

Mason Premier grade mallard pair salesman samples an unique find

BY RUSS GOLDBERGER

Salesman samples are among the rarest examples by the Mason Decoy Co., as only a handful have been found, making them among the most sought after by Mason collectors. Recently a pair of Premier grade mallards salesman samples, the only ones we're aware of, were located in Michigan. The owner had received them from his father, who was born in 1903 and acquired them he was just 9 years old, definitively dating them to 1912. They remained in the family until our recent purchase.

The Mason Decoy Co., the most successful commercial manufacturer of quality wooden decoys, operated in Detroit, Michigan from 1896 to 1924. Most of the decoy production was accomplished on

pattern lathes, but finish work and painting was completed by hand. The company was prolific, making hundreds of thousands of decoys that were shipped worldwide. Due to their quality and ready availability, many consider them the most collectible type of decoy today.

Mason offered most species in several grades, differentiated by their carving and paint detail. Premier and Challenge grades were the most elaborate. In 1905 Standard grades (glass, tack and painted eye) were added; due to their simpler designs they were more affordable to many hunters.

Mason appears to have crafted a small number of salesman samples, or presentation decoys, as a way to demonstrate their workmanship. As expected, the quality is

superb, but the body sizes are small. We have seen examples of a Premier mallard drake (very different from this pair), wood duck drake and canvasbacks; Challenge grade mallards; and Standard grade glass-eye mallards, bluebills, canvasbacks and redheads.

This pair of Premier mallard salesman samples (pictured below) is only 12 inches long (a normal Premier mallard is about 18 inches long), they're solid-bodied (most Premiers are hollow), and the head and body shapes are unique. The drake also has a turned head, another rare feature.

We continue to be amazed with the variety of offerings by the Mason Decoy Co. One can only wonder about what else is out there awaiting discovery.



Early Ward brothers “knot head” canvasback

BY DICK McINTYRE

Lem and Steve Ward got their start in making decoys in their father's shop in Crisfield, Maryland, and by 1918 were carving as a team. Throughout their decoy making career they developed many styles of decoys, some given a name familiar to most collectors: fat jaw, pinched breast, 1936 model, Bishop's Head style, among others. One of the models they developed in their early days was the “knot head” style, which accentuates the crown of the head of a canvasback in nature.

I recently acquired this “knot head”

canvasback from the West Coast, where it was tucked away in a small collection, having been purchased years ago from the family that originally ordered the rig of over a dozen from Lem Ward in 1924. The whereabouts of the others are unknown.

The head on this canvasback is turned sharply 80 degrees to the right with an unusually long, up curved bill. The knot at the crown of the head is the most exaggerated I've seen on this style. There's a deep thumb notch behind the neck, which creates the impression of raised wing shoul-

der carving. The thick, stipple paint on the back and the sides is elaborately applied. A diamond-shaped feather patch is scratch-painted nearly four inches up the back.

The early period decoys of the Ward brothers are among the most sought after by experienced collectors and folk art enthusiasts. The powerful carving, expressive posture and dry surface texture of this decoy are good examples why. 

