

A Shootout Over Hunting Collectibles

Duck Calls

Wooden decoys were designed to draw migrating waterfowl.

Now they are attracting much bigger game. By Monte Burke

OH, FOR THE GOOD OLD days. Like that time in 1990 when Thomas K. Figge got wind of a dozen wooden duck decoys carved by master craftsman Bert Graves that were just sitting, unloved, on the mantel of a funeral home near Bloomington, Ill. A preacher had seen them during a memorial service and passed along a tip to one of Figge's "pickers." Putting on an old pair of dungarees and driving a beat-up Buick Le Sabre, Figge was there bright and early the following Sunday—"I wanted to make sure there was no service," he says—and bought the birds on the spot for a sum he refuses to disclose.

A year later he heard of an old lady near Decatur, Ill. with a Harry V. Shourds hissing goose. During negotiations for the bird the woman sweetly asked, "You wouldn't happen to know anyone in Chicago who has Bulls tickets, would you?" Four playoff tickets (and an undisclosed quantity of cash) later, Figge had his goose. In 1994 a couple in Bureau County, Ill. refused to part with a pair of Charles Walker mallards unless Figge also bought their 1976 Mercedes 450SL. What wouldn't he do for his decoy collection? Figge shrugs: "It grows on you like a sickness."

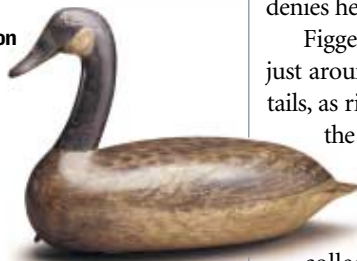
A decade ago that illness was sufficiently uncommon that he was able to amass one of the greatest decoy collections in the world, much of it on the cheap. He bought from other collectors and from descendants and widows of carvers, snapping up birds before they could hit the auction block. In the process he managed to disguise the fact that he's the son of V.O. Figge, who founded Davenport Bank & Trust,

an Iowa bank sold in 1991, for \$295 million, to what is now Wells Fargo. His props, including old Buicks and Oldsmobiles he took to buyers' houses ("I drove the paint off three of those bastards"), were all part of the bargaining act, a sort of collector's duck blind behind which he hid.

Now Figge, 60, must share the field with rich interlopers. Duck decoys are among the very hottest collectibles, says Nancy Druckman, director of American Folk Art at Sotheby's. Prices at the high end have doubled in the last five years and soared fortyfold in the past three decades.



Fanciful flock: mallards by Robert and Catherine Elliston (c. 1890); Ellistons' Canada goose (c. 1890); a pair of teals by Charles Perdew (c. 1945).



"My days of driving down old dirt roads and scooping up decoys are long gone," Figge laments. "Collectors have become very sophisticated and knowledgeable."

The major driver of that change was Figge himself. In 2000 in an auction cohosted by Sotheby's and Guyette & Schmidt, a decoy auction firm, Figge (via his agent) paid a record \$684,000, including a buyer's premium, for a preening goose carved by Cape Cod's A. Elmer Crowell. Three years later at an auction cohosted this time by Christie's and Guyette & Schmidt, Figge went head-to-head with billionaire hedge fund manager Paul Tudor Jones for a 1915 Crowell preening pin-tail. Tudor Jones reportedly left a maximum with his secretary, who was bidding by phone, thinking the price would never get that high. It did, topping out at \$802,000. (Figge still publicly denies he was the bird snatcher.)

Figge's comeuppance may be just around the next stand of cattails, as richer players lumber into the game, driving prices even higher. "The old decoy collectors are now having to deal with collectors who don't play by their rules," says Sotheby's Druckman. "The new guys are used to buying Winslow Homers." Among them: Jerome Lauren, head of men's design at the clothier run by his brother, Ralph. Jerry collects weathervanes, toy trucks and other Americana. "I don't pretend to be an expert," he says. "But I love these things."

Wooden decoys—ducks, geese, shore-



COURTESY OF STEPHEN O'BRIEN, JR.





Big bagged bird:
Thomas Figge
and a feeding
snow goose.

they were constructed of two halves, hollowed out for flotation, then nailed together.)

In the late 19th century on the Illinois River, which flows southwesterly through the state, decoys were carved by market gunners, who shot birds by the thousands and sold them to high-end restaurants like Chicago's Grand Pacific Hotel, which featured 20 species of game birds on its annual game-night menu. Charles Perdue, a carver from Henry, Ill., gathered wild rice from marshes and packed complimentary bags of it along with his dead fowl, which sold for 10 cents to 25 cents a pair.

Commercial harvesting of waterfowl all but ended with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. But the carvers kept at their craft. "Decoys were made as utility pieces, designed to kill ducks," says Stephen O'Brien Jr., who owns an American-sporting art gallery in Boston. "But the hunters, who carved these in their spare time, expressed their artistic nature by creating pieces that combine sculpture and painting." Robert and Catherine Elliston guided wealthy sports at the Undercliff Hotel on Lake Senawine, near Putnam, Ill. They also worked as a decoy-making team. Robert carved bodies out of white pine so precisely that he used glue instead of nails to attach the two halves; Catherine did the painting. When the birds come up at auction, they typically fetch \$100,000 apiece.

So do those made by Perdue. When he started carving in the early 20th century, his ducks had what were considered flaws at the time—thin necks that often snapped when handled. Such flaws are now considered assets, and early Perdues are among the most coveted examples in the world. Older, rare decoys by Henry Ruggles and Stephen Lane are nearly unobtainable. Figge has dozens by each Illinois River decoy artist, as well as birds by

CORAL VON ZUMWALT FOR FORBES

birds—were originally carved as hunting implements. Rigs of 6 to 100 ducks or geese were strung out early mornings on ponds and marshes as hunters hid behind blinds, hoping migrating flocks would see the decoys and come in for a landing or at least approach out of curiosity. The decoys

were never made to be exact replicas but to appear animate—that is, to look real from high above. Carvers from the Midwest, New England and the South made ducks that sat in the water, some with their heads up, some with necks preening backward, others that appeared to be sleeping. (Often

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carvers from New England, the mid-Atlantic and the South, a collection worth an estimated \$5 million to \$10 million.

With the introduction of lighter and hardier plastics in the 1960s, old wooden decoys were retired: tossed in garages, left on the water or put up on mantels, mainly forgotten except by hunters who saw sentimental value in them. "When the old guys look at a decoy, somewhere in their minds they see it floating in the water, as part of a rig, as part of hunting," says Donna Tonelli, a decoy historian.

Figge took his cue from the older collectors, who usually went to the sources—widows, family members, even the carvers themselves—to build their collections. "When I was a young boy, while my friends were playing with electric trains and teddy bears, I was out collecting decoys," says Donal O'Brien, 71, former chairman of the National Audubon Society and part of the old guard, with shorebirds and waterfowl in his collection. Lloyd Tayloe Griffith (he gives his age as "seasoned"), a physician from Mount Holly,

Va., started amassing decoys because they reminded him of a bygone era when migrating wildfowl darkened the skies near his family's farm at the mouth of the Potomac River. "We never thought that would end, but it did," he says. "When I see a good decoy, I see all of those birds again."

tion was among the best, selling posthumously at the 2000 auction, a watershed moment in decoy collecting. A William Bowman curlew that McCleery had bought in 1973 for \$10,000 went for \$465,000. The total ticket for the two-day sale was \$11 million, surpassing the previ-

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"Some folks thought it was akin to collecting bottle caps."

For many years decoys weren't even considered art by serious American collectors. Griffith remembers attending an art show and having to defend their status. "Some folks there thought it was akin to collecting bottle caps," he says. That lack of recognition didn't last long, thanks to a physician in Texas named James McCleery. Because of a childhood ailment he was confined to a wheelchair for most of his life. But he played out his passion for hunting with his keen eye for buying decoys, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. His collec-

ous high, in 1996, of \$3 million.

Those rocketing prices have left some old-timers embittered. Griffith was recently outbid (he won't say for what) by Tudor Jones, who never comes to the auctions in person. "It becomes apparent who Tudor Jones' guys are pretty quickly," says Griffith. "Midas is a pauper compared to him." He reserves special animus for Figge. "The same old story of a rich man trying to conceal his avaricious nature." Figge brushes aside the rebuke. "They can go collect funny books if they want," he says. **F**