When WOODEN BIRDS Take Wing

By Margaret Pridgen

Frankly, I didn't know what to expect of Grainger McKoy. Like many artists, he's always been sort of a shadowy figure. Rumored to be solitary and reclusive, they say he's at best publicity shy and, at worst, unfriendly..

I knew he'd turned us down in 1977, the last time someone from Clemson World approached him about an alumni profile.

Still, it was worth a shot. After all, he is widely acknowledged to be the world's finest wildfowl sculptor. He was born in South Carolina and still lives here, but his work is in the private collections of people with names like Mellon and Marshall Field.

What that man can do with his two hands, a carving knife and a piece of basswood would make the angels weep.

In one intense and brilliant period from about 1969 to 1974, Grainger McKoy and his mentor Gilbert Maggioni took the polite and self-satisfied world of bird carving and turned it on its ear.

It was a quiet revolution. All they did was take a friendly little handicraft and turn it into a fine art form.

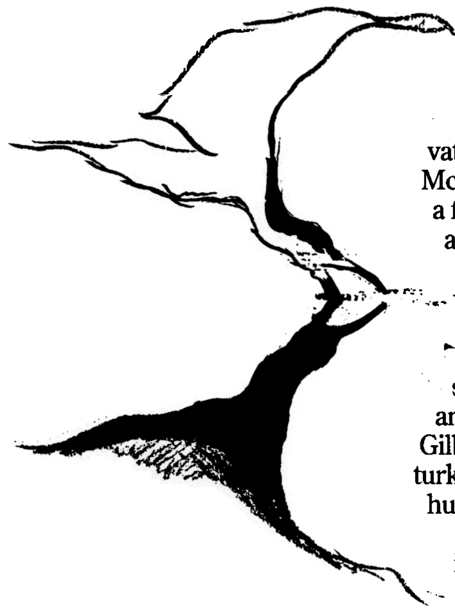
Into a world dominated by safe, tame, preppy, Ralph Laurenesque decorator ducks with well-coifed feathers and flat bottoms, Maggioni and McKoy introduced full-bird, spread-wing poses and a kind of wildness and danger — even violence — never before seen. A red-tailed hawk was shown attacking a pheasant, screeching in like an F-14 landing on a pitching carrier deck, with eyes blazing and talons bared. Two rails battled fiercely over a tasty morsel of crab.

Maggioni and McKoy flatly refused to carve any bird they had not observed closely in the wild and, if possible, held and examined. Their life-size pieces had precisely the correct number of feathers of exactly the correct size. Each feather was carved, shaded and painted individually. The results were, at times, spooky. People frequently mistook their work for taxidermy.

"I remember it just like it was yesterday," McKoy says of the beginning of what would become a movement in carving.

Maggioni and McKoy had been to the Eastern Shore to hunt geese and visit Grainger's relatives. Driving back, they stopped in at a waterfowl and bird carving festival at Salisbury, Maryland, then and now the largest event of its kind. They stayed several hours and looked at every piece there.

Photos by Ted Borg



"I could tell Gilbert was just captivated by what he saw and so was I," McKoy recalls. "We'd gone down the road a few miles when Gilbert turned to me and said, 'You know, I think I can do better than that.'"

Maggioni returned to the same show the next year as an exhibitor. It was a lot of the same stuff they had seen the year before — decoys, mostly, and small pieces. "And here comes Gilbert," McKoy says, "with this huge wild turkey in full flight. And I mean it was huge. It just shook the place up."

At the time, Maggioni was a bachelor in his late 40s, an accomplished watercolorist and the operator (along with his brother) of one of the last remaining oyster canneries in South Carolina. McKoy was a student at Clemson, an architecture-cum-zoology major who was just about to marry his high school sweetheart.

The two men had been introduced a few years earlier while Grainger was stil in high school, and they shared an interest in hunting, fishing and art. Maggioni became a father figure of sorts to the fatherless teenager from Sumter.

Grainger McKoy's parents were, he says, the original dropouts.

"You started to hear about people dropping out in the 60s, but my parents dropped out in the 1950s, moved down here to Sumter from North Carolina and built a log cabin. We lived in that cabin for over a year without any windows. We didn't even have chinking between the logs for a summer."

Living in the woods like that, Grainger was always outdoors — swimming, fishing and hunting. He was also good with his hands and interested in art. He liked to draw and whittle. Even though times were tough (his father died when Grainger was 9), his mother drove him to Columbia for art lessons every Saturday for two years.

She once went to the Library of Congress and copied down the name of every book ever published on wood carving. For years after that, at every Christmas and birthday, she gave Grainger one of those books.

"She was obedient in that," he says. "She always said, 'I don't care what you do as long as you enjoy what you're doing.'"

At 13, he chopped off the end of one of the cypress logs that made up his family's home and carved a shorebird from it. Instead of getting angry, his mother mussed his hair and put the little plover on the mantelpiece.

That little piece of cypress still sits on the McKoy mantel, only now it's the one in the historic Stateburg home where Mary Boykin Chesnutt was reared and where Grainger lives with wife, Floride, and their three children. He has four acres, five dogs, a horse, a pool, a mortgage and two children in college, and he supports all of it with his art.

He turns out to be not unfriendly at all, but as comfortable as a beagle inside its own loose-fitting skin. He's a trim 40-something, with blue eyes and about as much gray as black in his hair. His khaki work clothes are permanently stained with paint and there's a light dusting of sawdust on his head, eyebrows, clothes and forearms.

Each morning after breakfast, McKoy commutes about 100 yards to his workshop. His place perches on a rise just west of Sumter overlooking the Wateree River swamp and, beyond it, Columbia. Once you leave the coast with its broad expanses of salt marsh and mud flat, it's the most beautiful vista in South Carolina until you get to Table Rock.

The room where McKoy actually sits and works each day invites the outdoors in. Made of long-leaf pine that he felled and cut and planed himself, it's a smallish space. To the south are a couple of large windows and to the west, a three-bay window.

Shelves line the two long walls. Beneath them are stacked the crudely hewn shapes, in wood, of birds that just didn't make the grade but he's not ready to part with. A band saw sits in one corner, and in the corner opposite is a small rounded platform elevated about six inches off the floor. McKoy sits there on a lumpy cushion of deer hide on a straight-backed oak chair. Under the gaze of his late father, he works at a small, cluttered ledge that is rounded and curved so he can hunker in close for the detail work.

In the center of the room dominating everything is a piece in progress.

He's been working on it for six months and he has another six months to go. Today he began the detail work on the wings, carving the thin feathers individually, burning in the patterns, placing each one in place along the wing, only to be removed later to be painted separately.

Each wing will take him a week to complete. With five birds in the piece, that's 10 weeks worth of close work ahead on the wings alone. After that he will feather the bodies, finish the fine carving on the heads and beaks, paint the entire piece and, finally, construct the display case and the one-of-a-kind shipping crates that will send it off to its new owner.

With some coaching, even a rusty birder like myself can tell this piece will eventually be five startled pintails getting up in a rush of cries and

Above: McKoy's original sketch for "Black Skimmer"

Preceding page: "Quail Covey Rise" (1981) Collection of Earl Slick

wingbeats. But it's an ungainly thing right now with pale, bald ducks all akimbo. It stands seven feet tall including the base on which it rests. The steel superstructure that runs from one bird to the next is still visible where wooden feathers will one day be. The narrow tail feathers are made of strong yet flexible steel cast by McKoy and forged in his own furnace.

The tail feathers of one bird balance delicately on the wing tip of another. You just know that one day, some guy will be circling the finished piece, by then encased in plexiglas, muttering "Myrtle, honey, come look at this. How do you suppose he gets them to just hang in the air like that?"

It's a question people have been asking for 20 years.

McKoy started out in architecture at Clemson, but soon switched to zoology. Although not consciously preparing to be a wildlife artist, the combination proved useful.

"I learned a lot about the basic concepts of design, and that has helped me, I guess. But what broke me of wanting to be an architect was working in an architecture firm one summer." He found out he wanted to make and build things, not "rearrange the placement of toilets and storage closets."

Zoology was a struggle, too, because "I didn't study like I should have."

"I just basically wanted to walk around in the woods, draw some, whittle. You know, sit on a stump."

By the time McKoy graduated from Clemson in zoology in 1970, he was already married and the father of a son.

"It's amazing what having a family can do to motivate you," he says. He needed a 4.0 in both sessions of summer school to pull his GPR up to a 2.0 and graduate.

He made it, and then didn't know what to do with himself. So he accepted Gilbert Maggioni's offer to come to Beaufort, use an old garage on his place as a studio and take a flyer on his art.

"Grainger, this thing is wide open," Maggioni told him. "Why don't you give it six months and see what happens?'

With the flow of art lovers, nature lovers and wealthy lowcountry eccentrics that swirled around Maggioni, McKoy found himself in a sort of Southern salon for his kind of work. With $26 in the bank, he sold the first bird he carved for $75 and tripled his net worth.

"We were so excited, we went out to supper to celebrate. I told Floride, 'Sweetheart, we've got it made!'"

For the next four years, Maggioni and McKoy rode the breaking crest of a wave of interest in nature, wildlife and wildlife art. They worked intensely and exhibited regularly, but sparingly. From the outset, Maggioni encouraged McKoy to approach his work as fine art. They deliberately distanced themselves from the decoy carving competitions and craft fair scene where, McKoy says, "so much of this kind of work has stayed. Gradually people begin working to please the judges rather than themselves."

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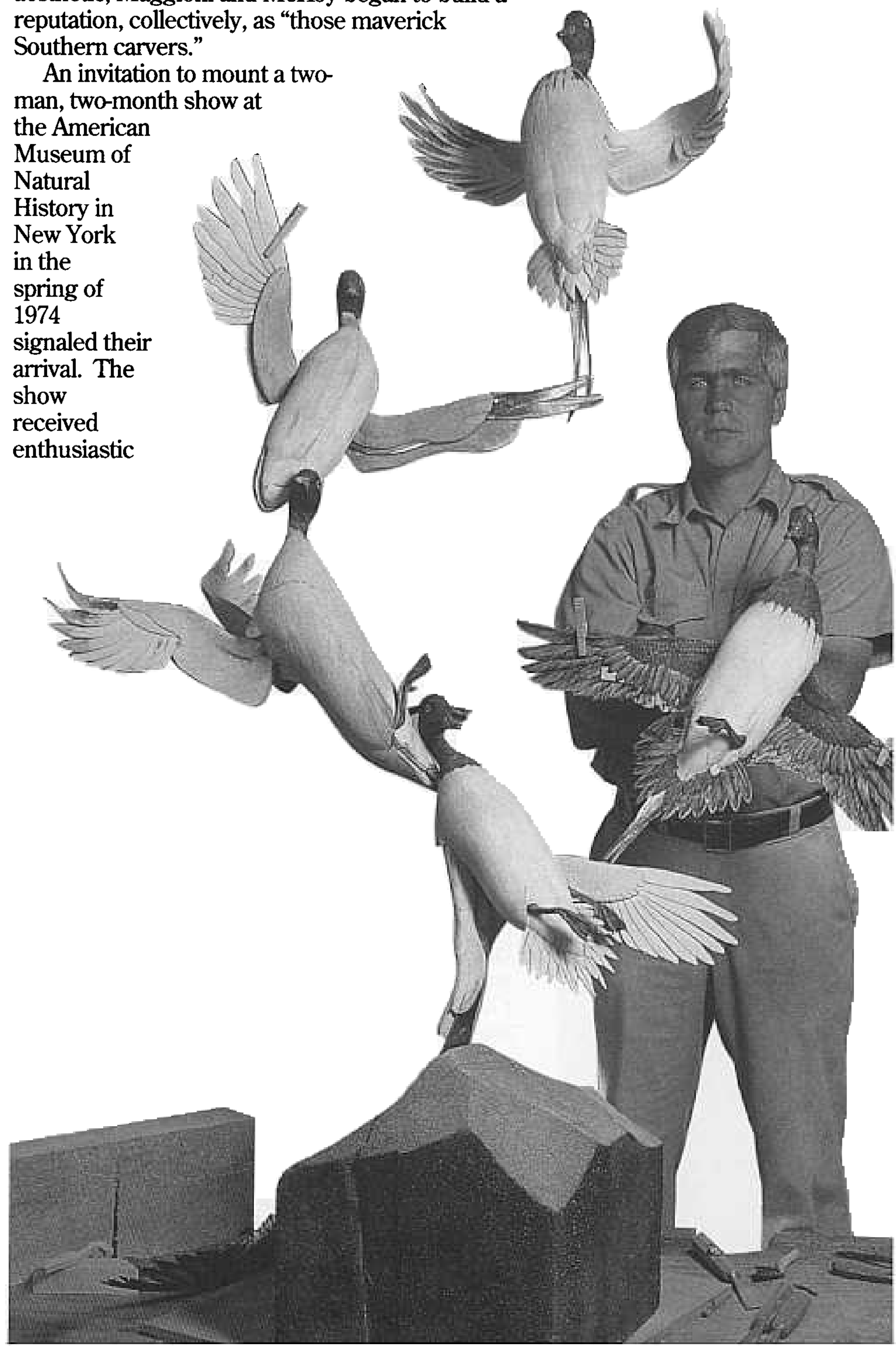

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Grainger McKoy (1) carves each of the tail feathers and wing feathers individually on the birds he creates. He starts by cutting a rough outline of the feather from a thin piece of basswood (2), then checks the positioning of each one in rough form (3). Next, he carves out the feather shape with a small knife (4), and smooths it with a sanding wheel (5). After burning in the feather pattern with a heated blade (6), he checks the final placement and spacing (7) of the tail feathers. They'll be removed yet again so each feather can be painted individually before they're finally set in place.

coverage in the Big Apple.

Columnist Nelson Bryant of the *New York Times* called their work "startlingly realistic and incredibly detailed."

"If wooden birds could fly," Bryant said, "those carved by Gilbert Maggioni and Grainger McKoy would be among the first to take wing."

With that wild turkey back in 1969, Maggioni had been the first carver to successfully hide the metal rod supporting his bird. But "it took Grainger McKoy to put birds together in flight," wrote the magazine *Wildfowl Carving and Collecting*. "With this quantum leap, there seemed to be no limit to what a steel suspension system could do."

Maggioni was at the pinnacle of his art in 1974 and beginning to scale back. At 25, Grainger McKoy had just hit his stride. He had moved from Beaufort to Wadmalaw Island a year earlier, in part to prove to the world, and perhaps to himself, that he was an artist with an identity independent of Maggioni's. The museum show "opened all kinds of doors for me," he says.

Before leaving New York, in fact, he was approached by the upscale Hammer Gallery on 57th Street about doing a solo exhibit. He worked for more than two lean years to prepare for that show, then went back to New York in 1976 with 15 new pieces. All of them sold within three days.

That kind of recognition — the gallery world seal of approval — gave him the credibility he needed to establish himself firmly and forever as a fulltime artist.

"It's kind of like getting an alligator on your shirt," he says. "You become a known commodity. What I've learned is that people with that kind of money don't mind parting with it. They just hate to be made a fool of."

By the time McKoy exhibited solo in New

York a second time, in 1984, his work had matured and begun to take a more sculptural direction. He showed a piece called "Covey Rise" (1981) that is the apotheosis of his hyper-realistic work; 13 bobwhite quail rising in a startled frenzy, perfect right down to the ratio of male-to-female, mature-to-immature birds in a covey that size. Yet also on exhibit was "Black Skimmer" (1984), a more abstract work that shows a realistic bird (of basswood) poised above its own reflection, sculpted in walnut, as it skims its beak along the water.

Critic Thomas Hoving called that show at the 82nd St. Coe Kerr Gallery "a superb retrospective exhibition" and McKoy "the incomparable wood-carver from South Carolina." Writing in his magazine *Connoisseur*, Hoving said, "I never fully realized how wondrously energetic and naturalistic his painted sculptures of birds are. They are far removed from the merely superrealistic."

McKoy's third New York show convinced him his clients and wannabe clients would search him out even if he never showed again. "I ran with that art scene for five years," he says, "but eventually I saw through it just like you see through the fraternity scene or anything else."

He now works from a comfortably long list of people and institutions who want to own a Grainger McKoy original. His most recent piece depicting Carolina Parakeets was commissioned by a museum in Los Angeles. A businessman in Winston-Salem owns five or six but, he says, "very little of my work stays in the Southeast."

As he nears completion of one piece, McKoy writes the next few people on his list and says, "I'm thinking about doing something like this. Would you be interested?" So far, he's managed to stay busy doing the things *he* wants to do.

But it's not even the thing itself that's important. Once he's finished a piece, it's history.

"By that time I'm so tired of it, I don't want to see it anymore. I start seeing all the things I'd do differently. Besides, at its best, it only succeeds in recreating a beauty that's already perfect the way it is.

"I do it because I enjoy doing it," he says simply. "I've thought about doing other things, but I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing. You know, I can come out here, work until midnight if I feel like it. Or work a few hours then go feed my dogs, or kiss my wife. Whatever."

Grainger McKoy enjoys his life. It may even be his greatest creation. It's graceful and in balance — just like his birds — but with a ribbon of steel through the core.

But it wasn't always that way.

The year was 1976. Grainger McKoy had just spent over two years of 12-,14-, 16-hour days getting ready for his second New York show.

He had had one taste of success, but it had been a shared triumph. This time, it was his solo shot at the title. His chance at the bigs. As the date drew nearer, the more obsessed with work he became. It meant more to him than his friends, his family, anything he could name.

The small wooden birds with their individual feathers took all his attention; they filled up the frame.

And the show was a great success. The glitterati all turned out — the Eastern blue-blood nature lovers, the gay art world insiders, the women with their false eyelashes, high heels and poodles.

At the end of the show, all 15 pieces had been sold and the gallery owner handed McKoy a very big check.

"I remember walking out onto 57th Street with that check in my pocket, and it was dark and drizzling rain and I was thinking, 'Is this all there is?' Just, 'Is this all there is?'

"I had put so much into that show — too much — that there was no way it couldn't be a let down. I was just drained. It had taken everything out of me."

He had burned, as Carlyle said of Blake, with a hard, gem-like flame, and he had burned out. He was not sure he'd ever work again.

"I went home and got on my brother's tractor and I didn't pick up a piece of wood for months."

During that low period, a childhood friend of McKoy's was growing increasingly ill of kidney disease. He sent for Grainger, who went to see him on what turned out to be the last day of his life.

The peace with which his friend faced death — a peace that came from his Christian faith — touched McKoy deeply. On the drive back to Wadmalaw from Camden, he had a quiet, personal, profoundly religious experience.

Eventually, the work drew him back and, like his faith, it's stronger than ever. Two recent pieces — one a least bittern balanced perfectly atop its own shadow and the other, 15 graceful sanderlings skimming above a breaking wave of walnut — represent, perhaps, his most successful expression yet of the marriage of the ideal and the real.

"I enjoy the work," he says. "I get a lot of pleasure out of it. But it's just wood and paint, you know. The moment I put that last feather in place it begins deteriorating."

He looks up from his work, out the window and straight at you. "It's all fleeting," he says.

And it comes and goes in a wingbeat. ■