



The Local Voice - Lancaster

Shining a Light On Issues Through Documentary Photography + Journalism

John Eichelberger

Art of a Feather

Duck Decoys Are Carving a New Niche

“A duck decoy is a man-made object that resembles a duck and is used to attract other ducks. Decoys can be used for hunting waterfowl, ornithological research or as collectible art,” according to Google Gemini’s AI response. It’s the last word in that definition, “art,” that has raised the decoy out of the rivers and lakes and into places of honor in homes around the world.

And, John Eichelberger knows a little something about that. About 13 years ago, when retirement was still a few years off, Eichelberger was visiting a friend in Havre de Grace, Maryland, who was a carver.

“There was a bookcase and, of course, the first book I picked up was, ‘How to Carve Decoys,’” Eichelberger said. “But, I had never really thought of carving.”

A few years later, that visit and that book came back to him and he decided it might be something he could get into. Together, Eichelberger and wife Jeanine began an internet search and found websites, DVDs and other sources. Before long, he found himself with tools in hand carving his first duck out of cork — a starter medium for the beginning carver.

He is part of a community of carvers that isn’t limited to ducks. At the Lancaster County Wood Carvers Annual Woodcarving & Wildlife Art Festival at Millersville, Pennsylvania, artists were showcasing everything from miniature woodland





creatures to nearly any species of bird to full-sized carousel horses. In addition to the three-dimensional pieces, certain artists carved flat boards, tree limbs and almost anything else that started out as a piece of wood.

Though the detailed and near-life like bald eagle might start out with a piece of wood and tools as basic as a carving knife, a chisel and a rasp, some use power tools like bandsaws, rotary tools, grinders and sanders. But, the most powerful tool may be the simple paint brush. Any piece of wood may encase a duck yearning to fly free, but it is the master's touch of the paintbrush that gives these creatures identity, personality and, yes, life.

It's the eyes imparting intelligence, the whisper of feathers, the smallest details giving the creatures depth and texture that make each bird look as though it will take wing at any moment. Viewers want to reach out a hand to stroke the soft feathers. Thus the signs asking viewers to touch only with their eyes.

These festivals often have an unusual aspect — not all of the artworks are sale. They are there for presentation and appreciation by those in attendance. The artists are willing and eager to talk about their art work, and equally excited to tell those who stop how to get involved themselves. And, that is how we got to know Eichelberger and to learn more about his flocks.

It wasn't until he had made a dozen or more birds over a couple of years working with cork before he finally took wood in hand and began to seriously carve.

"It wasn't a lot different," he said. "I went to different hand tools and for the Paulownia wood, I used more of the power tools and a draw knife. But, the concept itself and the procedure is basically the same.

"You start from a rectangle block of wood and end up with a decoy."

When it comes to painting his creations, he already had a little



background in art. He had taken art classes and completed a few paintings in high school. Like the proverbial riding of the bicycle, it came back to him pretty quickly.

“It’s not that hard, but there are different techniques you learn in painting birds.”

Eichelberger couldn’t name a favorite piece he’s completed, but he did say he enjoys making “dead hangs.” Also known as “nature morte,” these depict a raft of birds fresh from the hunt.

“They’re just a little something different,” he said.

Not all of his birds are meant for the display case. Some are actually working models used as decoys and that entails a different kind of carving and finish. In addition to sealing the piece to protect it, he has to weight the bird and float it to ensure it will stay upright and sit level in the water.

Duck decoy use is not new. Their use dates back to around 2500 BCE. They have also been considered an art form for several centuries. A.

Elmer Crowell (1862 – 1952) is considered “one of the greatest decoy makers and bird carvers of all time. The lifelike quality of his three-dimensional portrayals of American wildfowl is unsurpassed,” according to the Shelburne Museum website, which has an impressive collection of Crowell’s work.

And, in case this story has inspired you to grab a chisel and a block of wood to start your own journey to duck decoy master, consider that, according to the Guinness World Records, “the two most expensive duck decoys sold in a private deal for \$1.13 million each and were carved by” none other than Crowell — the “preening pintail drake” and the “sleeping Canada goose.”

