

# Donated prints benefit conservation



## Outdoors

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It's a case of compound earnings, you could say.

It also includes healthy portions of vision, generosity and talent.

And it is a Wisconsin original through and through.

The story has its roots in 1965 when Milwaukee banking scion Jack Puelicher made an irresistible offer to famed wild-life artist Owen Gromme: a paid commission with unbridled freedom to create a series of paintings for display at the downtown office of Marshall & Ilsley Bank.

Gromme agreed and produced 43 stunning works of art for Puelicher and the bank.

More than five decades later the interest on M&I's investment is about to produce more gains thanks to a new generation of business leaders and conservationists.

In November BMO Harris Bank (which purchased M&I in 2011) donated 900 Gromme wildlife prints to Ducks Unlimited, the international conservation organization.

The prints, made from the M&I series paintings, will be offered for sale to the public in 2020. Proceeds from the print sales will be used by DU for Wisconsin conservation projects. Based on estimated sale prices, the prints are expected to yield \$500,000 for DU.

A special showing and sale of the prints is planned Feb. 28. to March 1 at Penny Mustard Furnishings in Brookfield.

"It's a fitting circle," said Neil Riegelman, director of Wisconsin commercial banking for BMO Harris and a member of the Milwaukee DU chapter. "These pieces of art were created by a great Wisconsin wildlife artist and conservationist and they will now be used to benefit conservation in the state."

The seeds of the story were planted in

1965 when Puelicher, the third-generation president of Marshall & Ilsley Bank, invited Gromme, the designer of the 1945 Federal Duck Stamp and retired taxidermist and artist at the Milwaukee Public Museum, for a weekend at Puelicher's retreat on Lake Julia in northern Wisconsin.

Puelicher and Gromme were both avid sportsmen and enjoyed each other's company.

Puelicher was also a keen admirer of Gromme's work and had a vision to showcase his friend's talent.

"Owen, how would you like to have a gallery all your own for your paintings?" Puelicher is reported to have asked Gromme on the trip to Lake Julia.

In the book "The World of Owen Gromme" (1983) Puelicher described his goal for the Gromme commission.

"We were in the process of building a new bank building and I had been thinking for a long time about ways to make the new building special and attractive. I wanted something of beauty that was of particular interest to the people of Wisconsin. The more I thought about it, the clearer it became."

Puelicher placed only one restriction on the project. The subjects and settings must have a Wisconsin flavor.

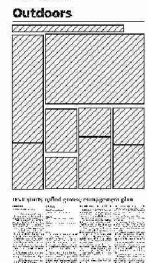
Gromme said yes and embarked on a multi-year project to paint exclusively for M&I.

"This being a very great opportunity, I think it is unnecessary for me to say that I tried to do my very best on every one and tried to make each one better than the other," Gromme wrote in a memoir.

The result was 43 Gromme paintings created for M&I from 1966 to 1969.

The work includes scenes Gromme summoned from his youth near Fond du Lac as well as an adult in the hunting blind and afield making nature observations.

Many have waterfowl as the subjects, such as "Freeze Up" (1968) which shows a flock of canvasbacks descending over a frigid lakeshore and "Wood Ducks - Gall's Pond" (1966) which depicts drake and hen woodies at rest on perches on a



placid water body.

Several capture vivid interactions between wildlife, such as "Snowy Owl, Buffalohead, Crow - Lakeshore" (1967) and "Goshawk Attacking Mink" (1969).

Yet others serve primarily to capture a native Wisconsin species in its element, such as "Pileated Woodpeckers" (1967) on a decaying birch tree and "Flickers" (1967) preening on a high snag.

For decades the work gilded the walls of the 6th floor of the bank's office building at 770 N. Water St.

In 2011, the originals were donated by BMO Harris Bank to the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau.

But Riegelman, a Racine native and avid hunter who joined the bank after college, knew BMO Harris was in possession of hundreds of prints made from the originals.

At a Milwaukee DU meeting earlier this year, he raised the possibility of BMO Harris donating 900 prints to the conservation organization.

The idea was accepted by DU as readily as Puelicher's offer to Gromme.

Glenn Goergen of West Bend is volunteer leader for DU in Wisconsin. He spends a lot of his time working on ways to produce revenue that can be used for habitat purchases or habitat improvement projects.

"Conservation without money is just conversation," Goergen said. "When we heard about Neil's offer on behalf of BMO Harris, we of course were extremely grateful. Now, we have to find out the best way to turn the prints into money and the money into projects to benefit wildlife."

Goergen said his goal is to save as much wetland and wildlife acreage as possible "before it gets demolished."

This year's gift of prints from BMO Harris to DU includes 38 of the series Gromme created for M&I. Goergen said DU plans to offer the prints at a discount from the appraised value.

As such, the prices will range from \$63 to \$1,250 each.

If they sell them at the anticipated prices, DU expects to convert the prints into \$500,000 worth of good for wildlife in Wisconsin.

Penny Mustard is planning an advertising campaign with details of the Feb. 28 to March 1 showing and sale.

Prints can also be purchased separately. For more information, contact DU's Tom Munich at (262) 965-3700.

Although Puelicher and Gromme have passed on, it's not hard to imagine they'd be pleased to see their 1960s project still paying dividends in their beloved Wisconsin.



**Owen Gromme created this painting, titled "Ruffed Grouse - Budding" in 1967 as part of a commission for M&I Bank.** PAUL A. SMITH



**Neil Riegelman, director of Wisconsin commercial banking for BMO Harris Bank, discusses a wood duck painting by late wildlife artist Owen Gromme that hangs in the bank's downtown Milwaukee office. PAUL A. SMITH**