

Wood, Field & Stream

The Art of Bird Carving

By NELSON BRYANT

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

New Yorkers may see the startlingly realistic and incredibly detailed work of these South Carolinians at the American Museum of Natural History until May 24. Entitled "Birds in the Wood," the exhibition is in Gallery 77.

For the most part, the life-sized shore birds, waterfowl, game birds and birds of prey are in motion—flying, feeding, running, hovering or attacking.

When this writer visited the two artists at the museum last week, they were assembling their various wildlife tableaus, which included feeding mallards, a red-shouldered hawk attacking a copperhead snake, a trio of green herons battling over their morning meal and a falcon diving on green-winged teal.

Maggioni and McKoy work in basswood, and sometimes hundreds of feathers are individually fashioned for each bird. Texture and detail are achieved by burning as well as carving.

Both men began carving by creating duck decoys for hunting.

Maggioni, who is in his 50's and operates an oyster canning factory in Beaufort, started painting in 1939, and in 1967 began to develop his present carving technique and habitat arrangements. His carvings have been shown at the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston and at Telfair Academy in Savannah, Ga., and his canvases and carvings have been ex-

hibited at the Waterfowl Festival in Easton, Md.

In 1970, after having graduated from Clemson University, McKoy moved to Beaufort to study Maggioni's style of carving. His work has been shown, with Maggioni's, at Telfair Academy.

Asked if the realism he and his colleague have achieved can be further refined, Maggioni said there was room for improvements in paints and painting techniques. Because they cannot use a ground (a neutral base paint) on their birds—it would ruin the natural shadings created by burning—there is always the problem of the oil paints they do apply spreading into unwanted areas of the bare wood.

Their realism extends to the realm of habitat. Their quahogs and oysters cannot be distinguished from the real thing, and the same is true of their wood grass, which is fashioned from paper-thin sheets of brass shim stock, then painted.

Many of the birds are hollow. This is done to reduce their weight, a critical factor when they are mounted on a single small point, say the tip of a cattail or a tube of grass.

Maggioni confirmed this writer's recollection that none of the acknowledged waterfowl decoy carvers of yesteryear, whose talents lifted the fashioning of waterfowl decoys for hunting to the level of a true folk art, had come from South Carolina. Although directed toward decorative birds, the talents of Maggioni and McKoy bid fair to fill—even if belatedly—this strange vacuum of creativity.

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Waterfowl Carvings on Display

By NELSON BRYANT

Some of the best work of many of the nation's professional and amateur waterfowl decoy carvers will be entered in the United States National Decoy Show on Long Island this weekend.

Sponsored by the Great South Bay Waterfowlers Association, the show will run from noon to 9 P.M. Saturday and from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Sunday at the American Legion Hall at 22 Grove Place, Babylon.

Proceeds from the affair will go to Ducks Unlimited, the conservation organization that since the 1930's has spent millions of dollars in acquiring, maintaining and improving waterfowl habitat in the Canadian prairie provinces where most North American ducks are born.

Waterfowl decoy carving achieved the level of a folk art during the days of market gunning, although the present surge of interest in decoys did not really develop until after World War II.

Today most working (as opposed to decorative) decoys are fashioned from plastic, rubber or some other synthetic material, although some firms do manufacture excellent decoys from cork.

The admission fee to the show is \$1. An auction of decoys and other carvings will be held Sunday afternoon at 3, and decoys will be on sale during the entire show.

Spectators will have a chance to watch craftsmen in action as they compete in a decoy head-whittling contest Sunday afternoon.

Decoys have developed from the crude grass, reed and mud representations used by the Indians of North America — one still finds mud

snow geese decoys being fashioned by Cree Indians on the shores of James Bay, Ontario — to highly realistic and exquisitely crafted decorative birds. The present exhibition of Gilbert Maggione and Grainger McKoy at the American Museum of Natural History is an example of the latter. And at the current American folk art exhibition at the Whitney Museum one may see some examples of 19th-century craftsmanship, including an oversized black duck decoy, circa 1860, from the collection of George R. Starr, M.D., of Marshfield, Mass. Great blue heron decoys are at the Whitney, too. These birds were once shot for their feathers, but representations of them also were set near regular duck decoys, the theory being that they lulled the waterfowl into a false sense of security. The great blue heron "confidence" decoy probably was ideal for this purpose, for that tall, wading bird of the marshes has marvelous eyesight and almost never allows man to venture within shotgun range without taking flight. Herring gull "confidence" decoys are still used by Maine seacoast gunners.

There is also at least one merganser (or sheldrake) decoy at the Whitney. This writer had long wondered why gunners, in an era when more edible ducks were plentiful, bothered to make merganser decoys. In a recent telephone conversation, Dr. Starr provided the answer: mergansers were shot in the spring, when few other species were about, and when, according to Dr. Starr's informant, the meat of the fish-eating merganser is at its best.