

For Immediate Release

December 12, 2002

Contact: Joel Gunderson 212.636.2680

**CHRISTIE'S TEAMS UP WITH GUYETTE & SCHMIDT, INC. TO OFFER THE
MAGNIFICENT DECOY COLLECTION OF RUSSEL B. AITKEN**

The Russell B. Aitken Collection of Waterfowl Decoys

January 18, 2003

New York, NY – Christie's, the world's leading fine art auctioneers, in association with Guyette & Schmidt, Inc., the world's largest decoy auction company, is proud to offer the incomparable waterfowl decoy collection of Russell B. Aitken. The sale, comprising over 350 carved wooden hunting decoys by renowned artists such as Elmer Crowell, Lothrop Holmes, the Ward Brothers, "Shang" Wheeler and others, will take place at Christie's Rockefeller Center saleroom on January 18. Two extraordinary decoys from the Aitken Collection—a rare pintail drake by Elmer Crowell and an exceptional red-breasted merganser hen and drake by Lothrop Holmes—are a threat to surpass the current world auction record for a decoy.

Russell B. Aitken

Russell B. Aitken (1910–2002) lived during the golden age of American outdoorsmen, hunting and fishing across great expanses of wilderness and his safaris, hunting trips and shikars took him across five continents. A figure Hemingway might have borrowed from real life, Aitken was a photographer, teacher, writer, artist, collector and marksman and he amassed awards and honors representing an extraordinary range of accomplishments. Examples of his art are included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art. He was the author of more than 300 articles in national sporting and natural history magazines. He received the Medal of Honor of the Adventurers Club of New York and the Medal of Honor of the Campfire Club of America. In 1949, he was named "High Gun" meaning he was the best skeet shooter in the U.S. Aitken's passion for art and natural history inspired his collection of wildfowl decoys, and for him, they represented important American sculpture. These decoys matched his lifelong interest in shooting with his keen appreciation for the elegance of birds and the artistic skill of the carvers who produced them.

The Collection

An extremely rare pintail drake decoy, carved by the renowned master carver Elmer Crowell (1864–1954) of East Harwich, Massachusetts in 1910 (estimate: \$300,000–500,000) will certainly be one of the major highlights of the sale. With its elegant turned head, crossed-wing carving and superb paint; this beautiful drake is arguably the finest piece that Crowell ever created. For ten years, Crowell managed a hunting camp on Wenham Lake in Beverly, Massachusetts for Dr. John Phillips for whom he made this decoy. When this important decoy last appeared at auction in 1986, it fetched a staggering price of \$319,000 and established a world auction record for a decoy—a mark that stood for eleven years.

Another major highlight of Aitken Collection is a truly exceptional red-breasted merganser hen and drake by Lothrop Holmes of Kingston, Massachusetts, circa 1868–1870 (estimate: \$300,000–500,000). Holmes was a ship's carpenter who made decoys in his spare time, and while he produced outstanding ducks and shorebirds, it is his mergansers that are generally recognized as the best of their type anywhere. This pair was one of the centerpieces of the Russell B. Aitken Collection and the only other original condition pair is from the collection of Windsor White, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

Further highlights include one of the finest groups of decorative decoys by the Ward Brothers ever assembled including a very unusual yellowlegs with both wings outstretched (estimate: \$3,000–4,000) and a pair of ringnecks in mint condition (estimate: \$8,000–12,000). Barbers by trade, Lem and Steve Ward began working as a decoy carving team in Crisfield, Maryland in 1918 and by the 1950s, their decoys were more likely to be on collectors' shelves than in the water. Also offered are numerous fine examples by Charles "Shang" Wheeler (1872–1949), considered the leader of a third generation of the "Housatonic School" of Stratford, Connecticut carvers. Decoys by Wheeler include a black duck in sleeping position in excellent original condition (estimate: \$15,000–20,000) and an exceedingly rare ruddy duck drake complete with metal tail feathers, the only known Wheeler ruddy duck in a courting pose (estimate: \$10,000–15,000).

An outstanding group of 19th century shorebird decoys includes prime examples by notable carvers including an exceedingly rare black bellied plover by Lothrop Holmes (estimate: \$30,000–50,000), an extremely rare ruddy turnstone by Elmer Crowell (estimate: \$12,000–18,000), and a unique curlew by Thomas Gelston (estimate: \$7,000–10,000). The sale also offers a wide selection of high quality contemporary and antique decoys under \$1,000.

Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., located in Farmington, Maine is the world's largest decoy auction firm. Under the leadership of Gary Guyette and Frank Schmidt, they hold annual decoy auctions in Illinois, Maine and Maryland. The firm provides free decoy appraisals for anyone sending photos to P.O. Box 522, West Farmington, Maine 04992. They also operate a shopping site featuring inexpensive decoys and waterfowl art at guyetteandschmidt.com/warehouse.

Auction: The Russell B. Aitken Collection

January 18 at 10 a.m. & 2 p.m.

Of Waterfowl Decoys

Viewing: Christie's Galleries at Rockefeller Center January 11 – January 17

Additional information about Christie's sale of the Russell B. Aitken Collection of Waterfowl Decoys can be found on www.christies.com closer to the sale date. All lots from the sale can be viewed online along with full catalogue descriptions on Lotfinder®, which also allows clients to leave absentee bids.

www.christies.com provides information on more than 80 sale categories, buying and selling at auction, complete auction results and Christie's international auction calendar.

Additional information may also be obtained by contacting the Guyette and Schmidt, Inc. offices at 207-778-6256 or on the Guyette and Schmidt, Inc. website www.guyetteandschmidt.com, which has a special promotion dedicated to the sale of the Aitken Collection.

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*Images available on request
Visit Christie's Web site at www.christies.com*