

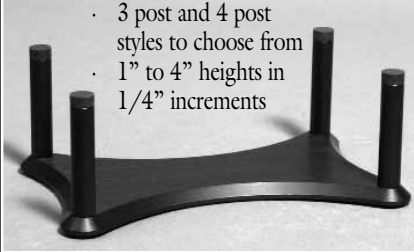
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BOOK REVIEW

“Masterworks of the Illinois River” compliments Ward Museum exhibit

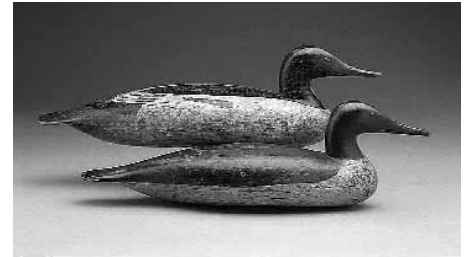
reviewed by *Decoy Magazine*

BY THE TIME YOU read this review of “Masterworks of the Illinois River,” a full color soft cover slip-cased catalog produced in coordination with “The Illinois River Meets the Chesapeake,” a two-month exhibit of Tom Figge’s Illinois River decoy collection displayed at the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art in Salisbury, Maryland, the show will be over and the decoys will no longer be available for first-hand viewing. However due to the high-quality photography by David Allen and well-executed design by Sean Westgate, readers will be able to appreciate and enjoy the roughly 150 decoys included in this exhibit for years to come. And this is even before you read the text that accompanies their work.

Stephen O’Brien Jr., a long-time decoy enthusiast and owner of Stephen O’Brien Jr. Fine Arts in Boston, together with Julie Carson, a marketing consultant who has written extensively on American art, teamed up to “catalog” the Illinois River decoys that were to be presented in the exhibit, and in the process produced one of the finest books ever published on Illinois River decoys.

For over 25 years collector Tom Figge has sought to assemble the finest examples by Illinois River decoy makers, an area rich in waterfowling history and noted for its superbly crafted and painted decoys. Most would agree that his journey has been a success. From his collection roughly 150 birds were chosen for this exhibit, including examples by 27 known makers and a handful of artfully made unknowns, providing viewers a rare opportunity to appreciate and evaluate a rather complete presentation of Illinois River decoys.


The book is organized chronologically, and the carvers are presented in order of their birth, beginning with Henry Ruggles (1830-1897) and ending with Virgil Lashbrook (1913-2003), each a small chapter containing a biography of the maker, details of their carving techniques and illustrations of their work. The book finishes with a chapter on Attributions and Unknowns. Nearly half the illustrations



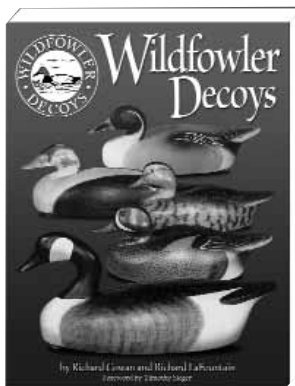
masterworks of the illinois river by stephen j. o'brien jr. and julie carson

represent the regions most noted and prolific makers: Charles Perdew (23), Robert Elliston (11), Bert Graves (10), Charles Walker (6) and Charles Schoenheider Sr. (6), giving readers a full panorama of the variety in their work. Lesser-known yet important makers were represented by a single decoy or pair in the book: Fred Allen, Walter Dawson, Oscar Alford, William Lohrman, Chris Powers and Michael Vallero, each a choice example of the maker’s talents.

Having had the opportunity to both view the display and peruse the book, we were particularly impressed with the work of Henry Ruggles and would be proud to display his handsome Canada goose on our shelves. We were also taken with the carvings of Stephen Lane, whose pintails, to our eye, are among the finest ever made on the Illinois River. The three decoys by Vern Cheesman in the display were all painted by Edna Perdew, and we should be thankful for their collaboration. And the Otto Garren wood duck should be sufficient to bring a smile to anyone’s face.

So if you were unable to see the Ward Museum’s impressive display, “The Illinois River Meets the Chesapeake,” you’ll still be able to view this fine collection of decoys in “Masterworks of the Illinois River.” And while nothing can replace the opportunity of seeing the actual birds themselves, this book, or exhibit catalog, is the next best thing. 

“Masterworks of the Illinois River,” by Stephen O’Brien Jr. and Julie Carson, 154 pages, over 110 color illustrations, soft cover with slipcase, published by Stephen O’Brien Jr. Fine Arts, Boston, MA, \$60 plus shipping



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