



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Feature Story

WINNING "DUCK STAMP" CONTEST TRANSFORMS ARTISTS' LIVES

John Wilson was on the job as usual that first Thursday in November back in 1980. For the past 25 years, the 51-year old Watertown, South Dakota, artist had been designing plastic and neon signs for the Stein Sign Display Company. But shortly before 3 o'clock that afternoon came a phone call from Washington, D.C., that dramatically transformed his life.

The caller was Bob Hines of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The message -- Wilson's 5 X 7 inch painting of a pair of ruddy ducks had been chosen as the design for the 1981-82 Federal Duck Stamp. Against towering odds, he'd won the Interior Department's annual Duck Stamp contest which, in recent years, has evolved into the world's richest art competition. The winning design each year graces the Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp that must be purchased by waterfowl hunters 16 years of age and older.

The electrifying news meant that print sales of Wilson's winning Duck Stamp design to collectors would earn him well over a half million dollars. Perhaps as important, the victory instantly catapulted the retiring South Dakotan to national prominence in the world of wildlife art.

"It certainly did change my life," says Wilson. The self-taught artist had only begun to concentrate on wildlife subjects some five years earlier. And although he'd gained some local notice, he recalls that "I'd just kind of dabbled in it. After working in the shop all day, you don't really feel much like coming home and starting again at night."

Winning the Duck Stamp contest, however, meant financial independence -- his own studio and freedom from the daily 8 to 5 grind. "It let me spend all my time painting," says Wilson. "I always really wanted just to paint. And now I've got the opportunity."

In fact, as far as Wilson is concerned, "I'm just doing a different kind of job. I still go to work every day and I'm working harder than ever trying to improve. Actually, I think you work even harder after winning because there's so much talent out there."



(over)

Indeed, Wilson's own talent has become widely recognized in the wildlife art world since he became a Duck Stamp winner. Moreover, his experience mirrors that of other "unknowns" whose designs have been chosen in recent years. The selection has always meant prestige. But as the rewards have escalated, so has the impact of winning the Federal Government's only continuing art contest.

The market for Duck Stamp prints, and the stamps themselves, has soared, along with the popularity of wildlife art in general. A decade ago winning artist Lee LeBlanc's design of a pair of Steller's eiders was issued in an edition of 1,000 prints. The print edition of the 1982 winner, two pintails painted by Minnesota's Phil Scholer, numbered 24,000.

By the mid-1970's, the Duck Stamp artists were already grossing well into six figures from sales of their prints. Estimates are that 1982 winner Scholer's proceeds will easily top \$1 million. Given the incredible profit potential, entries in the annual competition also shot up -- from 300-odd a decade ago to a high of nearly 2,100 in 1981.

Waseca, Minnesota, artist Richard Plasschaert, for example, faced nearly 1,400 other contestants when he won the competition on his first try in 1979. "I believe I had a lot of luck," he declares. "There are so many good artists out there." It was soon clear though that more than "luck" was involved for the virtually unknown Plasschaert.

The talented, self-schooled painter had worked for years at a catalogue printing firm to support himself and his family. After winning the contest (with a design showing a pair of mallards) he was free to become a full-time artist and spend the better part of the next year furiously painting. "I worked every day, every evening, every weekend," he recalls, "and it paid off." Plasschaert's art is now sought by collectors throughout the country. And over the past few years he's designed no less than ten state conservation stamps.

"No question," he says, "winning made a tremendous difference in my life. Before the Federal Duck Stamp there was no one beating a path to my door. Afterwards you find yourself in almost every gallery in the country that handles wildlife art. That doesn't necessarily guarantee that people are going to buy your work. But it does give you a golden opportunity."

In spite of the tremendous financial rewards and the widespread publicity, however, a Duck Stamp artist's future isn't assured. Veteran wildlife art dealer Bill Webster, who helped popularize Duck Stamp prints, explains, "winning doesn't automatically 'make' an artist. It puts him in the limelight. It doesn't assure him of lifelong success in wildlife art. If he's not good, he won't last."

Echoes Dick Plasschaert, "you really have to follow up and deliver. That's where some artists have gone wrong. Some have been very successful. And some haven't done much afterwards. If you begin believing your own press releases, you're going to get into trouble."

(more)

The latest unknown artist who's been plucked from obscurity to confront the test of sudden fame and fortune is 38-year old William Morris, a sales engineer from Mobile, Alabama. Morris, whose watercolor of a pair of widgeons won over nearly 1,600 other entries in last fall's contest, is facing special pressures. His design marks the 50th anniversary of the highly successful Duck Stamp program, which over the past half century has generated some \$285 million to help preserve 3.5 million acres of precious wetlands habitat for the nation's waterfowl.

-- FWS-55 --

Note: The colorful Duck Stamp may be purchased for \$7.50 at most Post Offices and many national wildlife refuges, or ordered by mail for \$8 (includes 50 cents postage and handling) from the U.S. Postal Service, Philatelic Sales Division, Washington, D.C. 20265-9997. The 50th anniversary (1984/85) stamp goes on sale July 2.

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