The Ancient Art of Decoy Fishing

Charles Pedew, Frank Cassini, Oscar Henry Peterson, G. Bert Graves—mention of these or other famous carvers of duck decoys instantly garners the attention of avid collectors of outdoor sporting memorabilia. Collecting duck decoys has become a national obsession in the last fifty years and there is little indication that interest in these hand-crafted relics of bygone days will soon wane.

What is surprising is that another kind of carved decoy has only in the last decade come into its own as a highly collectible folk art item. From the western Great Lakes to upstate New York, hand-carved wooden fish without hooks are being sought after with increasing urgency as supplies dwindle and prices skyrocket. The growing respectability of this new folk art passion is reflected in the increasing numbers of recent exhibitions. For example, the Museum of American Folk Art produced an elaborate exhibit under the title The Art of the Spear-Fishing Decoy. In catalog and other recent books by authorities on fish decoys are useful sources of information. Collections and carvers have also organized the American Fish Decoy Association, which now publishes a regular newsletter.

In Decoy Magazine and the Wisconsin Outdoor Journal one can now read articles detailing the fine points of collecting ice fishing decoys and profiling the careers of well-known and accomplished fish decoy carvers such as Oscar W. Peterson, John Snow, Sr., Ray Thompson, Frank Mitera, and John Albert Ryken. The beautiful wooden fish, painstakingly carved, weighted, and painted by these men and a host of others were designed to attract fish close enough to spear through the ice. The decoys themselves were given, traded, or sold for a pittance as little as 30 years ago. Now, individual decoys, judged by their aesthetic qualities and the name recognition of their carvers, are fetching prices from twenty dollars each to as high as $18,000.

Sparking fish with the aid of a decoy saw its peak popularity 40 to 110 years ago. It became a commercial fishing technique throughout the Great Lakes region by the late 1800s, but was outlawed from most areas at various times through the 20th century. Although decoy fishing for sport is still legal in...
a few locations in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, the main emphasis is on collect-
ing the decoys and gathering information on
their production, use, and traditions, in-
cluding documentation of the early history
of winter spearing with decoys.
Without question, 19th and 20th cen-
tury decoy fishing in North America was
adopted from traditional winter fish spear-
ing as practiced by the Indian tribes of the
Great Lakes region. There are many eye-
witnes accounts of various Indian tribes, such
as the Dakota, Potawatomi, Meno-
mie, Cree, and Ojibway, especially the
Ojibway, using fish decoys in combination
with blanket-covered "dark hats" and spe-
cial fish spears termed "lensers" to procure
fish through the ice. Some Indian groups,
such as the Ojibway around Lac Du Flam-
beau, Wisconsin, still practice and preserve
the techniques of traditional winter spear-
ing. Ethnographer Frances Densmore de-
scribed Ojibway decoys in use early in this
century:
"The decoy fish were made
of wood with a tail of birch bark
and buoy weighted down with lead.
Some skill was required in making
these so that their equilibrium in
the water was perfect."
Henry Schoolcraft, writing in the 1660s,
provides another early description of tradi-
tional winter spearing:
"There are some modes of
fishing through the ice which are
very ingeniously, one of the most
common is, to play a decoy... by an
instrument which is called an
ash dun, by the Algonquin tribes...
The decoy is generally the image of
a small fish. The Indians, placing
himself flat on his stomach, covers
his head with his blanket, supported
by branches, in order to exclude the
light. By excluding the extraneous
glare, the vision is extended into
the waters below, and the watcher
stands ready with his spear to dart
the point into his victim, as soon as
a approaches to seize the bait."

The earliest descriptions of winter spear-
ing with decoys are from the late 1660s. For
information on earlier origins we must turn
to other sources. Authorities on decoy fish-
ing have determined that the practice ex-
tended throughout the North American
Arctic, subarctic, and Great Lakes region,
and that it also occurred in northeast Asia.
For various reasons, most fish decoy au-
thorities (in folk art and collecting circles)
favor a North American origin for decoy
fishing. One noted authority has even sug-
gested that racism is a motive of those
considering otherwise. The answers to ques-
tions of origin and diffusion of the fish
decoy must understandably come from the
realms of archaeology and ethnography.
In modern times, use of fish decoys has been
documented among nearly all of the
groups inhabiting the North American Ar-
tic and subarctic. Minimalistic, documenta-
tion for this practice in the eastern Arctic
ests for the East Greenland, Polar, Iglulik,
Baffinland, Labrador, Netsilik, Caribou and
Copper Eskimos and the Icelands of Quebec. In
The western Arctic, the Mackenzie, Bering Strait, Prince of Wales, and mainland Southwestern Alaska Eskimos also used decoys during modern times. Many of the western subarctic American Inuit's tribes, such as the Corteo, Chilkoots, and the Nushagak, the Chukchi, the Chukchi, the Attukashet, and the Montagnais. Then, in North America, the practice extended from north of the Arctic Circle to the south of the Great Lakes, where ice fishing becomes understandable at around 40 degrees latitude.

Outside of North America and Greenland, the tradition of fish decoy use is documented throughout much of the northeastern part of Asia. Decoys were used in the Asian Pacific Northwest from northern Japan northward, around the Bering Straits, and elsewhere in Asia among various groups as the Ainus, Koryak, and Samoyeds. In the eastern Siberian interior, groups such as the Evenke, Yakut, and the Evenki of the Palaikait Region (west of Lake Baikal) also used fish decoys. Decoys do not appear to have been used in western Siberia, Europe, Scandinavia, or Iceland. In short, fish decoys are known to have been used during modern times in about 65 percent of that part of the Northern Hemisphere where ice fishing can be practiced.

Figure 3. Paddle shell fish decoys (made circa 500 b.c. from Faulk County, Illinois) are the southernmost archaeological fish decoys known. The largest is a slightly longer than three inches. A split sickle-type fishing stick, for propping the decoy in the water, was found with one of these. (Illinois State Museum collection photo by Marlin Fries)

Archaeology is the only method of determining the antiquity and ultimate origins of fish decoys. Most modern fish decoys are made of wood and weighted by pouring molten lead into the hollow body cavity. It is all certain that wooden fish decoys were made prehistorically. If they were widely used in the precontact era, we would have little knowledge of it. Although wooden artifacts are sometimes preserved in caves, lakebeds, or permafrost, or by charring, their preservation in most archaeological sites is extremely rare. It is a simple matter however, to carve a decoy of heavier material and there are numerous archaeological fish decoys made of stone, bone, ivory, and stone. The persistence of items of these material in archaeological sites allows tracing the age, origins, and spread of the practice.

In the Great Lakes region, ancient fish decoys are made of mussel shell (although one copper decoy has been found). Typically, the carvings are detailed with eyes, gills, and scales and they often have holes for lower fins, which may have been made of buckskin. Well over forty such decoys have been reported from archaeological sites, especially from central Nebraska to South Dakota, the Northwest Central Illinois, to central Minnesota. Shallow decoys are apparently made by most of the American Indians in the Mississippi Valley area, with the earliest example-dating to around 1000 b.c. to 1100 A.D. Nears of mule bones of fish decoys of mussel shell appear continuously into the 1700s. One shell decoy was found in 1730s Fox village in central Wisconsin and one of
fishing are ultimately to be found. In eastern Siberia, fish decoy of stone are considered to be typical of the Neolithics, which spans four millennia from about 4000 BC to 1000 BC. Fish decoys are especially plentiful in the Neolithics sites of the Pribilof region, west of Lake Baikal, which is interestingly enough the deepest body of fresh water in the world. In the Pribilof, stone fish decoys first appear in the Serrovo Period, between 4500 and 3600 years ago. Their persistence in that locale into modern times is sufficient cause to assign Asia as the original source of decoy fishing.

Decoy fishing through the ice is an ancient subsistence practice that survived because it provides a reliable source of food during the most difficult season of the year. It originated almost 5600 years ago in north-central Asia and spread to this continent over 1000 years ago, where it is now an ancient and traditional practice in its own right. Adopted by the immigrants that flooded into the Great Lakes region of North America during the 17th century, the complex of tools used in decoy fishing has been modified only in form, not in function. This may be simply because the component functions of decoy fishing cannot be substantially improved upon. But it is perhaps more romantic to assume that the tradition persists because it epitomizes a timeless relationship between the wary fish and the hunter waiting in ambush.

Further reading:


Figure 5. Bone fish decoys of the Evenki, the Pribilof Region of Eastern Siberia.

the earliest written accounts of decoy fishing apparently describe shell decoys. A letter written in 1709 by Annoine Raoudot de
describes various winter fishing practices of the northern Indians and states "to attract the fish they use small fish of porcelain which they play in the water attached to the end of the line." Other early references describe beads, gogetts, and wampum belts made of this "porcelain." According to the editor of The Forest Relations and Allied Documents, Robert G. Thwaites, porcelain is "simply the French-Canadian term for shell, glass, or porcelain beads used as money and ornaments by the Indians." Almost certainly, Raoudot was de
tailing fish decoys made of shell.

North of the Great Lakes, fish decoys made of bone and ivory are a relatively common find in archaeological excavations. Archaeological sites in Alaska and the Yukon have yielded decoys dating to the 19th century and much earlier. Some of these sites contain material as old as 900 A.D., but it is not yet verified that decoys there are quite that old. The Thule (early Eskimo) sites of the Melville Peninsula, Baffin Island, and Greenland provide the earliest definite evi
dence for fish decoys in North America to date. Still, these decoys were made no earlier than about 900 A.D.

It is in Asia that the origins of decoy

Figure 6. Approximately 4300-5000 year-old stone fish decoys. Serrovo Period, Pribilof Region, Asia.
Figure 1
Distribution of mussel shell fish decoys