

**Duck Dynasty**

**The Athenaeum Society**

**March 5, 2015**

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In the few years that I have been a member of this organization, I have given probably a half-dozen papers on various unrelated subjects. Being a Christian County redneck by birth, these previous endeavors have usually reflected that upbringing and would not be confused with any attempt to relay my knowledge of the humanities or any sort of artistic expression. I have always known that there has been a gap in my education, purely my own fault, that has led to an inability to really appreciate Van Gogh, Rembrandt, or Monet.

Tonight I'd like to try to bridge that gap and move out of my comfort zone and discuss artistic expression by a family well known to many, whose accomplishments are truly appreciated by few. As usual, I promise that the lack of depth of this paper will only be surpassed by its brevity.

In West Monroe, Louisiana lives a close knit Christian family who has built a financial empire based on duck hunting, the Robertson clan. Millions of duck hunters have purchased their famous "Duck Commander" duck calls which they have parlayed into a multi-million dollar industry. Their reality TV series is watched by millions of Americans, many of whom have never experienced the comforts or thrills of a duck blind at sunrise. Their story is in all aspects an amazing example of American ingenuity and the opportunities available in this great country of ours. If you have never seen an episode of "Duck Dynasty", my suggestion is that you don't. It is totally stupid and ridiculous and besides that's not what this paper is about anyway. Who in the world would want to do that?

Rather, I hope you would be more interested in hearing about another truly talented American family from Minnesota, but before I get into that some proper context is in order.

If you visit the corner of North Fairfax Drive and Vermont Street in Arlington, Virginia, you will see a non-descript building at 4401 North Fairfax that contains a three-office suite that

houses one of the best ideas the American government has ever had. This is the address of the Federal Duck Stamp Program which is part of the Division of Bird Habitat Conservation, which itself is a thirty-employee sub node of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is part of the Department of the Interior.

Its story might restore some faith in our often ineffective and inefficient government. Three women run the greater than \$800,000-a-year program; which in 2010 generated more than \$24 million in revenue through the sale of an obscure revenue stamp to a diminishing number of hunters and collectors. Signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1934, this little program has generated more than \$800 million. More importantly, ninety-eight cents of every dollar has been used to purchase about 6 million acres of waterfowl habitat in the United States, encompassing more than 550 national wildlife refuges.

Initially, the ducks portrayed on the Federal Duck Stamp were painted by an artist commissioned by the program on a yearly basis. The first duck stamp artist was Jay N. "Ding" Darling, an editorial cartoonist and passionate conservationist. There have been a number of artists with more than one contribution. Iowa's Maynard Reece has painted a record five Federal Duck Stamps between 1947 and 1970. His depiction of a black Labrador retriever holding a drake mallard is a print owned by many avid waterfowler/lab owners.

Currently, the Federal Duck Stamp Contest is the most prestigious wildlife art contest that you've never heard of. Held annually since 1949, it is the only juried art contest sponsored by the U.S. government. One would think that if our government was going to promote one juried art competition that it would fall under the National Endowment for the Arts, not Fish and Wildlife.

Every August, more than 200 artists pay a \$125 entry fee to submit renderings of waterfowl to an elite top secret panel of judges. In September, over two tense days described as the World Series for wildlife artists, one will be awarded the top prize. His or her winning painting will grace the following year's Migratory Bird Conservation and Hunting Stamp - the sticker all sportsmen sign and affix to their hunting licenses to legally hunt migratory waterfowl.

There is no prize money. Winners, however, can earn a fortune through licensing agreements and collectible limited-edition prints, garnering the stamp a reputation as the "Million-Dollar Duck."

Each year the organizers consult their list of forty-two eligible North American waterfowl species and decide which set of five species will be the focus of future contests. The eligible species are drawn from nine categories that include not only diving and dabbling ducks, but also whistling ducks, swan, geese, sea ducks, mergansers, and stiff-tailed ducks.

There is a Zen-garden quality to the whole enterprise, with the artists working within a rigid framework of contest rules that dictate everything from the year's eligible species, which are selected 6 years in advance and are 5 in number, to the seven by ten inch size and type of painting surface, to the appropriate seasonal foliage and plumage that can appear in the painting.

All competitors are encouraged to create the paintings with three things in mind: artistic impression, anatomical correctness, and suitability for reproduction on a stamp measuring one and three quarters inches long and one and a half inches wide. In 1984, there was a true fiasco which occurred in the competition. That year the judges selected a red-eyed widgeon as the winner of the competition. Subsequent scrutiny of the painting revealed the rendition had no primary flight feathers. Those flight feathers were subsequently painted in prior to the actual stamp production so that it would be accurate.

Since then, contest organizers have a waterfowl biologist in attendance to assist the judges in determining if, for example, a bird's plumage is consistent with the foliage in the painting's background. Painting a duck with spring plumage against a background showing fall foliage would be inconsistent and problematic; the equivalent of painting Mona Lisa with a mustache, at least among those who know waterfowl.

As the competition begins, no one knows who the judges are or what they are looking for. The first round is quite simple and quite ruthless. In it, the 5 judges individually and independently inspect the entry and simply hold up a placard voting "In" or "Out", with 3 "In" votes required to take you to the second round.

This is all done with no collaboration. In fact, each judge doesn't know who the other four are until the competition begins. Entries are hand delivered to each judge's table where they inspect the entry itself as well as a projection of the entry on a small monitor which shrinks it to actual duck stamp size. Neither the judges nor the audience knows who painted each work. To receive 4 or 5 "In" votes in the first round is uncommon. Winning is totally dependent on the subjective whims of the 5 judges, who change every year. Each of the five judges is also allowed the option to choose up to five selections from the excluded entries to go on to round two based on their own personal bias. It would be unusual, however, for more than 5-10 selections to receive such a reprieve and proceed to the second round.

On the second day of judging, the survivors are reviewed again, usually about 10% of the total entries. This time each judge assigns a score between 1 and 5 to each painting, with 5 being a perfect score. The top 5 highest scores progress to the final round.

During the final round, the judges again review the entries. They indicate their scoring by using only 3 of their point placards - the 3, 4, or 5. That means a painting can score no less than 15 points or more than 25 points.

As in previous rounds, judges are unaware of how their colleagues vote. Should there be a tie, the process is repeated until a winner is declared and the "Million-Dollar Duck" is selected.

The most elite players in the Federal Duck Stamp game and the only set of siblings are Minnesota brothers Bob, Jim, and Joe Hautman, a dynasty one competitor dubbed the "New York Yankees" of competitive duck painting. In two decades, the brothers have collectively won the Federal Duck Stamp competition ten times and their work has been featured on more than 41 state and federal conservation stamps.

During the span between 1987 and 2014, a Hautman brother has finished among the top 3 finalists 20 times, including the 10 wins, 8 second place finishes, and 2 third place finishes. Making that record statistically improbable is the contest rule, first entered in 1972, that makes winners ineligible to compete for the next three contests after their win. That means that all the Hautman brothers were eligible to compete together in only 6 contests during that period. In at least 7 of the contests, two of the three brothers were sitting out.

Raised by a duck-hunter Dad and a painter Mom, none of the brothers formally studied art. Joe, in fact, has a doctorate in physics. Bob and Jim used to paint and roof houses. As kids, they were raised in a duck hunting family, were all avid outdoorsman, and were enthralled by their Dad's collection of duck stamps. They didn't even know about the contest until the mid-1980s, when they first entered.

By 1996, their fame on the duck-stamp circuit led to them being name-checked in the movie "Fargo" which was made by their childhood friends, the Coen brothers. The reference

was no fluke. Jim and Bob were living together at the time the Coens were making the movie, and the filmmakers raided their studio while shooting. They took several paintings for the walls of the Gunderson house, as well as old brushes, easels, mounted birds and other things to serve as props. In the movie, Norm Gunderson remarks how his entry in the contest finishes behind a Hautman brother's painting.

The Hautman's creations have been displayed in the Oval Office and the Smithsonian Institute. Jim Hautman, in 1989, at the age of 25, became the youngest artist in history to win the Federal Duck Stamp contest. He has since won three more. Bob's achievements are numerous as well, winning two Federal Duck Stamp contests, as well as his designs being selected for the 1995 Minnesota Pheasant Stamp, the 1988, 1992, and 1997 Minnesota Duck Stamps, the 1989 Nevada Duck Stamp, and several other state stamps. Joe has won the Federal Duck Stamp Contest four times as well as state duck stamp contests in Minnesota, South Carolina, and New Jersey three times.

The brothers' ability to crack the code of the Federal Duck Stamp contest is not only attributable to their artistic abilities, but also to their relentless research, planning, and overall knowledge of how to play the game.

For example, in 2010, the contest was being held in California, a state known more for its tree huggers than its duck hunters. The five duck species chosen were the brant, a sort of monochromatic black and tan duck, the Northern shoveler, a beautiful duck with a Jimmy Durante-type schnoz, the ruddy duck, sort of an odd-ball small dabbler, the Canada goose, and the specklebelly (or white-fronted) goose.

The decision on which species to depict in your painting is obviously crucial. Jim figured that since the contest was in the west, there would probably be western judges. A lot of

specklebellies migrate along the Pacific Flyway, so a western bird seemed to be a logical choice. He accumulated photos, most of which he took himself, some twenty-five hundred in number. He obtained a number of mounted specklebellies, and went hunting on more than one occasion for the geese, filling his freezer with specimens - All in preparation to paint his duck stamp entry. Deciding on the background of the painting - sunny or stormy, flying, or swimming, or standing was accomplished by trial and error with multiple attempts until the final idea materialized.

Interestingly enough, Bob, who was also eligible that year, came to almost the same choice independently of his brother. Bob also narrowed his choices to the white-fronted goose. Neither chose to portray the geese flying or swimming. Instead, both decided to paint standing birds. They purposely did not reveal the goose's feet in their painting as waterfowl feet are notoriously difficult to paint with accuracy and are easy fodder for judges to be critical. Both brothers depicted their specklebellies standing in foliage, Jim a pair of geese, Bob a singleton.

Two hundred and thirty-five renditions of one of the five different species of waterfowl entered that year. When the final round was reached, two of the remaining entries belonged to Bob and Jim. At the conclusion of the judging, there was a tie necessitating a tie-breaking round. The final results - First place - Jim. Second - Bob. Not the first time two of the brothers had finished 1, 2.

As an outdoorsman and conservationist, I truly appreciate the beauty and bounty of nature and the responsibility we as individuals have to sustain it. If not for the Federal Duck Stamp Program, I have no doubt that the waterfowl which we have so thoughtfully provided refuge and support would not be existent in huntable numbers today. You must buy a duck stamp to legally hunt waterfowl. It will also grant you access to any of the waterfowl refuges nationwide. For \$15, quite a bargain and remember 98% goes to the ducks!



So, what exactly is art, anyway? This is sort of an unanswerable question and a personal one. The world of high art, which is the type of art that ends up in museums and on the syllabi of college art-appreciation courses, often wrinkles its collective nose at the whole genre of wildlife art, as if sniffing something steamy and organic left by one of those golf-course befouling Canada geese. To me, however, it's the art I appreciate.

My wife has a wonderful appreciation/tolerance of fine art as evidenced by the tasteful display of hand-carved decoys, taxidermy of some of North America's greatest game animals, and the beautiful display of 16 framed prints of consecutive Kentucky Duck Stamps that grace our walls. Fortunately, I was able to provide these priceless items and enjoy them daily.

I remember well buying my first Federal Duck Stamp. Then it could only be purchased at the post office. What I remember most is that not only did it have to be adherent to your hunting license to legally hunt waterfowl, but it also had to be signed on its face in ink. As excited as I was to get to go on my first duck hunt, I truly did hate to write my name on that beautiful piece of art.

The Robertsons will always be considered as the Duck Dynasty, but I hope that at least amongst this group that we will always remember the Hautmans of Minnesota as having truly earned that title.