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# Vincent Giannetto, III



BY D. G. CHASSEUR

## *Carving the Delaware River tradition.*

The essence of carving is the ability to capture the character of a species and translate it through wood and paint. But how do you capture the difference between a mallard and a black duck besides just painting them different colors? It isn't easy, but master carvers always seem to find ways to do it, and do it convincingly.

For the old-timers it was different. They spent their days in small boats, sitting on cold riverbanks or in wet duck blinds, watching and waiting for waterfowl to be drawn to their decoys. Hunting, waterfowling and the traditions that went along with them were a way of life. For old-time hunter-carvers along the Delaware River, making decoys was just a part of it. They spent as much time seeing, and often handling,

the real thing as they did their own work. This experience is evident in their work and has made their decoys some of the most detailed, intricate and collectable pieces ever made.

For the most part, those days are gone, along with the old-timers and the traditions. But along the Delaware there remains an old-timer, a hunter-carver who still lives the traditions. He makes his living as a full-time carver, still spending his days out among the reeds and marshes, watching the ducks fly in. After

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Vincent Giannetto, III, in his workshop surrounded by his works. The shop is an old corn shed and barn that was built back in the 1940s by his father and that he rebuilt in 1999, keeping the original structure intact.



The pintail is the featured decoy of the Upper Bay Museum exhibit. The one on the right is currently on display there.

five decades of carving the Delaware River gunning style decoy, Vincent Giannetto, III, has become one of the most collectable carvers of our time.

### NECESSITY AND DESIRE

For Vincent Giannetto, III, the reason he began carving as a teenager was the desire to capture the character of wildlife. He grew up less than a mile from the banks of the Delaware River in the small town of Beverly, New Jersey, before the river was dredged, destroying most of the region's ecosystem. He hunted and trapped the river, and fell in love with its beauty and the wildlife that took shelter there.

When he was 15, his mother finally allowed him to use an old canvas-covered canoe that had been in the barn for years. He spent the summer patching and painting it, finally getting it to float. In the end, it was too heavy to carry, so he built a cradle with wooden wagon wheels and added a long handle. To hunt, he would fill it with his gear and pull it almost a mile to Mill Creek, which fed the river. After a long day on the water and the even longer pull back, he would arrive home, smile and just say, "great day."

Giannetto couldn't afford to buy a decoy rig and decided to make his own. In the beginning, he didn't have any guidance and found his way mostly by trial and error. These efforts and a homemade portfolio containing sketches and paintings done on scrap paper earned him acceptance into the Philadelphia School of Art. He turned it down, though, choosing instead to work for himself and spend his time with his family or out hunting, fishing or trapping. In hindsight, this may have been one of the best decisions he ever made. His time outdoors and his familiarity with waterfowl combined with his natural talent as an

artist in a way that has been described as carving born from a love of the outdoors, from respect and affection for game, and a recognition that nature's beauty is something worth preserving.

### DELAWARE RIVER STYLE

He picked up the Delaware River style with its raised V and detailed handcrafting from his time among the local river hunters. He took that basic style and added to it using rasps, drawknives and hand tools, things that few other carvers of the time were doing. His carvings took on a distinctive look that incorporated side pockets, eye grooves, cheek pouches and individual back and tail feathers. These details gave his work a realistic and lifelike look and added "attitude" to the overall decoy. But it was his lack of formal schooling or training and his self-taught style as an oil painter that gave his decoys a unique look and feel that even today makes them stand out in the flock. It was a look that people started to notice.



Pictured are a 2002 mallard drake and 2003 black duck. The black duck is a difficult bird for a carver to really "hit" because the colors are so difficult and close.

As Giannetto used his rig along the river, local hunters and carvers admired his work and eventually convinced him to attend a decoy show in Babylon, Long Island, in 1967. The following year he entered and won a best of show ribbon, and in 1969 he took ten ribbons in shows from Maine to Mississippi and Michigan to Long Island. He recalls that “pickers” would come by his house each year after the hunting season ended and purchase the decoys from his rig. Later he would see them sell at national auctions for \$500 to \$800 each. To date, he has won best of show ribbons in nearly every major carving competition in the country. The Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, hunters, collectors and authors alike have sought out his work. It has been featured in books and displayed in the Christmas windows of Rockefeller Center in New York City.

In the winter of 2002, he was invited to the White House by First Lady Laura Bush and recognized as one of the country’s most skilled artisans. His work was displayed on the White House Christmas tree and subsequently placed in the Smithsonian Institute’s White House Collection. Truth-be-told, Vince himself would say that his invitation from the White House came unexpectedly—that he is more at home



A 2003 feeding brant. Relaxed poses help to decoy the live birds by making the environment appear safe.

among the reeds and marshes than the city lights and society receptions.

He’s enjoyed the role of host, however, since the Upper Bay Museum of North East, Maryland, opened a yearlong exhibit in October 2003 featuring five decades of his work and sharing his story as one of the last true hunter-carvers remaining along the Delaware. He is pleased that the museum celebrates the old traditions and keeps them alive to share with the public.

The Delaware River region and the way Giannetto shares his work have changed over the years, but his love of art and the outdoors never has. He marks those changes in small ways. When he was young, he didn’t give a duck a second chance—numbers were important. Now he often finds himself studying the feather patterns, colors and anatomy of the different ducks so intensely that many times he doesn’t even get around to shooting. Just sitting there, watching the ducks swimming through his decoys wondering why they don’t talk back, is reward enough.

For the past two decades, he has been a full-time carver, earning his living solely from carving. He still follows the traditions associated with the Delaware River style gunning decoy, characteristics that increase his pieces’ value among collectors, and spends much of his time along the river. But like the migrating waterfowl, he has had to find new water, and these days, most of his time is spent “out back” on his 60 acres of protected wetlands along the Delaware Bay. He still watches the ducks fly in, and he seeks to capture their character in every carving. It isn’t easy, but each piece is a labor of love.

More information about Vincent Giannetto, III, can be found at his website, [www.ducksandsuch.com](http://www.ducksandsuch.com). The Upper Bay Museum welcomes visitors Wednesday through Sunday, noon to 4:00 p.m. year-round, and can be reached at (410) 287-2675.

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