

Anthony Hillman

2026 Hurley Conklin Awardee

By Pat Johnson

As an outdoorsman, a painter, decoy carver, and author, Anthony “Tony” Hillman is a perfect candidate for the Conklin Award and as the artist of this year’s show print.

Born in Atlantic City in 1948 and raised in North Wildwood, he remembers a different, quieter shore than today. “I could go outside and play and I wandered all over. The beach and the marsh were my playgrounds. I spent a lot

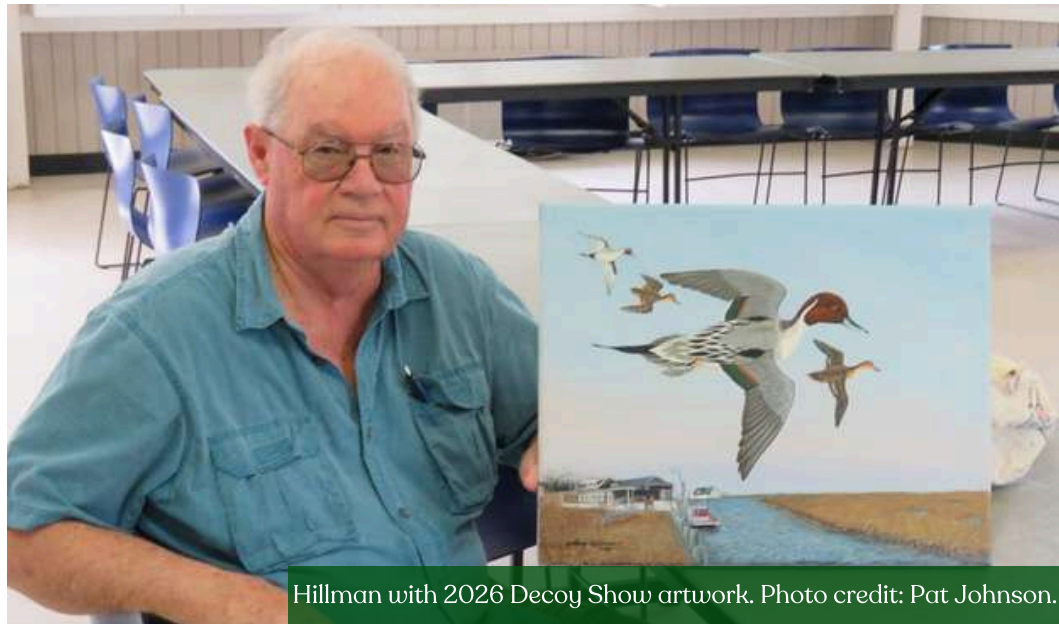
of time fishing and crabbing at Tony’s Marina and the owners would feed me lunch. On the road to the marina there was an osprey nest on every pole.”

His father was a WWII veteran and worked as a TV repairman and his mom was a housewife who knew how to cook the ducks his brothers would bring home. His father also worked occasionally with famous decoy carver Harry Mitchell Shourds painting houses.

He had four brothers and was the next to the youngest in the pecking order. When his two older brothers hunted, it was Tony’s job to skin the birds. “I took a correspondence course in taxidermy but it didn’t take.”

Looking back into his extensive genealogy, Hillman recounted there is a Lt. Col. Josiah Hillman who fought in the Revolutionary War with George Washington and had oversight of a fort on the Delaware. There was also a John Hillman who was a house painter and carver in the 1700s. “Maybe the carving genes came from him,” Hillman speculated.

“I always drew birds. As a kid I drew on the end papers of the Book of Knowledge (Encyclopedia).”



Hillman with 2026 Decoy Show artwork. Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

When Hillman graduated from High School in 1966 he went to the Hussian School of Art in Philadelphia for six months. The war in Vietnam was heating up and he joined the Marines before being drafted. He was enrolled in the anti-tank division at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. He thought he might be sent to Vietnam but he wound up going to sea school. He was on a destroyer that held 40 marines and 1,200 sailors. “We were in the Mediterranean and I was always looking at the birds that would alight on the rigging during their migration. I was on the ship a year and a day.”

Back at Camp Lejeune he drew military weapons from manuals for slides used for training purposes. It was his first experience with commercial art skills.

After his service he returned to Philly, married, and had a daughter. He got jobs with prestigious commercial and advertising firms but he missed the shore. “I was getting an ulcer and I hated living in the city.” So he took his bride and daughter to a small house on the bay in Brigantine. “My brother said I should go clamming. Well, we had a dock and there was an old garvey in the

yard half full of water and I bailed it out and started scratch raking hard clams. I averaged 800 to 1,200 clams on a tide. I'd take them to Pleasantville and sell them. I loved clamming, the birds would follow you around as you stirred up the mud." He also hunted and made his own decoys. His young daughter helped him paint snow geese flatties.

All through his life he kept on painting and drawing—watercolors of marsh scenes and ducks. He went to Stockton University and got a degree in painting. He still had connections in Philadelphia and did illustrations for Gray and Rodgers Advertising Agency, spot illustrations for the Fish and Wildlife Service and other clients. When his family moved to Seaville, he met Harry V. Shourds and they traveled to decoy shows together. Since Hillman knew commercial art he decided to do a shorebird pattern book with Shourds. "We did full size profiles and top views, we ring-bound it and printed 500 copies." "Harry and I did three books together and I later did the (decoy) painting books. I've published seven or eight books and sold over 100,000 copies." The books made his name in decoys. "You can't buy better advertising," he said.

His own style of decoy carving is self-taught by watching others carve.

"I used to visit Hurley Conklin. From him I learned to stretch the bodies out for more visibility. Hurley had talent to take a pattern and reduce it to its essentials."

"I was friends with Sam Hunt. I made him a couple of nice black ducks. Sam built me a sneakbox. He taught me a lot about wood."

Because of his friendship with Hunt, Hillman was invited to attend the 1983 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington D.C.

"They said Sammy wouldn't go without me," said Hillman. "The Smithsonian sent a big truck to Sam's house in Waretown and took an 18-foot garvey and a 12-foot sneakbox. Sam threw a bunch of shoes in a gunnysack and we went to the festival."

The festival that year was highlighting New Jersey folk artists and French/American music and dance.

"It was two weeks in the summer and we had a great time. We were in a tent next to a bunch of Cajun musicians. Not everyone knows that Sam was a terrific dancer. He danced all day with Alice Ridgeway.

"Our tent was all decoys. Arthur Pelligrin was in his 80s. He carved in tupolo wood. Charlie Hankins and his helper set up a steam box and built a sea skiff.

"I had some black ducks that I sold and I met people from all over the world. A guy from Germany ordered a bird from me."

Hillman is known not only for his decoys and his books but for his miniatures. Ever the salesman, he notes that, "Everybody has room for miniatures."

He was chosen this year to paint the cover illustration for the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show, a real honor.

His pattern and painting books of ducks, shorebirds, fish decoys and miniatures have inspired countless craftsmen and hobbyists and are still found on eBay and other outlets. And although he still carves for clients, "I'm as busy as I want to be, I had lots of work pressure when I was doing commercial art and I never said no but when it comes to decoys, I don't want to be rushed."



2026 Hillman Rudy Duck.
Photo Credit: Mike Mangum.