

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Tradition from a Woman's Hand: Female Decoy Carvers

By Patricia H. Burke



Photo Credit: Nancee Jo Luciani

2010 FWH Exhibit - Snipe

The exhibition, *Tradition from a Woman's Hand: Female Carvers, Historic and Contemporary*, was recently held at the Jersey Shore Folklife Center at Tuckerton Seaport. This groundbreaking exhibition, curated by Jaclyn Stewart, Director of the Folklife Center and assisted by Nicholas Wood, Folklife Program Coordinator, contained over 70 decoys carved by women from ages 15 to 85 years old. The carvers included Nancee Jo Luciani, Laurel Dabbs, Dorothy Dow, Claire Ecker, Blaine Bush, Rosalyn Leach Daisey, Shannon Dimmig, Emily Disbrow, Gigi Hopkins, Beebe Hopper, Kathy Marchut, Barbara Nyman, Lynne Reitmeyer Van Daley, Noelle Jessen Petragmani, Joan Siebert, Helen Lay Strong, and Jinx & Dick Troon.

Traditionally, decoys were carved by men, although sometimes their wives would do the painting. In the 19th century, when men were hunting at first for survival, women were also occupied with survival motivated work including cooking, preserving food, candle making, spinning, weaving, and caring for many children. Faced with inadequate educational opportunities, women in early American society had very few outlets for artistic expression. Native American women made pottery, woven baskets, embroidery for clothing, and blankets. African American slaves created textiles and baskets with a strong African design. European women wove fabric and made pieced quilts.

The year 1918 was a pivotal year for waterfowl hunters. Congress passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act which banned commercial hunting of wildfowl and placed strict limitations on recreational hunting. As a result, decoys were put to another use and unfortunately many were used as firewood. Perhaps coincidentally, a New York architect, Joel Barber (1876-1952), found a decoy near his boathouse on Long Island and was so intrigued by it that he

Continued on page 6

started collecting other decoys. He lent decoys from his growing collection for exhibition at the Newark Museum and at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1930s. Then in 1934, Joel Barber, as *the* promoter of decoys as folk art, published his book *Wild Fowl*

Photo Credit: Emily Disbrow



2010 FWH Exhibit - Wood Duck - Drake

Decoys. Five years later in 1939, Adele Earnest (1901-1993) established the Stony Point Art Gallery in New York where she specialized in decoys and folk art. In 1965 she wrote *The Art of the Decoy: American Bird Carving*. She was one of the founders of the American Folk Art Museum and was one of the pioneers who recognized that decoys were truly “floating sculpture.”

After 1918, the demand for functional decoys for hunting dropped tremendously and the professional decoy carvers began carving decorative and miniature birds to sell. In 1923 Joel Barber helped to organize the first decoy carving contest ever held. He organized other shows in the 1930s at Abercrombie and Fitch in New York for carvers to showcase their work.

Helen Lay Strong (1915-1995), one of the carvers represented in the Folklife Center’s exhibition, began carving in grade school in upstate New York. Her father was a waterfowl hunter and was also a guide for other hunters. He had specimens mounted by a local taxidermist which she used for studying. She began selling her carvings in the 1920s and was carving miniature waterfowl and songbirds as well as dogs. She began selling her birds wholesale around 1945 through a store on Fifth Avenue in New York City and soon her carvings were in the hands of collectors throughout the United States.

As industrialism and its machinery replaced artisans and their handcrafted products, some individuals realized that the country might be losing its traditional crafts forever. Others were concerned about the loss of quality in machine made products. In 1925, Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler Bidstrup co-founded the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina.



Photo Credit: ???

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Continued on page 7

The school flourished under Murrial “Murray” Martin who supervised the school’s woodcarving program. Woodcarving was taught to both men and women as a way to earn money in the rural Appalachian Mountains. They carved small animals and birds and helped revive the carving tradition in that region. And “it was something a mother could do at home without leaving her children”.

Eleanor Park Vance (1869-1954) and Charlotte Louise Yale (1870-1958) formed, with the financial help of George and Edith Vanderbilt, what was to be known as the Biltmore Estate Industries. They were social workers from New York City when they arrived in Ashville, North Carolina in 1901. They began a craft school and taught the impoverished youth of western North Carolina, woodworking and woodcarving and hand weaving of fine cloth. They helped bring about a revival of traditional mountain crafts. Eleanor Park Vance

was an accomplished woodcarver who had learned woodcarving and design at the Cincinnati Art School. In 1915 they moved to Tryon, North Carolina where they started a craft industry known as the Tryon Toy-Makers and Wood-Carvers.

Women carvers have created award winning working decoys, decorative carvings and miniatures. According to Dr. Cynthia Byrd, Curator and Folklorist of the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury University, Maryland, when the Ward Foundation held its first Exhibition (now Competition) in 1968, Gladys Black had one of her carvings exhibited. Recently, Nancee Jo Luciani who has won

major awards at the Chesapeake Challenge, Salisbury, Maryland remarked that “Birds appeal to women. It’s a natural thing. We relate to nesting and nurturing and what is aesthetically pleasing. Who can’t resist a baby bird or a great Blue Heron?”

If you missed the exhibition, which ended in January, you can still go to several galleries and shows around Ocean County where many of these award winning decoys are on display. *The Painted Parrot Decoy & Studio* in Toms River, the *Tuckerton Seaport Gift Shop*, and *Jersey Made* in Mount Holly, NJ have decoys and decorative birds for sale. They can also be purchased at the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Show on March 26th at the Parkertown Firehouse, at the Ocean County Decoy & Gunning Show in Tuckerton in September, and at the Annual Toms River Art & Decoy Festival every January. A catalogue of the exhibition is in publication and will soon be available for purchase at the Tuckerton Seaport Gift Shop.

Continued on page 8



Photo Credit: Laurel Dabbs

2010 FWH Exhibit - Yellow Legs Pair