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Decorative Turkey Callmakers: Artists or Craftsmen

Lauren E. Virgo
University of South Carolina

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DECORATIVE TURKEY CALLMAKERS:
ARTISTS OR CRAFTSMEN

by

Lauren E. Virgo

Bachelors of Arts
Clemson University, 2003

Certificate of Museum Management
University of South Carolina, 2005

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Accepted by:

Peter Chametzky, Director of Thesis

Lydia Brandt, Reader

Lana Burgess, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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DEDICATION

To the turkey callmakers and turkey call historians who welcomed me into their world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff of the National Wild Turkey Federation's Winchester Museum for the opportunity to work with them on this project. In addition to the NWTF's museum staff, there are many NWTF employees, callmakers and call collectors who shared their knowledge and passion for turkey calling with me. Without their enthusiasm for turkey calls I would not have the appreciation that I have today for this wonderful and uniquely American craft.

A big thank you is needed for my family and friends who always encouraged me to complete my degree. Of course, this thesis would not have been possible without the professors and staff of the School of Visual Art and Design. They gave me a second chance at finishing my degree and for that I will be forever grateful.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of the wild turkey call and the role of decorative callmakers in the world of art and craft. Is a turkey callmaker an artist or a craftsman? Are their decorative turkey calls works of art or works of craft? This debate is explored via the decorative turkey calls that have won the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show portion of the National Wild Turkey Federation's Grand National Callmaking Competition. These winning turkey calls are currently on display at the NWTF's Winchester Museum in Edgefield, South Carolina.

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. The organization is dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of the hunting tradition. The headquarters for the NWTF is located in Edgefield, South Carolina. The headquarters has a 7,200 sq.ft. museum that supports the mission of the National Wild Turkey Federation with the exhibition of hunting- and preservation-related items, including a large collection of over 500 turkey calls. In 1994, the NWTF hosted the first national competition for decorated turkey calls. The competition continues to this day and has become the epicenter for turkey call making excellence.

PREFACE

My first professional museum job after college was working as the Collections Manager for the National Wild Turkey Federation's Winchester Museum. I spent many years learning about the wild turkey, its preservation, and its hunting tradition. This thesis seeks to convey the responsibility felt by the staff of the NWTF towards preserving the heritage of the American wild turkey hunting tradition. This thesis traces the evolution of turkey call design and explores the role of decorative turkey callmakers as seen in the holdings of the NWTF's Winchester Museum. From the depths of historic necessity to modern decorated forms, turkey calls have carved out a splendid path.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCAA	Callmakers & Collectors Association of America
DTCBS	Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show
GNCC	Grand National Callmaking Competition
NWTF	National Wild Turkey Federation

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When Henry C. Gibson burned images of hunting dogs, log cabins, and nostalgic phrases onto the side panels of a turkey box call in the late 1890s, he couldn't have realized the impact of this minor decoration. Prior to Gibson's decorative additions, turkey calls were simple, handmade hunting tools that had been used by hunters for thousands of years. Just over one hundred years after Gibson's wood-burned decorations, the National Wild Turkey Federation created a national competition for decorative turkey calls as part of their Grand National Callmaking Competition (GNCC). Callmakers from across the United States compete annually in the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show (DTCBS) of the GNCC where they showcase their stunning, carefully carved decorative turkey calls (Fig. 1.1). The winning DTCBS calls are eventually displayed as part of a permanent exhibit at the National Wild Turkey Federation's Winchester Museum in Edgefield, South Carolina. It is this transformation of turkey calls from a simple hunting tool to incredible works of beauty that begs the question – are decorative callmakers craftsmen or artists?

Turkey calls are a uniquely American hunting tool created to hunt a uniquely American game bird. Wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) only existed on the North American continent until a segment of the population was taken to Europe for widespread domestication around the 1500s when the conquistadors returned from their explorations

in Central America. While some American Indian cultures were able to domesticate the wild turkey, most native persons hunted the cunning game bird with a combination of camouflage, traps, blowguns and calling techniques.¹ Turkeys were not hunted using guns until the European settlers arrived in America. After centuries of over-hunting and hunting practices that are considered illegal today, the wild turkey was on the brink of extinction by the late 1800s. Author Thomas Bangs Thorpe noted in 1854 that “every passing year lessens its numbers; and as their disappearance always denotes their death their extermination is progressive and certain.”² However, through efforts of wildlife conservation and hunting regulations, the population was restored to sustainable levels. Through restoration efforts the national population of wild turkeys has risen from an estimated 500,000 in 1954 to over 7 million wild turkeys today.³ The story of the wild turkey from near extinction to thriving populations is one the most successful wildlife restoration achievements in America.

In forests, mountains and prairies across the United States, the distant gobbling of male wild turkeys can be heard during the spring time. Ideal turkey habitat is a large expanse of wooded land with open fields nearby. This habitat is typically full of mast producing trees, insects, and berry laden bushes. The male turkeys are performing their strutting and calling ritual to catch the attention of female turkeys (Fig. 1.2). When a wild turkey hunter walks into the forest to harvest a bird, he brings with him a little bit of trickery. To catch the attention of a lovelorn male turkey, the hunter must replicate the romantic vocalizations of a female turkey or the territorial gobbles of a male turkey to

¹ James G. Dickson. *The Wild Turkey: Biology & Management* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1992), 8.

² Thomas Bangs Thorpe. *The Hive of the 'Bee-Hunter'* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1854), 9.

³ Dickson, *The Wild Turkey*, 16.

attract attention. The need to create these alluring vocalizations is the basis for a hunting tool known as a turkey call. Turkey calls can come in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials. Some of the more common turkey calls are the box call, the slate call, the yelper and the tube call. These calls will be discussed in Chapter 2 (Figs. 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6).

While the earliest known turkey calls were wingbone calls created by American Indian hunters thousands of years ago, turkey calls were not widespread as a hunting tool until the late 1800s.⁴ At the same time that turkey calls were becoming a more popular hunting tool, the Industrial Age ushered in the new capability to mass manufacture turkey calls. By 1897, an Arkansan named Henry Clay Gibson applied for the first patent for a turkey box call (Fig. 1.7). Turkey box calls have been documented to be in use since the 1700s, but Gibson was the first callmaker to have a patent issued for his design. In addition to being the first person to patent a turkey box call, Gibson is also recognized as the first person to sell turkey calls that were wood-burned with elaborate decorations. As a result, he is recognized as being the first callmaker to create a decorative turkey call – a call that told a story in addition to its function of calling in wild turkeys. From this beginning, a number of callmakers have opted to add sculptural elements to their functional turkey calls, such as a painting of a gobbler or a carving of a leaf. A small percentage of callmakers have taken decoration to another level where the entire surface of the call is decorated, sometimes, to the point of being barely functional. The comparison of these elaborately decorated turkey calls has led to the creation of a national competition.

⁴ Howard Harlan, *Turkey Calls: An Enduring American Folk Art* (Nashville: Harlan/Anderson Press, 1994), 16.

When the National Wild Turkey Federation hosted its first national convention in 1977, the main purpose of the convention was for biologists to share scientific research and focus on the restoration of the wild turkey population. However, the NWTF also recognized the need to have hunters involved in the convention. So, the Grand National Turkey Calling was created for callers from across the United States to compete.⁵ By the 1980s, the NWTF's national conventions expanded the offerings of the national gathering to include a competition for handmade turkey calls – the Grand National Callmaking Competition (GNCC). In 1994, this competition was enlarged to include a specific category for decorative handmade turkey calls. Thus the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show (DTCBS) competition was established as part of the GNCC.

By analyzing the backgrounds of the DTCBS winners along with other decorative callmakers and the range of functionality in their winning calls, this thesis interprets the placement of decorative callmakers in the world of art or craft. Key questions to be answered are: Is a turkey callmaker an artist, folk artist, craftsman, or studio craftsman? Turkey calls have been interpreted by previous scholars as being an American folk art. While several of the decorative callmakers refer to their works as folk art, I believe that the majority of the DTCBS winning calls fall more into the category of studio craft which is a combination of craftsman skill and artistic expression.

This thesis is aided greatly by the works of two turkey call historians – Earl Mickel and Howard Harlan⁶. Mickel interviewed hundreds of turkey callmakers across the United States in the 1990s for his books *Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: Mick's Picks* and *Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: The Rest of the Best*. Harlan is a game

⁵ Wayne Bailey and Neal Weakly, "A History of the Early Years," *Turkey Call*, Mar/Apr 1994, 34.

⁶ In addition to being authors/historians, Mickel and Harlan also judge calls at the NWTF's national DTCBS competition.

call historian and collector who has thoroughly researched the history of turkey calls in his work *Turkey Calls: An Enduring American Folk Art*. My knowledge for this paper has also been gleaned from conversations with callmakers and collectors during my four-year tenure as the Museum Coordinator for the National Wild Turkey Federation's Winchester Museum. Special recognition goes to Charles Burke and Chris Karinja for their wealth of knowledge about modern callmakers.



Figure 1.1 John Parker's 2008 DTCBS winning box call, "Circle of Life." NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 1.2 Two wild male turkeys strutting in a field. Image from National Wild Turkey Federation online, <http://griffinsguide.com/content/2014/03/09/23-great-spring-turkey-photos/>



Figure 1.3 Hunting Class call – M.L. Lynch Box Call. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 1.4 Hunting Class call – Replica of a BGI yelper by Irving Whitt. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 1.5 Hunting Class call – Tube call by Knight & Hale. Image courtesy of Knight & Hale.



Figure 1.6 Hunting Class call – Slate call with striker by Clint Corder. Image courtesy of the NWTf.

(No Model.)

H. C. GIBSON,
TURKEY CALLER AND GOBBLER.

No. 574,534.

Patented Jan. 5, 1897.

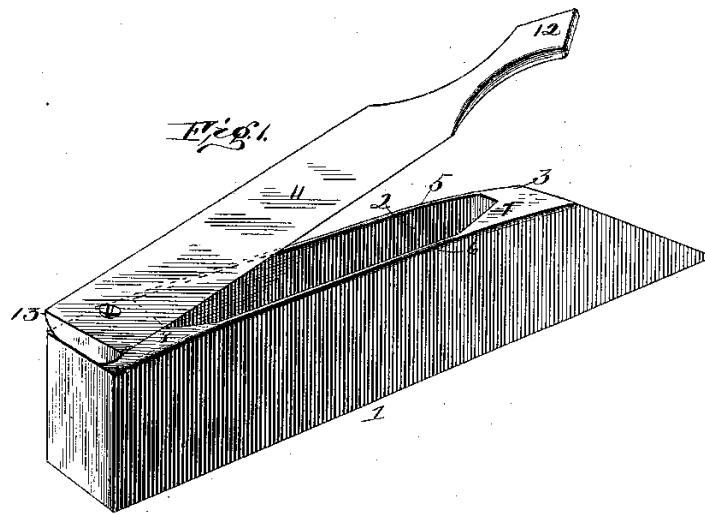


Figure 1.7 Henry C. Gibson's patent for a turkey box call. Patent number 574,534.
Image courtesy of the United States Patent Office.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF THE TURKEY CALL

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the wild turkey is a uniquely American game bird. From the point of near extinction in America to its impressive return to self-sustaining levels, the American wild turkey has made an incredible recovery with help from wild life professionals, conservation organizations, and wild turkey hunters. At the current population levels, wild turkey hunting has been able to resume its balance with nature as part of the prey-predator cycle. Wild turkey hunters have used turkey calls as part of their hunting technique for thousands of years. It is only within the last one hundred years, though, that these turkey calls have been altered to resemble sculpture more than a hunting tool. This chapter traces the history of turkey calls from their earliest, purely functional versions to their recent sculptural enhancements.

The earliest records of turkey hunting by American Indian cultures came from accounts by European settlers. They recorded many types of turkey hunting from trapping turkeys in pens to Indian turkey hunters camouflaging themselves in moss, like modern day gillie suits, and hunting wild turkeys with blow guns. Often in the accounts, American Indians were shown to call in turkeys with either their voices, using a leaf or large blade of grass, or a calling device made from the wing bone of the turkey.

The wingbone call is the first known type of handmade turkey call. American Indian hunters discovered that by sucking on the narrow diameter of the bird's wing bone, you can mimic the sounds of a female hen. The NWTf's

Winchester Museum has in its collection one of the oldest known wingbone turkey calls. This 4,000 year old turkey wingbone call was discovered during an archaeological dig in Indiana along the Ohio River (Fig. 2.1). The call is constructed using the ulna and radius bones from the wing of the wild turkey. By lightly sucking on the radius bone, a hunter can produce the sounds of a female hen, which is key to convincing a male turkey (gobbler) to come close to the hunter's blind.

Wild turkeys are incredibly wary creatures and much skill is required of the hunter to get close enough to the bird for a good shot with either a shotgun or a bow and arrow. As suggested in the book *The Hive of the Bee-Hunter* on the hunting traditions of early Americans in 1854, the cautiousness of the wild turkey is extraordinary. The author rates the intelligence and wariness of the wild turkey above that of deer and any other wild game.⁷

Turkeys can vocalize more than 28 different calls. These calls have different meanings from vocalizations of satisfaction (the purr) to warning signals (the putt) to the courting sounds of a female turkey (the yelp). Wild turkey hunters focus primarily on replicating a handful of turkey vocalizations that might cause a gobbler to come near their camouflaged hunting blind. There are at least four call vocalizations that every turkey hunter needs to know: the yelp, the cluck, the gobble and the purr. Clucks, purrs and yelps are typically made by hen turkeys when they are content and/or looking for a male turkey. A gobble is a male turkey vocalization and can be used by a turkey hunter to challenge a nearby gobbler into a confrontation. A skilled hunter can produce most of these vocalizations using just one or two turkey calls. However, a hunter who has been

⁷ Thorpe, *The Hive of the 'Bee-Hunter'*, 12-13.

hunting for decades will tell you that a wise hunter brings four or five different kinds of turkey calls on a hunt because you cannot predict what type of call will entice a gobbler.

Early hunting techniques that included baiting, trapping and night hunting were eventually outlawed with the over-hunting of the species and the need for population restoration. As a result of outlawing those forms of hunting and the enforcement of hunting seasons, the majority of hunters resorted to the usage of turkey calls. Whether they were purchased or hand-carved by the hunter, turkey calls are offered in a variety of shapes, sizes, and function.

Turkey calls are divided into two main types – 1. friction-operated calls and 2. air-operated calls. Friction calls include but are not limited to box calls, trough calls, slate calls, chamber and striker calls, and push button calls. Box calls and slate calls are some of the most popular forms of friction calls. Calls within the air operated category include wingbone calls, trumpet calls, yelpers, tube calls, shaker calls and mouth calls. Air-operated turkey calls work by forcing air across a vibrational surface or through a narrow diameter channel. Versions of these turkey call types were handmade for generations by hunters until the Industrial era offered another way to purchase calls that were mass produced. Below is a timeline of the development of mass marketed turkey calls.

Timeline of noteworthy, consumer-purchased turkey calls:

- 1867 – Patent is issued to Samuel McClain for an in-mouth bird call
- 1881 – Charles Jordan’s Combination Yelper was marketed nationally
- 1882 – The BGI Yelper was mass marketed
- 1897 – Henry C. Gibson patented his box call design (Fig. 1.7)
- 1900 – Droughan applied for a patent for a scratch box call
- 1912 – First known fencepost style box call appeared and Saunders patented a striker & slate call
- 1917 – Tom Turpin’s No. 2 Style yelper
- 1919 – Tom Turpin’s No. 3 Style yelper
- 1921 – H. P. Bridges patented a diaphragm call & J.E. Jackson patented a push pin friction call
- 1926 – Tom Turpin began making box calls in addition to his yelpers
- Late 1920s – E.G. Chalkley obtained the rights to John E. Jackson push-pin call (patented March 27, 1923)
- 1930 – W. Fox’s Tru-tone single slate call was developed
- 1931 – P.S. Olt created a scratch box to work in conjunction with a hunter’s gun stock
- 1939 – The most successful mass producer of box calls, M.L. Lynch began producing his first model of box call (Fig. 1.3)
- 1950 – Herring produced a collapsible trumpet yelper, Bowles created a double-sided scratch box, and Megginson created a piston-powered call
- 1952 – Walker patented an ink well call
- 1958 – Jochenning & Leon patented their Turkey Caller
- 1960 – Neil Cost began making box calls (Fig. 2.2) and Raymond Chisholm developed his popular version of a trough call which reinvented the trough style call
- 1965 – E.L. Wisor developed a cylindrical peg-n-slate friction call
- 1968 – Winterbottom reenergizes the fencepost box call
- 1973 – Morgan patented a tube call
- 1974 – The Pulley crank box call was patented
- 1976 – E.O. Mitchell’s Big “Turk” worked by placing a piece of slate in a turtle’s shell; the concave body of the shell amplified the slate’s noise
- 1978 – D.D. Adams patented a double slate call
- 1980 – Cassette created a two-button push pin call
- 1981 – Whedon & Hearn patented an interchangeable mouthpiece yelper

Some of the more innovative callmakers who produced consumer-purchased calls were Michael Leroy Lynch, Neil Cost, and the aforementioned Henry C. Gibson. Gibson was crucial due to his box call patent and thus setting the standard for that particular

turkey call type. Lynch was significant because he was the first callmaker to successfully mass produce and mass market a turkey call. And last, but not least, Neil Cost was the callmaker to perfectly tune a friction call to replicate the vocalizations of a wild turkey. These men produced turkey calls that were revolutionary in the turkey call world.

Henry Clay Gibson

Born in 1848 near Dardanelle, Arkansas, Henry Clay Gibson worked as a farmer and as a manager of a fencing company. He also helped to organize Mt. Nebo Summer Normal which was the first normal school in Arkansas. Little else is known about Gibson other than he applied for a patent along with a man named John Boddie. Turkey call scholars believe that Boddie helped Gibson market his box calls to regional hardware companies.⁸ The patented design is composed of three components: a rectangular block of wood with a deep chamber carved into its body, a thin piece of wood in the shape of an elongated paddle, and an attachment point to join the two pieces of wood together. The call works by the hunter abrading the underside of the paddle with chalk and then gently scraping the chalked side of the paddle against the top walls of the open chamber. This chalked friction of wood against wood produces the vibrations necessary to imitate several calls of the wild turkey. Gibson's design was so simple, but so effective, that it is still used by callmakers today.

While the patent alone is significant, the major contribution by Gibson was his decorated turkey box call. Although only a few examples of Gibson's decorated calls exist today, no other decorated turkey calls have been recorded before his version. His

⁸ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 80.

wood-burned turkey calls ushered in a new wave of turkey calls that looked beyond function to include expression and personalization.

An exact replica of his most well-known box call design shows imagery that would be attractive to turkey hunters (Fig. 2.3). On one side of the box's chamber, Gibson burned the design of a strutting male turkey while on the other side is the depiction of a hunter holding a gun and walking with his hunting dog. The rest of the burned designs were simple dashes and flourishes with the final touch being the callmaker's own name brandished on the top of the paddle (Fig. 2.4). The designs are very rustic with no signs of shadowing or three-dimensional skill. Although rudimentary, these simplistic wood-burned drawings were the beginning of the decorative turkey call.

Michael Leroy Lynch

Born in 1896, a Mississippi gentleman named Michael Leroy Lynch began making turkey box calls in 1939 after working as a home builder and custom cabinetmaker for years. M.L. Lynch, as he is commonly known, was a man who liked to experiment with the basic designs of turkey calls. Lynch's first calls were made from cedar in his shop in Birmingham, Alabama. Later, Lynch changed the materials to walnut paddles and mahogany chambers. These call chambers were glued together rather than carved from a single block of wood to make the design easier for mass production.

Lynch's most revolutionary contribution to the turkey calling world was the idea of mass production. Before Lynch, most turkey callers made their own turkey calls or purchased them from a small scale operation. Lynch was the first person to successfully market and sell turkey calls on a mass scale. In fact, he was known to travel all over the

eastern portion of the United States with turkey calls in his trunk, selling them in bulk to any hunter or hunting store he came across.⁹ Eventually, Lynch's company would grow to include more than 20 different models of turkey calls – all primarily friction calls.

He began by making box calls with very simple designs that were very close in scale to the Gibson patented design. In 1940, he added grooves to the side panels of the box calls and forever changed how future turkey call makers chose to design the box call chamber (Fig. 2.5). Many call makers today still use the grooved-sides design for their call chambers. From the late 1950s until he sold the company in 1970, Lynch would continue experimenting with the design of the chamber walls, the internal shape of the chamber, the ways of bracing the chamber walls, and the design of the paddle.

Neil Cost

A few years after the Lynch World Champion Turkey Caller was unveiled in 1958, a callmaker in Greenwood, South Carolina named Neil Cost began selling hand-carved turkey calls. Cost's revolutionary contribution to the world of turkey calls was his tonal perfection. Called the "Stradivarius of Turkey Calls," Neil Cost was a perfectionist who carved, sanded, and constructed turkey calls that flawlessly replicated the tonal vocalizations of a wild turkey (Fig. 2.6).¹⁰ In fact, his turkey calls were tested in a sound laboratory and compared to actual turkey vocalizations. The difference between Cost's turkey call and the real turkey vocalization was nearly imperceptible to the human ear. In his interview with author Earl Mickel for his book *Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: The Rest of the Best*, Cost said "Turkey calls are a piece of wood that when properly

⁹ Harlan, *Turkey Calls*, 80-83.

¹⁰ Mickel, *Mick's Picks*, 57.

selected, precisely cured and expertly fashioned, become an instrument to duplicate turkey language.”¹¹

Cost often said that for every single turkey call that made it out of his work shop, two more went in the trash. He would never allow an imperfect turkey call to leave his shop. As a result of this high degree of perfection, his turkey calls became recognized as some of the best turkey calls in the nation. After nearly fifty years of turkey callmaking, his dedication to the promotion of turkey callmaking and his skill in tonal perfection earned him South Carolina’s Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Award in 2002.¹²

While Gibson, Lynch and Cost considerably altered the landscape of field grade turkey calls, there was also a growing movement to take turkey calls beyond the singular function of being a hunting tool. Ornate turkey calls have emerged slowly from the world of field grade turkey calls and into a category of their own. Very few examples of decorated turkey calls exist between Henry Gibson’s early 1900s wood-burned turkey calls and the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show winners of the 1990s. Their slow emergence is very likely a result of declining wild turkey populations.

Gibson created decorative turkey calls during the late 1890s and early 1910s when turkeys were populous and hunting limits for the wild game bird did not exist. Thus, a decline of wild turkey populations due to overhunting was inevitable. With this decline came less demand for turkey calls. It makes sense that a callmaker would only build fully functional field grade turkey calls for hunters who might be desperate to call in a food source.

¹¹ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 150.

¹² Jeffrey Day, “S.C. ‘King of Box Call’ to Receive Folk Award,” *The State* (Columbia, SC), Apr. 22, 2002.

It was only after decades of hunting regulation, wildlife conservation, and habitat restoration that wild turkey populations began to obtain balanced levels in the 1960s and 1970s. With this resurgence in wild turkey populations, a large number of hunters once again sought turkey calls for the field. It is at this time that decorative turkey calls also reappear. With a new demand for turkey calls, callmakers once again began to experiment with shape and form.

One particular enclave of callmakers that reemerged in the 1960s was the Eminence callmakers. In 1968, the town of Eminence, Missouri, held a centennial celebration. The Eminence area's turkey season had recently reopened in 1960 after being closed for twenty-three years while the populations were conserved. There was a turkey calling contest at the town's centennial celebration. The contest was won by Dan Searcy who used one of his father's fence post style calls that had been made in 1912. These fence post calls are unusually long-bodied box calls that were carved from a single block of old fence post wood before and during the Great Depression.¹³ Many of the early fence post calls are covered with wood-burned images and the shape of the paddle is very close to that of the Gibson design with its almost diamond shape. At any one time, there were probably only ten fence post style callmakers in Eminence in the 1960s, but they have become well recognized in the callmaking community for their particular decorative call style.¹⁴

This resurgence of decorated turkey calls in the late 1960s and 1970s eventually led to competitions for the decorative category at turkey callmaking events. The National

¹³ Typical box calls are less than 8 inches long. Eminence fence post style box calls are 12 to 17 inches long.

¹⁴ Kevin Howard, "Here's Where to Find Hand-Crafted Turkey Calls," *Outdoor Guide*, March 9, 2015.

Wild Turkey Federation created the national Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show (DTCBS) competition for only decorative turkey calls in 1994 as part of their Grand National Callmaking Contest. This contest has pushed the creativity of callmakers to a new level as can be seen in a comparison of the first DTCBS winner with the 2014 winner (Figs. 2.7, 2.8).

The impact of the NWTF's Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show cannot be underestimated in the growth of decorative turkey callmakers. In an interview with callmaker Kent L. Bowers, he noted that he was a dedicated duck callmaker since 1983. However, he noticed the growing market for custom made turkey calls in the early 1990s. So he began making turkey wingbone calls with decorated aspects in 1994.¹⁵ It is interesting that he noted the growing market for custom turkey calls around the same time that the NWTF created a new category for the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show.

Another callmaker that was inspired by the NWTF's national decorative call competition was Jack Burrus of Eminence, Missouri. Although Burrus does not carve in the traditional fence post style of other Eminence callmakers, he is well versed in the carving tradition. His typical carvings feature Western themes of cowboys and American Indians. In Earl Mickel's book, Burrus states "The N.W.T.F. decorative call competition got me interested in carved turkey calls in 1994."¹⁶ So, in a way, the creation of the decorative turkey callmaking competition was a motivation within the callmaking world to then create more elaborate, decorative turkey calls. The cycle is self-perpetuating.

¹⁵ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 21.

¹⁶ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 32.

As can be observed in the evolution of calls in the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show competition, decorative turkey calls have become more and more elaborate within the past two decades. This extensive decoration has led many to consider these calls as collectors' items that should not be used as a hunting tool. Modern decorative callmakers tend to place emphasis on the materials that will best yield a certain aesthetic rather than only using materials that create a perfect tonal vocalization of the wild turkey. For instance, Dave Constantine's 2007 DTCBS winning call replicates the same shape of a traditional box call (Fig. 2.9). However, the callmaker chose ivory, a very dense material, over a piece of wood like poplar or cedar which would have resulted in making realistic turkey vocalizations. This ivory box call can technically function as a turkey call because its paddle does swing across the top panels of the chamber, but the sound the call creates would never fool a wild turkey.

It is this preferential placement of a call's aesthetic value over its hunting function that is the basis of my argument in Chapter Three. Does this decrease of functional value relegate a decorative callmaker to the realm of an artist? Or does the fact that the callmaker retains the functional form of a call keep him in the realm of craftsman? The answer lies somewhere between the two worlds where a decorative call can be both art and craft.



Figure 2.1 4,000 year old wingbone call made by an American Indian. Discovered in an archaeological dig along the Ohio River in Indiana. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.2 Neil Cost's 1964 prototype box call with a single-checked design on the side panels. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.3 Gibson turkey box call, historic reproduction. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.4 Gibson turkey box call, historic reproduction. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.5 M.L. Lynch Model No. 102 box call with grooved side panels. One side of the box was worked to make the sounds of a hen while the other side was used to make the sounds of a gobbler. NWTf's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.6 Neil Cost's Signature Box Call with triple-checked design, 2000. This call was made for Neil's daughter, Sally Carr Morris. Image by Matt Lindler, NWTf.



Figure 2.7 Scott Basehore's 1994 Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show winning box call. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.8 Richard L. Steward's 2014 DTCBS winning box call titled "In the Timber." NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 2.9 Dave Constantine's 2007 Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show winning box call. Made entirely of ivory. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.

CHAPTER 3

ARTIST OR CRAFTSMAN

In the world of handmade turkey calls, there is a wide variety of calls available. Most calls have a very pure form and stick strictly to the functional designs that have worked for centuries. These Hunting Class calls have smooth surfaces, purposeful design, and no decorative elements. There are some Hunting Class calls that are bedecked with simple line drawings or a few flourishes of natural elements, but these decorations in no way alter the functional form of a field grade turkey call. Finally, there are the exceptional turkey calls that are elaborately decorated to the point that most purchasers display the calls in their homes instead of taking them into the woods on a hunt. Although the level of craftsmanship required for Hunting Class calls is equivalent to the level of skill needed to craft Decorative Class calls, the focus of my thesis work is with the callmakers of the Decorative Class.

It is difficult to place callmakers into one category. Earl Mickel conducted interviews with over 500 callmakers across the United States for his two books, *Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: Mick's Picks* (1994) and *Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: The Rest of the Best* (1999). Most of the callmakers he interviewed produced field grade turkey calls, but a few dozen produced decorative turkey calls. During his interviews, some of these decorative turkey callmakers would self-identify as artists while others would identify themselves as craftsmen. In other interviews, the callmakers

used the words artist and craftsman interchangeably. Thus enters the confusion of this issue. Are callmakers craftsmen, artists, folk artists, or do they fall more into the category of studio craft? This chapter will explore this conundrum by primarily analyzing the works of the NWTF's Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show winning callmakers.

A Note about Female Callmakers

The world of turkey callmakers is predominately male and predominately Caucasian. Female callmakers who produced consumer-purchased calls are small in number. In some cases, women who make turkey calls do so in partnership with their callmaking husbands. An example of this interlocked relationship is GNCC entrant Sarah Clarke and her husband Don. After working for the Union Pacific Railroad for forty-one years, Don retired and began making turkey calls under the name Clark-It Custom Turkey Calls in Sheridan, Arkansas. Don builds the calls and Sarah decorates them with wood-burned and painted designs. They have been making turkey calls together for more than a decade.¹⁷

Another husband and wife team is the Gaskins of Rapid City, South Dakota. Tricia Gaskins was a professional jewelry and scrimshaw artist when she met Randy Gaskins at a Mountain Man retreat. Randy has built wingbone and horn mouth calls

¹⁷ Made in Arkansas, "Talkin' Turkey with Sheridan Couple," *THV11* video, 3:11, March 21, 2014, <http://legacy.thv11.com/story/news/local/2014/03/20/made-in-arkansas-talkin-turkey-with-sheridan-couple/6667935/>.

since the early 1990s. With their cooperative partnership, Randy builds the calls while Tricia decorates them with her scrimshaw skills.¹⁸

One example of an independent female callmaker is Goldie Goodman of Evening Shade, Arkansas. She attended Arkansas State University to study in the fine arts program and worked for several decades as a mold assembler in a plant. When she began hunting wild turkeys in 1989, she noticed a scratch box call that her brother-in-law was using and she knew that she could make her own. Goodman also carves walking sticks, statues, and other wooden artworks.¹⁹

The lack of female turkey callmakers could be attributed to the tradition of men being the hunters in most cultures.²⁰ As the primary hunters, men would also be the ones to create any necessary hunting tools. While the majority of current wild turkey hunters are men, this tradition is slowly changing. Programs like the NWTF's Women in the Outdoors promote outdoor sports and hunting to women. By more women entering the hunting fields, I expect to see an increase in female callmakers.

In the field of decorative turkey calls, there have been only five female callmakers to enter the NWTF's Decorative Turkey Call competition within the past three years:

Bobbie Jean Boyd, Sarah Clarke, Dana Cornette, Jennifer Demay, and Patty Harness.²¹

Although a woman has yet to win the DTCBS competition, I believe it is only a matter of time before a woman does win the top award.

¹⁸ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 81.

¹⁹ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 82.

²⁰ The 2011 US Fish & Wildlife Survey reports that 89% of hunters are male. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, FHW/11-NAT," 29, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/fhw11-nat.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2016).

²¹ Two of the women, Dana Cornette and Patty Harness, have placed in the Decorative Turkey Callmaking competition. Information from author's conversation with the NWTF's Special Events Coordinator Karen Cavender, March 28, 2016.

Artist / Folk Artist

During my research for this thesis, Matt Lindler and I had a conversation about how decorative turkey callmakers define themselves. “If you were to ask them [decorative callmakers], they would say that they’re artists.”²² Several of the callmakers self-identify as artists and they refer to their calls as works of folk art. What is interesting to me is that they consider themselves artists and do not further define themselves as folk artists.

In the turkey callmaking world, turkey calls are commonly referred to as folk art by callmakers, collectors, museum curators and authors. In fact, the most comprehensive history written about turkey call development designated turkey callmakers as folk artists. In Howard Harlan’s book, *Turkey Calls: An Enduring American Folk Art*, Harlan argued that callmakers were masters of their craft who understood the ingenuity and skill required to lure in the cunning wild turkey.²³

When the NWTF built a permanent exhibit about modern turkey callmakers in 2005, the exhibit was titled “American Folk Art: Featuring the Wild Turkey.” The exhibit displayed the DTCBS winners alongside other modern turkey calls. All of the calls were placed in either glass topped pedestals or inside large caseworks with exhibit labels (Fig. 3.1). This way of displaying the calls gives the museum visitor the impression that they are viewing a work of folk art because the call is removed from its function of being a hunting tool and instead takes on the role of educational device.

²² As the NWTF’s Director of Photography and Editor of Turkey Country and JAKES magazines, Matt Lindler has been photographing and working with decorative callmakers for nearly twenty years. Author’s conversation with Matt Lindler, March 18, 2016.

²³ Harlan, *Turkey Calls*, 38.

Another institute that displays turkey calls in a museum environment is the McKissick Museum in Columbia, South Carolina. The University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum curates their Neil Cost call collection as part of their Folklife Resource Center. Cost was awarded the Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Award for South Carolina residents in 2002.²⁴ The award recognizes “traditional artists ... who practice art forms that have been transmitted through their families and communities.”²⁵ Turkey callmaking is certainly a community unto itself. Callmakers are typically encouraged in their craft by more experienced mentor-like callmakers, they have an online community where they share tips and their creations, and they have a way of talking about their calls that is special to callmakers.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines folk art as “the traditional, typically anonymous, art of usually untrained people.”²⁶ Folk art is furthered explained by the American Folk Art Museum as the work of self-taught artists whose art reflects our shared culture.²⁷ Although outside of the realm in which most people think of folk art; i.e., Grandma Moses or Howard Finster, turkey calls could be considered a form of folk art. Given the untrained background of most of the DTCBS callmakers, turkey calls are handcrafted with experience based skill. Much like their folk art counterparts, the DTCBS callmakers often give titles to their works. A title signals to a viewer that the work is to be interpreted much like a work of art. For instance, the most recent winner of the DTCBS Tim Oldham, Jr., named his work “Close Call” (Fig. 3.2). The title for his

²⁴ Five weeks after receiving the award, Cost died at the age of 78 from emphysema.

²⁵ “Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Awards,” South Carolina Arts Commission, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/folkheritage/>.

²⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folk%20art>.

²⁷ American Folk Art Museum, “About,” accessed January 30, 2016, <http://folkartmuseum.org/about/>.

box call is certainly well chosen given the subject matter of a hawk nearing a young turkey poult.

When looking at the educational backgrounds and professional lives of the eleven decorative turkey callmakers who have won the DTCBS, only three callmakers attended college and earned a degree in an art field. The other eight callmakers cite a mentor or natural ability as their guiding force in their callmaking skills. It is this tendency of a callmaker to train oneself or study with another, more experienced callmaker that pushes the argument towards the definition of folk artist for decorative callmakers.

The argument against viewing turkey calls, in general, as being folk art is that the Hunting Class calls maintain their functionality. The Decorative Class calls bend more towards folk art due to their sculptural qualities and the fact they would not fare well if taken on a hunt. Their exotic materials, extraneous carvings, and colorful appearance would make for a poor hunting tool. However, if one looks closely at even the most elaborate decorative turkey call, the basic form of a working turkey call is visible underneath all of the carving. Without this basic turkey call form, these pieces of wood would simply be a three-dimensional wood sculpture and not a turkey call. A craft person ensures that the basic form of function exists even if, as in the case of these decorative turkey calls, it doesn't function well.

While describing the creation of historic non-utilitarian baskets in *Choosing Craft*, Ed Rossbach states: "Both kinds of baskets [utilitarian and non-utilitarian] carried spiritual meaning. ... They show handles, supports, legs, closures, eccentric forms borrowed from some long forgotten time when such features were devised for utility.

These features appear in contemporary baskets ... to strengthen ‘by a tradition that lies concealed behind them.’”²⁸ This is a great way of viewing the more quickly evolved aesthetic of turkey calls from their utilitarian design to the more non-utilitarian, decorative design. The callmakers have retained the aspects of functioning calls, such as handles, chambers, paddles, and hinged joints, but without the ability to function fully. These utilitarian aspects of turkey calls have been retained as elements of the design to maintain the visual identification as a turkey call.

If callmakers ever began designing decorative turkey calls whose hinges didn’t swing, whose trumpet wasn’t drilled with a chirping diameter, or whose striker didn’t abrade the slate surface, then you would have a work of art and not of craftsmanship. Because at that point, the calling aspect of the turkey call would not exist. It would simply be a sculptural work with no inherent function and no right to be called a turkey call. Since decorative turkey calls maintain the ability to function as calling devices, however poorly, I believe that they cannot be deemed as art or folk art. Decorative turkey calls keep their functional form and, as such, can be placed firmly in the argument of being categorized as a craft made object.

Craftsman

Craft is often defined by specific materials, such as wood, glass, textile, or ceramic, while fine art is usually defined by the media of paint, photography and film. Cross-over mediums of clay, metal, stone and wood can have makers on both sides of the craftsman-artist line. For instance, a piece of ceramic can be both craft and art by

²⁸ Diane Douglas and Vicki Harper. *Choosing Craft: The Artist’s Viewpoint* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 250.

traditional meaning. A ceramic pot can be skillfully crafted to hold water while another piece of clay can be transformed into a Modernist sculpture that replicates the shape of a pot. Thus, media cannot draw the line between art and craft.

Instead of basing the idea of craft on a particular medium, craft can be thought of as a mindset or intent and workmanship within a chosen medium. If the maker has studied his medium and intends to make an item that is both beautiful and functional, then he is a craftsman. In *Choosing Craft*, Bruce Metcalf observes that “[i]t’s my contention that the primary cause in craft practice is the labor, not the idea.”²⁹ He also goes on to argue that a craftsman dedicates his life to one medium and mastering its qualities while an artist is encouraged to float between mediums in the search of expression. Even if the crafted object is placed on a pedestal or in a display cabinet instead of being used, the non-usage of that item by the purchaser should have no effect on the definition of its maker. In other words, a callmaker shouldn’t be defined as an artist simply because the call’s purchaser treats it like a work of art.

Another way in which a definition of craft can be sought is in the way a viewer is invited to interact with the creation. In Howard Risatti’s *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*, he defines differences between craft objects and Minimalist/art objects by stating that they are different in the way they “communicate their physical existence.”³⁰ Minimalist objects communicate solely based on their visual appearance whereas craft works communicate both visually and in a tactile way. Risatti states that craft objects “encourage active physical engagement” which decorative turkey calls

²⁹ Douglas and Harper, *Choosing Craft*, 63.

³⁰ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 146-147.

definitely do. They encourage the viewer to pick them up and observe them from every angle.

Decorative turkey calls are truly sculpted in the round. Whereas sculptural art pieces normally have a base that is not worked by the artist, turkey calls are hand-sized and are picked up to be experienced from every surface. All surfaces of a turkey call are given a treatment, even if it's only a minor texturing or a beautifully polished piece of wood. Turkey calls are meant to be experienced from every angle and every side.

In *Choosing Craft*, textile artist Sonya Y.S. Clark states that “the sensuality of their pieces recreates moments and celebrates shared experiences.”³¹ While callmakers may not view their works as being “sensual,” turkey calls do represent shared experiences and it recreates moments spent in the woods by the turkey hunters. Most turkey hunters will relate that hunting is not about the meat from the wild turkey. If they needed meat, a hunter could just visit a grocery store or a butcher. Being a hunter is about celebrating nature. It's experiencing the woods and reveling in the primitive nature of our human behavior. Hunting returns a person to his most basic behavior of gathering food for survival. It's about communing with nature and celebrating its bounty.

Turkey callmakers share a love of nature with wild turkey hunters and they celebrate their shared love of the wild through the calls. In honor of this shared love, callmakers often sculpt imagery that celebrates the world of turkey hunters, such as morel mushrooms, fall or spring foliage, and wild turkeys themselves. Other common themes for the sculptural elements are fish, antlers, foxes, acorns, and feathers.

³¹ Douglas and Harper, *Choosing Craft*, 38.

What is fascinating about craft is the object's ability to communicate with and convey meaning to the viewer. The handmade object can tell stories about its maker, its owner, and its creation. In Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman*, he stated that "people can learn about themselves through the things they make, that material culture matters. ...we can achieve a more humane material life, if only we better understand the making of things."³² A viewer isn't going to learn as much about the material culture imagery of a hunter from searching websites. However, a person who views a collection of decorated turkey calls can grasp the important experiences of a hunter. Even if the viewer is not a hunter or wildlife biologist, the common themes of turkeys, flora, and rural landscapes represented on the calls echo the important shared experiences of wild turkey hunters.

In a quote from *Choosing Craft*, jeweler, sculptor and teacher Bruce Metcalf identified craft as being "against the anonymity of mass-production and for the personalized object. ... Craft stands against big-money capitalism and for small-scale entrepreneurship. ... Craft continues to be a social movement, often intuitive and without leadership."³³ Metcalf's sentiments resonate strongly in the turkey callmaking community. Callmakers typically operate as small-scale entrepreneurs who refuse the avenue of mass production. In a slight contradiction to the last part of Metcalf's statement, turkey callmakers do have a national organization to promote their works. The Callmakers & Collectors Association of America (CCAA) offers an almost guild-like brotherhood via an online community.

³² Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 8.

³³ Douglas and Harper, *Choosing Craft*, 27.

Guild System

Author Howard Harlan is not just a collector, callmaker and historian of turkey calls. He is also a co-founder of the Callmakers & Collectors Association of America. This association is “dedicated to promoting interest in and knowledge of the history of callmaking in America and to create a fellowship between all those who are involved in making and/or collecting game calls.”³⁴ In Sennett’s *The Craftsman*, he explored the history and function of the medieval guild in relation to the education and skill levels attained by the guild’s master craftsmen and their apprentices. It is interesting that members of the callmakers’ community refer to themselves as a guild. They truly embody both the structure and spirit of medieval guilds in the way they support one another, even if the majority of their interactions take place online. Their website provides a forum for sharing their latest works, encouraging competition between one another for the best crafted call, and for patrons (collectors) to view and purchase calls.

When not conversing online by sharing skill tips, designs, and end products, members of the callmakers association attend group gatherings, support one another at competitions, and occasionally hunt together. They share a competitive, and yet bonding, environment where new makers are encouraged and skilled makers are critiqued and praised. The turkey callmakers also have a sense of honor and trustworthiness. They often will point out a callmaker who “cheats” by not hand-carving a piece of their turkey call. Cast plastics are a frowned upon aspect of decorative turkey calls because they are viewed as a short-cut in the eyes of many callmakers.

³⁴ “Home Page,” Custom Calls Online, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://customcalls.com/>.

Members of the CCAA also bond in a way that is beyond the normal craftsman in his workshop. They share personal stories and hardships. This relationship greatly mimics the surrogate father-son bond mentioned by Sennett as being a key component between a master craftsman and his apprentices. In some instances, the callmaking father-son bond is literal. One such pair is the father and son team of James and Len Yule. They are the only relatives who have won the Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show award. James Yule learned the craft of carving from his father who operated a duck hunting lodge and he passed down his knowledge to his son Len. While their styles are somewhat similar due to this relationship, Len added his own independently acquired knowledge of braiding leather to enhance his turkey calls.

However, most craftsman-apprentice relationships are formed between two like-minded individuals who favor one medium over another. In many instances, a well-experience callmaker will select one or two men to study under him. This parental surrogacy is widely recognized in the relationships of South Carolina Folk Artist Neil Cost with his apprentices. Throughout his lifetime of crafting tone-perfect turkey calls, he offered advice to dozens of callmakers, but he extensively mentored only two men. Steve Mann and Lamar Williams are recognized by the callmaking world as Cost's approved protégés.

Steve Mann was formally taken on as an apprentice by Neil Cost in the late 1990s. Mann spent an average of 30 hours a week with Cost over a period of five years to learn his craft.³⁵ He continued to study with Cost until Neil's death in 2002 and he produces a call very similar to Cost's style. Lamar Williams started making turkey calls

³⁵ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 150.

in 1977, but it wasn't until 1985 that he began studying with Neil Cost. He currently produces the checkered box call and boat paddle call styles that Cost made famous. While originality is highly praised in the turkey callmaking world, the only exception would be the ability to create a turkey call on the level of a grand master turkey callmaker, such as Neil Cost.

Neil Cost was nicknamed as the “Stradivarius of Turkey Calls” due to his ability to carve/tune a turkey call in such a way as to exactly replicate the vocalizations of a wild turkey. His skill level and auditory ability was such that it could not be replicated, even by his apprentices.³⁶ It was an innate part of his being and genetic hearing ability. This level of tacit knowledge can only be understood as a certain genius quality within the craft.

Although techniques can be passed along from mentor to apprentice with enough time, the passing down of tacit knowledge is more difficult. Sennett explains *explicit knowledge* as knowledge that can be instructed via book or person as in instructing a callmaker to angle his chisel at a certain angle to make the best cut. In comparison, *tacit knowledge* is knowledge of a skill that is inherently learned, such as knowing when a section of the sculpture can survive more carving and when it cannot. Tacit knowledge is more of a “feeling” knowledge that is hard to instruct others in and is gained after years of working with the craftsman’s medium.

The Eminence, Missouri, callmakers are an interesting study of a localized guild-like system in the history of decorative turkey callmaking in which an enclave of

³⁶ Johnny Lott, “Neil Cost: Stradivarius of Turkey,” *Turkey Call*, Sept/Oct 1993, 28-31.

decorative turkey callmakers that stretched across generations. The original Eminence callmakers produced calls from around the 1910s to 1930s. They all created unusually long-bodied box calls with wood-burned designs and paddle designs similar to Henry Gibson's. These callmakers are most well-known for their usage of found wood, such as fence posts, and carved a unique style of box call. The legend is that wood was such a scarce resource by the time of the Great Depression in Missouri that hunters resorted to recycling old fence posts into turkey calls. The Eminence fence post style is easily recognized today by its long chamber body and handle, narrow sounding chamber, pointed lid grip area, one-piece construction, and wood-burned decorative designs. The abnormal body length of these calls has led to their nickname of boat-paddle calls.

In 1968, the city of Eminence held a centennial celebration. As part of this celebration, the city held a turkey calling contest. A man named Dan Searcy won the calling contest using a 1912 fence post box call that his father had made for hunting. Thus, the fence post style of Eminence callmakers was reinvigorated. Three callmakers emerged as traditional fence post callmakers after being inspired at the 1968 centennial calling contest. Their names were Walter Winterbottom, Swiney Rayfield, and D. Dan Searcy.

Walter Winterbottom was a lifelong outdoorsman who never sold any of his turkey calls, but instead gave them away to friends and family. Winterbottom wood-burned nature theme designs into his long fence post box calls.³⁷ Winterbottom was visited one day by in 1978 by a callmaker named Neil Cost. Cost purchased an

³⁷ Mickel, *Mick's Picks*, 241.

Eminence style call from Winterbottom for \$25. Years later in 1989, he created his own version of the boat paddle call (Fig. 3.3).³⁸

Swiney Rayfield started making turkey calls in the 1960s when he saw that “all the good old boys around Eminence were talking calls.”³⁹ He began making turkey calls by patterning his calls after an old turkey call supplied by his father-in-law.

After winning the calling contest, Dan Searcy patterned his turkey calls after his father’s 1912 model.⁴⁰ Searcy made only about ten turkey calls a year while following the long body, one-piece construction method of the traditional fence post style. As of 2015, Searcy was 93 years old and still encouraging the next generation of Eminence callmakers to carry on the tradition.⁴¹

This tradition of callmaking instruction from mentor to mentee, the focus on the production of a quality turkey call, and the support system between callmakers creates a modern guild structure for their field. With their guild system, the argument for decorative turkey callmakers being defined as craftsmen is strong. However, the tendency for decorative turkey calls to suffer from a lessened functional aspect pushes me in another direction - the direction of Studio Craft.

Craft + Artist = Studio Craft

Craft has been thought of as a lesser form of creation. If something wasn’t art, then it was crafted. Art was for the refined viewer while craft was a simplistic, common

³⁸ Mickel, *Mick’s Picks*, 59.

³⁹ Mickel, *Mick’s Picks*, 185.

⁴⁰ Mickel, *Mick’s Picks*, 203.

⁴¹ Kevin Howard, “Here’s Where to Find Hand-Crafted Turkey Calls,” *Outdoor Guide*, March 9, 2015, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://outdoorguidemagazine.com/2015/03/09/heres-where-to-find-hand-crafted-turkey-calls/>.

object. In Howard Risatti's *A Theory of Craft*, he argued that "craft" objects have been lessened in the minds of people because of the ability for modern machines to execute an object's creation.⁴² Although a turkey call could be designed by a callmaker and independently produced by machines, decorative callmakers hold themselves to a higher standard. A lathe or a Dremel tool might be used to aid in carving, but the machine is still wielded by a skilled hand and most of the finishing touches are done without the aid of a machine.

In the 1960s, a new movement began that has since been referred to as Studio Craft. It is a movement that combines the works of craft media with art-educated makers. Studio Craft evolved from the Arts and Crafts movement which, in turn, evolved from the Gothic Revival writings of the mid-1800s in England. Men like John Ruskin, A.W.N. Pugin, and William Morris were proponents of the revival of the crafted objects movement in England. Their writings and productions influenced the development of the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the century. The supporters of Arts and Crafts also sought to offer an alternative to the Industrial Revolution's mass-produced objects that left the maker out of the equation. They wanted to return to the days of individual craft and elevate craft production to the same level as art in the minds of the consumer.

The expansion of the Arts and Crafts movement into America had some major advocates, including British architect-designers Charles Robert Ashebee and Charles Francis Annesley Voysey. Alongside American architect Frank Lloyd Wright and designer Louis Comfort Tiffany, the aesthetics of the Arts and Craft movement spread quickly in the United States. The Arts and Crafts emphasis on handmade items over

⁴² Risatti, *A Theory of Craft*, 168-169.

completely machined objects spread from home design to jewelry to furniture. This gradual push by makers, authors, and designers to place craft above mass-produced, machine-made items eventually brought craft into the refined world of art.⁴³

After World War II, a return to economic prosperity and the advent of new technologies like television, dishwashers, and electric appliances were the focus of a factory-made consumerism. Craft once again was forced to reexamine its place in a consumer-driven society that placed value in quickly made, easily purchased, technologically advanced products. In the face of this technology laden society, craft became radicalized. New methods, techniques and assemblage technologies were used and craft organizations began organizing “designer-craftsmen” exhibitions. After the WWII, more colleges and universities added visual arts programs to their curriculum. Craft found a new home in the realm of higher education. Art teachers were being required to become engaged in the field of their medium, i.e. participating in national exhibitions. The theoretical now had to become the practical. In a way, the dividing line between the worlds of art and craft began to blur.⁴⁴

Turkey callmakers have benefited from this revised view of craft in the world of art. While the majority of callmakers do not have any formal education in the arts, their works are no longer a lesser creation and they can be potentially viewed as a work of art with the skill of a craftsman behind its creation. This blend of craft skill and art quality is the argument for decorative turkey callmakers to be categorized as a studio craft.

⁴³ Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-38.

⁴⁴ Koplos and Metcalf, *Makers*, 213.

However, the designation of decorative turkey callmakers as studio craftsmen is not a clear-cut categorization either.

One of the major wood artisans in the Studio Craft movement was Wharton Esherick. In a *Craft Horizons* interview titled “The New American Craftsman: First Generation” in 1966, Esherick discussed the changing atmosphere of craft with fellow wood artists Sam Maloof and Donald McKinley.⁴⁵ The men were very open about the challenges of balancing professional woodworking with the economics of the studio. Most of them worked under the apprentice-mentor relationship and most of their pieces were custom ordered by patrons. They called themselves “craftsmen” and bemoaned the term “handcraft” since it gives the impression that tools were not used by the artist. They definitely viewed themselves as outside the art world even as other woodworkers self-identified as artists. The difference was the economics of calling something art which usually indicated that the piece would be more expensive and individually made across a period of months. Whereas, for these furniture craftsmen, a craft piece usually involved the supervised creation of multiple objects at once.

In the East Coast potters segment of the article, four potters interviewed one another. These potters were Daniel Rhodes, Val Cushing, Robert Turner and James McKinnell. Potter Daniel Rhodes perceived that the fine arts felt cut off from society while James McKinnell observed that “the sense of control over one’s own destiny that can be felt all through the crafts.”⁴⁶ The potters talked about how ceramic work became so popular in the pre-WWII era because it was a way to make an income after the Great

⁴⁵ “The New American Craftsman: The First Generation,” *Craft Horizons*, June 1966, 16-19.

⁴⁶ “The New American Craftsman: The First Generation,” 21.

Depression. It was a way to become self-sufficient. Rhodes, Cushing, Turner and McKinnell agreed that they approached it much the same way, but observed that potters of the 1960s looked more at ceramics as an art form and not as a way to support oneself. The four ceramicists discussed the education of potters and how universities promote the design over the material. The ceramicists considered craftsmanship as the garnering of skill in the medium while universities valued discussions of ideas. Robert Turner stated that "... if an object is utilitarian, going to be used, something happens which keeps this object from becoming a work of art."⁴⁷

Decorative turkey callmakers could fall on either side of this debate. On the one hand, a portion of the DTCBS winners self-identify as artists. Their calls incorporate sculptural elements onto the base of a functional call design which has been rendered practically useless in the hunting fields. As a counterpoint, other DTCBS winning callmakers create artwork onto a fully functioning turkey call, but it is the purchaser who renders it useless by placing it on display instead of taking it on a hunt. One such example is John Parker's 2009 DTCBS winning sculptural box call that highlights the habitat of the Gould's subspecies of the wild turkey (Fig. 3.4).⁴⁸ Parker created intricate sculptural elements around a box call form. To ensure that the call would function, he floated a calling chamber inside the form (Fig. 3.5).

Even the authors of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* observed in the preface of the book that the "first difficulty is defining terms. Craft is a broad category of handwork. Studio craft means handwork with aesthetic intent, largely or wholly created

⁴⁷ "The New American Craftsman: The First Generation," 24.

⁴⁸ There are five subspecies of the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*). The Gould's subspecies lives primarily in the desert habitats of Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico.

by individuals (usually art school or university trained) to their own designs. Craft is no more difficult to pin down than art is – which is to say, nearly impossible.”⁴⁹

The Victoria & Albert Museum interviewed several professionals in the art field and asked them to define the difference between art and craft. Christopher Frayling, rector of the Royal College of Art stated in the article that the “American Customs & Excise definition of 'a work of art' is that the owner must be able to prove it is completely useless. Craft work is something else, though it can produce objects for contemplation as well as objects for use.”⁵⁰ Turkey calls can be objects of contemplation and use. The contemplation aspect is clear from the choice of decoration on the calls, such as morel mushrooms, turkey feathers, and three-dimensional turkeys. This imagery evokes memories and reminds the viewer of positive moments spent in nature. While being contemplative objects, decorative turkey calls also maintain their functional forms. Instead of being carved into a piece of sculpture, these calls maintain their shape and movement to function as a turkey call if one so chooses. The issue arises with the fact that while some of the decorative calls would produce decent turkey vocalizations, there are some that sound more like seals than turkeys. The fault lies with the materials. Most friction calls rely on wood types that have flexibility and a good, tight grain. However, this wood is not always the most aesthetically pleasing material. Decorative callmakers sometimes set aside functionality for a better looking material. Thus, they are no longer putting function above aesthetic. It could be argued that this preference of aesthetic over

⁴⁹ Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), preface.

⁵⁰ “What is Craft?” Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/what-is-craft/>.

function while maintaining the functional shape fits into the argument that decorative callmakers fall into the category of studio craft.

There are three DTCBS callmakers who fit well into this category of studio craftsman - Don Bald, James Yule, and Dave Constantine. All three men attended some level of college and studied in the arts. They have also won the lion's share of the DTCBS awards with a total of twelve awards out of the current twenty-three years of competition.

With a total of seven wins, Dave Constantine has won more DTCBS awards than any other callmaker (Fig. 3.6). Constantine spent one year studying art at the University of Wisconsin before leaving to become a commercial fisherman in Hawaii for two years. After returning to his home state of Wisconsin in 1974, he took on freelance illustration and design work. In 1985, he took the step to become a full-time, professional artist. He began by carving wood sculptures and then migrated to making turkey calls. In addition to entering and winning callmaking competitions across the nation, Constantine also exhibits his works. Of all the DTCBS winners, Constantine is the closest to being defined as a studio craftsman. He received only a minimal amount of formal art education before striking out on his own and becoming a professional artist. His callmaking skills are self-taught through trial and error. His works are astounding and his obsession with detail is what makes him one of the great decorative callmakers.⁵¹

Sennett observed that the “craftsman often faces conflicting objective standards of excellence; the desire to do something well for its own sake can be impaired by

⁵¹ Scott Bestul, “Wisconsin’s Turkey Artist,” *Turkey Call*, Sept/Oct 1997, 33-34.

competitive pressure, by frustration, or by obsession.”⁵² Obsession is a good way to describe the work of these turkey call makers. They are often wild turkey hunters who began their hunting days using purchased, mass manufactured turkey calls. Then they became interested in the creation of producing their own hunting implement. For some, this fascination with making the turkey call becomes an obsession and moves to the next level of studio craft.

Both Hunting Class and Decorative Class callmakers are obsessed with quality. While Hunting Class turkey callmakers focus on producing a call that is fine-tuned with materials that are of the highest quality, Decorative Class callmakers focus on incorporating the imagery of the wild turkey hunter’s world – sometimes to the detriment of the call’s sound. Hunting class calls tend to be made of readily available hardwoods, such as oak, butternut, cypress, mahogany and poplar. Decorative Class callmakers tend towards more exotic materials and intricately carved scenes affect the sounding ability of the call, such as ebony, cocobolo, deer antler, sterling silver and ivory. While ivory isn’t rare as an art medium, per se, it is unusual for its usage in a hunting implement that is exposed to the fluctuating temperatures and humidity of the outdoors.

One decorative callmaker that uses exotic materials and still maintains the functionality of his calls is Don Bald (Fig. 3.7). Bald has won the Grand National Calling Competition’s DTCBS competition four times. He is a nationally renowned turkey callmaker and collector who has been making calls since the 1970s. Bald attended Southern Illinois University and has been a high school teacher of industrial arts for more than three decades. He also does carpentry work on the side. His hobbies include

⁵² Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 9.

photography, woodworking, duck decoy carving, and outdoor sports. He makes a variety of turkey calls types, but he has won all of his DTCBS awards for his style of tube calls and yelper calls. What is interesting about his pieces is that he primarily only uses wing bones that are provided by the customer. Since wild turkey wing bones cannot be purchased, these wing bones are most likely harvested by the customer or by Bald himself which makes the usage of these bones much more personal.⁵³

James Yule received a degree in art and taught classes in jewelry, tooled leather, and engraved metal for twenty years at the Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta, Canada. Now deceased, he was known for his incredible intricately carved duck and turkey calls. His 1995 DTCBS winning box call features carved wood and bone in an American Indian theme. Called “The Michelangelo of Turkey Calls” by his son Len Yule, James Yule spoke of his medium like the famous Italian artist. “The wood suggests the carving itself. ... The craftsman strives to be in harmony with his material and bring out the innate qualities.”⁵⁴ Interesting to note in his quote is that while Yule considered his turkey calls works of art, he referred to himself as a craftsman.

James Yule taught his son Len the skill of wood carving when he was a young boy. Although he ultimately chose the profession of horse trainer and saddle-maker, Len brought his father’s teachings into his side hobby of making turkey calls and won the 1998 DTCBS award for his box call. In an interview with Len Yule for *Turkey Call* magazine, Len lamented that hunters who purchased his calls were hesitant to take the call into the woods on a hunt. He stated that he made his calls to be both beautiful and

⁵³ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 7.

⁵⁴ Scott Bestul, “A Higher Calling,” *Turkey Call*, Jan/Feb 1998, 41.

functional. In his own words, “To me, you better be able to call up a bird with one or it’s nothing more than a pretty box.”⁵⁵

What is very telling is that callmakers can see the dividing line between a Hunting Class call and a Decorative Class call, but they choose to walk the line. For instance, a callmaker named Mark A. Stephens, who has no background in art, remarked that his “intention is to make a call anyone can afford that will be his favorite sounding call but pretty enough he may not want to take it in the woods.”⁵⁶ Stephens makes turkey calls that are structurally very true to a traditional turkey call form, but they are hand-painted with beautiful nature scenes.

Another callmaker who walks the line between beauty and function is Irving Whitt. Whitt has been drawing, painting, and carving since he was a child, but he didn’t start making turkey calls until 1998 when he wanted to carve a turkey call for his daughter’s first turkey hunt. In a 2010 interview with Jim Casada, Whitt said that even though his calls are elaborately carved the goal is to call in turkeys. He puts the function of the call above the beauty of its carving.⁵⁷

While some callmakers like Don Bald and Len Yule purposefully walk the line of art and function, other callmakers have the decision made for them. A callmaker can build function into a call but if the purchaser chooses to place it on display in his home and never take it on a hunt, then the function of the call is taken from it. This removal of function by the user can be seen in other instances.

⁵⁵ Bestul, “A Higher Calling,” 40.

⁵⁶ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 211.

⁵⁷ Casada, Jim, “An Art Most Beautiful and Deadly,” *South Carolina Wildlife*, Mar/Apr 2010, <http://www.scwildlife.com/articles/marapril2010/turkeycallers.html>.

In R. Ruthie Dibble's "The Hands that Rocked the Cradle" article, she discussed the alternative function of an object once its original use no longer applies.⁵⁸ In her article, she explored the alternative function of cradles in early America. From their original function of rocking swaddled babies to their iconographic shift into illustrative usage in paintings and into verbal usage as idioms, such as "cradle of democracy" or "cradle to grave." In much the same way, decorative turkey calls have moved beyond the original function as a hunting implement and into the world of symbolic representations.⁵⁹ Decorative calls are typically not used by their purchasers to call in wild turkeys. They are used instead to invoke the spirit of the wild turkey and the experiences of a turkey hunter in the woods, much like how a work of art invokes emotions. Whether a decorative call is carved with images of wild turkeys, deer, fish or morel mushrooms, each image is carefully crafted to trigger the memories of the hunter. The call is used to transport the hunter to his memories of being in the woods and the appreciation of nature that accompanies such remembrances (Fig. 3.8).

When the Pilgrim cradle was on display at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, the cradle became a "surviving witness of the past, almost spiritual in its ability to distill abstract events into concise and powerful narratives."⁶⁰ Similarly, a decorative wild turkey call is able to distill ideas that are associated with hunting wild game into a concise narrative within a small planar space. The physical presence of the decorative turkey call invokes happy, if not sometimes frustrating, memories of the hunter. Hunters

⁵⁸ R. Ruthie Dibble, "The Hands that Rocked the Cradle: Interpretations in the Life of an Object," *American Furniture*, 2012, 1-23

⁵⁹ Even the wild turkey has moved beyond being a simple game bird. Not only does it appear in everyday Americana, but the wild turkey is used in popular expressions like "jive turkey" or "going cold turkey".

⁶⁰ Dibble, "The Hands that Rocked the Cradle," 14.

often spend more time in the woods contemplating nature than in the active role of hunting wild game.

This need to create remembrances of time spent in the woods is further echoed by one of Henry C. Gibson's calls (Fig. 3.9). Not only did he wood-burn images of a strutting wild turkey, hunting dogs and a log cabin on his call, but he also burned the following words into the call – “The time when we were boys / The age in which we live.”⁶¹ The poetry of these words captured the contemplative function of this decorative call as mentioned by Christopher Frayling.⁶² A turkey call carved with images of a sunset on a beach or a skier going down a snowy slope would not have the same affect, no matter how beautifully it is carved. The imagery of hunting and the natural environment surrounding the hunter is intimately tied to a decorative turkey call.

Breaking the Labels

Craft is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “an activity involving skill in making things by hand.” By that definition, every creation is a craft. Painters hand-work their paintings by using a paintbrush, trowel or other tool. A sculptor chisels away at a block of stone to create a statue. Their works of art are made by hand just as much as a table is carved by a furniture craftsperson. So, what is a better definition of craft or does there need to be a definition at all? Should every artist be considered a craftsperson and every craftsperson an artist? Why do we seek a line in the sand? Shouldn't the

⁶¹“ Henry Gibson's Turkey Call for J.C. Jonson,” Online collection of Joe and Donna Tonelli, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://edecoy.org/>.

⁶² “What is Craft?” Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/what-is-craft/>.

dimensional formation of expression be just that - no matter whether the object is a painting or a woven basket? The object is a creation and the person is a creator.

The Victoria & Albert Museum sought opinions on the definition of craft from various authorities in the field including Paul Greenhalgh. Greenhalgh, author of *The Persistence of Craft* and the Director of the Corcoran Museum, indicated that the word craft has had several meanings throughout the past two centuries. He stated that “there can be no one-liner” definition for craft, but that today’s current meaning recognizes “the significance of genre-based practice in the arts.” This line is troublesome because a painter can be just as focused and skilled in his specific medium as a furniture maker.

Some callmakers approach callmaking from neither an untrained perspective nor an arts educated background. Two of the DTCBS winning callmakers were professional engineers before they began making turkey calls – Kent Freeman and Dennis Poeschel.

Kent Freeman, of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, has won the DTCBS competition twice using extremely realistic turkey carvings (Fig. 3.10). Freeman attended Southeast Missouri State University where he obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Zoology. A lifelong hunter, Freeman worked for the Missouri Department of Conservation and as a manager for a trucking company for twelve years. Freeman left his management job and became a full time callmaker and carver. His attention to detail is incredible as his studies in zoology have influenced his hyper-realistic carvings of turkeys. In addition to being influenced by his zoological studies, Freeman also apprenticed under duck callmaker Alan M. Bradley. He was encouraged to make “fancy” turkey calls by a friend in 1971.⁶³

⁶³ Mickel, *The Rest of the Best*, 76.

An engineer by profession, Dennis Poeschel (deceased) retired and dedicated himself to his passions of carving and photography. He began by carving sculptural works, duck calls and duck decoys. In his online biography, Poeschel recalled how he was inspired to begin carving turkey calls after he participated in an art carving contest at the NWTf's Convention. During his visit to the convention, he came upon the Decorative Turkey Call competition. He immediately saw a connection between his sculptural art carvings and the calls entered in the DTCBS.⁶⁴ Thus began his work in turkey callmaking.

Poeschel estimated that a hand-carved box call like his 2002 DTCBS winning box took him around 300 hours to create (Fig. 3.11). The carving illustrates a story of turkeys and their habitat. In a 2001 interview with the *Milwaukee Journal*, Poeschel described how he used carbide and diamond burs to grind his pre-sketched designs into the wood or ivory surface.⁶⁵ He stated that “the secret of a good working turkey box call is the break. When you slide the lid across the call it forms a natural double yelp, as the sound breaks from a high tone to a low tone.” Although his calls were beautifully executed using his skills as an engineer, they also functioned very well.

In the world of craft, functionality is a major proponent of the definition. If an object has no function, then it is assumed to be art. In the world of turkey callmakers, an object can still be identified as a turkey call even if its beauty affects its function. What is interesting to note is that, for decorative callmakers, it is easier to maintain the functionality aspect of certain turkey calls. For example, a yelper turkey call works

⁶⁴ “Dennis Poeschel Biography,” Custom Calls Online, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.customcalls.com/>.

⁶⁵ Tim Eisele “Turkeys Answer His Call,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), Apr. 22, 2001.

because of the diameter of its calling channel. Exterior additions and the materials won't affect its calling ability. In contrast, a turkey box call's functionality is greatly affected by the call's materials and external decoration. A box call will not work properly if its walls are too thick with decoration or if the material doesn't have the right grain or hardness. All this is to say that it is easier for a callmaker to maintain the function of a decorated yelper or tube call versus a decorated box call. In observance of this fact, it is natural to categorize functioning decorative calls as works of a craftsman and to categorize less well functioning turkey calls as works of an artist.

The comments from David Revere McFadden, chief curator and vice president at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York, closely mirror my own thoughts on this debate of artist versus craftsman. McFadden states that it "... is time to move beyond the limitations of terminologies that fragment and separate our appreciation of creative actions, and consider the 'behaviors of making' that practitioners share."⁶⁶ In a 2008 interview with Liz Collins in *Choosing Craft*, Collins reflects that "I wonder if the fine-art versus craft split matters anymore. I teach a new generation that doesn't care about old art-craft hierarchies."⁶⁷

It certainly seems like many of the authors, collectors, and callmakers do not see a separation of craft and art. When describing Earl Mickel's books about callmakers, writer Tom Carpenter wrote that Mickel documented "the callmaking art's best

⁶⁶ "What is Craft?" Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/what-is-craft/>.

⁶⁷ Douglas and Harper. *Choosing Craft*, 297.

craftsmen.”⁶⁸ Later in that same article, Mickel referred to his books as “testaments to the craft of creating turkey calls as hunting tools and works of art.”⁶⁹

When Don Bald described his works on his website he stated that his work “elevated the creativity, craftsmanship and quality of his unique form of folk art.”⁷⁰ Bald worked for almost forty years as an Industrial Arts high school teacher, but he blends the categorization of his works by calling his folk art calls a work of craftsmanship instead of a work of artistry.

Another interesting perspective on this issue of placing a singular piece of work into multiple categories can be found in Mary Douglas’ article “When is a Teapot Not a Teapot.”⁷¹ In her article, Douglas explores the different ways that visitors react to craft in the diverse spaces of the Blue Ridge Parkway’s Folk Art Center which is operated by the Southern Highland Craft Guild. I can attest to the fact that upon first entering the Folk Art Center, you are greeted by guild members who are giving live demonstrations of their craft. When I visited the Center several years ago I watched a glass artist pulling molten glass and a wood-turning artist working at his lathe. Visitors were encouraged to engage with the guild members and view the techniques used to create their works. As you walk further into the Folk Art Center, you enter the Gift Shop area which is full of guild members’ works. On the second floor is the exhibition gallery in which historic and modern craft pieces are displayed in cases. Within one building, craft is treated as a source of live engagement, a place to purchase craft pieces, and a museum display of craft works. This leads to an understanding of these works as craft, studio craft and folk

⁶⁸ Tom Carpenter, “The EARL of Turkey Calls,” *Turkey Call*, May/June 2005, 34.

⁶⁹ Carpenter, “The EARL of Turkey Calls,” 35.

⁷⁰ “My Biography,” Bald’s Calls, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.baldscalls.com>.

⁷¹ Mary Douglas, “When is a Teapot Not a Teapot,” *American Art*, Spring 2007, 19-23.

art. Even the name of the building – Folk Art Center – states that craft is folk art. This blending of craft with art lends itself to the argument that craft and art can exist in a blended definition.

Finding a Category

It is not absolutely clear-cut that a callmaker can be defined as a craftsman, an artist or a studio craftsman. In one argument, the decorative turkey callmaker could be categorized as a craftsman and the call is a craft object because it was born from a place of function. The turkey call is meant to call in a wild turkey for the purpose of gathering a food source. If it wasn't a turkey call in form, then it would simply be a piece of sculpture that resembles a turkey call. However, the decorative turkey call often does not function as an effective turkey call. A hunter would not rely upon it to call in a wild turkey for many reasons:

1. It doesn't produce the correct sounds for calling in a turkey;
2. It is too bulky and prone to breakage if it were to be taken on a turkey hunt in the woods;
3. It is too colorful for hunting.

While it is believed by wild turkey biologists that turkeys cannot interpret colors, they can interpret patterns that do not belong in nature. Thus, turkey calls need to be earth-toned and hunters need to wear full body camouflage while hunting. As a result of this non-functional aspect of these sculptural turkey calls, there is an argument that they should be considered works of an artist. However, reverting back to intent of the creator, these works are not meant for admiration only. They invite the viewer to hold them and

work the call, even if the sound emitted would never effectively call in a wild turkey from the woods.

A decorative turkey call functions in much the same way that a tree branch removed from a favorite hiking trail functions when it is carved into a beautiful walking stick. In the example set forth, a functioning branch of tree is removed from its original purpose and carved with care and skill into an object of remembrance. While it aids its walker, it also evokes memories and emotions of times spent in those favored woods. A turkey call may not function in terms of its original purpose of calling in wild turkeys, but it has instead been carved into a vehicle for remembrances of time spent in nature. Whether the walking stick is used on a hike or it remains on display in the home, its function of recalling memories is constant.

If one has to define a difference between art and craft, the simplest definition appears to be that art is created for the sake of expression while craft is created for the sake of working with the medium. Both may result in works of beauty that cause an emotional reaction, but the definition comes from the intent of the creator. A turkey callmaker does not intend to create a work of art. His intent is to capture a story of the hunter and relate that story through a variety of materials onto the basic form of a turkey call.

In a way, the overarching reason to argue for decorative turkey callmakers as craftsmen is their intent. In a manufacturing world where it is just as easy to replicate their work using robotic equipment, it is the intention of the callmaker to hand-carve, hand-paint, and hand-join their medium with the end result of creating a functioning

turkey call that makes them craftsmen. As Richard Sennett states in his Acknowledgements section of *The Craftsman*, “Making is thinking.”⁷² It would be much easier to design a call, have a machine mass-manufacture them, and sell them by the hundreds. It is the time and dedication of skill given to the object that makes it a craft. It is the callmaker’s desire for the call to be picked up, played, and admired that makes it a craft. When that line is crossed to no longer invite the viewer to work the call and no longer build the call by hand, then the decorative turkey callmaker will become an artist and not a craftsman.

According to Richard Sennett, a craftsman’s rapt attention to the detail of creation is called “*material consciousness*” and he observes that all craftsmen have it.⁷³ Turkey call makers are very slow and deliberate in their craft. Depending on the intricacy of the carving, a turkey call’s construction can take anywhere from 500 to 1,000 hours. Turkey callmakers take pride in a call that requires extensive hours to craft. They often will dedicate a period of months to a turkey call that will be entered in the NWTF’s Decorative Turkey Call Best of Show championship.

While an argument of craftsmanship is strong for several of the DTCBS winning decorative callmakers, it is by no means absolute. There are certain instances when decorative callmakers have created calls that are incredibly delicate or impractically tall. These calls are rendered useless as calls and function more as artworks than turkey calls. Two such instances of this blend of a craft medium in an art world are Dave

⁷² Sennett, acknowledgements, x.

⁷³ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 120.

Constantine's 2007 DTCBS winning call and Tim Oldham, Jr.'s 2016 DTCBS winning call.

In 2007, DTCBS multi-winner Dave Constantine carved an incredible scene of ivory trout jumping through atmospheric waters (Fig. 2.9). The delicacy of the carving and the time committed to the detail of the fish, the river rocks and even the turkey feather that has alighted onto the surface speak of the craftsmanship that went into this turkey box call. The thinness of the carved ivory fish and the abrading of the paddle against the upper chamber increase the risk of damaging the artwork if the call were to be played.

In the same vein, Oldham's "Close Call" box call has a towering sculpture of a hawk in flight (Fig. 3.2). The artwork has moved beyond the surface of the turkey box call. Instead of placing the basic form of the box call as the main support for the design, the box call is a minor component of a larger sculpture that envelopes the call.

There are strong points for all sides of the argument. Decorative callmakers are not easily sorted into one category or another. They all have some aspects of folk art, craftsmanship and studio craft. A good example of this multiplicity comes from a section of *Choosing Craft*. In this particular interview, Judy Chicago recalls visiting a china-painter's house and seeing that "[a]ll the chairs had needlepoint cushions; all the beds were covered with quilts; all the pillowcases were hand-embroidered; all the walls were covered with oil paintings; all the plates were painted with flowers; and the garden was planted with the kinds of flowers that were painted on the plates. This woman had done

all that work, trying as best she could to fit her creative drive ... into the confined space of her house, which could hardly have held another piece of work.”⁷⁴

In terms of the previously stated arguments for craftsman or artist, how should this woman be defined? Did she self-identify as an artist when she painted a canvas and then switch her identity to that of a craftswoman when she embroidered a pillowcase? I don't know that I have a good answer for this question other than she probably didn't reconsider her title based on what medium she was working with at the time.

In the last century, it was easier to define a craftsperson as one who worked in a functional medium and was apprenticed or self-taught while an educated artist created works that served no utility or function except to trigger a response from the viewer. Modern decorative callmakers have diverse educational backgrounds, work with a blend of media, and manufacture various levels of function into their calls. Callmakers are exposed to a world of art through education, the internet and mentor-apprentice relationship and they inevitably, whether they intend to or not, create works that are collected and placed in showcases. Their calls never reach the hunting woods and are instead prized as works of folk art that tend to be more extravagant and sculptural.

Attempting to assign a definitive category that encompasses the entirety of decorative callmakers is difficult to say the least. I would not define any of the callmakers as “artists,” because they create works that still strongly feature the functional form of a turkey call. However, the DTCBS winning calls made by these craftsmen are clearly not being used for their intended purpose as they are currently on exhibit at the

⁷⁴ Douglas and Harper, *Choosing Craft*, 279-280.

NWTF's Winchester Museum. Yet, there is a category that spans both artist and craftsman – that of the studio craftsman. It is my conclusion that decorative callmakers best fit into the category of studio craftsman – a maker who creates non-functioning pieces that celebrate the functional craft media through artistic design.

After all of my research and analysis, I recognize that a callmaker's world encompasses the tools in his hand, the intricate manipulation of a craft medium, the support of his callmaker brothers, nature at his door, and the shared culture of wild turkey hunters and call collectors. Callmakers create not for the sake of expression, but for the love of working in the medium. They hold themselves to high ideals of craftsmanship and eschew the easy route of mass production. They learn by example, apprenticeship, and years of trial and error. There is no rushed production in the world of decorative turkey calls. Each piece is crafted by hand for an audience that appreciates the imagery reflected on the small planes of a decorative turkey call. They are innovators and traditionalists, realists and dreamers, but more than anything they are makers in the truest sense of the word.



Figure 3.1 Modern turkey call exhibits at the NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 3.2 Tim Oldham Jr.'s "Close Call," 2016 DTCBS winning box call. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image courtesy of the NWTF.



Figure 3.3 Example of Neil Cost's boat paddle box call. Owned by Gary Berry. Image by Matt Lindler, NWTF.



Figure 3.4 John Parker's 2009 DTCBS winning call highlights the Gould's subspecies of the wild turkey that lives in a desert habitat. Image by author.



Figure 3.5 John Parker's 2009 DTCBS winning call floats a functional double-chamber box call inside his decorative exterior. Image by author.



Figure 3.6 Dave Constantine's 2012 DTCBS winning box call, "Snow Birds." NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 3.7 Don Bald's 2000 DTCBS. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 3.8 Dave Constantine's 2010 DTCBS winning box call, "Red Handed." NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 3.9 Henry C. Gibson's 1908 Box Call with poetry for J.C. Jonson. Online collection of Joe and Donna Tonelli. <http://edecoy.org>.



Figure 3.10 Kent Freeman's 1997 DTCBS winning box call. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.



Figure 3.11 Dennis Poeschel's 2002 DTCBS winning box call. NWTF's Winchester Museum. Image by author.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Blind: A hunting technique in which a hunter constructs a temporary structure that blends into its surroundings thereby disguising the hunter from the prey. Historically, blinds were created using materials found near the hunting site, such as tree branches, moss and grasses. Modern blinds are more like tents with camouflage fabric.

Box Call: A turkey call that is constructed as a long, shallow box with a removable paddle-like lid that is attached to the call using a pivot point.

Ferrule: A metal sleeve used to bind one thing to another. Ferrules used in turkey calls are most often gun ferrules, which are the casings of gun shells.

Inlay: A decorative addition that is cut into the surface of an object. Turkey call makers will occasionally use this technique to add accents of different wood pieces or ivory pieces into the body of a turkey call.

Lanyard: A cord or strap used to hang something around one's neck. Lanyards for turkey calls are typically made from leather or synthetic fiber.

Lathe: A lathe is a machine used by wood workers. It is a fixed machine with a horizontal axis. Wood is attached to this horizontal axis and is set to spinning. As the wood turns, the wood worker will apply a metal tool to carve the spinning wood.

Scrimshaw: Scrimshaw is the product or process of carving or engraving ivory.

Wingbone Call: A turkey call that is constructed from one, two or all three bones from the wild turkey's wing.

Yelper: A mouth operated turkey call that typically has an elongated bell shape with a narrow diameter internal channel.

APPENDIX B

LIST OF THE DECORATIVE TURKEY CALL BEST OF SHOW WINNERS

- 1994** – Scott Basehore (Denver, Pa.) – Checkered Box Call with turkey bust
- 1995** – James Yule (deceased) – Box Call with Native American designs
- 1996** – Kent S. Freeman (Kennett, Mo.) – Box Call with turkey leg designs
- 1997** – Kent S. Freeman (Kennett, Mo.) – Box Call
- 1998** – Len Yule (Sasakwa, Okla.) – Box Call
- 1999** – Don Bald (Lebanon, Ill.) – Triple Wingbone Call
- 2000** – Don Bald (Lebanon, Ill.) – Small Tube Call
- 2001** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – Carved Box Call
- 2002** – Dennis Poeschel (deceased) – Box Call with Ivory Scrimshaw
- 2003** – Don Bald (Lebanon, Ill.) – Turned Barrel Yelper
- 2004** – John Parker (Trenton, Ohio) – “Birds and Bulls” Box Call
- 2005** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – Deer Skull Box Call
- 2006** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – Foxes in the Snow Box Call
- 2007** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – Ivory Trout Box Call
- 2008** – John Parker (Trenton, Ohio) – “Circle of Life” Box Call
- 2009** – John Parker (Trenton, Ohio) – Gould’s Box Call
- 2010** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – “Red Handed” Box Call
- 2011** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – “And on the Fifth Day” Box Call
- 2012** – Dave Constantine (Durand, Wis.) – “Snow Birds” Box Call
- 2013** – Steve Lumma (Wentzville, Mo.) – “Spring’s Glory” turned ivory Yelper
- 2014** – Richard L. Steward (Seymour, Ind.) – “In the Timber” Box Call
- 2015** – Don Bald (Lebanon, Ill.) – Yelper
- 2016** – Tim Oldham Jr. (Newburgh, Ind.) – “Close Call” Box Call