



Erie Art Museum

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Erie Decoys: Folk Art Sculpture

October 25, 2016, Erie, Pennsylvania – The Erie Art Museum is pleased to present a new Little Things Gallery exhibition, *Erie Decoys: Folk Art Sculpture*. The show will open October 29, 2016.

Antique duck decoys, rescued from the waterways that were their original home, are now widely recognized as folk art sculptures. Because Erie is located on one of the major flyways, both an early market gunning industry and sport hunting thrived here. As in other regions, a school of local decoy carving developed. Decoy carving was also an artistic expression of a lifestyle that flourished on Erie's bayfront. The Little Things gallery now showcases duck decoys from the Museum's permanent art collection, including work by Erie carvers Frank Buchner, Ken Chandley, Robert Ebisch, K. Henrichs, Harry Hahn, Jack Sweet, and a few unknown old timers.

Images and caption information available at this link:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BxujczcjBP4eYWhSRkhzc1EzVEk>

Erie Decoys

Migratory waterfowl have traditionally followed seasonal flight paths called flyways. Presque Isle Bay, on the extreme western tributary of the Atlantic flyway, is a stopover for at least two dozen different varieties of ducks. Long after the carving of decoys became a commercial enterprise on the Atlantic coast, hunters on Erie's bayfront were carving their own redheads, pintails, bluebills, and canvasbacks.

Decoys are peculiarly American, having been invented by Native Americans thousands of year ago, and were generally unknown in the rest of the world. As in so many aspects of their survival in the New World, European settlers in early America quickly learned to imitate the Native Americans whom they were so rapidly displacing. As duck hunting grew from a subsistence activity to a commercial enterprise during the 19th century, hunters who were most talented at making decoys began carving for other hunters, especially during the winter off-season. On the Chesapeake, Bay, and at other prime flyway sites on the Atlantic coast where the harvest of ducks was counted in the millions, specialists were able to make substantial incomes from carving.

By 1900, market hunting had so depleted the flocks of ducks, geese and shorebirds that a public outcry was raised. In 1918 Congress passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, outlawing the interstate sale of game meat, and effectively ending legal market gunning. The practice continued illegally in many regions, including Presque Isle, for many years, but was eventually replaced by sport hunting. The decoys in this exhibition were carved by hunters for their own use in sport hunting.

Characteristics of Erie Decoys

Erie decoys are distinguished by several unusual characteristics. The carved patterns on the backs of many decoys are totally unique to Erie. Other decoys with carving on the back tend to be realistic, more nearly resembling actual wing patterns. Although the originator of this pattern is unknown, Frank Buchner is the likely candidate. Exactly how many carvers used this peculiar pattern is also unknown. Some unidentified decoys with carved backs may have been earlier efforts by Buchner or by William Kurtz, another master of the style. It is clear, however, that Harry Hahn, Marty Jensen, and at least one other known but unidentified carver were imitating the earlier carvers in some of their efforts.

Another peculiar characteristic of many Erie decoys is an unusually wide body, widening toward the rear, and finishing in a flat or upraised tail, usually either square or semicircular in shape. This wide, flat “pancake” body is well suited to the choppy lake waters. The usual, rounded shape of most commercial decoys earned them the title “rollers” because of their tendency to tip over completely in rough water, especially if they had taken on a coat of ice.

Duck Hunting at Long Point

The photographer of these two images, George Barker of Niagara Falls, NY, visited Long Point in 1890, where he captured “The Duck Hunters—A day at Long Point, Canada” and, probably, this image of a Lake Erie layout boat, a rather sportsmanlike device which required relatively placid waters. A total of thirty-three decoys are visible, including the two attached to the boat. The layout boat is still used by sportsmen today throughout Lake Erie. Jeri Klein’s 1975 design is based on versions he observed in Sandusky, Ohio.

Frank Buchner (1871-1947)

Frank W. Buchner was the most prolific and one of the most talented of the carvers to work in Erie, and his decoys influenced those of many other carvers. Buchner was chief engineer on the Erie Sand & Gravel “sandsucker,” the barge-mounted dredging machine which clears the channels for navigation. He was born on East Sixth Street and resided as an adult at 124 Chestnut Street, in a house that no longer exists. A heart condition forced him to give up his position with Erie Sand in 1938, when he moved to Albion, bought a farm and raised horses. When the United States entered World War II, Frank Buchner was already 70 years old and in poor health, but because of the manpower shortage, he was persuaded to go to sea as the Chief Engineer on a Liberty Ship.

His granddaughter remembers him as a “very handy man with a large tool box” who kept his tools very neat and clean. He roughed out the decoy forms with a drawshave and did the finish carving with a knife. He carved decoys for himself, and for others. His nephew, Jack Buchner, remembers buying 18 new decoys in 1934, for \$1.50 each. Another batch of decoys was reportedly given to a doctor in payment for an operation.

Buchner's decoys are first-rate examples of folk art decoys. They reflect his peculiar vision of what ducks look like, and resemble actual ducks only in the particulars. The patterns, which he carved on the backs, varied from one duck to another, but were relatively consistent within a species. He used glass eyes, generally placed high on the head, often giving the duck a humorous aspect. His vision was both sculptural and painterly, as the decoys were painted to resemble the plumage of the duck they imitated. Unfortunately, many surviving decoys have been over-painted in solid black, which subsequent hunters found to be essentially as effective as the original colors.

Ken Chandley (1912- 1981)

Discarded telephone poles, made of rot-resisting cedar, were the favorite source of decoy carving material. Originally the carvers sawed and split an appropriate length of pole, then did all the initial carving with a drawshave, finishing it off with rasps and sand paper. Later, when this block was cut, Ken Chandley had found a friend with a large band saw, who cut the pole into a roughly decoy-like shape, saving a lot of shaving.

Ken Chandley was born in Erie in 1912 and grew up on the Bayfront, living first on the 400 block of West Second Street and later on the 400 block of West Front Street. He worked for many years as the production manager at Bucyrus-Erie. Like most of the other carver/hunters, Chandley hunted mostly in Presque Isle Bay, only occasionally in the lake, and used a rig of about fifty decoys.

Captain Harry Hahn

Captain Harry Hahn was one of five brothers, known as Harry, Hickey, Hockey, Honey, and Will. They were all "lakers", but Will came ashore early after a battle with a severe storm on a two-man fishing sailboat. Edwin, nicknamed "Honey", was superintendent of the fish hatchery at the foot of Myrtle Street for several years.

They all roughed out decoys, mostly from old cedar telegraph poles. Most of their decoys were not consciously artistic—it didn't seem worth the effort, because they were handled roughly and got banged up. They were carried in large wicker clothesbaskets and tossed into the water with one thing in mind: to leave an open lane in the middle for clear shooting.

Captain Harry made a blind, or sink box, that was small and painted a fall grey to blend with water on grey days. It was constructed of wood from orange crates (each piece about ¼" x 5" x 30" long). The box was very portable and easily transported on a launch, not needing to be towed. When the weather changed suddenly it could be quickly moved to the best area.

Before 1918 there was no limit, and no ducks were protected. Harry's son recalled his father bringing home burlap sacks full of big ducks. Live decoys were permitted up until 1935, and Harry kept a pair of mallards in a caged area with a small pond.

"My dad was an expert on a sewing machine, and he made a cover for his gun and a large suit to cover his hunting clothes, using white bed-sheets. He would saw the Bay ice and open a hole large enough to decoy ducks. He used live decoys secured by a cord and proper weights. He would lie on the ice, unseen, until he got a good shot. If the ducks were high and would not hit the water he would not shoot, because a duck that smashed on the ice would break its bones."

Jack Sweet (1928-2012)

The natural finish duck is a “shelf-sitter”, not a working decoy, carved by Jack Sweet before he founded Decoys Unlimited here in Erie in 1953. Decoys Unlimited produced various commercial grade hard balsa/wood headed hunting decoys designed by Jack Sweet in different sizes. The decoys have flat bottoms with wooden keels. They were produced on a twenty-four capacity duplicator and hand painted utilizing a lot of comb painting. Decoys Unlimited advertised nationally in Hal Sorenson's "Decoy Collectors Guide" in the 1960's and the decoys were sold extensively throughout the United States through Abercrombie & Fitch. Sweet also carved decorative birds and competed in the New York National Decoy Shows in the early 1960's, winning many ribbons and later participating as a judge. Jack closed down Decoys Unlimited in 1976, and moved with his wife to Idaho, where he operated a sporting goods business.

About the Erie Art Museum

The Erie Art Museum anchors downtown Erie’s cultural and economic revitalization, occupying a group of restored mid-19th century commercial buildings and a modern, ‘Green,’ 10,500 square foot expansion. The newly expanded Museum marks the first LEED-certified building in the region, soon to be complete with a planted rooftop.

The Museum maintains an ambitious program of changing exhibitions annually, embracing a wide range of subjects, both historical and contemporary and including folk art, contemporary craft, multi-disciplinary installations, community-based work, as well as traditional media.

The Erie Art Museum also holds a collection of over 8,000 objects, which includes significant works in American ceramics, Tibetan painting, Indian bronzes, contemporary baskets, and a variety of other categories.

The Museum offers a wide range of education programs and artists’ services including interdisciplinary and interactive school tours and a wide variety of classes for the community. Performing arts are showcased in the 25-year-old Contemporary Music Series, which represents national and international performers of serious music with an emphasis on composer/performers, and a popular annual two-day Blues & Jazz Festival.

The Erie Art Museum, café, and gift shop is open Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m.-5 p.m., and Sunday, 1-5 p.m. For additional visitor information, visit online at www.erieartmuseum.org or call 814-459-5477.

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