

VINCENT GIANNETTO III

From Jersey waterways to the White House

by David F. Giannetto

The White House of the United States is an unusual place to find a decoy carver from the small town of Beverly, New Jersey, even if he is one of the most collectable carvers of the time. The White House is a long way from the banks of the Delaware River and its numerous creeks, or the saw grass of the New Jersey Bays - places Vincent Giannetto III always feels more comfortable and at home.



During his teenage years, in the 1950s, you could walk the back paths from his parent's home to the Rancocas Creek and down to the banks of the Delaware, hardly trespassing upon anyone's property. But few teenagers took those walks, few were captivated by the wildlife and the wildfowl those waterways brought to our shores. Those walks were the beginning of a love and respect for the outdoors that shaped the life, the lifestyle and artwork of a man that many have grown to respect. They combined with his skill as a carver and oil painter in a way that has been described as carving "born from a love of the outdoors, from respect and affection for game, and from a recognition that nature's beauty is something worth preserving."

Born and raised in Southern New Jersey, he learned to hunt on small creeks and out of the way potholes. He couldn't afford to buy a decoy rig, so he decided to make his own. In the beginning he had little guidance, and found his way mostly by trial, error, and his natural talents. These talents, and a homemade portfolio containing sketches and paintings done on leftover scrap paper, earned him acceptance into the Philadelphia School of Arts, but he turned it down. Choosing instead to work for himself as a mason, and spend more of his time with his family or out on the water hunting, fishing, trapping, or simply bonding with nature.

His first introduction to formal decoys came from a worker who owned a few John Fitzpatrick decoys. From them he picked up the Delaware River style with its raised "V" and distinctive detailing, a style he still follows to this day. Using rasps, drawknives, and hand tools, he took that basic style and added to it things that few other carvers were doing at that time. As an avid hunter he had spent a lot of time handling ducks, learning their anatomy. Those long days on the meadow watching them interact with their environment gave him an intimate understanding of how they moved, behaved and looked out on the water. These things came together and gave his carving a unique and distinctive look that incorporated side pockets, eye grooves, cheek pouches, and individual back and tail feathers. These details gave his work a more realistic and lifelike look, and added more "attitude" to the overall decoy, a look that people started to notice.

When a friend of his acquired a double-ended canvas johnboat, they put in on the creek and could finally paddle out to the river. Hunting along the river he met other local hunters and carvers who liked his work and eventually convinced him to attend a decoy show in Babylon, Long Island. He came away convinced that he could compete or at least try. The following year, 1968, he entered and won a best-of-show ribbon, and in 1969 he took 10 ribbons in shows from Maine to Mississippi, and Michigan to Long Island.



In the early 80's, he attended the first Tuckerton decoy show and won his first best-of-show ribbon there in 1987. He recalls that at first it was mostly local carvers who came in their pick-up trucks, and set-up in the park. He has shown there nearly every year since it first started, but had no idea that it would grow to become the largest show in New Jersey, and a main event in a town that had revitalized itself by sharing its history of local hunters and carvers through the show and the new Tuckerton Seaport. For the past few years he has been asked to carve miniature decoys for display on each of the best-of-show plaques awarded in the competition. In 2003 he won the best-of-show Delaware decoy competition, and received one of his own miniatures back. These days he jokes that he often feels lost in the crowd seeing how successful the show has become.

Right about when the Tuckerton show first started, he put away his mason's trowel for the last time, and took up carving as a full-time career. In addition to carving decoys, he began to hand-make folk art pieces for high-end gift shops across the country. It started with a few Santa Clauses he made as Christmas gifts for his family and friends. They were so well received he decided to try them at the local shows. Owners from local gift shops began purchasing them for resale, and his new line of carvings, what he refers to as "creating tomorrow's heirlooms today" was born. Moving into this new area allowed him to reach new customers and expand to new areas outside of the east coast, the primary area for decoy buying and selling. To Vince it didn't matter if he was carving gunning decoys or folk art, it allowed him to do what he loved every day. And he hasn't looked back since.

From those humble shores and the inspiration they instilled, his art has traveled a long way. He has won nearly every major carving competition in the country, including the

Ward World Waterfowl Competition. The Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, hunters, collectors, and authors alike, have all sought out his work. It has been displayed in the Christmas windows of Rockefeller Center, New York City, numerous museums throughout the country, and after last Christmas even found a home in the Smithsonian Institutes' White House Collection. Truth-be-told Vince himself would say that his invitation to carve for and visit the White House came unexpectedly – that he is more at home amongst the reeds and marshes than the city lights, and more comfortable out on the meadow than greeting visitors at a gallery.



Over the years the way he has shared his art and love of the outdoors may have changed, but it has never diminished. He still spends much of his time along the waters of the Delaware River, but these days most of it is spent hunting, fishing or walking “Outback”, his 60 acres of protected wetlands along the Delaware Bay.

