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Ducks Do More Than You Might Think to Help Save the Planet

At the Bruce Museum, an exhibition of duck stamp art tells a 90-year-old story about how paintings can contribute to land preservation.

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Adam Grimm won this year's federal duck painting contest with this painting of spectacled eiders. "There is no bigger prize in the world of wildlife art," he said. Adam Grimm

By James Barron
Reporting from Greenwich, Conn.

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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on the art world stretching boundaries with new artists, new audiences and new technology.

You don't have to be a conservationist or a hunter to marvel at the portraits at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn. Each one is of a duck. Some show ducks flying — mergansers, pintails, mallards and elders. Some show ducks swimming. One shows a dog with a duck in its mouth.

The portraits of the ducks (and that retriever) were drawn or painted for stamps. Not postage stamps, but federal duck stamps that hunters who want to shoot waterfowl are required to buy along with their state licenses.

The revenue goes toward buying acreage for wildlife habitats. The government spends almost all of the money from the duck stamps on land acquisition — $1.2 billion in the 90 years since the first duck stamps were sold. Only the cost of printing the stamps has been deducted.

The first duck stamp, in 1934. It cost $1 and was designed by Jay Norwood Darling, a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist. US Fish and Wildlife Service

The winning stamp from 1974-75 by David Maass. US Fish and Wildlife Service

The duck stamps have been "a source for some of the best wildlife art that's ever been produced," said Daniel Ksepka, who curated the exhibition. It is the first to bring together the original art behind the annual stamps, which since 1949 have been created from the winner of a duck painting contest. The recent originals are the same size — 10 inches wide and 7 inches high — because the contest has size requirements.

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Many of the duck stamps on display in the exhibition "Conservation Through the Arts: Celebrating the Federal Duck Stamp," which runs through Feb. 9, come from the Bruce's own collection — and most of the Bruce's duck stamps were donated by Richie Prager, who retired in 2019 from BlackRock, one of the world's largest asset managers. He described himself as "a complete zealot on the subject" after beginning a conversation by saying "I hope you have time. You're not going to get short answers."

He went on to talk about the stamp artists he had met and the way he had assembled his collection of paintings and sketches from which the stamps were made.

For those who had never heard of duck stamps, the exhibition is eye-opening. Ksepka said he had heard museum-goers say "three square inches" — the size of a duck stamp — and "six million acres,'" the amount of land the stamps have helped buy, roughly twice the size of Connecticut.

“Conservation Through the Arts: Celebrating the Federal Duck Stamp” at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn. Patrick Sikes Photography

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Suzanne Fellows, the duck stamp program manager with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, said that captured the appeal of the duck stamps. “You can be a person who never hunts, but loves the beauty of the animals and message that we’re saving the habitat,” she said. Or, like Prager, duck stamp enthusiasts can have what he called “collector’s disease, and once you get it you can’t stop.”

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That was how he explained going from acquiring every duck stamp issued — a single stamp from each year — to acquiring a page of every duck stamp to buying the original artwork for more than 60 of them. Each year’s stamp is the work of a different artist, but a handful of artists have done stamps for more than one year.

Prager said he had always intended to give his collection to a museum. “I called a few museums I thought would be easy marks,” he said, but he was “met with more skepticism” than he had expected. It turned out that the place he was looking for was close by. He lives in Greenwich, not far from the Bruce.

The first duck stamp he bought — the one by the artist Alderson Magee that was issued in 1976, when Prager was 16 — ignited his passion for collecting. “My mom got me into stamp collecting very young,” he said. “It was her money, and I was trying to collect everything under the sun.” She advised him to stop. “What my mom was trying to tell me was, wait until something speaks to me and collect that.” Seeing Magee’s stamp, Prager realized that duck stamps were what spoke to him.

A stuffed red-breasted merganserin the Bruce Museum exhibition. The show closes in February. Patrick Sikes Photography

The duck stamp contest, which has existed for 75 of the duck stamp's 90 years, is the only art competition run by the federal government. The museum, where the judging for the 2024 duck stamp took place last month, calls the contest "the Super Bowl of Wildlife Art."

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Adam Grimm, the winner this year, compared being asked why the contest mattered to asking a singer why "American Idol" is important: "There is no bigger prize in the world of wildlife art."

The prize might not sound like much. There is no prize money. The Fish and Wildlife Service awards the winner only a single decorative page of his or her own duck stamps, with the signature of the secretary of the interior. But the government lets the winners retain the rights to their artwork, and selling prints of winning designs can pay well. Robert Steiner, who won the federal contest in 1997, sold 6,000 prints of his painting of a Barrow's goldeneye at prices that started at $200.

Fellows said that about a million and a half people buy duck stamps every year. Roughly 900,000 to 1.1 million are duck hunters, she said. The others are collectors and conservationists.

The very first duck stamp cost $1 and was the work of Jay Norwood Darling, a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist who was known as Ding. He was also a conservationist who was worried that wetlands were being ruined by developers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt named him to a committee on wildlife restoration in 1934 and, as Fellows tells it, Darling "gave the president quite the hard time, and Roosevelt said, 'All right, you do it — you think my job is so easy, you go direct the United States Biological Survey," one of the Fish and Wildlife Service's predecessor agencies.

Then, when Darling suggested selling stamps to raise money to buy and preserve land, Roosevelt snapped "'What do you mean, a stamp?' — and Roosevelt was a stamp collector himself," Fellows said.

A sheet of duck stamps on display. Patrick Sikes Photography

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Ksepka said Darling had drawn mallard ducks on cardboard from a dry cleaner. “It was intended to be a rough draft,” Ksepka said, but someone from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing took it, “and almost without his knowledge it became the 1934 stamp.” Fellows said that “whatever it was drawn on,” it became an icon for conservationists. But the cardboard was apparently thrown away after the printers copied it onto a metal plate. Ksepka said. The Bruce has a print of an etching by Darling that he made after the stamp had been issued.

The duck stamp contest began in 1949. Until then, the Fish and Wildlife Service had invited artists to submit images, a process that Prager said was “probably somewhat clubby.”

Fellows said there are 300 to 600 serious duck stamp artists across the country. “Not all of them enter every year,” she said. Some never do. Those who do must follow rules. “From beak to tail, it should be correct,” Ksepka said. “If you’ve got the wrong number of toes or the beak’s got the wrong color on it, that would cause you to lose out.”

The judges also take into account whether an image is suitable for a stamp. “You don’t want a flock of 300 on a stamp,” he said.

A carved wooden duck by Charles Ralph Wells. Paul Mutino

Grimm, who grew up in Ohio, lives in Wallace, S.D., population 91, according to the 2020 census. “We’re surrounded by prairie and wetlands," he said, "and lots of ducks. That's the whole reason why we live here."

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He dropped out of art school at 21. "They were pushing abstract," he said. "I just really wanted to paint ducks."

His parents said they would support him if he won the duck stamp contest. He submitted his entry at the beginning of his junior year. The phone call telling him that he had won came about a month later. "So I left," he said. That was in 1999. He won again in 2013 and now this year.

"You put your all into it, the design, the color, the pose of the birds," he said. "And you have to think about how it's going to look when it's small," because the judges don't want something that, when it is shrunk to the size of a stamp, "is going to look like a blob."

James Barron writes the New York Today newsletter, a morning roundup of what's happening in the city. More about James Barron

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