

# William Herman SCHMIEDTGEN

## Finding a calling in the realm of waterfowl art

by Donna Tonelli

ABOVE: *Bluebills in Flight, Princeton Game & Fish Club, Bureau County, Illinois, oil on canvas, 20 x 18 inches, signed, ca. 1911.*



*SHE CAME IN FROM THE EAST, wing-weary and badly crippled – a lone mallard hen – and widowed. So weary was she that barely could her wings carry her over the surface of Lake Michigan. And as she neared the Chicago shore, every wing stroke seemingly her last. This egg-laden Mallard spied the quiet waters of the old lagoon in Lincoln Park. No fear, no mallard weariness, no natural cautiousness possessed her now. She sat her wings and flopped into the lagoon.*

*About the same time William Schmedtgen, cartoonist and newspaper artist, sat before his easel in the offices of the Chicago Daily News, a dejected figure in his white tunic and slippers, despair stamped upon his drawn features – discouraged. For, the man – born of temperament – had sensed a strange unformulated call at the door of his heart – a haunting voice telling him that another field of art lay open before him – a field that promised fame and fortune. Whether this strange sense pointed towards the portrait, or whether it favored the landscape, the artist did not know, so utterly obscure seemed this apprehension, despairingly haunting him with self-dissatisfaction.*

*Stricken with this foreboding, and unable to paint, he donned his street attire, and wended his way north along Lake Shore. It was a balmy late May afternoon; a fresh wind off the lake fanned his face. With uncertain step he walked on, until he found himself at the old lagoon in Lincoln Park. Here was a beautiful spot he chose to while away a moment – beautiful in dense foliage and in the calm of the quiet waters. Along the shore a snipe scampered. At the water's edge a frog crouched silently. The artist observed these little acts of natural life; they fascinated him.*

*But suddenly, arousing a fluttering in his heart, he saw a wild duck waddle from the near-by flower bed, jump in the wing, rise above the tree and out of sight. Standing there, non-plussed at the sight of a wild mallard in Lincoln Park, Schmedtgen caught a vision. So close had been the duck that the very features of the bird were stamped in his mind. And now, stirred with artistic gift, he drew a pencil and envelope from his pocket and, with marvelous accuracy, sketched a rising mallard. Instantly the wrinkled lines disappeared from his face; new force possessed him; new talents seemed to shower his with glorious promises – He had found his calling in the realm of Art!*

- Fish Berg



*Canvasbacks over Rousseau Lake, Princeton Game & Fish Club, Bureau County, Illinois, oil on canvas, 30 x 20 inches, signed, ca. 1911. AT RIGHT: Tom Turkey and his Harem, oil on board, 12 x 18 inches, signed, ca. 1920.*

**T**HIS INTRODUCTION by Fish Berg for the 1921 exhibition of 24 paintings by William Schmedtgen at Young Art Galleries in Chicago depicts a familiar picture of a man burdened by an unfulfilling occupation infused with stress. Fortunately fate intervened, and this weary artist found an escape among nature, not as a hunter but as a painter, able to immerse within the beauty of the wildlife he found there and observantly apply that vision to canvas.

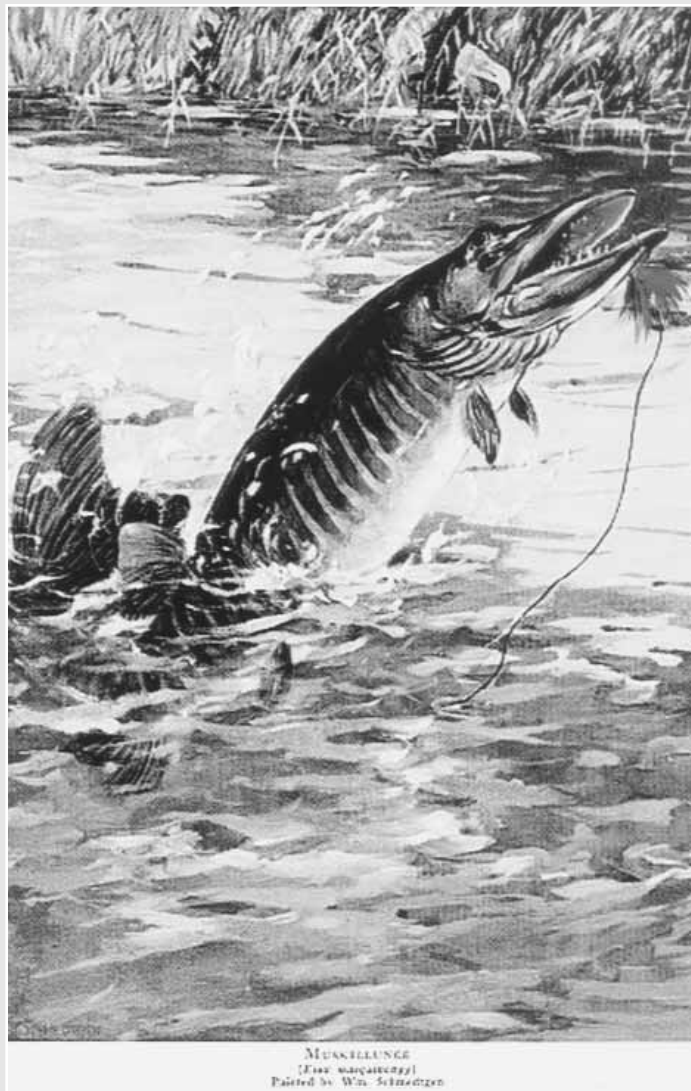
Born in Chicago on May 18, 1862, Schmedtgen began his studies at the Chicago Art Institute, and in 1883 joined the art staff of the *Old Chicago Mall* newspaper. After a bit of seasoning, he headed to St. Louis and then New York, pursuing work as a commercial artist. When he returned to Chicago in 1886, Schmedtgen was hired as the head of the art department at the *Chicago Record*, a position he held until 1901.

His work with the *Chicago Record* placed him in the thick of the big news events of





Jumping Northern, oil on board, 10½ x 18 inches, signed, ca. 1930.



MUSKIELUNGE  
(Esox masquinongy)  
Painted by Wm. Schmedtgen

Muskie print by Schmedtgen offered by Outdoor Life, ca. 1920s.

the day, and most notably was his coverage of the infamous frame-up trial of the four men accused of inciting the Haymarket Square riots in Chicago on May 4, 1886. After months of high drama in the courts, and the resulting high volume of newspaper coverage, the men were found guilty, and Schmedtgen was given the unenviable assignment of illustrating the hanging of the convicted “anarchists.”

Art Young, a reporter for the *Record*, noted Schmedtgen’s behavior in a column he wrote on the day of the event: “Next morning I saw Schmedtgen put a revolver in his hip pocket and noted he was white and trembling. Outside in the streets an ominous prevailed. Business seemed to come to a halt. Pedestrians were comparatively few, and every face was tense. We who stayed in the office didn’t talk much and when we did our voices were subdued...Three hundred policemen had formed a cordon around the jail, a block away from it on all sides...only persons who could satisfy police that they had bona fide passports could get through.

Once a newspaperman got in the jail, the police would not let him out though he could send copy to his office by messenger. The hanging proceeded efficiently...when the four men had dropped from the scaffold and the doctors pronounced them all dead, the tension of the months was suddenly over...Schmedtgen’s sketch of the hanging had been rushed into print. I saw him that afternoon. He was ghastly pale and said nothing.”

Schmedtgen was a master at “chalk-plating,” an innovative process that revolutionized newspaper illustration during the late 1880s, and he was instrumental in introducing this new form of printing to the industry. A chalk-plate (koalatype) was a perfectly smooth sheet of steel coated with a layer of kaolin, or china clay. An illustration would be engraved through the coating down to the steel surface, forming the matrix into which molten lead was poured to make the stereotype plate, or die, for the printing presses. Thus a newspaper illustrator would “redraw” his sketches made in the field to prepare them

directly for press. During the Spanish American War of 1898, Schmedtgen used this process as he traveled with the American armed forces.

The Chicago Institute of Art presented two group exhibitions of the drawings of Schmedtgen, Frank Holme and John T. McCutcheon. The first, held January 16 to February 21, 1897, displayed drawings made, almost exclusively, for newspaper reproduction. The purpose of the exhibit was to illustrate the range of newspaper coverage and its influence on both the politics and noted events of the day. There were a few miscellaneous drawings on exhibit that were used as illustrations in books or magazines.

The second exhibition, in January 1899, after the end of the Spanish-American War, was a collection of war pictures depicting “the important scenes, incidents and character of the war with Spain drawn many times under conditions hardly conducive to the production of a work of art, hence many of them are mere notes, but valuable because of their histor-



*Bass Jumping, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches, signed, ca. 1930.*



*Close-up of Schmedtgen's signature.*

ical accuracy." Schmedtgen's works represented "nearly all of the naval maneuvers before Havana at the beginning of the war, the rendezvousing of the fleet at Key West, and the picturing of some of the expeditions prior to the landing of the army at Santiago." He also landed with the invading army at Baiquiri and continued to document the engagements and daily workings of the army until two days after San Juan Hill was taken.

It is no wonder that Schmedtgen needed an outlet from the stress of his job. While he continued to work as a newspaper illustrator, after his marriage in 1900 to Clara Thureau and through his remaining years, Schmedtgen focused his attention on wildlife art, creating a growing reputation as a commercial artist in the process. His artwork graced the covers of popular outdoor magazines, advertising calendars and posters – even jigsaw puzzles and sheet music – and he provided the illustrations for several books, including "A Strike!" by Wm. Boyce, self-published in 1894.

Schmedtgen found respite at his resort in Ottawa County, Michigan, and took to the surrounding lakes. He was inspired by the fish that exploded from the clear blue waters, dangling from the end of his fishing line, and his renditions of jumping bass and northern pike were published on the covers of *Outdoor Life* (June 1929) and early Pfluger tackle catalogs. Along with other wildlife artists of the day, he supplied artwork for *Outdoor Life* that was



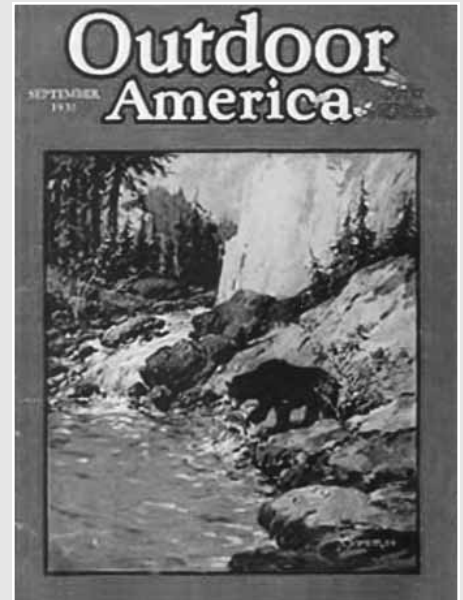
*Bear, oil on board, 12 x 14 inches, signed. Published on cover of Outdoor America, September 1931.*

used for a series of 12 wildlife prints, "suitable for framing," that was offered during the 1920s and 30s. (Examples of these show up on eBay for \$10-15 apiece.)

Schmedtgen often traveled to the Illinois River valley near Hennepin, sometimes as a guest of the Princeton Game & Fish Club, to hunt waterfowl and paint waterfowl scenes. The minutes of their club meeting records show that he stayed at their clubhouse for a month in 1911. For years, his oil on canvas painting of canvasbacks flying over Rosseau Lake hung in their clubhouse.

Hunters familiar with the Princeton Game & Fish Club will recognize the scene of several of Schmedtgen's oil paintings due to the distinct landscape of its grounds, located on the west side of the Illinois River across from Hennepin. Aside from Goose Pond and Russeau Lake, the grounds are comprised of 2000 acres of timber and potholes along the Illinois River shoreline. This timberland is honeycombed with man-made channels, which connect numerous hunting holes. Before each season the timber is flooded, creating an enticing loafing spot for the ducks that migrate through there.

The appeal in Schmedtgen's paintings is his ability to capture those special moments that make a sportsman hold his breath, like the instant a duck hunter, in the first light of morning on a crisp fall day, catches a glimpse of a flock of mallards flying down the boat ditch towards his blind. Or when a large tom turkey, making its way through the timber in a kaleidoscope of autumn colors, his harem making their way behind him while feeding along the way, freezes in its tracks. In real life the hunter would freeze too, hop-



*September 1931 issue of Outdoor America featured Schmedtgen's illustration on the cover.*

ing the tom hadn't spotted him in the underbrush, trying not to make a sound to give his presence away.

Schmedtgen's artistic repertoire included pen & ink drawings, gouache watercolors, full color illustrations and fine art paintings. Many of the pen & inks were executed after the Spanish-American War during travels to Mexico, Spain, Italy and Northern Africa. A fine example of a gouache is his 1912 illustration for the sheet music of Bernie Adler's "Just as the Ship Went Down," which depicted the sinking of the Titanic. As a rule the oil paintings commissioned as illustrations were done on composition board, while his fine art paintings were executed on stretched canvas.

The Chicago Art Institute has one of the great collections of Impressionistic art, which undoubtedly inspired him, because a strong influence of that style is evident in Schmedtgen's work, particularly his painting of wild turkeys, as the tom's luminous black feathering and bright red head are immersed within minute impressionistic splashes of vivid color that make up the forest landscape.

After 40 years in the newspaper and illustration business, William Herman Schmedtgen retired to his home in Wilmette, Illinois. He continued to paint, and draw political cartoons until he was incapacitated by illness and forced into a wheelchair several years before his death on December 31, 1936. His reputation as a newspaperman was such that even the *New York Times* published his obituary. As more of his paintings are exposed to the collecting public, his sporting art will be favorably compared to the noted wildlife artists of his day.