

September/October 1983

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Sporting

C L A S S I C S





Marsh Heron by Granger McCoy
Green Heron by Billy Rupp

Oyster House

CONNECTION

Three world class carvers, Gilbert Maggioni, Grainger McKoy and Bill Rhett—two of whom revolutionized the thinking of decorative carving—all had one connection—an oyster house in Beaufort, South Carolina.

by Pat Robertson

It all began, so the story—now almost a legend—goes on a goose hunting trip to Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Grainger McKoy of Sumter, South Carolina, was a freshman architecture student at Clemson University, a talented youngster who liked to carve duck decoys. His hunting companion was Gilbert Maggioni, a prominent Beaufort, South Carolina businessman who had achieved some success as an artist. Maggioni also was a maker of fine working decoys, and he had become interested in sculpting birds from wood.

McKoy’s brother at that time worked at Maggioni’s oyster factory—The Ocean Lake and River Fish Company, and the younger McKoy had met Maggioni through his brother. “I was in high school when I met him,” said McKoy. “He saw some of my decoys, and we discovered we had a similar interest in carving and hunting.” McKoy’s mother had grown up on a dairy farm on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and McKoy had spent his Christmases and vacations there, hunting with his uncles.

As a result of their similar interests, and because of McKoy’s connection with the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the two South Carolinians—one older and already a success in the oyster business, and the other young and just beginning to search for the road to a lifetime profession—traveled to

Maryland to shoot ducks and geese. This was about 20 years ago, and it was on this trip that they decided to go by a carving exhibition being held at Chestertown, Maryland.

“This,” said Maggioni from his front porch on the Morgan River just across from the city of Beaufort, “apparently was the second bird carving exhibit as such. As I remember, it was staged by the local chapter of the Audubon Society, and it took place in the parish house of the Episcopal Church. The first one had taken place two years previously.”

There were perhaps 21 or 22 exhibitors in the cramped parish house and all but one or two of the birds shown were in static positions. They were like decorative decoys; there was no action. In the car, after leaving the show, Maggioni’s artistic blood began to heat up. “Hell, McKoy,” he reportedly turned and said to his young friend, “we can do better than that.”

“That thing really turned Gilbert on,” recalled McKoy. “He went home and really started carving—and it wasn’t long before he was getting very innovative.” McKoy kept in close touch with his older friend, and soon began spending his vacations from school at Beaufort, visiting with Maggioni at his house next to the oyster factory. “I’d take my knife and we’d spend that time carving,” he said.

Maggioni, a bachelor at the time, threw himself into this

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new endeavor, working hours into the night to perfect a wing position, etching in the feathers with his knife, then searching for just the right paints to bring the wooden bird to life. "He made some terrific progress during this time," said McKoy, "not only in technique, but in the way of expressing a bird in flight."

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"It was apparent," said Maggioni, "that was the thing nobody was doing. And this was what *had* to be done." The problem was that no matter how good the sculpture was, the piece still looked like it was carved from a block of wood. The wings, the tail, other aspects of a bird in flight just didn't come across. And this is where Maggioni set the bird carvers on their respective ears. He developed the technique of carving the feathers individually, then inserting them into the birds—just like a real bird's feathers!

"The separate feather technique," he said, "was self-evident." It was, he said, a logical step—a bend in the road that somebody had to take. Within a period of two or three years, three things occurred in the carving field that revolutionized it from a craft to art. "The separate feather technique came in about 1968 or 1969," said Maggioni, "and in about 1971 or 1972 we saw the first feather burned with an instrument like a soldering iron, the so-called burning technique. Also, about the same time, acrylic paint came in. So we had these three things going together."

Those three steps enabled the sculptors to put the birds in flight, to portray them in their most natural fashion. But, that presented yet another problem. "Once a bird was in flight, there was a problem as to how to display the gentleman," chuckled Maggioni, sipping from his afternoon glass of Heineken's.

Suspending the birds from wires or setting them up on sticks would destroy the lifelike illusion of flight. Maggioni and McKoy solved the problem by providing habitat to support the bird. This evolved, said Maggioni, into some rather involved displays. Then, in his estimation, McKoy "took a quantum leap forward" when he mounted one bird in flight from another.

"This," said Maggioni, "is probably the state of the art as it stands today—from the static bird perched on a piece of driftwood to the bird in flight with separate feathers that enables us to depict accurate flight positions, along with the burning technique and the acrylic paint which gives the desired surface effect."

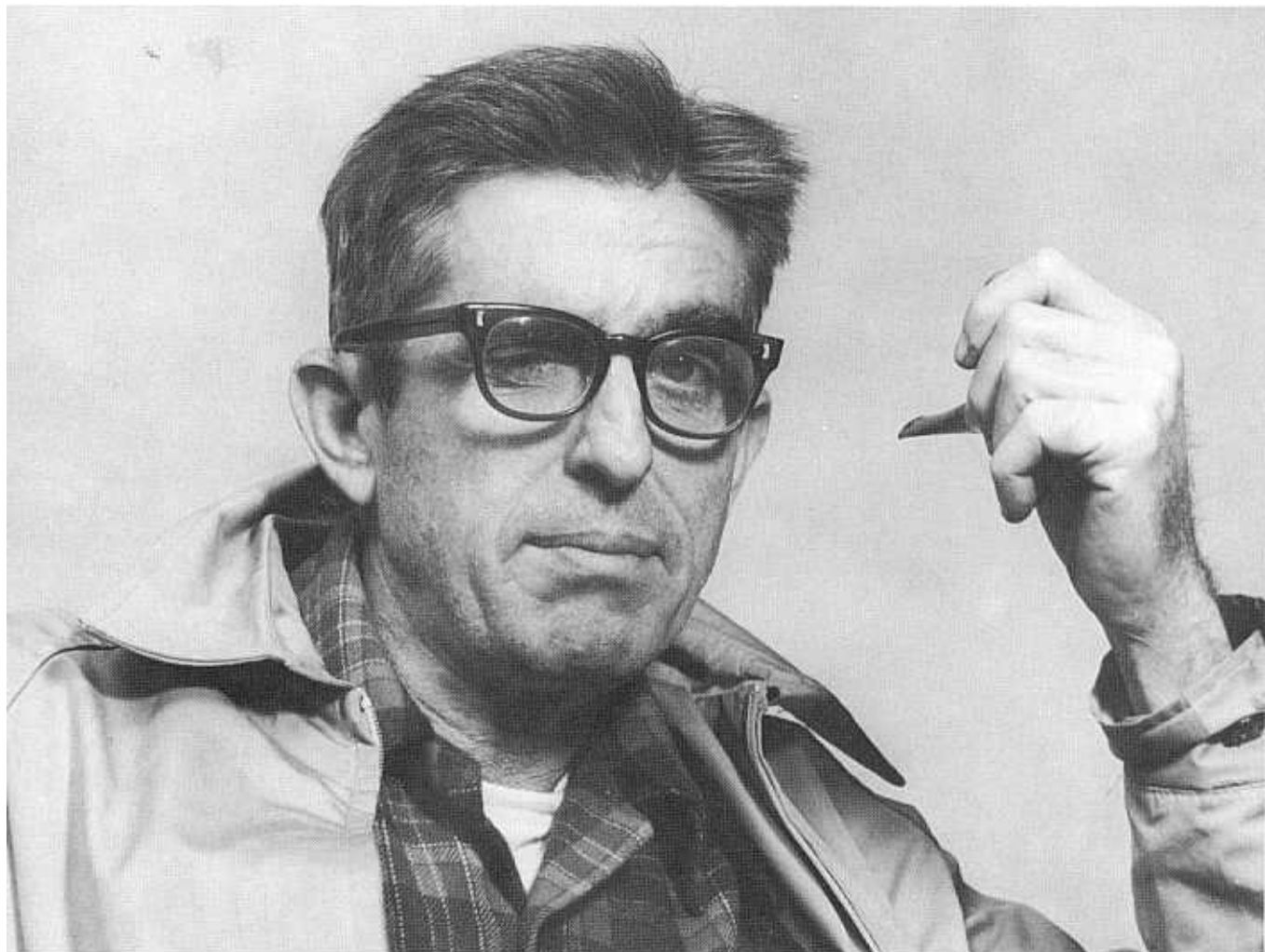
While Maggioni and McKoy were creating quite a stir in



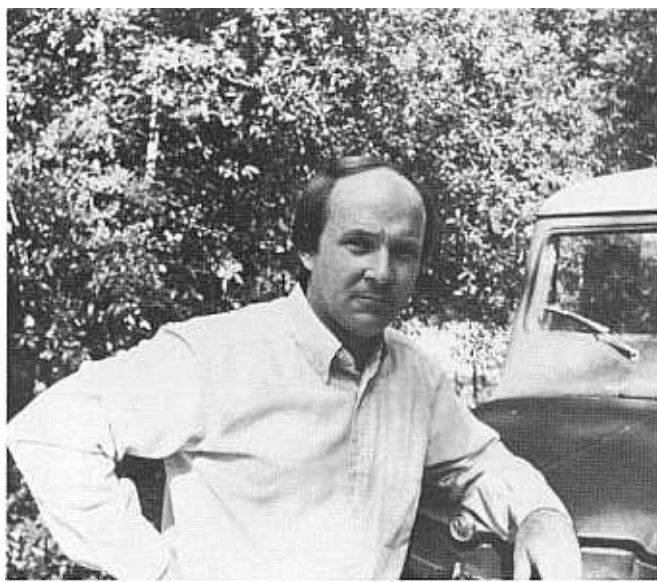
Above: Wren by Grainger McKoy
Below: Purple Gallinule by Gilbert Maggioni
Opposite page: Pintails by Gilbert Maggioni



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COURTESY OF WILDFOWL ART MUSEUM



the bird carving world, their work, at least at first, was not appreciated by some of the other carvers. “We had a lot of flak from the old traditional carvers who felt that this wasn’t sculpture, that it was assembly work,” Maggioni said. Of course, sculpture is—as the Oxford English Dictionary would define it—three dimensional art, regardless of how you put it together. Some of the finest sculptures we have are made of bits of clay and wax and mounted on a mandrel. They are added on, and a bird carver using a separate feather technique is an add-on proposition. It’s not shaving away as Michelangelo did when he made some of his statues. There he chopped stone away.”

Maggioni recalled an incident at the carving competition held annually at Salisbury, Maryland while McKoy was still attending Clemson. “He got out of school and went with me

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to show some of the things I’d done. The one that sticks out in my mind was a turkey—a full-sized wild turkey in flight. The feathers weren’t burned, but the bird had separate feathers in the wings and tail and there were a lot of insertions around the vent. That kind of bugged everybody’s eyes. It was mounted on a brass rod, but you couldn’t see the rod unless you got around the bird. That was the first time, I think, that we had showed a bird in flight.

“This thing got started at Salisbury because there was a group of six or eight carvers at Salisbury that had showed over in Chestertown—and they were a tightly knit little group. Well, Grainger and I hung the turkey, and then the wife of one of those carvers came over to me and she squared off and looked me dead in the eye and said, ‘We hate you!’ ” “It was,” said Maggioni with a chuckle, “a rare occasion because I had nothing to reply. McKoy, observing the incident, stuck his knuckle in his mouth to keep from laughing.”

It was about this time that the first part of the oyster house connection was completed. McKoy, who had entered Clemson as an architecture student, had changed his major to biology and was about to graduate. “I was too much of a traditionalist. I liked dormer windows and things of that sort, and it was more than the School of Architecture could stand.” He’d also gotten married and was a brand new father.

“Everyone was on him” said Maggioni. “They kept asking him, ‘When are you going to work?’ I told him not to worry about all that. Everything will be all right. I sold him a bill of goods,” he laughed. Following his urge to carve and listening to Maggioni instead of bowing to pressures from family and friends, McKoy came to Beaufort.

“I didn’t even interview for jobs. I wasn’t interested in a job. After my last exam I moved to Beaufort, and I had them mail my diploma to me,” said McKoy. “You should have heard my mother-in-law. ‘You are going to take my daughter and do what? Carve?’ Looking back it was a bold step, a youthful step.” McKoy’s wife taught school and supported them while he worked with Maggioni on the birds.

“We had a ball,” recalled McKoy. “We duck hunted. We sat up late talking, and we traveled. He introduced me to a new art form and to a way of living. Gilbert was working, running his oyster business, but being a bachelor then he could carve all night if he wanted to. I look back on those 18 months to two years as one of the more pleasant memories I have. We weren’t competitors at all. I respected him tremendously, and I think he enjoyed my company and respected my pursuits.”

The work was hard. McKoy wasn’t on the payroll at the oyster factory, but Maggioni would work hard and long into the night and his young student was very uncomfortable if he



At top opposite page: Gilbert Maggioni

Bottom opposite page: Billy Rhett

Above: Grainger McKoy



Rhett went to work full-time at the oyster factory to be near Maggioni. There he did everything: drag-line work, moving oyster shells for replanting in the summer, and welding.



couldn't match his tutor's pace. "He really kept his foot on my neck," grinned McKoy, "And, it set the groundwork for years to come in working speed and diligence, and in not being addicted to the mediocrity that surrounded us."

After six months, McKoy could see that the work was going somewhere. He wasn't making a living at it, but his art was grudgingly beginning to be received. Soon they would be invited to show at the Museum of Natural History in New York, and by 1975 their work would be on display at the prestigious Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. In less than two years McKoy's apprenticeship had ended. It was time to strike out on his own. He found an old country store adjacent to his brother's farm on Wadmalaw Island, about 20 miles south of Charleston, South Carolina that he converted into a work shop. McKoy moved his family, which has since grown to include a son and two daughters, to the island 11 years ago, and since that time he has become a major force in fine art sculpture. "He is the best in the field," Maggioni said matter-of-factly.

Before McKoy left Beaufort, he and Maggioni had an exhibit in Savannah. An offshoot of the show was the third part of the oyster house connection. Bill Rhett, then a young college student from Beaufort, visited that exhibit and he was excited by what he saw. The sculptures of birds in flight, interacting with snakes and other animals, mounted from habitat, stimulated a desire in him "to see if I had it in me to carve one of those critters." He got a summer job at the oyster factory, hoping to find a way to study under Maggioni.

He met Maggioni at the oyster factory and found out he didn't give lessons. "But, I just had to try my hand at carving, so he donated some wood and some chisels and I had a knife. He wouldn't sit down and say 'this is how you do it,' but I'd work on a piece and take it to him and he would give me criticism on it."

That fall Rhett returned to school, but the urge to carve stayed with him. He left school and went to work full-time at the oyster factory to be near Maggioni. There he did everything: drag-line work, moving oyster shells for replanting in the summer, and welding. ("By the way, I'm no welder, and I'm no drag-line operator either, but I did it.") At night he would go to Maggioni's shop to work, "mostly cleaning up." But it was there that he learned the techniques with Maggioni's encouragement.

"I worked there six and a half years, carving at night. A lot of nights I'd carve on past midnight, after work. I learned to drink eight or nine cups of coffee a day so I could keep it up." The coffee and the long hours combined to give Rhett a bleeding ulcer, but with Maggioni's encouragement and



Opposite page: Woodcock by Grainger McKoy
Above: Blue Crab by Gilbert Maggioni
Below: Snipe by Billy Rhett

“The energy needs to come out in the sculpture in order to put life in it. You have to really get excited before you ever turn the band saw on to cut it out.”

criticism, he did learn to carve.

And when some of his work began to be noticed, he started getting some of the same kind of criticism that Maggioni and McKoy had endured a few years earlier. “I entered a sculpture in one of those shows—against Gilbert’s advice. I entered it anyway because I needed the money and first prize was \$10,000. I thought I’d be great, but the judges didn’t think so. I had this pair of wood ducks eating grapes, and they said wood ducks will not eat grapes. I had worked on that piece for a year and four months, and before I started I had researched it quite a bit. One of the books I read gave a breakdown on the diet of woodies and it tells you in there that they do eat grapes.”

But Rhett persisted, and today he is recognized as one of the best. “It took about seven or eight years for me to realize I could make a living at it. I always dreamed I could do that, but I was afraid to stop that regular pay check every week and put all my time into the carving. What broke me away from that thinking was the first major sale I had. You have to have the money to survive, but I was always afraid that I would start just going for the money and not trying to perfect the art. I’ve seen a lot of carvers, because it’s a new art form and because there is a lot of money involved in it at times, start to mass-produce sculptures. But if it’s not interesting, I don’t want to fool with it. I’ve got to keep a new twist on it just to live with myself. If I’m frustrated, nobody else can live with me either.”

Rhett, like Maggioni and McKoy, found that it takes patience and study. “You have to really study the bird before you carve it. You have to have an intimate understanding of it, find out how it nests, what it eats, what its habits are. You have to spend some time in the woods and look at the bird in its natural habitat.”

Once the studying is done, once Rhett is familiar with the subject, he starts to feel the excitement building. “I can’t just go to the freezer and grab a bird and say, ‘this is it, I’ll carve this one.’ It would look like a dead bird from the freezer if I did that. The energy needs to come out in the sculpture in order to put life in it. You have to really get excited before you ever turn the band saw on to cut it out.”

Rhett said that excitement must remain “until the last brush stroke of paint is put on the bird. The moment you lose your excitement in the sculpture, it shows.” Keeping that level of enthusiasm can be difficult if you are dealing with the detail required in these realistic sculptures. “But even that keeps it interesting,” said Rhett. “It is much more fun to work with a bird in flight with his wings positioned dramatically than to produce something looking straight ahead with both feet planted firmly on a piece of driftwood.



Above: Carolina Wren by Grainger McKoy

Below: Early mallard by Gilbert Maggioni

Opposite page: Morning Dove by Billy Rhett



“Gilbert and Grainger really developed the art form . . . with the inserted feathers and the lifted wings, the ducks swooping over the water, the quail jumping out of the bushes. . . .”

“You have to see what you are going to carve in that block of wood before you start cutting the high corners off. Sometimes there will be 500 or 600 feathers in a single wing, depending on what I’ve got the bird doing—how dramatic, how many lifted feathers. Say you’ve got a quail taking a dust bath. He is naturally going to be ruffled up, and you will have a lot of insertions in there.”

Perhaps the most dramatic of Rhett’s work was a sculpture of a peregrine falcon attacking a sora rail. Rhett’s wife, Nancy, an acclaimed watercolor artist herself, described the circumstances around the sale of that sculpture:

“This doctor in Colorado was very critical. He had talked with Bill about the piece, but he was still not committed to buy it. Then the peregrine was given a place of honor at the Maryland show, and he flew there to see it. He saw the little sora rail with the peregrine. The falcon had struck the rail. Being a neurosurgeon, the doctor knew that moment when the impulse of the severed spinal cord reaches the brain, and the rigor that the bird goes into for that instant. And because of that he bought the piece. Bill didn’t medically know it; he’d just seen enough birds to know that there’s a moment when they die—and he got the moment of death in that bird.”

Today, Bill and Nancy Rhett live in a house they built on Conch Point across the water from the city of Beaufort. There he carves his birds, and she produces much sought after watercolors—both of which are often on display in their little gallery downtown.

The bird carving that these three—the oyster house connection—have perpetuated over the last 10 to 15 years has a lot of followers now. “These carvers,” said Rhett, “got their start, like me, admiring Gilbert and Grainger’s work. Gilbert and Grainger really developed the art form to what it is today, with the inserted feathers and the lifted wings, the ducks swooping over the water, the quail jumping out of the bushes, really bringing the sculpture to life. I got caught up in it because I was there at the time.”

Back at his shop on Wadmalaw, McKoy agrees that Maggioni literally brought the carving craft into the realm of fine art. “He was playing with flight and design, plus he knew the birds. It was pretty exciting to me to be in company with this fellow who was really making some strides in a new art form.”

One of the things that Maggioni did to influence his young carver friend was to expose him to fine art. Whenever they traveled, they would go by Washington and visit the National Art Gallery, or go to the fine art galleries in New York. “He would always mention how carving should be treated as art, and he conveyed that feeling to me. He was the largest single



Covey Rise, by Grainger McKoy features 13 quail suspended from each other's wingtips and took 20 months to execute.

influence on my work. We would go and look at this work as art, whereas today in many circles it's still thought of as a craft."

The work deserves more than that. In centuries past it was considered fine art and somewhere along the line the concept has been degraded. "I think," said McKoy, "one reason is that it is an outgrowth of decoy making, a folk art. It's hard to get over that hurdle into fine art. Certainly the craft of decoy making is what stimulated my interests, but Gilbert propelled me into this realm of greater expectation."

Another problem is the subject matter. "It's hard," said McKoy, "for art critics and people in the art academy, so to speak, to think of wildlife art as anything other than a little gleeful toy of sportsmen. When I have exhibited at fine art galleries, I've heard the directors murmuring, 'What are we turning this place into, a zoo?' It's hard for some directors to digest this art form."

And then there is the problem of those who exploit the art, who themselves don't work to make it fine art. "I think the work should be able to stand on its own," said McKoy. "But I think most of it isn't fine art and that is the problem. So you almost have to divorce yourself from the general trend of the shows and the competitive exhibits to pursue it as an art."

There are a lot of carvers today, and "a lot of good ones," said McKoy. "I know there is some very good work being done. The finishes and the techniques have really come around. But, to be considered art, it's got to be more than technique, and I think that's where the work often falls short. They think a lot of it is based on the finish, the technique—not the nature of the bird, or the anatomy of the bird, or stretching that bird to its limits as far as design capabilities and look at it as art. I think the work being done as a whole is very shortsighted."

The most acclaimed of McKoy's work is a covey rise of 13 quail, the result of 20 months of painstaking work in his Wadmalaw shop. The idea for the piece, which has the quail dramatically suspended from each other's wingtips and habitat, came one day while he was bird hunting with his brother. "It was one of those dreary days, real cold and the birds never came off the roost. It was early afternoon; the dogs pointed, and we kicked through where the dogs were. They stayed right there, then finally broke and ran around and came right back and pointed in the same place.

"The grass wasn't real thick, so we were looking at the dogs just knowing it was a rat. Then the quail flushed. I had never had quail all over me. They had just come right up off the roost! I said then that I was going to do a covey rise one day, I just didn't know it would be that soon."

Walter Rosine, author of *Bobwhite Quail*, considered the

bible on managing quail, visited with McKoy and advised him on aging the birds, and sexing them for the time of year. He gave him the right proportions—three adult birds and ten sub-adults—for a covey rise of thirteen birds. The piece has been highly acclaimed, and it sold for a figure so high that McKoy prefers not to discuss it.

There were some side benefits, too. McKoy recalls a rainy Saturday afternoon when he was working on the sculpture. "I was over here painting this bird and my son, who was about 11 at the time, was helping me make up the droppings for the roost. I said, 'Son, there are four billion people on this earth today, and I bet you are the only one other than quail who is making that stuff.' He stopped, and his head started swelling a bit, and he said, 'Daddy, do you really think so?' I said, 'I know you are the only one making that stuff.' He made quail droppings all day long. I couldn't stop him, and I've still got plenty of it left over."

So when McKoy finished the sculpture, he put his name there on a leaf. And, he added, "and son."

"That's just as much his carving as anybody else's," said McKoy with a father's pride.

So where does the work go from here? Maggioni no longer carves. "My eyes are not what they used to be. And it's sheer tedium once you commit yourself to the burning thing, and eventually to the feather inserts." He has married and built a home next to the water. McKoy and Rhett continue to carry the art forward, and there are some younger carvers coming along who are beginning to make an impression.

Maggioni believes it is time for the younger artists to plow some new ground. "I'm encouraging some of these fellows to get into other things, and I hope they do. It follows a natural line of succession from the decoys. But the depiction of fur in solid wood poses different problems from the depiction of feathers. The execution of feathers in wood seems to have been worked out.

The main problem with many of the latter-day carvers—those not close enough to Maggioni and McKoy for imminent criticism and encouragement—is that they are breaking little new ground. "They," said Maggioni, "are not inclined to take the time. Nor do I think most of them are possessed of the natural inquisitiveness, based on a sincere desire to know, to investigate and to thresh out all these avenues.

"They will pick up a technique, but the techniques have just about been developed to the point where they leave little that can be imagined. If you are going for ultimate realism, you will soon work your way through wood. You'll exhaust the possibilities of wood. And, I think it is very close to that point now." 