Wilson Merganser Sets A Record At Copley?s Summer Sporting Sale

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PLYMOUTH, MASS. — The Duck-a-thon. The Duck Trifecta. The Trail of Tears. Duck, Duck, Goose. These are among the many phrases used to describe the annual New England summer decoy auctions conducted within five days of each other in the month of July.

Kicking off this annual tradition was Copley Fine Art Auctions' sporting sale July 25–26 at the Radisson Hotel in historic Plymouth. Just minutes from the *Mayflower II* and Plymouth Rock, where the likes of William Bradford and Steven Hopkins are said to have stepped foot on American soil for the first time, decoy collectors, dealers and sporting art enthusiasts descended on the quaint New England seacoast town to begin the annual ritual of hobnobbing, collecting and wheeling and dealing. The 589-lot auction grossed $2.3 million in sales and achieved a 90 percent sell-through rate.

Chairman and chief executive officer Steve O'Brien welcomed attendees to the auction with introductions to some of the highlighted lots, before inviting auctioneer Peter Coccoluto to the podium. He returned shortly after the sale was underway to make one more important announcement — an invitation for everyone in the salesroom (which was filled to capacity) to the much-anticipated annual seafood buffet at Cap and Paige Vinal's home in Duxbury. The Vinals, who are highly respected collectors, are known for their hospitality and generosity. After attending all three major decoy events, it is clear that this small but very friendly world of collectors knows how to have a good time.

The decoys were sold on day one of the auction, while fine art was offered on day two. Offerings encompassed examples from many of the major geographic areas known to decoy collectors, with a something for everyone. The decoy highlight was a red-breasted merganser drake by Maine carver Augustus "Gus" Wilson (1864–1950). Born on Mount Desert Island, Maine, Wilson was a lighthouse keeper, boat builder and decoy carver.

The impressive merganser, carved with a rare open bill and described as the finest Gus Wilson ever offered at auction, proved the claim by setting a world auction record for a Wilson decoy when it sold just under estimate for $330,000 to a phone bidder. "The distinct animation and rare open bill sets this all-original decoy apart," commented Colin McNair, Copley's decoy specialist. "This is the kind of piece that elevates a decoy carving to a fine piece of American folk art."

The 16½-inch bird is well known in collecting circles, having been on the block in 1992 and 1996 and illustrated in Joe Engers' 1990 book *The Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys* and Robert Shaw's *Bird Decoys of North America*. Many of the world record auction results for top carvers come from mergansers, mainly because the specie's animated form, striking plumage and pronounced crest lends itself well to artistic interpretation.

The second highest price achieved was for a swimming brant by Nathan Cobb Jr (1825–1905) of Cobb Island, Va. With impeccable provenance and described in the catalog as "the finest Cobb brant in existence," the bird realized $168,000 from an absentee bidder. William Mackey Jr, who once owned the brant, describes the Cobbs in his book *American Bird Decoys*, 1965, as "determined to produce the best decoys possible, and their work excellently served the needs of both the Nineteenth Century hunter and the modern collector."

So, we have duck, duck… now goose. A fine Maryland Canada goose by venerated carvers Lemuel and Stephen Ward passed on the block but sold after the auction for $80,000. The goose, which hailed from the George Thompson Collection, is illustrated in Shaw's book as well. Shaw describes the Ward Brothers as "by far the most prominent Chesapeake Bay carvers of the Twentieth Century and amongst the greatest and most influential bird carvers of all time."

Other notable highlights included a feeding yellowlegs, an exceptional shorebird by Lynn, Mass., carver Fred Nichols (1854–1924), which took $54,000, and a preening canvasback drake by Connecticut carver Charles "Shang" Wheeler (1872–1920), which brought $48,000, comfortably within estimate.

Among miniatures by Massachusetts carver A. Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) were a white pelican that far exceeded its $1/2,000 estimate to sell for $20,400 and a preening yellowlegs that brought $12,000.

One of the highlight lots from the Mackey-McCleery Collection was a feeding black bellied plover by Seaford, N.Y., carver Obediah Verity, but it failed to reach its $125,000 low estimate and was passed. A rare full-bodied sperm whale carving by Connecticut and Vermont carver Clark Voorhees (1911–1980), sold above estimate on the phone for $12,000.

Day two featured a selection of 200 works of art, including sporting art masters Frank Benson, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Ogden Pleissner and Roland Clark. Cover lot "Redheads in Flight" by American Impressionist Frank Benson (1862–1951) brought the top lot of the fine art offerings, selling for $360,000 over the phone. The impressive 36-by-45-inch oil on canvas depicting a flock of redheads flying above a marsh against a cloudy gray sky, was created in 1916, the year that Benson first visited Arthur Cabot's private hunting club at Long Point on Lake Erie. Benson once wrote to a collector that "Long Point was a wonderful place to me for I never had such a chance to see so many kinds of ducks so close at hand." Another Benson work, "Salmon Fishing," a 14-by-19-inch watercolor created in 1925, sold for $30,000.

"The Visitors," a 16-by-20-inch oil on board by New York realist Ogden Pleissner (1905–1983), soared well beyond its $75/85,000 estimate, finally selling for $198,000, the third highest price at auction for the artist. The painting, which depicts a Southern cabin scene, was sold with a print created from the painting titled "Monday Morning," published in 1944 by Samuel T. Shaw.

Immediately after the Pleissner sold, "Maryland Marsh," a 20-by-24-inch oil on board depicting a hunter taking aim in a marsh in autumn by John Frost (1890–1937), achieved $45,000. "Cock and Hen Pheasant," a watercolor by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896–1969), sold within estimate for $30,000, while a watercolor and gouache, "Birds of the Auk Family," by venerated ornithological artist Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874–1927) went for $14,400. "Leaping Brook Trout" brought $6,000 against a $2/4,000 estimate, setting the record for a watercolor sold at auction by William Schaldach (1896–1982).

One of the surprises of the sale came when a pair of bronze elephant bookends created in 1913 by Mahonri M. Young (1877–1957) took $8,700, well beyond its $400/600 estimate. Young, the grandson of Brigham Young, was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, and later moved to New York City, where he maintained a studio. The elephants are illustrated in *Famous Small Bronzes*, published in 1928 by the Gorham Company Bronze Division, New York.

All prices reported include the buyer's premium.

For additional information, www.copleyart.com or 617-536-0030.