percent improvement over last year," O'Brien said a week later as he set up for the Nantucket antiques show. (Besides running the annual auction, he and his wife, Cinnie, are sporting art dealers with a gallery on Boston's Newbury Street.)

"Considering the economy," O'Brien said, "I was pleased. What I'm most excited about is that virtually everything sold. We had very few buy-ins. There was a little bit of unevenness in the middle market, and as a result I think there were some pretty good buys, but I was impressed with the strength in the high-end pieces and also in items under ten thousand dollars."

O'Brien's sale was second in the lineup of three specialty auctions traditionally held in July in New England. On the two previous days, Ted and Judy Harmon's Decoys Unlimited of West Barnstable, Massachusetts, held its sale on Cape Cod. On two subsequent days, Guyette & Schmidt of St. Michaels, Maryland, held its sale in Portland, Maine. Major collectors and dealers like to attend all three, but this time, some players were absent or seen at only one or two—a sign of the times.

"Airfare, rental cars, hotel bills, restaurant meals—it's all adding up," said a collector who spent six figures at O'Brien's but none anywhere else.

O'Brien's auction house has always distinguished itself from the Harmons' and Guyette & Schmidt's by selling both art and birds. Interestingly, at this sale O'Brien did \$1.6 million in each category.

Obviously, the dual-content concept is producing good financial results, but O'Brien continues to tweak his format. The consensus this time was that it worked. Bidders liked having art on one day, birds on another, instead of one long day of both, back to back, or two days of a mix.

A good auction requires showmanship, but most bidders, given the choice, would probably take speed over style. Last year, the pace of auctioneer Jay Beard, accompanied by a gyrating, hand-clapping spotter, was an agonizing 40 lots per hour. This time, guest auctioneer Michael Grogan, whose own 20-year-old auction house has general antiques sales in Dedham, Massachusetts, dispersed lots at 70 lots per hour-or lph (if I may invent a useful abbreviation for these pages).

O'Brien's catalogs continue to be sumptuously illustrated. They are also well written, almost lovingly. O'Brien seems to delight in composing chronicles that evoke the period when the artworks and decoys were created. At age 40, he is still young, but his first hunting and fishing experiences date to his boyhood, and he capitalizes on these as well as on his and his family's friendships with some of the greatest names in sporting art collecting.

Narrative writing ability aside, O'Brien's condition reports on the decoys are straightforward and notably thorough. (Bidders interested in artworks must ask for them.) "We try to set ourselves apart by really detailing the descriptions on the birds," he said. "That links back to not wanting to get anything back."

O'Brien positioned the art portion of the sale on the first day, perhaps to give bird bidders a breather after the Harmons' sale. (See page 46-B for that story.) Its live audience numbered about 50; twice that many came for the birds.

Top-lot bidders on both days were predominantly on the phones, usually a recipe for auction tedium, but the Osthaus record-setter, *Pointer with Quail*, produced an entertaining phone bidding war between O'Brien and his father. The painting by the German-born American sporting-dog painter opened in Grogan's book at \$40,000, the low estimate. Soon enough, the contest between son and father's bidders began. Back and forth they went for a full 15 minutes, with Grogan calling "Junior" and "Senior" (or, variously, "Dad").

"Didn't we all know it was a two-hundred-thousand-dollar painting?" Grogan asked his audience when the bidding reached that level. It proved to be the dividing line. After five took it to the next increment, père was silenced, and the new record for Osthaus was set at \$230,500 (includes buyer's premium).

"I knew that painting was one of the best I'd seen by the artist, but I didn't have any idea it would go where it went," said O'Brien, who identified his bidder only as a private collector. As for the consignor, he was a great-nephew of 19th-century merchant George M. Brady Esq. of Detroit, Michigan, who commissioned the oil on canvas work from the artist in 1890.

O'Brien is increasingly associated with the artist Frank W. Benson. In 2006 Benson's 1927 oil on canvas *Salmon Fishing* sold for \$747,500, accounting for about a third of the entire sale's take. This sale featured over 40 Bensons in a variety of media, including many fine, rare, and early etchings consigned by two of the artist's great-grandchildren.

A Benson that came from a different source was the second-to-top painting lot in the sale. A watercolor titled simply *Widgeon*, it is believed to have been commissioned from the artist in 1926 by George de Forest Lord, an owner of the famed Blake Plantation of Hampton County, South Carolina, where it hung for many years. Consigned to the sale by a Lord grandson, it went on the phone at \$131,500.

The buyer of Benson's *Widgeon*, a private collector from the West, phoned in several wins on important art lots at this auction. One was a watercolor by Ogden M. Pleissner, *Waiting for the Rise*, a classic Atlantic salmon fishing scene dating from 1952. Consigned to the sale by the Norman B. Woolworth family of Winthrop, Maine (relatives of the five-and-dime store founder), it was the top Pleissner in the sale, fetching \$94,875.

The same western phone bidder paid \$89,125 for Aiden Lassell Ripley's *Point in the Corn*, a watercolor of a quail hunting scene on a southern plantation. "It had all the bells and whistles that southern quail hunters are looking for in a Ripley work," said O'Brien, whose book about Ripley, coauthored with Julie Carlsen, will be published soon. That price beat the record not only for Ripley watercolors but for all works by Ripley.

Point in the Corn came fresh to the market from the family of Clifford Llewelyn Fitzgerald, a New York City advertising executive, who lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, and owned the plantation pictured. Of the sale's nine Ripleys, it made the most, chased by several other phone bidders, including the usually unstoppable George Arnold of Ormond Beach, Florida.

The plantation at the time Ripley painted it, in the 1930's or 1940's, was 12,000 acres that extended from Thomasville, Georgia, into Leon County, Florida. "Thus my interest!" the collector of Florida art wrote in a post-sale e-mail. "As a point of reference, the Florida state capital, in Tallahassee, is in Leon County."

Collectors Mary Jane and John Dreyer of Ridgewood, New Jersey, were among the strongest room bidders at the sale, buying paintings and decoys, as well as the circa 1910 Tlingit salmon basket that O'Brien presented in its own separate catalog and gave a \$60,000/90,000 estimate.

Its provenance included an unnamed private collection in Seattle, Washington, Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe, the Charles and Valerie Diker collection of New York City, and dealer/designer/collector Ned Jalbert of Westborough, Massachusetts.

On May 18, an 18th-century Tlingit warrior's helmet sold for \$2,185,000 at Fairfield Auction in Newtown, Connecticut. Brought to an appraisal day benefit for a local senior center, it remains the most expensive American Indian object sold at auction.

The Tlingit salmon basket, however, was from a century later and not even close to being a new discovery. On one bid against the book, the Dreyers had it at \$63,250.

"I think it was a little too quick to bring it back on the market," O'Brien said, "but I think in the long term it will be a good investment."

The Dreyers won several of the sale's other good buys, including Ripley's 1949 watercolor *Two Woodcock* (\$19,550), Lynn Bogue Hunt's oil on canvas depiction of buck fever, *Big Horn Rams* (\$33,350), and another Pleissner watercolor from the Woolworth family, *Duck Hunting at Dawn* (\$63,250).

"There were some good buying opportunities reflecting the uncertain times," said O'Brien. "Astute buyers worked them up. There has been a shift in both the decoy and sporting artworks market, so for the smart collector, it could be a good time."

The sale's top bird lot was not a bargain. It was a life-size reaching black duck by A. Elmer Crowell that went to a Cape Cod collector in the room for \$214,000. According to O'Brien, the circa 1912 decorative was bought in 1959 from a Minneapolis art gallery by J.B. Linsmayer, a close friend of Jimmy Robinson. Who had it before that is unknown, but its base bears the earliest oval Crowell brand and, penciled below that, a previous asking price: \$15.

Robinson was editor of *Sports Afield* and founder of the Sports Afield Duck Club, one of the world's great gathering places for migratory waterfowl, located on the Delta Marsh in Manitoba province. He made it a habit to be photographed with the many celebrity guests he entertained there, including Ernest Hemingway, Clark Gable, and Monaco's Prince Rainier. One presumes that Linsmayer was within shoulder-rubbing distance of some of them.

Never mind its celebrity associations. The duck represents a brilliant example of the master's work. O'Brien's catalog notes that, along with Canada geese, Crowell's yearling bag was almost always predominantly black ducks, and his familiarity with their anatomy is apparent in the meticulous detail, but only a true artist could have conveyed the bird's animated motion and the idea that it is a very specific individual of the species.

Gene and Linda Kangas of Creekside Art Gallery, Concord, Ohio, bought another of the sale's prominently featured bird lots, a pair of geese by Minnesota's John Tax. One is a nested-head sleeper; the other, a watch gander, considered to be Tax's best high-headed sentinel and the tallest of all Tax sentinels. Lucky enough to get the complementary rig mates for just above the low estimate, the Kangases paid \$103,500.

They also bought a West Coast bird, an exceptional flying brant by George William McLellan, paying \$43,700, again just above the low number. Considered to be the best of the nine existing classic redwood McLellan brant decoys, each with uniquely designed movable and adjustable wings, this one retained its original brass mounting devices and original wooden carrying box.

"We prefer decoys that are readily distinguished from the crowd; made in small or very limited numbers; one-of-a-kind or one of just a few; by a particular artist—in other words singular statements," Gene Kangas wrote in an e-mail after the sale, adding that he and Linda naturally gravitate toward birds that "demonstrate individual sculptural expression"—e.g., "decoys in various lifelike postures—feeders, swimmers, reachers, sleepers, nested-heads, and watchers sculpted by carvers who developed their own personal creative sensibility."

"The John Tax geese and George McLellan brant cross the critical threshold from decoys that were once intended as merely utilitarian hunting tools into expressive folk art. Opportunities to acquire decoys with such exceptional qualities are extremely rare. We are excited to have been able to add them to our collection."

We also spoke on the phone to Gene Kangas, who, with Linda, has been collecting decoys for 40 years and written three books on the subject, along with two national decoy directories and two exhibition catalogs. Aware that market reports stressing record prices can discourage new collectors, he mentioned a few of the sale's appealing lots on the low end. There was, for example, a black duck by Charles Hart of Gloucester, Massachusetts, that went in the room at \$2300. "It had a lot of quality to it. I own the best Charles Hart in existence. I didn't need it, but it's a very nice one."

He also singled out an early "root head" decoy with a removable head that was attributed to Roger Williams (1770-1840) of Peconic Bay, Long Island, New York. If it is a Williams, somebody bought a 200-year-old decoy for \$172.50.

The swimming brant by Havelock Mill of Prince Edward Island, Canada, circa 1880, was another good buy at \$460, Kangas said.

Last, Kangas named the Ontario hollow mallard drake. An Internet buyer who calls himself or herself "good4sure" got that one for \$180.

"The fact is, there are some great decoys and great prints that can be bought for a hundred and fifty dollars today," O'Brien said, "and we will always offer them. Some of our best customers started out buying at that level, and now they have graduated to buying million-dollar items."

For more information, contact Copley Fine Art Auctions at (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site ([www.copleyart.com](http://www.copleyart.com)).

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