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THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

DECOYS

"American Folk Art is the art of the people who sought personal expression in the everyday objects they made primarily for common use", so says Adele Earnest in her book "The Art of the Decoy".

All research indicates that the unique folk art of decoy-making apparently developed only in America. Although hunting and catching wild fowl has existed from the earliest civilizations, there is no tangible evidence that the decoy art developed anywhere else in the world. A few old decoys have been found in Europe, but their use was not general and these particular ones probably dated after the settlement of America. One plausible reason may be that other methods had been long established and, proving satisfactory, became traditional and remained popular.

Americans seemed to provide the best combination of circumstances that produced this remarkable folk art. Some of the largest bird migrations in the world were found here; the early settlers needed wild game to supplement their food supplies; they had the freedom of the new land to hunt anywhere; and the basic idea of "making a bird to catch a bird" had already been conceived by the American Indian as early as A.D. 1000.

The earliest known American decoys, found in Nevada in 1924 by archeologists from the Museum of the American Indian in New York City, were canvasbacks which had been formed out of native bulrushes woven, twisted and tied into birdlike shapes, and several other species made by mounting stuffed skins and heads of actual birds into lifelike poses.

Not all decoys are good or necessarily deserve the name of "art", but it is an astonishing fact that so many are excellent - some are naturalistic, others are impressionistic or highly stylized and some are primitive. Some have been carved with infinite pain, others casually put together from pieces of driftwood, fence posts, or ship timbers washed up on the beach. It is a truly American folk art, indigenous to this country, popular in use, and formed out of natural woods by an individual creator.

The decoys shown in the U.S. Pavilion collection are representative of the wide range of both expression and species. The exhibit includes a variety of both shorebird decoys, sitting birds, and some "flying" bird decoys. The shorebirds refer to any of the wildfowl that feed along the beaches, tidal flats, or the lowland marshes and meadows. Shorebird decoys are generally mounted on metal or wooden sticks propped up in the beach sands. Smallest of the shorebirds are the sandpipers; most delicate and varied are the yellowlegs. The curlew, seen also in the metal weathervane in this

exhibit, is the largest and most impressive of the shorebirds. The sitting bird decoy is a floating lure that rides at anchor, attached to a piece of twine and fastened to a weight that drops to the bottom. Among the sitting birds, the duck decoys predominate because of their widespread use all over the continent. The floating decoy had to balance expertly on the water without toppling. Weights on its bottom acted as stabilizers. Thus, the carver unknowingly often met the requirements of good sculpture by building his decoy so that it would balance, be compact and sturdy, and have no irrelevant detail. The mergansers, with their elegant crested heads, are the aristocrats of the decoy family, and, when one is found, are highly prized. Decoys of the snow goose are also rare finds. A hundred years ago the snow goose was a familiar sight all over America. Today it is seldom seen on the East Coast. Its main route has shifted to the Pacific.

Decoys of such birds as the swan, crane, gull, heron, are among the most beautiful and the most rare. They were made primarily for the feather hunter and were only used singly or in pairs. Some decoys, such as the loon, are known as "solitary persuaders". Because the loon is an unsociable bird, other birds would be likely to come to rest on a lake where a solitary loon could be seen swimming quietly.

Man's ingenuity and curiosity led even the decoy-maker to experiment with inventions for better decoys, such as a mobile yellowleg that could turn, always facing into the wind, or the decoy that could attract attention by wiggling its head or flapping its wings.

However, the real art of decoy-making lay always in the fineness and individual expression of the carving and the often intricate mixing and applying of the varied shades and colors of the feathers.