



Just ducky

Great gifts, but learn collector's preference

By C.L. Rugenstein
staff writer

IF YOU'RE thinking of buying your favorite collector of duck decoys a special ducky gift, think again.

"Don't," said collector Ronald Swanson of Bloomfield Hills. "Unless the collector has declared him or her self on some particular duck."

There are enough decoys by enough well-known makers to find just the right one for the discerning collector after first finding out what he or she wants.

Some of the big names in antique decoys are Elmer Crowell of Massachusetts, Albert Laing of New York, Nathan Cobb and the Ward brothers of Virginia.

"Some people think Crowell's the best," Swanson said.

A CROWELL PINTAIL decoy in

the head tucked sleeping position sold for more than \$300,000 a few years ago, Swanson said. A Laing bird sold for \$48,000, and a Cobb goose recently went for \$95,000, he said.

"Like snowflakes, people look for different things," Swanson said. "Some want the birds in mint condition. Some collect only from birds that were used for hunting."

Some collectors buy birds in different positions — sleepers, or birds preening their feathers, while some like rare species like Sheldrakes or Ruddy ducks.

MOST, LIKE authority Adele Earnest, co-owner of the Stoney Point Folk Art Gallery in Stoney Point, N.Y., like them because they're a primitive art form.

The bulk of prized antique decoys were carved between 1850 and the late 1940s, Swanson said.

"The only indigenous form of folk

art (in America) are fish and duck decoys."

Lowell Jackson, a collector and co-author with Clune Walsh Jr. of "Waterfowl Decoys of Michigan and the Lake St. Clair Region," added some famous Michigan makers to the list.

Decoys by Tom Schroeder, Ben Schmidt, Nate Quillan, the Schweikart family of Belle Isle, Detroit's own Mason decoy factory and Tom Chambers of Canada are all very desirable, Jackson said.

THE SCHWEIKART DECOYS, dating from the turn of the century, are very stylized and easily recognized by the long sloping top of the head and beak.

"Schweikart decoys are one of the best because there are limited numbers, and they're very collectible," Jackson said.

Prices for a Schweikart can range from \$6,000 to \$10,000.

The Mason Decoy Factory birds, produced between 1885 and 1910, include shore and confidence birds, other waterfowl like herons or Canada geese. A Mason curlew can demand as much as \$12,000, Jackson said.

Jackson's tool for the hottest antique decoy went to Canadian carver Tom Chambers. A Chambers Woodcock is not the substance duck can go for anywhere between \$10,000 and \$25,000, he said.

ANTIQUES WERE working decoys, meant to be utilitarian, not for show. Many were carved by men who made their living from market hunting for fancy restaurants in big cities.

Carvers and collectors of contempo-

rary decoys, like Oakland County's own Hans Bolte, go for realism.

Most of the contemporary birds have never hit the water. And most, like Bolte's, have a "German porcelain realism," Jackson said.

BOLTE, A FORMER pattern maker who also teaches decoy carving, showed some of his work. A rainbow of ribbons — local, national and international awards for his work — lined the hallway to his basement work shop.

There, a Mallard hen and drake were carved and painted with such detail that they seemed ready to quack.

Bolte's decoys can sell for anywhere from \$450 to \$12,000.

Bolte was also knowledgeable about other contemporary artists like Jim Foote, one of his favorites.

Foote, who was with the Department of Natural Resources for years, also painted duck scenes. But a canvasback hen by Foote could cost a collector between \$2,500 and \$3,000, Bolte said.

Bolte's personal favorites to carve are sleeping ducks. His carving of a sleeping canvasback hen was good enough to win a world championship and an international championship for decorative decoys, and he displayed at the Smithsonian in 1979. That duck is a keeper, however, and an inspiration to Bolte's decoy carving students.

Collectors and would-be collectors can find Bolte's work from time to time at a chain of shops called Wild Wings in Birmingham, Plymouth or Grosse Pointe.

COLLECTORS ARE a good place to start, both to learn about and buy decoys, Jackson said.

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