



I Love Les Kouba Art!

BY ARLEN A. AXDAHL,
ART BROKER & SECONDARY MARKET SPECIALIST IN LES C. KOUBA ART



"The Empty Stand"

I began buying wildlife art in the late 1970s after stopping by the Plymouth building in downtown Minneapolis one afternoon where art was being sold.

I bought some Les Kouba prints and had them framed for my home in Minnetonka, Minnesota.

After a while I began reading the classified art ads in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, calling numbers for the ads to ask about the art they had for sale.

Early in my hunt for Kouba original art, I received a phone call from a woman in North Minneapolis who had a small original of Les Kouba's that I traded for an "In Shelter" print.

After the trade, it was discovered the small sketch was the original sketch Kouba put his trademark "13" birds in. I later sold this original sketch to a collector in Andover, Minn. for \$5,000.



Les Kouba's First Sports Afield Cover Artwork

Many more trips to the American Wildlife Art Gallery, (AWAG), developed into a deep friendship with Les Kouba. "Heading for Shelter" was one of the first prints I remember that was starting to rise in value.

So, I bought a lot of those prints at \$400 - \$1,000 per print which were later sold at a nice profit.

I have bought and sold virtually hundreds and hundreds of Les Kouba's prints, not mentioning small sketches, small originals and miscellaneous items.

Not only did I buy Les Kouba's prints but Terry Redlin's, Robert Bateman's, Charles Peterson's, Bev Doolittle's, other Minnesota local artists and national artists.

I am a public speaker on Les Kouba any time the opportunity presents itself. In the late '90s I spoke to many groups that liked the Minnesota's renown wildlife artist, Les C. Kouba. I have also spoken at the McLeod County Historical Museum in Hutchinson, Minnesota about the art of Les C. Kouba (the Les Kouba Museum).

When Minnesota Ducks Unlimited had the original painting of "Heading for the Stubble" as its sponsor print of the year, I purchased the original painting from the man that won it at the raffle. I paid \$5,000 for

the painting and later it was sold for \$18,000

Even though there is no official fan club, I consider myself to be a life member of that club and feel I am the number one member. Perhaps we ardent fans should start one?

When Les Kouba passed in 1998, I attended his funeral and cried as if my father had died. I knew we would miss the "GRAND OLE MAN." In my view Kouba is Minnesota's version of Norman Rockwell.

I've probably bought and sold hundreds of Kouba prints, perhaps 60-70 originals, including "The Empty Stand," "The Blizzard," "Prairie Pintails," "Late Bills" and many other titles and untitled works.

Recently, I purchased the original painting of "After the Rain" and sold it the very next day. I guess, smiling widely, that's what I do. Currently, I have something like 40 plus Les Kouba originals in-house.

My most recent purchases were three Kouba oils used for Schmidt Beer advertising art (see below the Mallards, Pheasants and Bass artwork). I have owned and resold a lot of the Schmidt Beer can originals, in fact, a man in Wisconsin had nine of them and I bought them all.


Watercolors are another of my favorite art works. I have virtually bought and sold

dozens and dozens of them over time, including small pencil sketches as doodles from some family members.

I am also the proud owner of my website, WWW.LESKOUBAORIGINALART.COM which is owned by my offline company called Axdahl's Art World located in Titusville, Florida.

All in all, I have been doing Les C. Kouba art for over 40 years and it has been and still is a very exciting ride uncovering dozens and dozens of NEW Kouba images that are in the homes and offices around this great country of ours.

I'm thinking in Les C. Kouba's lifetime he has perhaps painted and published thousands and thousands of great scenes from the great outdoors we all love so dearly.

I figure there about 40,000-50,000 Les Kouba originals out there being enjoyed every day. Let's not forget the Les Kouba Museum in Hutchinson, Minnesota. It needs our FULL support to help "Keep the Les Kouba legacy alive." 



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Les Kouba Biography

(Courtesy of Les Kouba Outdoors)



Les Kouba

Les Kouba was born in a winter storm, on a farm outside of Hutchinson, Minnesota on February 3, 1917.

The world didn't have any idea what would be in store for this adventurous young boy wandering over the fields and looking at the sky to the sounds of migrating Canada geese in the spring and fall where his father taught him many of the little tricks in hunting, trapping and fishing and he learned to appreciate the joys of being in the outdoors early in life.

Les Kouba started to draw at a very young age, probably on anything he could find. These were the days when the countryside and the sky were filled with ducks, geese, fish, deer and other wildlife. It's been said at the age of eight Les Kouba knew he wanted to be an artist. At the age of 11, he sold his first painting to a wealthy German farmer for \$8. Soon after that he was thinking of being an artist.

At age 14 he was enrolled in the Federal Schools, a correspondence school in Minneapolis, MN, where he developed a friendship with his instructors, learning the valuable lessons that life had to impress upon him. It was here he met an instructor by the name of Walter J. Wilwerding, who would become a very large influence on his future art. "You must learn how to draw before you start to paint," he told Les.

Having left formal schooling early, Les took his life on the road to draw and paint. At age 16 his journey began. It consisted of painting trucks, signs, wall murals and anything that required paint, a brush and a steady hand. He was on the road exploring the sites to see and earning a living.

Some of his very best customers were individual Coca Cola bottlers for whom he painted the logo on their trucks. He also painted the windows of drug stores that sold the Coca Cola products. Word of mouth was the way he earned his way. After traveling in 39 of the 48 states, however, it was time to come home and settle down.



Les Kouba's First Statue of Little Crow in 1937

After returning home, Les met and married Oriol Thiem, from Gibbon, Minnesota, the woman who became his life partner and best friend. As they settled into home life, Les was to begin the notoriety he would learn to enjoy as the sportsmen of, not only Minnesota, but the world.

A job at Onan Corporation was the starting point in his employment in commercial art. Eventually, Onan talked him into starting his own art business, Kouba Advertising Art. Later, Kouba's inventions, the Art-O-Graph projector and the Map-O-Graph projector, used to enlarge pictures and maps, led to his success outside the art world. Both inventions have been sold around the world. In 1966 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) ordered one of each. It was assumed the projectors were used in the preparation of lunar maps.

In keeping with Kouba's love of hunting, he patented a process for folding a paper goose decoy in 1946. Clare Fry, art director



of Brown & Bigelow, a major calendar firm in the United States, saw some of Kouba's paintings at the Zesbaugh's Gallery. Hoping to have Brown & Bigelow use his art he did a trial painting called "Daybreak on the Marshes." Fry and Brown & Bigelow, St. Paul, Minnesota, loved the painting. They bought it for \$600 and helped to launch Les C. Kouba's career as a wildlife artist.

He not only did calendar prints but magazine covers for *Sports Afield* in the years October 1950, June 1963, September 1971, November 1967 and as 2 others. For a total of six *Sports Afield* covers. The 1950 cover he painted was a flock of bluebills in flight during a heavy snowstorm. Kouba loved doing this. His dream had been to do cover art for magazines. This was just the beginning. He also did a number of illustrations for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune Picture Magazine*.

Later to his surprise he noticed that people were fascinated with the idea of an artist painting in front of a group. So, he crisscrossed Minnesota putting on painting demonstrations for places and people like the



Jimmy Robinson was a frequent visitor at Les Kouba's Gallery



Les Kouba Designed Lewis and Clark Ranger Stamp from 1982



First Bank system, Northwestern National bank, the Elks, the Kiwanis and any other group that had an interest in seeing him paint. His willingness to do this was probably a very large factor in the success he enjoyed.

His work at Advertising Art included Red Owl, Old Dutch potato chips, Watkins, Schmidt Beer, Cola Cola, and the list goes on. He did a series of wildlife paintings for the Royal Stationery Company of Minneapolis. They put the scenes on their stationary but also created prints of his paintings. This was a transition point for his work from commercial art to fine art.


Other successes of his work included a print offered by Watkins where Watkins printed 5,000 and had requests for 24,674. He also had a successful art program with Argosy - The Complete Man's Magazine. When people subscribed for 16 months

they received four wildlife prints: "Call of the Wild - Goose," "Spring Fawn," "Pride of the Lillies," and "Southern Beauties." Kouba knew he had a market out there to tap.

On an inspiration, he entered and won the Federal Duck Stamp in 1958-59 with "Canada Geese," held by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He won again in 1967-68 with "Old Squaws Ducks." He never entered the competition again. His wildlife art was getting into the hands of the consuming public. His crowd of friends included some big names, Bob Hope, Arthur Godfrey and Jimmy Robinson, to mention a few. People who personally knew Kouba, attest to the fact that the man was a showman and sometimes more of a businessman than artist. He needed a mix of both to have success he had.

Les C. Kouba died on Sept 13, 1998

passing quietly in his sleep in a nursing home, but not before leaving the world richer with all the people that he helped, all the pencil drawings, etchings, book illustrations, art prints, the dollars that he generated for Ducks Unlimited and other good causes.

Les Kouba painted for some 60 years, sharing his thoughts of hunting, fishing, wildlife, ducks, geese, nostalgic Americana scenes and more to grace the walls of many homes and businesses. Recently, one of his paintings of a moose was chosen in 2014 to be on a "Call of the Moose" Minnesota license plate to help support DNR moose management and research. Since 2010 there has been a 50 percent decline of the moose population. They need help before they disappeared. If Les was alive he would be happy to lend his artwork to the cause. 



Minnesota critical habitat license plate featuring Les Kouba's artwork

www.LesKoubaOriginalArt.com

.....**FOR SALE**.....

Les C. Kouba, original oil painting, **1980 "THE EMPTY STAND"**
Framed, 24" x 36" image, oil on canvas. Published. Asking \$28,500. (Appraised Value)

Les C. Kouba ,original oil painting, 1970's "The Picked Field "
Framed, 24" x 36" image, oil on canvas. Published. Asking \$28,500.

Other Kouba oils, watercolors, pencil sketches available. Call for titles!
Kouba books, prints & art bought & sold. (Other artists as well)

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