

Scrimshaw

by Nancy N. Johnston

“The trickiest area of collecting in American folk or maritime art is scrimshaw.” So say Janice Hyland and Alan Granby of Hyland Granby Antiques, scholars/dealers in maritime folk art based in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The reason for this, according to Alan, is that “with the proliferation of fakes and forgeries, the nuances are not easily identifiable.” John Rinaldi, a maritime dealer in Kennebunkport, Maine, reflects that since “The \$10,000 mark was broken in the 1970s, fakes have infiltrated the market.” To address the problem of fakery, the New Bedford Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts, offers a forensic laboratory

to determine authenticity. Experience, however, is what hones the senses to what is authentic and what is not, though even the most schooled collectors must continue to carefully examine unfamiliar pieces.

Scrimshaw can be defined as carving, engraving, or embellishing of bone or ivory. Practitioners of this art form are known as scrimshanders. Scrimming, or the art of scrimshaw, was practiced by sailors working on ships during whale hunting expeditions held mainly in the nineteenth century. Some of the vessels were equipped for voyages lasting up to four years and sailors utilized their idle time, sometimes months between whale sightings, scrimming whale teeth and

bone, mainly the jaw (panbone). At the height of the whaling industry—between 1825 and 1865—over 700 vessels were registered to hunt from whaling centers along the New England coast. (Sperm whales were harvested for oil, used in lamps and to make candles; the industry declined as a result of changing resources for energy.)

There are two categories of scrimshaw, engraved and carved. The majority of engraved scrimshaw is on whale teeth; far fewer panbones are engraved. Engraved work includes everything from whimsical images of beloved women left behind and tributes of love to detailed depictions of three-masted ships or homes far away.

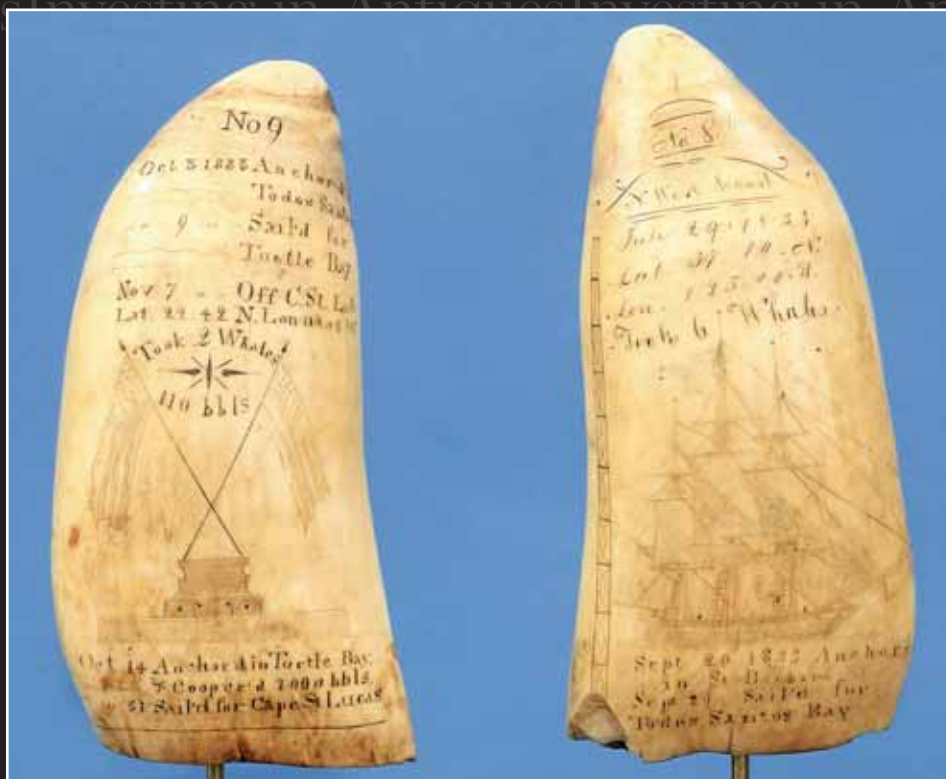
Fig. 1: Large and Important Sperm Whale's Tooth Scrimshawed by the Pagoda Artist. Northeast Auctions, *Marine & China Trade*, lot 757, August 21, 2005.



Carved scrimshaw includes such utilitarian pieces as clothes pins, pie crimpers, corset busks, boxes, walking canes, and swifts (collapsible yarn winders). Much like every other item in today's market, demand is growing. The first notable record broken was for a Susan's tooth by Myrick, which sold in the 1970s for \$10,000, as noted above. Twenty years later, a Susan's tooth again broke records when it sold for \$100,000. The latter tooth was purchased by Janice Hyland and Alan Granby, who remark that 25 years ago barrels of teeth were available, whereas today the old teeth are few and far between.

The value of a scrimshawed whale tooth is determined by an attribution or signature, its subject matter, and the actual work or detail of the scrimshander. The vast majority of all scrimshaw is unsigned. The most desired subjects are whaling scenes, images of sailing ships, and patriotic themes with double crossed flags or cannons. The larger the tooth, the better. The most famous engraver was Frederick Myrick (1808–1862). He produced thirty-six or more "Susan's teeth," so named for the Nantucket whaleship *Susan* on which he made them during the years 1828 and 1829. He was the first artist to sign and date some of his work. Another well-known scrimshander is Edward Burdett. Born on Nantucket in 1805, he suffered an untimely death at sea in 1833. Last year one of Burdett's seven known signed teeth sold at Northeast Auctions, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for an impressive \$293,000. The record, however, goes to an engraver known as the "Pagoda artist." Unsigned, his masterful style is considered the finest example of the art form. At the same Northeast Auctions's sale last year, a tooth attributed to the Pagoda artist (Fig. 1), estimated at \$35,000–50,000, sold for \$303,000.

A defining point for scrimshaw was John F. Kennedy's interest in collecting the material in the 1950s and 1960s. Frank Rigg, curator of the JFK Library and Museum in Boston, recounted the touching story of Jacqueline



Occasionally something extremely rare and unique comes on the market such as this pair of scrimshaw "log" teeth engraved aboard the ship *Timoleon* and signed by the Nantucket born whaleman Josiah Sheffield Jr. (American 1807–1880). These are the only known teeth from an original set of nine that mark the events of a single whaling voyage.

The first tooth is engraved from top to bottom with the following: No. 8/ N. West Coast/July 29" 1833/Lat. 37 10. N./Log.125. W./Took 6 Whales. Below is an engraved ship portrait with figures and the words: Sept 20 1833 Anchored/in St Barbara/Sept 29 Sail'd for/Todos Santos Bay. The reverse is signed "JOSIAH SHEFIELD JR." within an oval border with decorative center. H. 6-1/4 in., W. 3 in.


The second tooth is engraved from the tip to the bottom: No 9/Oct 3 1833 Anchored in/Todos Santos/"9" Sail'd for/Turtle Bay/Nov 7" Off C. St. Lus./Lat. 22.42 N. Lon 110.08 W./Took 2 whales/—*/110 bbls/. The engraving features two crossed American flags with arrow tip poles on plinth and the words: Oct 14 Anchored in Turtle Bay./& cooper'd 1000 bbls./31 sail'd for Cape St. Lucas. The obverse has an engraving of a standing woman within a rectangular border. H. 6-1/8 in., W. 3 in.

Kennedy's Christmas gift to the president in 1962. She purchased a large whale tooth and commissioned scrimshander Milton Delano to engrave it with the presidential seal. Her husband loved the gift so much, Mrs. Kennedy had it buried with him.

Another defining moment for scrimshaw came in the 1980s when, over a period of four years, Sotheby's sold the collection of Barbara Johnson. The sale of Mrs. Johnson's collection by a major New York auction house brought a good deal of attention to scrimshaw, and collectors began to seriously include this art form in their collections.

Even as prices are rising, Rinaldi compares scrimshaw to decoys, weathervanes, and other areas of folk art and, given the prices realized for those forms, one might consider

scrimshaw a land of opportunity. Along that line, Dr. Stuart M. Frank senior curator of the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and author of, among other titles, *The Dictionary of Scrimshaw Artists and Fakeshaw—A Checklist of Plastic "Scrimshaw,"* points out that while prices for whale teeth strengthen, there is value in walrus ivory, citing the fact that masterpieces in walrus ivory sell for a fraction of the price of whale teeth.

Collecting genuine scrimshaw may be challenging, but with knowledge acquired at museums, shows, auctions, and with guidance from veterans in the field, it can also be rewarding. 

Nancy N. Johnston is a private consultant and broker for art and antiques, and a regular contributor to Antiques & Fine Art.