

VINCENT GIANETTO III

Carving a Career, Chip by Chip

By D.G. Chasseur

Just about 50 years ago, about when the first edition of *Chip Chat's* was coming off the press, Vincent Giannetto III was sitting in an orchard, carving a peach pit, slowly turning it into a monkey. His teen-age days drifted by, full of sketches on scrap paper and long walks along the waterways near his parent's home. These sketches would later earn him acceptance into the Philadelphia School of Arts although he never did attend. You might even go as far as saying he never liked school much to begin with, but he was a fast learner and took an interest in things that few others of his age did. He would come to make his living off of those things, and turned it into a full-time career. Later in life they earned him recognition by the White House as one of the nation's most talented artists, and led him to become one of the most collectable carvers in the country.

Born and raised in Beverly New Jersey he started carving at about the age of 10. He often visited a local handyman that lived in a small shack near his parent's home. He picked up a few penknife tricks from him, like carving a ball in a box. As a teen-ager he would bring home scraps of wood left over from his father's lumberyard and work with hand tools to turn them into decoys. He hunted over them in the numerous creeks and potholes that marked southern New Jersey and along the Delaware River. He was an avid outdoorsmen, and loved life along the river. Hunting, trapping and fishing became a way of life for him, and he took to following the traditions of the old-time hunter-carvers along the river.

His work took on a unique look that was a combination of his natural talents as a wood worker and oil painter, and his interest in wildfowl and hunting. Since he never had a formal teacher or mentor to learn from, his style developed all on its own. His decoys carried with them a more realistic look and feel, and more detail that was commonly found along the river. He attributed this in part to his early days whittling.

"I think whittling and working on small things gave me a feel for working with a knife and adding small details to my work. It seemed natural for me to continue doing this when I began carving decoys. I didn't realize at the time it wasn't something that other decoy carvers were doing because I never knew any other carvers and never owned any of their work." Late in his teen-age years his friend finally got a Garvy boat big enough for them to put in at a local creek and row their way out to the river. Hunting along the river exposed him to other hunters and carvers. And for the first time he got feedback from other decoy carvers and began to understand how different his work was, and how much they liked it.

In 1966 a local carver talked him into attending a decoy competition held on Long Island, and he came away convinced he could compete. The following year he entered his first decoys into competition and came away with several first place ribbons. The following years he traveled the country and attended all the major shows, winning in total over 35 best-of-show awards. He became recognized as one of the top decoy carvers in the

country, and often saw his work sold by collectors at auction for five to eight times the amount he sold them for.

Despite all the attention he received as a decoy carver, he never gave up whittling. “One Christmas I carved a few Santa Clauses as gifts for my family and friends, and they really seemed to like them, so I carved a few and took them with me to the shows I was attending. At one of the shows I was approached by a few gift shop owners who asked if I could make a few extras for them to resell in their stores. And simple as that a new line of carvings was born for me.” This new line of country collectables he called “creating tomorrow’s heirlooms today” and he was soon supplying over a hundred high-end country gift shops across the country with his work. Each piece was, and still is, hand-carved and hand-painted and therefore his ability to supply them was limited.

This new line of work was an important step for him as a carver because it allowed him to hang up his mason’s trowel and take up carving full-time. For him it didn’t matter what he was carving, he was happy to be working with wood and doing something he loved every day. He was soon expanding his country collectables line to include a variety of animals and characters which would fit in any country home. Country Living magazine took notice and featured them in its Christmas edition, and a few national companies purchased his work for casting and resale through national department stores.

In the early 90s the American Museum of Folk Art in New York City ran an exhibit of his work and used it as a display in the Christmas windows of Rockefeller Center. Vince never made it into the heart of NYC to see the display, but that shouldn’t be a surprise. True to form he still loves the peace and quiet of the open meadow, and spends most of his free time down on his 60 acres of protected wetland property that his family calls the “Out Back”. “When people would come calling for me my wife and kids would always tell them I was “out back” carving, so the name just kind of fit and stuck over the years.”

He did make one recent exception when it came to avoiding the big cities. “When the White House contacted me and asked me to carve for the First Lady Laura Bush and attend a reception there it was a little hard to pass up. It wasn’t something I ever thought of, or ever saw coming. I asked them how they had gotten my name and the lady asked back with a funny laugh: ‘you are one of the most collectable carvers in the country aren’t you?’ I never looked at it that way before.”

Becoming so well known as a carver was unexpected, to Vince it is still doing something that he loves each day. Carving decoys and hunting over them out on the meadow may be his passion but he is quick to say that whittling still holds a dear place in his heart. Sitting out on the porch with a knife and carving a small caricature gives him the freedom to just make it up as he goes, and to find the form that lies hidden in the wood. It is a relaxing art that he still practices to this day. Last year his wife finally got a set of her very own Santa’s under the 12 foot Christmas tree that graces their home every year. “She’d been complaining for years I always made things for everyone else but her” he says.

The tradition of carving is continuing for Vince threw his children. Two of his sons have taken up his craft and are following in footsteps, winning their first blue ribbons in 2003. He has been working with wood for nearly five decades now, and is considered the last of the true Delaware River “hunter-carvers.” He has come a long way from his simple beginnings as a hunter along the Delaware River that loved to carve. But it didn’t start that way, it started with a teen-ager sitting in an orchard, carving a peach pit, slowly turning it into a work of art.

More information about Vincent Giannetto III, along with a catalog of his work can be found at his web site: www.DucksandSuch.com.