

Eastern Shore museum shows storied heritage of region's wildfowl art

Imagine what the Ward brothers – Lem and Steve – would think. The two Maryland Eastern Shore natives were early 20th-century pioneers of the Chesapeake Bay region's wildfowl-art industry.

Later this month, April 24-26, the 39th annual Ward World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition and Art Festival will be held at the Ocean City convention center. The competition, which features more than 150 varieties of bird carvings by 800 of the top carvers in the world, is a signature event of the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury University.

"We get wildfowl artists from all over, especially from strongholds like Japan, the Netherlands and England, as well as Canada," says Lora Bottinelli, executive director of the Ward Museum.

The Ward Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed in 1968 to promote wildfowl art and preserve the legacy of the Ward brothers, established the Ward Museum through a partnership with Salisbury University in 1976. In its initial years, the

foundation coordinated exhibitions and produced publications to advance this art form.

Today, the Ward Foundation is an affiliate of Salisbury University, having donated the Ward Museum facility and its collection to the university in 2000. The foundation retains operational responsibility for the museum.

From 1976 to 1991, the museum was located on the university campus. It shifted to its present site amid the lush surroundings along the Atlantic Flyway – one of the major migratory routes for birds – during a phased move in 1991 and 1992.

The distinctively designed museum with its peaked roof and three-story atrium windows was built on the edge of Schumaker Pond in Salisbury. "The pond is a headwater of the Wicomico River, one of the important tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay," Bottinelli says, "and that makes us part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed area."

Ward Museum is also part of the Chesapeake Bay Gateway Network – 150 parks, wildlife refuges, museums, ships, historic communities, trails and other places that provide visitors with authentic Chesapeake Bay experiences.

The museum's 4.5-acre property has a nature trail, fishing pier, observation deck and an open-air pavilion that houses an outdoor living classroom. Pavilion space is available for weddings and meetings.

Inside, the museum provides 12,000 square feet of exhibit space. The Art Lamay Gallery and Welcome Gallery have changing exhibits of painting, sculpture and carvings by environmental artists. Additional galleries spotlight decoys that represent major flyways in the region.

The Championship Gallery is a collection of contemporary wildfowl sculpture from the museum's permanent archives, including winning entries from the Ward World Championship event.

And, the newly renovated Habitat Theater is the prime inter-active space in the museum. *Winged Migration*, an award-winning documentary film about the migration patterns of birds, is now showing there. The theater also houses a children's puppet stage where young visitors can become familiar with environmental issues.

Another element of the museum is a re-creation of the workshop that the Ward brothers used. Examples of their carving, painting and other

memorabilia – even poetry – are on display.

Lemuel T. Ward, Jr., and Stephen Ward were born in the mid-1890s. (Steve was a year older.) They were natives of Crisfield – a seafood-industry town literally built on discarded oyster shells – and came from a family of watermen who worked on the Chesapeake Bay. Their father, L. Travis Ward, Sr., was a barber. He was also one of the early carvers linked to the "Crisfield school of decoy carving" during the early 1900s.

Crisfield decoys had flat bottoms that allowed them to ride the water like a duck, unlike the round-bottom decoys from the Upper Bay region that rolled in the waves. They were over-sized and had finely carved heads, making them easily visible and lifelike.

Like their father, the Ward brothers became barbers. They also turned to carving to offset slow periods at their barbershops. Their decoys ended up on display, next to the hair tonic bottles. Hunters heard about the decoys and came to buy them.

When the brothers pooled their talents and set up a joint workshop in the early 1920s, they became *L.T. Ward & Brother Wildfowl Counterfeiters in Wood*. Lem developed his skill as a

painter. Steve was the primary carver. Though neither one had training as an artist, they could translate their intimate knowledge of wildfowl gained as avid outdoorsmen into realistic-looking decoys.

As a team, the Ward brothers created “between 27,000 and 50,000 decoys – working, decorative and ornamental,” according to a written submission by former Maryland Senator Paul S. Sarbanes to the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center. Others estimate their output to be between 25,000 and 40,000 pieces.

The Wards had a never-ending waiting list for decoys, which certainly grew after *National Geographic* magazine featured them three times, Bottinelli says. Through the 1950s and 1960s, they participated in decoy-carving contests up and down the East Coast, she adds.

“Their decoys have attitude,” Bottinelli says. “It’s not just the abstract realism – they come to life.” They also have value. She mentions that some of the pieces created by the Ward brothers “are insured for well over \$100,000.”

Don Briddell who became a student of the Ward brothers at the age of 13, reports in his *Overboard Art* website that decoys the Wards made in the 1920s have fetched prices as high as

\$95,000. That’s a cosmic leap from the \$1.50 price tag the Wards attached to each of their working decoys in that era. A haircut then was a fraction of what the decoys cost: 15 cents.

By the 1950s, the Ward brothers were moving away from working decoys to decorative ones. Their customers were looking for decoys to place on a mantle, not in the water. Lem expanded his style during the 1960s. He began to create “highly decorative carvings that included wall-mounted pairs of flying ducks on painted backgrounds,” Bottinelli says.

Carved decoys, today, are associated with an expanding category of wildfowl art. Bottinelli observes a trend to “more attention on exotic birds” by contemporary wildfowl artists. She says tupelo wood and basswood are used extensively – the Ward brothers regularly used cedar. “An industry has been built to support the art form.”

Visit the Ward Museum site to check on exhibitions and events. Hours are Monday through Saturday, 10-5; Sunday, noon to 5.

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