

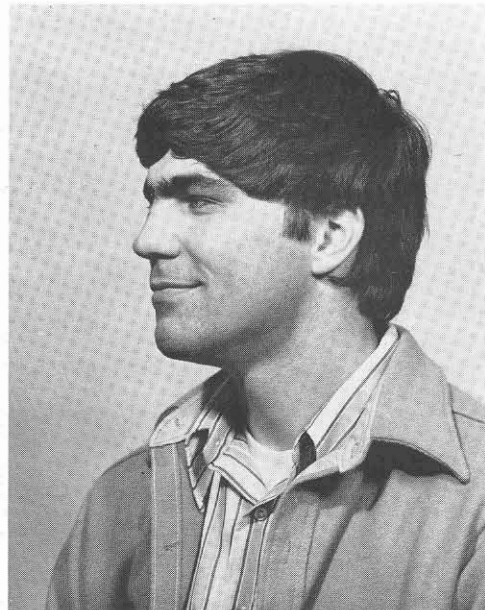
# Grainger McKoy

by Kenneth Basile

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**“His work seems to defy gravity. The extreme detail and realism all add to the effect of motion and flight.”**

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American bird carving, in the more traditional sense, decoy making, has been a well-established part of the American experience since the early 19th century. It was not until the late 1940's or early 1950's that people such as Lemuel and Stephen Ward began looking at the carved bird, not as a functional tool, but as an object that reflected their own response to the environment around them. In many of these early decorative carvings, like the decoy, different anatomical parts of the birds were not accurate and the paint work still maintained an individualism that had been developed over many years of carving.

Though the Ward brothers had developed a technique of carving individual feathers as far back as the 1930's, it was not until the middle to late 1960's that it was refined and expanded to produce more than just an impressionistic presentation of the quality of feathers.

The carving world, still fairly isolated from the mainstream of American fine art, quickly picked up this idea of creating extreme realism through the fragmentation of the actual bird by carving individual feathers and reassembling the fragments back into a coherent whole. The realism achieved through the use of specialized tools such as woodburners, homemade knives and gouges led to the creation of a carved bird that is virtually impossible to tell from a real bird. The main visual problem the carver was left to deal with was the fact that these sculptures were still taken totally out of context. Bases were usually a piece of driftwood. The emphasis was usually on the techniques used, the coloration and pose, making a bird that represented a mounted specimen more than an actual slice of reality.

The work of Gilbert Maggioni of Beaufort, South Carolina enabled wildfowl carving to make a visual quantum leap. Maggioni brought to the carving world many traditional sculptural concepts.

But in the fall of 1967, Maggioni and his friend, Grainger McKoy, were more concerned with hunting ducks and geese on Maryland's Eastern Shore. They had traveled to Chestertown, Maryland with McKoy's brother, Adair, to hunt geese and ended up viewing an exhibition of decorative bird carvings. At this show the bird carvings, according to McKoy, were very static and were more like a decoy than a real bird. Everyone said you couldn't make a wooden bird fly. Gilbert Maggioni told his friend, "Grainger, you and I can do this."

During the next year, Maggioni pioneered some of the carving techniques that most bird carvers still follow today. The first piece Maggioni made, a flying wild turkey, which was later purchased by Texas governor John Connolly, made a tremendous impact on this part of the carving world. He had made a wooden bird fly.

McKoy feels it was that show in 1967 and Maggioni's encouragement that got him to try carving. Maggioni encouraged McKoy to work with him. In 1970, upon graduation from college, he did just that. He rented a house in Beaufort, South Carolina, moved his wife and two children and started a partnership that was to change the direction of this traditional American art form.

McKoy's early carvings at this time were fairly simple — a single super-realistic bird. With each piece, the birds and their presentation became more complex. Gradually, following Maggioni's lead, environments were added, ultimately becoming whole

sections of corn fields, marshes, rivers and forests. He began incorporating bronze, brass, resin and any other materials that would enable him to achieve the same realism in the environments as he was achieving in his carved wooden birds. He found he was always working to add the power and force of flight and action to his creations.

Of particular importance to both McKoy and Maggioni was giving or relating an understanding of the complex interrelationships of the many parts of a sculpture. No longer was the bird isolated from its natural surroundings. The birds were just a part of a greater whole. Their birds appear to be suspended or actually flying through the air. No longer was the emphasis placed upon the maker's painting and carving ability, but upon his organization of the total composition. For if this were not present, the sculpture would not work.

Grainger McKoy, over the years, has continued to follow his style. But he has carried his concepts even further, adding greater dynamics of motion and force. His "Covey of Quail," for example, has stopped a moment of time. This sculpture or environment, trapped in a case, carries on a tradition initially established by Maggioni.

After eighteen months with Maggioni, he moved his family back to Wadamalow Island, South Carolina to continue the work that he and Maggioni had pioneered. Settling into the isolated workshop on the island, he quickly began turning out masterpieces. No longer making single birds, he was now producing multifigure compositions.

For those who have never seen his work, it is difficult to describe the beauty of his creations. It is hard to believe that he or the many other gifted carvers of today could create with such detail. He initially works out his ideas in foam. His multifigure compositions can be easily

worked and reworked in this medium. He uses basswood for his birds because of its soft, fine grain. It is a very stable wood and, unlike other woods, is less apt to check and spot. Every feather on his birds is individually carved. Many of them are separately carved and inserted into the main structure of the body. This technique of feather insertion and the fact that every feather vein is burned in with a woodburning tool revolutionized the pace and direction of bird carving in America. Today, after fifteen years of sculpting birds in their environments, McKoy is one of the few leaders in a field that has become very competitive.

All of his birds are painted with oil base paints. After constructing the whole piece, it is disassembled for preliminary painting. Initially using an air brush for the first coats of paint, McKoy puts on the final colors by hand. After painting the parts, the whole piece is reassembled.

McKoy likes to point out that his birds appear as if they were stopped for a moment in time as if they had been photographed. But he does not use photographs, he uses his instincts and intuition in figuring out how the birds look at any particular point in time. A good part of McKoy's time is spent observing nature. He knows in his mind before he starts, the exact organization and structure of the piece he is about to create.

His work seems to defy gravity. The extreme detail and realism all add to the effect of motion and flight. In many of his compositions he is concerned with conflict and aggression, which tend to heighten the impact of the piece.

McKoy, still actively working today, has added his own style to this type of bird carving, making his work very identifiable. He uses strong diagonals and angles in positioning his birds within their environment. This seems to expand the movement and environment beyond the confines of the case, exploding into the realm of the viewer's reality.

By the early 1980's the emphasis on the complete environment began to change for McKoy. He began paying more and more attention to the many intangibles surrounding his birds. These were the elements which actually held the sculpture together. His birds, though in many cases still carrying the main visual impact of the sculpture, became in actuality a secondary feature assisting the artist in communicating much more complex concepts and ideas about the world around him.

When one looks closely at his work, the birds take on a different quality. The flawless technique is still there. The perfection, the superrealism of a moment captured in time is there. In fact, the realism tends to heighten the awareness of the viewer. The concern now is with relationships. The move-

ment and force are still there, but looking closely one feels the air, water, dust and light. A skimmer is moving through the water. At first glance, the viewer is confronted with a striking presentation of a skimmer balanced on its negative counterpart. Upon closer study we see that it's not the bird that has captured his attention. What is not there is what concerns him. The water, the quality of water, the quality of light and its relation to water. The negative counterpart is the bird's reflection as it moves rapidly across the surface of the invisible water. McKoy, in much of his work, is trying to move the viewer into a landscape. The intangible parts, the space, the things we cannot see but do feel are his concerns. Look hard, move from the representational to the abstract. He wants to take the viewer beyond the bird and into his universe.

More recently he has been concerned with moving visually backward into the actual materials, no longer attempting to deny and hide through technique and realism the integrity of the wood he uses to make his sculptures. The motion, movement and concerns with light, air and water are still there but these elements are made more complete, by admitting or accepting and showing the wood he is carving. By no longer trying to hide the materials he is using, he has shown and laid bare the creative process. Showing the plastic nature of the world around him has now become a visual feature of many of his works.

When looking at Grainger McKoy's art as it has been practiced over many years, it is easy to see how each piece is basically a study to prepare him for the work that will follow. Still a realist in every sense of the term, the nature of his message and its visual impact becomes more complicated with each creation.

McKoy has made a conscious, creative effort to avoid redundancy in his work. Bird art in America is still fairly dependent upon visual elements developed in the early 1900's. In other words, bird sculpture today is still fairly dependent upon a criteria used to evaluate the hunting decoy. McKoy feels the emphasis in this area has been toward craftsmanship. Much of the bird carving world, as we know it today, is usually caught up in some kind of contest or grand happening. These contests or large shows over the years were and are promoted, for the most part, by sportsmen's groups or conservationists. According to McKoy, the methods of presentation were fairly rigid with little leeway for deviation from the established norm. As recently as 1965, the bird art or carving world judges were having difficulty defining what it was they were evaluating and looking at. The only tools they had for evaluation were craftsmanship and

durability. Though there is evidence of "decorative carvings" being judged in contests as early as 1949, their place in the decoy contests had not been clearly established even in the mid 1960's.

In 1965, William J. Mackey, Jr., a decoy historian and a judge of gunning decoys since 1948 said, "My chief concern is a tendency for expert carvers to 'guss up' decoys until they are really ornamentals rather than working 'stools.' It is a fad that can be carried too far." (Decoy Collectors Guide, Vol. III, No. 4, Oct., Nov., Dec., 1965, pg. 9, William Mackey). Robert Kerr of Smith Falls, Ontario a noted decoy and decorative bird carver who competed in many of the early competitions, was asked in 1965 what the difference was between working decoys and the birds he carved for the mantelpiece. His reply was, "I guess you could say, I put a keel on the gunning decoys and a felt cloth on the bottom of the decorative models." (Decoy Collectors Guide, Vol., III, No. 2, April, May, June, 1965, Pg. 26, Harold Sorenson).

Though McKoy early in his career in the 1970's exhibited at these events, McKoy said, "It did not take him and Maggioni long to feel these activities inhibited their creativity." Criteria for evaluating bird carvings in the carving competitions and exhibitions were rigid and based upon decades of decoy making, he feels. The individuals sponsoring these events were, for the most part, McKoy believes, people with little experience in the world of fine arts. Within these narrow perimeters came a standardized product that left little room, according to McKoy, for the vision and ideas of a true artist, even though some major works of art have come from the bird show contests and exhibitions. McKoy and Maggioni have displayed their work at the Easton Waterfowl Festival, Easton, Md. and at the Ward Foundation Wildfowl Carving and Art Exhibition, Salisbury, Md.

Instead Maggioni and McKoy traveled to New York City to display their art. In March of 1974 they held their first major exhibition, "Birds in Wood," at the American Museum of Natural History. The exhibition ran for a month and turned out to be a tremendous success. This exhibition prompted Victor Hammer, the owner of Hammer Galleries, to ask McKoy to hold a one-man show in his gallery. This exhibition was held in the fall of 1976. It, like the American Museum of Natural History exhibit, was a great success. In 1975 he was also a participant in the Animals in Art Show produced by the Royal Ontario Museum and Expressions of Nature in Art at the Greenville Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina. In 1976, he was a participant in the exhibit "Bird Sculpture, A Native American Art Form Refined," which the Ward Foundation helped set up, at the

Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama and at the Gibbs Art Gallery in Charleston, South Carolina. McKoy also participated, in 1977, in the exhibit, "The Artist and the Animal," sponsored by the Audubon Society at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia and in 1978, "Wild America," at the Kodak Gallery in New York City. He is presently represented by the Coe Kerr Gallery in New York City.

McKoy marches to his own drummer. He makes only what he wants to, showing his audience the world as he sees it. He prefers to work at his own pace.

"I carve for myself," he says. Patrons feel fortunate just being able to get anything he wants to make. He says he is never satisfied with his work. With each new piece, the visual problems become greater and more difficult to resolve.

The work of Grainger McKoy has acted as a bridge between two different areas of the animal art world. His work is following in a tradition of the great artist-naturalists who have played such an important role in the development of American art. At the same time, McKoy's art, as has the work of others, has acted as a catalyst or model for those who are still caught up in the decoy art world.

This influence has been important, causing a major drift in visual emphasis, moving from a demand for work based only upon realism, toward art more involved in making evident the many intangibles of the natural world around us. Grainger McKoy is still working at his studio in South Carolina, creating the magic that makes wooden birds fly.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>William Mackey, "Life and Times of a Decoy Judge," *Decoy Collector's Guide*, III 4:12, 1965 p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Hal Sorenson, "Bob Kerr - Canadian Carver," *Decoy Collectors Guide*, III 2:10, 1965, P.26.

## Our Back Cover

This pair of American Widgeon won the \$750 Marie Conway Memorial Prize for artist Ron Louque in the Ward Foundation 1984 World Championship Wildfowl Painting Competition. The Marie Conway Prize was the latest in a series of awards for the 32-year-old Orange, VA resident. Ron recently won the 1985 Ohio Duck Stamp Contest, and he finished ninth in the federal duck stamp competition in 1983. His work has recently appeared in *Ducks Unlimited*, *Audubon*, and *Southwest Art* magazines and on National Wildlife Federation conservation stamps.

Ron's remarkable career in wildlife art began in the New Orleans area, where

he was born in 1952. He developed an interest in birds as an 8-year-old when he was given his first field guide, then branched into taxidermy at the ripe old age of 11. He began painting during his second year at Louisiana State University, where he was studying ornithology. Aided by an intense love of nature study and taxidermy, Ron was soon producing fine quality paintings. After only two years of study, Ron began a career as a professional artist, without having had even the first formal art lesson.