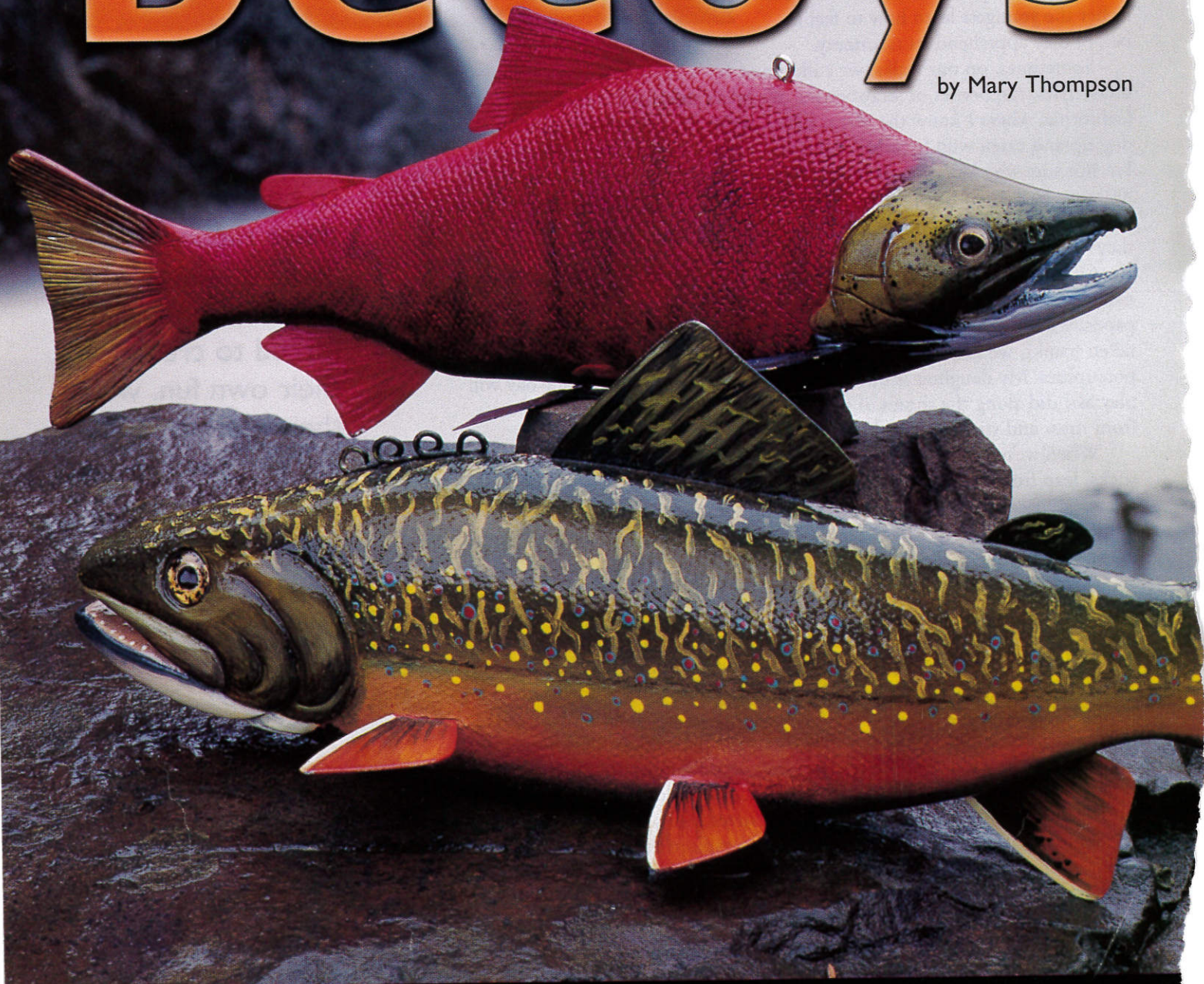


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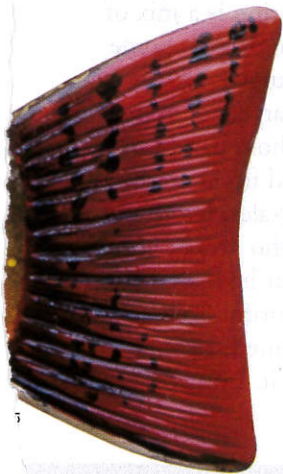
Fish Deccoys

by Mary Thompson



You can lead these fish to water, but you may like them better on the mantel

Fish decoys used to be just fish bait. Today they're pure American folk art. The fish on top is a sock-eye salmon by Craig Kimmell, an artist known for his realistic renderings of fish and other aquatic life. The fish on the bottom is a brook trout by Bob Johnston; it carries his trademark airbrush strokes and multiple line ties.



It's difficult to say what lures you – the shimmering patina, the slim curve of a tail, or the delicate contours of a thousand hand-carved scales – but once you pick up a wooden fish decoy, it's easy to get hooked.

Considered an original American folk art, the first decoys were carved thousands of years ago by American Indians looking for better winter fishing lures. Most of today's fish decoys are destined for fireplace mantles and coffee tables, where collectors can show off a menagerie of fish, from yellow and electric blue sunfish to chubby, moss-green large-mouth bass. Airbrushed or hand-painted, realistic or reminiscent of modernistic art, each fish is a unique handcrafted creation.

This mix of modern artistry and centuries-old tradition can be found in workshops across Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, where most master carvers are happy to put on a pot of coffee for visitors and spend hours discussing their craft.

From the basement workshop of his home outside Duluth, Minn., Marvin Johnston continues a tradition he learned from his grandfather between ice fishing trips near Johnston's childhood home in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Despite 50 years of carving, it was only in the last decade that Johnston began thinking of decoys as folk art rather than fish bait after seeing other carvers' work at carving competitions. Some of his recent work, including an 8-inch

rainbow trout, recently won top honors at the 2000 international fish decoy competition in Livonia, Mich., one of the country's largest carving competitions.

On a recent visit, Johnston retreats into a spare bedroom and returns with an arm-load of decoys, including the award-winning trout, a shimmering fish whose olive-green back blends into a sunset-washed pink.

Each decoy is a blend of wood-carving talent and artistic paint work. Johnston begins by hand-tracing each pattern on a block of wood that he cuts out with a band saw. He does the remaining finishing work by hand, carving and sanding each piece until it's smooth as bone. Once a lead weight is placed in the belly and metal fins are slid into place, the decoy is ready to be painted. Johnston carefully sketches the colors of each fish using acrylic paint, then finishes it off with a coat of marine varnish to protect the paint and wood. The final touch: a pair of green and black glass eyes.

In the hand, the trout is surprisingly smooth, its varnished wood and gently curving body recalling memories of childhood fishing trips on quiet lily-pad-covered lakes. The feeling is magnified when Johnston demonstrates the fish's swimming prowess by placing it in a small aquarium. If you close your eyes, you could swear you were holding a squirming fish in your hand.

This doesn't surprise Johnston, who says the decoy's swimming ability is the most important factor in luring a fish to strike. Like most

carvers, Johnston tries his hand at anything that might tempt a northern to strike – blue-and orange-speckled pumpkinseed sunfish, taupe-colored suckers, lean, long-legged frogs. Color isn't too important, says Johnston, who notes red and white decoys are among the most popular for fishermen. "The point of these things is to fool a fish into thinking they're looking at another fish," he explains. "That's why it's as important for them to swim right as it is for them to look good."

How well a fish swims depends on two things – form and weight. Decoys are generally carved with a slight curve to their tails to produce

a circular swimming motion, while the wooden belly of each fish is hollowed out and filled with lead to make it sink. A decoy's ability to swim in tight circles is a point of pride for most decoy makers – and a solid requirement for anyone interested in taking home a trophy at the annual show in Livonia, where schools of fish get their fins wet in 8-foot vinyl swimming pools set up for the occasion.

Every August, 5,000 people gather in this Detroit suburb to watch nearly 150 master carvers and newcomers compete. Like Johnston, most of the competitors are avid fishermen who spend years studying the fish they hope to re-create from

wood and paint. The judges, a mix of master carvers and fisheries biologists, spend hours weighing the merits of each particular fish. Even with that collective expertise, event organizer and former world carving champion Blaine Kimmel admits that who wins often depends on the judges' aesthetic tastes. "When you go up and look at a fish, it's like going to a beauty pageant. Some people like one thing, others like another. There's an element of personal preference at play."

It's the same story for collectors, who say they are often at a loss to describe why they will choose one piece over another. "For me, something happens when you turn one over in your hand and feel you can really begin to understand the fish you're holding," says Donald Petersen, a Loyola University (Chicago) business professor and owner of one of the country's largest fish decoy collections.

Petersen picked up his first fish decoys in 1984 at a flea market near his cabin on Big Sandy Lake near McGregor, Minn. Since then, he has collected more than 1,500 decoys and written two books on decoy carvers, including "Fish Decoy Makers Past and Present," which profiles more than 150 Midwestern carvers.

Petersen's collection is a mix of antique and modern decoys. Some are carved by well-known artists, others by obscure carvers or even anonymous men whose hand-carved fishing decoys ended up in antiques auctions and estate sales. It's all the same to Petersen, who says he simply searches for what he likes.

"If a fish is beautiful, well-carved and well-painted, I could care less who made it. I just collect



Above: "Fish" decoys include models of other creatures that might attract live fish, such as this crayfish created by Blaine Kimmel.

At right, from top: white crappie, longear sunfish and Canadian walleye by Craig Kimmel. Each fish scale was individually whittled.



the art," he says. "And you never know what may become valuable. Today's unknown artist might become tomorrow's known artist."

And while any carver will tell you they're grateful for their customers' attention, some carvers find that fame can be hard on a man whose primary passions lean toward the outdoor life.

When Jim Stangland began carving fish decoys in the 1980s, he assumed the new hobby would be a quiet retreat from his days as a commercial painter. But by the mid-90s Stangland's fish were being sold around the world – and a steady stream of visitors to Stangland's rural Rochester, N.Y., workshop was seriously cutting into his fishing time.

So Stangland recently moved his family and his workshop to Baudette, Minn., where the fish are plentiful and the people scarce. People who want to stop in usually call first, and even then they often have to wait for Stangland to return from a fishing trip.

Looking at his fish, though, it's easy to understand why collectors are still chasing him all the way to Baudette. His decoys are dominated by brilliant primary colors – sunny, fresh yellows and deep crimson reds – mixed with bold black details that guarantee his fish will stand out on a collector's coffee table or book

shelf. Unlike some carvers, who stick to one style, Stangland prefers to move between the realistic and the fantastic, including lemon-colored perch adorned with bold black swirls and fire engine-red dots.

Stangland sells pieces, which cost between \$25 and \$450, in curio shops across the country and on Internet sites like eBay. He maintains his New York connections by selling to gift shops around Lake George and Thousand Islands Lake, and has heard from friends that his work has ended up in unexpected places like Venice, Fla. This day, he is burning scales into a large walleye headed for a store in California.

Fish decoys may be big business these days, but that rarely appeals to master carvers like Stangland. "I could make trout all day long and sell every one of them, but it's more fun and challenging to make something I haven't done before," says Stangland, who recently finished his first sharks – a tiger and a great white. He has spent the last several months carving a 5½-foot muskie that he's making for himself.



North American Indians are believed to have begun spearing fish through the ice thousands of years ago. In his "History of the Ojibwe People," published in 1685, Warren Wilson describes a group of young Ojibwe men heading out across the frozen water between Bayfield, Wis., and Madeline Island (in Lake Superior) with ice spears.

Ice spearing became a popular wintertime activity for European Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Spearfishing has since been outlawed in many U.S. states,

but remains a legal sport open to anyone fishing in Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, South Dakota and Montana.

Ice spearing is done in windowless ice houses with shuttered doors that allow a faint, greenish glow to emanate from the water underneath the ice. The decoys are dropped into the water, where they turn in slow, tight circles to attract predator fish like northern or walleye into the spearfisher's range.

Fish decoys started out as simple pieces of hand-carved wood that were blackened in fires to resemble the dark patina of a winter fish. Paint began replacing fire in the late 1800s as commercial decoys became popular with recreational fishermen. Some of those early commercial decoys, now considered antiques, are housed in museums like the Smithsonian and sold for more than \$30,000 in private auctions.

Anyone interested in these folk art finds should beware: The market has been flooded with frauds in recent years.

"When you see these decoys for the first time, they all look good, but there are some very good imposters out there," warns New Yorker Steve Michaan, who has collected antique decoys for the Smithsonian and the Museum of American Folk Art.

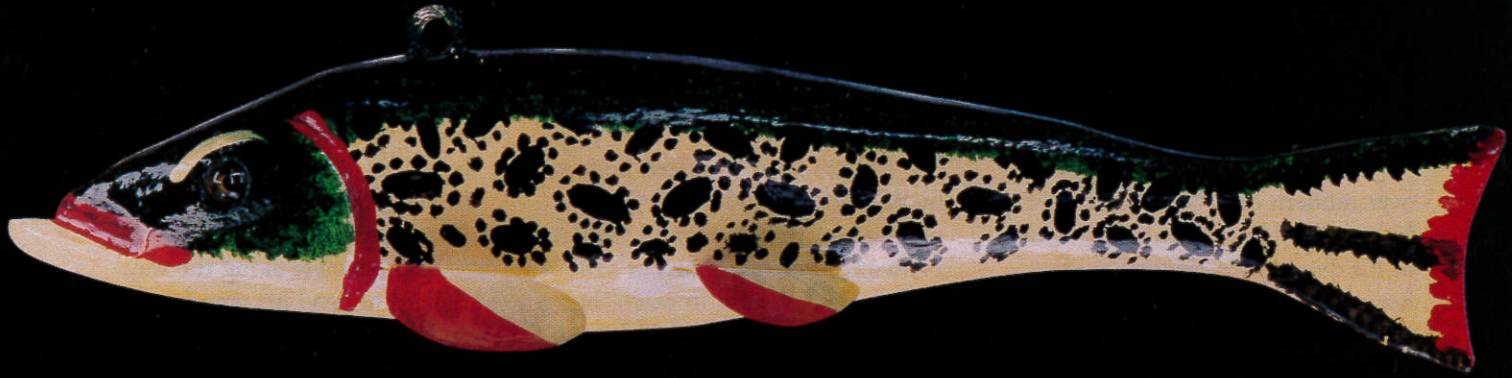
Michaan recommends getting a written, money-back guarantee on any antique decoy, then having it authenticated by an experienced collector. Michaan gets about a dozen requests like this each day through his Web site: FishDecoy.com. On any day, up to three-fourths of them are fakes.

Still, Michaan considers



Left: Marvin Johnston created this "dogfish" to go with his catfish.

At right: Jim Stangland's brightly painted fish have attracted a following. Stangland also does more realistic fish.



antique decoys a worthy pursuit. "A great piece has amazing power," says Michaan, whose own collection of 300 antique decoys was featured in a travelling exhibition by the American Folk Art Museum in 1992.

Michaan prefers antique decoys over modern ones because of their history. He likes the fact that most of his decoys bear the marks of heavy use, from the razor-fine scratches of hungry muskies to pock marks and fins knocked off by a fisherman's spear. "Once you're finished admiring its beauty, you realize it was made by someone who threw it in the water and sat waiting for hours to catch a fish. They weren't thinking about art, they were trying to feed their families.



One of the undisputed modern fish decoy folk art masters is Dave Kober, who lives just outside

Traverse City, Mich., a region rich in decoy folk art history. Less than 30 miles from Kober's home is Cadillac, Mich., home to the late Oscar Peterson, whose early 20th-century decoys have sold for more than \$10,000.

Kober's work has been honored by the Michigan Heritage Society, featured on the Home and Garden Network, even auctioned at Sotheby's. He's hard to reach, but not because of his fame. He's been chopping wood – and the fish have been biting – keeping him away from his workshop. Despite all the attention he's gotten in recent years, Kober never tires of talking about decoys, and he settles in for a long conversation about his work.

Kober's decoy-carving talents may be exceptional, but the story of how he got started is the same story told over and over again by fish carvers across the Midwest. He learned to carve from his grandfather, Lester Ballard, who would

whittle decoys while young Kober kept watch over the ice fishing hole.

Kober started out copying his grandfather's decoys. "I guess it's like a kid learning anything from his grandfather, whether it's knowing how to swing a bat or comb your hair. If he said that's the way to do it, you do it that way. It's pride," Kober says.

Somewhere along the way, Ballard noticed his grandson's talent and urged him to number and sign each decoy Kober made. Today, Kober has a stack of notebooks that record each of his 2,000 to 3,000 decoys now held in museums and private collections around the world.

Most of his life, Kober assumed the only creatures interested in his decoys were fish. That changed in the 1980s, when antique decoys became hard to find and hungry collectors were seeking new sources of fish. All of a sudden, the retired environmental manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency saw his hobby turn into a second career. Today, collectors with a passion for Kober's work sign up for an entire set of his work – 40 different species of fish, from delicate pumpkinseeds to spike-toothed muskies.

Unlike most carvers, who smooth, paint and varnish their decoys to a slippery finish, Kober allows the wood's grain to become the predominant feature in his work. "I let the wood tell me what it wants to be," he explains.

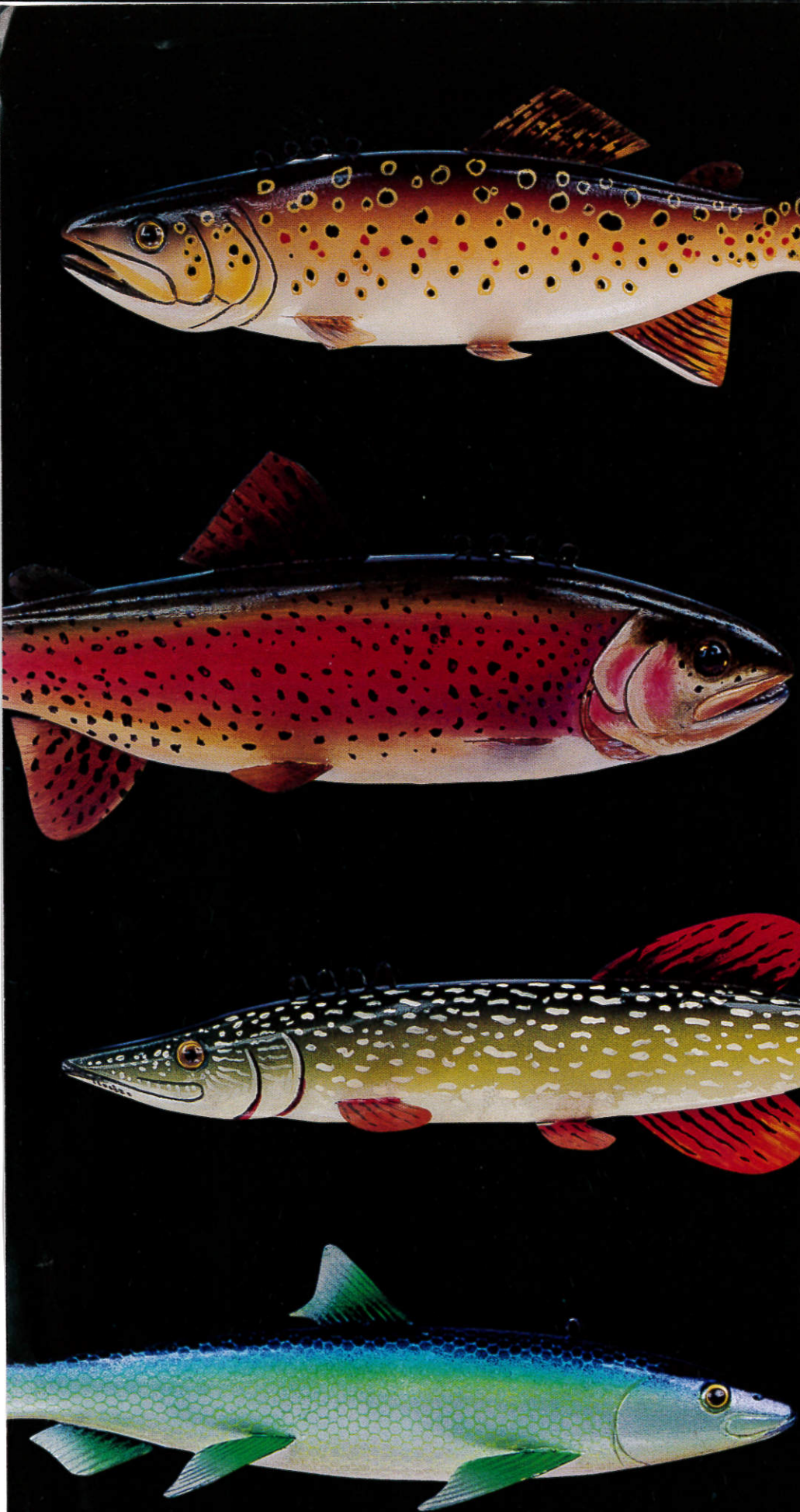
Kober's popularity also stems from his decorative painting – an amazing feat considering he's colorblind. He attributes his success to decades of observing his subjects on fishing trips. "I know what the colors look like to me," says Kober,



Above: Marvin Johnston has some fun with a realistic-looking brook trout, complete with life-like teeth.

At right: Dave Kober lets the wood grain show on his fish decoys. From top, northern pike, pink salmon and wall-eye.





who custom-mixes his paints. “Just don’t ask me to tell *you* what they look like.”

Four of Kober’s decoys fetched \$3,000 at a Sotheby’s estate sale a few years ago – but that doesn’t mean his current work will strain a new collector’s budget. He still sells his custom decoys for \$250 each.

Kober’s decoys are among the favorites in collector Noralie Larson’s collection, which she showcases in the white pine great room of her lakehome overlooking Thomas Lake in Greenville, Mich.

Larson started her collection about 12 years ago when her fiancé, Pat Jachim, gave her an old trout decoy as a gift. “It was very folk-art, not much to look at,” she says, “but somehow I got hooked.”

Today, she owns 150 fish decoys, including a large collection of brightly colored sunfish that catches the sunlight pouring through the windows of the new great room built to accommodate several of her glassed-in display cabinets.

“I’m drawn to decoys that are realistic, colorful and unique. You’ve got to buy what you like rather than worrying about some future price and fame,” says Larson. Still, she does realize the market value of her collection.

“I’ve half jokingly warned my family not to sell them at a garage sale for a buck apiece if I die.”

Mary Thompson is a freelance writer in Duluth, Minn., land of 10,000 lakes and 150 fish decoy carvers.

From top:
Brown trout, rainbow trout
and northern pike by Bob
Johnson of Baxter, Minn.;
cisco by Marvin Johnston.