

**Art, Identity, and Commodity:  
Scrimshaw in Relation to Whaler Identity Expression Through the Lens of Nineteenth  
Century American Labor History**

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## Introduction

Scrimshaw: a peculiar word for a niche art form that is familiar only to a few devoted collectors and historians with a taste for the sea. The term refers to engraved whale bone made by sailors aboard American whaling vessels during the nineteenth century. There has been a surprising amount of scholarship on this art form written by a small collection of enthusiasts. During the mid to late twentieth century, there was a resurgence of interest in the medium. In part, this was influenced by the former president John F. Kennedy's publicly expressed fondness for scrimshaw, which brought the art form into the public consciousness. The revolutionary work of art historian Frank Stuart—former director of the Kendall Whaling Museum—further inspired academic research with the publication of his methods for identifying and analyzing scrimshaw motifs and artists. Since then, scrimshaw has experienced relatively scarce in-depth study in the twenty-first century, least of all in the medium's relation to American labor history. As an art form developed as a consequence of the economically prosperous whaling industry, scrimshaw offers an unparalleled perspective into the intersections between art and labor.

In my study of the origins of scrimshaw and the visual motifs that are characteristic of this art form, I seek to answer how the art of scrimshaw—and the pursuit of creative expression under the confines of a labor centric environment—speaks more broadly to the sociocultural developments in the United States during the early to mid nineteenth century. In what ways did scrimshandering act as a vehicle for self expression and exploration of identity outside of labor? How do these pursuits add nuance to narratives around American work ethic during this period? How do these expressions of identity—and the discovery of meaning outside of labor—reveal the extent to which whaler identity was shaped in relation, and proximity to, domesticity?

In addressing these questions, I will make meaningful contributions to the art historical study of scrimshaw by contextualizing the craft within the broader economic and sociocultural landscape of its time. I will offer a more holistic view of the American folk art, explaining what makes this art form and the environment which facilitated its creation distinct from other art forms. In doing so, I will stake a claim in the disciplines of history and economics through this case study, revealing how art, and the creative pursuit, work to undermine and complicate relations between a laborer and their craft. As a consequence of developing capitalist economic models in nineteenth century America, scrimshaw demonstrates how the effects of over consumption and profit driven models brought the rise and downfall of the whaling industry. These conditions shaped the meaning of commodity and facilitated the proliferation of scrimshaw as a whaler's art.

In consideration of these historical contexts and my analysis of common visual motifs, I will argue that scrimshaw symbolizes the physical manifestation of growing sentiments among the American public in their demands for, and normalization of, work-life balance. Thus demonstrating not only the value of leisure, but in this case its necessity for coping with oppressive and alienating work environments. Scrimshaw served as an outlet for whalers to express themselves in ways that would normally be inaccessible or seemingly contradict the built image of the fearless, hyper-masculine whaleman, in the creative expressions of yearning for romance and domestic life. Therefore, scrimshaw exhibits how whaler identity was shaped by their estrangement from land and loved ones, highlighting the often lonely, alienating realities of life aboard a whaling ship. This form of creative expression was only made possible through the capitalist structures which laid the foundations for the whaling industry in America, necessitating the mass culling of whale species. The capitalist drive for whale bodies, provided the byproduct

that would become the medium for scrimshandering and the long voyages which dispossessed whalers from their lives back on land for extended periods, yielding more leisure time to pursue creative endeavors.

The topic of labor, as it pertains to art, has yet to be explored in depth in the study of scrimshaw. The pursuit for meaning, community, and comfort under consuming capitalist paradigms is emblematic of how labor and art connect in genre defining ways. I see my contributions to be a much needed amendment to how scrimshaw is conceptualized as a symbol of whaler culture relative to the complex realities of its historical contexts. And by conceptualizing scrimshaw within the broader historical landscape, I aim to bring greater relevance to the art form as significant to the greater history of American folk art.

## **Section 1: The Whaling Industry**

### 1a) Origins of the Industry

Europeans' first encounter with whaling in the Americas was during the days of the *Mayflower*, when they observed the bountiful whale populations off of the coast of Cape Cod.<sup>1</sup> Envisioning great economic potential, white settlers employed Indigenous people from the Northeast, enabling them to learn new, efficient ways to kill and harvest whales. The products from which would then be sold for the British crown, church, and/or government to take in for profit.<sup>2</sup> Until the late 18th century, American whaling voyages were short and targeted right

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<sup>1</sup> Norman E. Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders: Whales and Whalers* (N. Flayderman & Co. Inc., 1972), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 16.

whales, but whalers soon took preference to sperm whales, who produced oil of superior quality.<sup>3</sup> Measuring about 60 feet in length and weighing up to 45 tons, these mammoths of the sea were incredibly profitable to hunt for a few reasons. For one, spermaceti oil (a substance found in the head cavity of a sperm whale) proved to be highly efficient in fueling illuminants of the period, and could be processed into a wax to be incorporated into cosmetics, candles, and ointments.<sup>4</sup> Ambergris—another sperm whale product drawn from the animal’s digestive tract—proved to be a powerful preservative that prolonged the effective scent of perfumes. This made the substance incredibly profitable, for one pound of the “floating gold” would sell for as much as \$80,000 in the 1880s.<sup>5</sup> With great potential for consumer markets, it is hardly surprising that 53% of the estimated 430,000 whales killed by American whaleships in the nineteenth century were sperm whales.<sup>6</sup> Other whale products, such as baleen and whale bone harvested from right, grey, and bowhead whales, were used for the boning of umbrellas and corsets, but sought after to lesser extent than the mighty sperm whale.<sup>7</sup>

The mid nineteenth century, from the 1830s to the 1850s, marked the “golden age” for the American whaling industry. With new advances in whaling technology ranging from larger ships to improved tools and methods, these vessels could embark on longer voyages and traverse

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<sup>3</sup> Nina Helman and Norman Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy: The Whaleman’s Art of Scrimshaw* (Balsam Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw* (The New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2024), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy*, 17.

farther to reach waters that were previously inaccessible.<sup>8</sup> The growth of the industry and simultaneous capitalist drive for spoil and conquest brought more waste products to be repurposed into small decorative objects, marking the coinciding golden era of scrimshaw. However, this era would quickly fizzle out as the excess of whale products in the American market depreciated its value; a trend that was reinforced by the economic depression of 1857.<sup>9</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the much cheaper kerosene was discovered to be an efficient illuminant fuel alternative, outcompeting the rare and perilously acquired spermaceti in the popular market and further supporting the fall of the golden era of American whaling.<sup>10</sup> Even if short lived, the heyday of American whaling left a legacy of decimation and colonization: whale species were brought to the brink of extinction for profitability margins, whalers brought disease to the pacific ports they visited, and their oceanic exploits helped fund colonial expansion and Christian missions to these same islands, having irreversible effects on Indigenous populations.<sup>11</sup>

It is under this drive for reaping oceanic exploits that the whaling industry facilitated the development and growth of scrimshaw as an art form. In consideration of the historical and economic contexts which gave rise to the scrimshaw art movement, the legacy of the American whaling industry is further problematized as we uncover the working conditions aboard these ships and conceptualize what life was like at sea. It would be these very conditions that would ultimately motivate the creative endeavors that are the focus of this study.

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<sup>8</sup> Briton Cooper Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 2; Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 44, 46-47; Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 137.

## 1b) Working Conditions and Life at Sea

The prospect of riches and social mobility—and at times the potential glory that comes from conquering the wild unknown—were the primary motivations for men entering the whaling industry. Second to investors, whaling ship captains were some of the wealthiest residents of port towns, earning approximately triple the monthly income of a mercantile ship captain by the mid nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> As former crew members who worked up the ranks, captains gave young new hires, or “greenhands”, incentive to enter the industry in hopes of achieving similar professional success.<sup>13</sup> Men of marginalized groups, including Black and Indigenous people, were able to experience social mobility in the whaling industry more than through other industries. Evident in recorded demographics, whaling crews were multiethnic and multinational in nature. It is estimated that by the end of the 1850s, one sixth of the whaling workforce was comprised of Black men. Indigenous whalers from present day New England, New Zealand, and Hawaii composed a sizable portion of these “yankee” crews as well. Drawn by economic incentives, Indigenous peoples would be employed at the ports supplying provisions to whaling ships.<sup>14</sup>

Though achieving such economic success didn’t come without its drawbacks. While potentially lucrative to the special few that could snag a good catch, the pursuit for the great sea mammal could be dangerous and at times life threatening.<sup>15</sup> Targeted whales wouldn’t go down

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<sup>12</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 42; Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 43, 50.

<sup>15</sup> The process would be as follows: Once their target was spotted, small whaleboats led by a mate—a high ranking officer, second to the captain—would be lowered from the “mothership” to pursue their catch. Harpooners—more experienced whalers often of Indigenous backgrounds—would thrust the harpoon’s speared blade into the flesh of the whale. Attached at

without a fight and were known to strongly resist their capture. The distressed and aggravated animal would attempt to flee while still attached to the harpoon spears lodged into their flesh, taking whalers for a turbulent ride coined the “Nantucket sleigh ride”. Whales would smash against ships in resistance, causing casualties in the process.<sup>16</sup> Illness was another ever present threat to the lives of nineteenth century whalers, as the overcrowded quarters became breeding grounds for disease. Malnutrition, seasickness, and scurvy were common, though medical professionals were rarely aboard whaling vessels.<sup>17</sup>

In the commonly told narrative of the life of a whaleman, these dangers are not unfamiliar. Popular media such as the story of *Moby Dick* contribute to this image of whaling as thrilling, perilous, and honor worthy. Yet besides these few hours of excitement, life aboard a whaling ship was more frequently the contrary; dull and monotonous. When not in the active pursuit of a catch or processing the whale into consumable products, most time was spent in wait and anticipation. Whale ships were known to be incredibly well staffed in preparation for the hunt and later processing of the catch, employing roughly thirty men. With ample hands to make light work of daily activities, whalemen were left many hours without structured activity. Whaleman Charles Nordoff speaks of his experience at sea, writing, “...we were not a week upon the whaling ground, ere every one complained of the weary monotony of such a life...By the time we had gotten a month’s experience of cruising ground, I no longer wondered at the

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the end of which would be a line of rope that would keep the boat fastened to the whale. This would usually prompt the whale to try to escape and swim in a flurry, initiating the infamous “Nantucket sleigh ride”, where the still attached whaleboat is roughly dragged by the distressed animal. Once secured to the whale, the mate and oarsmen would use lances (sharp spear-like weapons) to finish the job; Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 103-108.

<sup>16</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 16, 152; Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 88.

wandering, lack-luster look, the shuffling walk, and awkward appearance generally, of your regular old whaleman. His mind has been gradually killed out of lack of use.”<sup>18</sup>

Henry A. Phelon, a crew member aboard the *Ploughboy* of New Bedford writes in his journal on August 8, 1848, “...Saw nothing today of any consequence. We cruise in pretty close to land. Am in hope soon to get some W[hales] there is hardly a right but what I think of home. So ends there 24 hours.” This is following several weeks without sperm whale sightings and many failed attempts towards catching a whale.<sup>19</sup> Inflation of the industry brought increased competition among whaling vessels as they fought to be the first to find and catch the elusive sperm whale. This further contributed to whalers’ lament over extended periods of inactivity, with whale sightings and successful catches becoming less frequent.<sup>20</sup> Phelon recalls interference from other whaling vessels in the *Ploughboy*’s pursuit for a successful catch: “Saw 2 ships...which was the *Minerva* of New Bedford...the other ship was right ahead, had 3 boats down after a whale, tried to overtake her. She had got a large sperm whale alongside just as we got to her. She was the ‘*Copia*’ of NB.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> Phelon, Henry A, *Ploughboy (Ship) of New Bedford, Mass., Mastered by Henry Phelon Jr., Keeper Henry A. Phelon, on voyage 16 June 1848 - 18 November 1849*, Journal, From New Bedford Whaling Museum, *New Bedford Whaling Museum Logbook and Journal Collection*, <https://archive.org/details/kwm-804/mode/2up>.

<sup>20</sup> Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-1906* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 300.

<sup>21</sup> Phelon, Henry A, journal entry aboard the *Ploughboy*, August 16th, 1848.

## Section 2: The Art Objects

### 2a) Art on Board

#### History of Engraved Whale Bone as an Art Form

Whalersmen spent many hours unoccupied, in wait for work, as the extended length of whaling voyages, abundantly staffed crews, and long periods in between catches gave the men a considerable amount of time at their disposal. Ample idle time coupled with the wealth of raw materials in the form of whale bone, made an environment ripe for creative pursuits. However, the art of engraved whale bone wasn't a new practice at the time of the scrimshaw movement's genesis, nor did it spontaneously emerge on Euro-American whale ships.

Many Indigenous communities, including Alaskan, Hawaiian, Maori, and Fijian Indigenous communities to name a few, have longstanding traditions of revering and crafting whale teeth, and whale bone more broadly, into practical objects. Maori people fashioned whale bone into weaponry, musical instruments, and decorative accessories.<sup>22</sup> They believed whale bone possessed spiritual potential (*mana*) from its association with the god of the sea and carving, their great ancestor, Tangaroa.<sup>23</sup> Native Fijians also attributed spiritual significance to whale bone; they considered uncarved sperm whale teeth to be *tabua*, or sacred ceremonial objects.<sup>24</sup> Sperm whale teeth were extremely rare to come by on the island until contact and trade

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Fig. 2, an example of Maori engraved sperm whale bone decorative object.

<sup>23</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 33-35.

<sup>24</sup> Refer to Fig. 3, an example of Fijian *tabua*, strung on coconut fiber chain.

with people from the neighboring island of Tonga, Chinese traders, and Euro-American whalers facilitated the exchange of whale bones for other material goods.<sup>25</sup>

Native people in Alaska have a long standing history of carving bone, tooth, antler, and other animal byproducts into hunting tools, needle cases, and sculptural figures. In the late nineteenth century, the influx of non Indigenous whalers, missionaries, and explorers brought a new market for tourism in Alaska, as Indigenous people recognized the profit potential in capitalizing off of the interests of foreign people to sell their traditional crafts.<sup>26</sup> Carved jewelry, figurines, knives, and objects made to cater to Euro-American interests including letter openers and cribbage boards, were commonly sold as souvenirs as proof of Euro-American consumers' exploration and conquest.<sup>27</sup>

Through frequent trade, employment of, and engagement with Indigenous communities, Euro-American whalers would've been familiar, or at least exposed to, Indigenous tradition. It is most likely that they came to see whale bone as a viable medium for art production because they observed the material being used in a similar fashion by Indigenous communities. While scrimshaw has become its own art form distinguishable from its Indigenous contemporaries, it's important to recognize that this art form, as like many traditions, didn't arise in isolation from the multicultural, multinational world that it was born out of.

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<sup>25</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 43, 68-70.

<sup>26</sup> Refer to Fig. 1, an example of Native Alaskan engraved marine ivory souvenirs.

<sup>27</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 26-28.

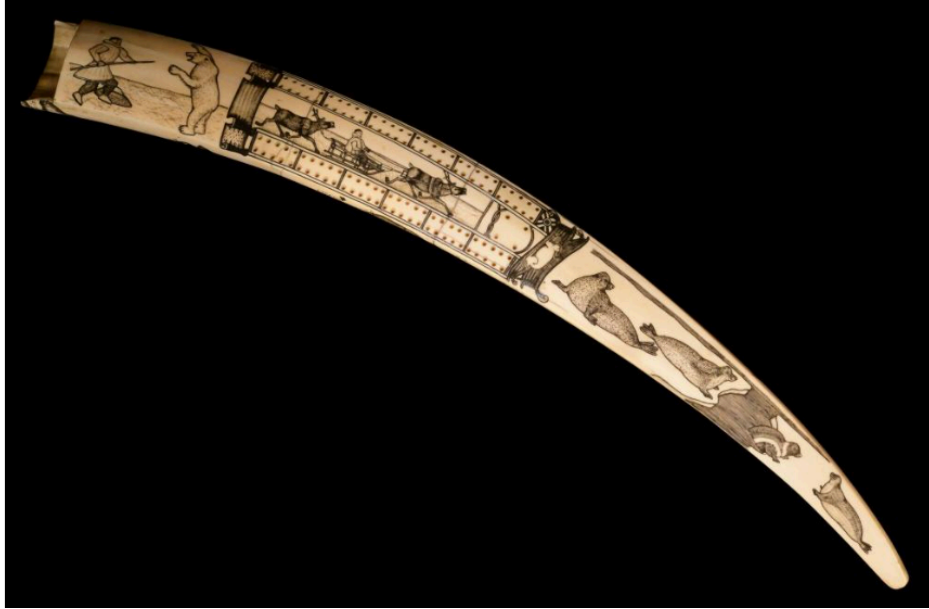


Fig. 1, Billy Kamoneseok (Native Alaskan), *Kamoneseok Cribbage Board*, ca. late 19th century, walrus ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

*This engraved walrus tusk cribbage board features various monochrome pictorial scenes. At the base of the tooth a figure is pictured fighting against a polar bear on its hind legs with a spear in hand. In between the rows of the divots of the geometrically decorated playable board, is a figure sitting on a sleigh led and followed by reindeer. Closer to the tip of the board are a family of sea lions separated by a river of water. This board game was most likely made for the purpose of being sold to Euro-American explorers, missionaries or whalers as a souvenir, as a game with British origins.*



Fig. 2, Pendant (Maori), ca. 19th century, whale ivory, The British Museum, London, England  
*Above is an example of Maori made sculpted whale bone. Made of a whale tooth, this pendant features a squatting human figure with its arms wrapped around its chest. Unlike scrimshaw which typically uses a blackening agent to define the incised lines, this work doesn't appear to use any additional materials to define the engraved markings.*



Fig. 3, Tabua (Fijian), ca. 19th century, whale ivory and braided coconut sinnet fiber, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

*Pictured above is a whale tooth or Fijian Tabua with an inscription reading “NABIT”. Threaded at the base and tip of the tooth is a braided strand of coconut sinnet fiber, making the ceremonial object wearable. Tabua were given at formal ceremonies as a representation of strong bonds between the giver and the receiver. Once discovered to be symbols of wealth and prestige, Euro-American whalers traded the discarded whale bone with Fijian Native people.*

A major point of difference in Euro-American whalers’ treatment of whale bone compared to the many Indigenous societies they interacted with is that it was by no means considered sacred. Instead whale bone was seen as a convenient tool or canvas for artistic expression, as the material surfaced as a waste byproduct from whaling capitalist ventures. The commodity had little commercial value and was in great quantity, as up to fifty teeth could be harvested from the lower jaw of a single sperm whale, resulting in an abundance of the byproduct from a growing whaling industry.<sup>28</sup> This made whale bone easy to acquire with little

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<sup>28</sup> Helman and Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy*, 24-25.

cost to the whalers themselves once they were able to properly process the material; whale teeth were practically given away by whaling captains to get rid of the excess biomatter.<sup>29</sup> It's easy to see then why yankee whalers took to engraving and sculpting whale bone in their free time as it was one of the few raw materials that were accessible to them while at sea.

Scrimshaw provided a well needed reprieve from boredom and an escape from potentially consuming thoughts of homesickness, heartache, and loneliness that come from long sea voyages, separated from one's loved ones for extended periods of time. Under poor working conditions and health, and close quarters with their colleagues, life aboard a whaling ship often felt bleak; feelings which couldn't easily be avoided as whalers lived and worked in the same spaces.<sup>30</sup> Outside of occasional visits to port towns for supplies and sexual favors, whalers were largely isolated from the outside world within the confines of their sea vessels.<sup>31</sup> Scrimshandering became a welcome pursuit to set aside pessimistic thoughts by using art as a creative outlet to express those feelings. So much so that captains would encourage their crew to take on scrimshandering and other creative pursuits to keep their minds and bodies occupied during their leisure hours.<sup>32</sup> Michael Cumiskey, a whaler aboard the *Abigail* of New Bedford in 1836 wrote in his journal, "I am unsettled in mind for the want of work. Saw nothing, and work all dun. An idle head is a workshop for the devil. Employed scrimshan."<sup>33</sup> Where one may assume that idle time would be desirable, for laborers who can't escape the confines of their

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<sup>29</sup> Mirelle Luecke, "Exploring the Sea as Studio: The Importance of Labor and Leisure in Sailor Folk Art," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 14, no. 1 (2021): 61.

<sup>30</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 21, 152; Davis, Gallman, and Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 135.

<sup>32</sup> Luecke, "Exploring the Sea as Studio", 61.

<sup>33</sup> Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 100.

workplace, there's an expressed "want for work", or the need for work rather. It becomes apparent that while aboard a whale ship, the idle state was so mind-numbingly boring for whalers that with little resources or flexibility but to do anything else, work was sought after for providing solace from dreaded inactivity. As written by whaler Cumiskey, work was welcomed to preoccupy whalers from unsavory thoughts of loneliness and isolation, or feelings of general boredom. By employing themselves with scrimshandering, whalers wouldn't allow themselves to feed into negative thoughts, serving to ward off devilish temptations and leading to the encouragement of artistic endeavors during their leisure time. The products of their creative past-times would then become souvenirs from their adventures and exploits or gifts to be given to their loved ones waiting for them on land, giving whalers something to look forward to and motivate them through the monotony of their work.<sup>34</sup>

### Methods to Scrimshandering

From the motivations behind this art form, I now dissect the aesthetic forms which scrimshaw assumes and how scrimshaw is traditionally crafted, describing commonly used tools and methods:

Scrimshaw is a broad genre of decorative art and takes on many functions and visual forms. The art form can generally be divided into two broad categories, that of "pictorial scrimshaw" and "functional scrimshaw". There are intersections between the two, but the categories can generally be described as follows: "pictorial scrimshaw" is ascribed to works of engraved whale bone whose primary function is to be viewed and admired for its visual properties, with engravings depicting narratives, scenes, or visual symbols to be interpreted. This category of scrimshaw usually comes in the form of engraved whale teeth (the most common

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<sup>34</sup> Helman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 22.

form of scrimshaw) and isn't intensively sculpted to take on another shape other than that of the natural tooth shape.



Fig. 4, Frederick Myrick, *Scrimshaw of the Ship Susan*, 1829, whale ivory, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

*With the limited view available online, we can see a monochrome engraved sperm whale tooth of the ship Susan cruising towards the Nantucket shore pictured in the distance to the right. A light house and a house with a barely visible chimney are built upon the small sliver of land; a ship is stationed nearby at the dock. In the distance to the left of the ship Susan a sailboat is pictured heading in the same direction. Written above the ship Susan is a scroll of text reading “The Ship Susan on her passage towards Nantucket”. Other details include a small ship engraved at the tip of the tooth, perpendicular to the ship Susan, a vine pattern encircling the base of the tooth, and various inscriptions.*

“Functional scrimshaw” on the other hand, denotes whale bone that has been sculpted to serve a purpose, commonly made into domestic objects such as crochet hooks, yarn swifts, or pie crimpers; or objects incorporated into women’s fashion, namely busks: a long, narrow rod made

from whale jawbone that would be inserted in an opening in the front of a corset piece to support the bodice.<sup>35</sup> While functional scrimshaw may have some of the characteristics of pictorial scrimshaw (i.e. elaborate engravings depicting symbols, narratives, or scenes) their primary purpose to be used, rather than solely viewed, and are sculpted into a shape that isn't easily discernable as a whale tooth or panbone.



Fig. 5, *Lozenge Crimper*, ca. 19th century, whale ivory, wood, metal, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

*Above is a pie crimper, the handle made primarily of whale ivory tapers to a pointed end. Around the neck of the handle are two bands of wood alternated with a single band of whale ivory. At the opposite end is the fluted wheel of the pie crimper held together by a metal axle. Attached is a three-prong fork also made of whale ivory.*

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<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Davidson and Molly Duggins, *Sea Currents in Nineteenth-Century Art, Science, and Culture* "Commodifying the Ocean World" (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 243-244.

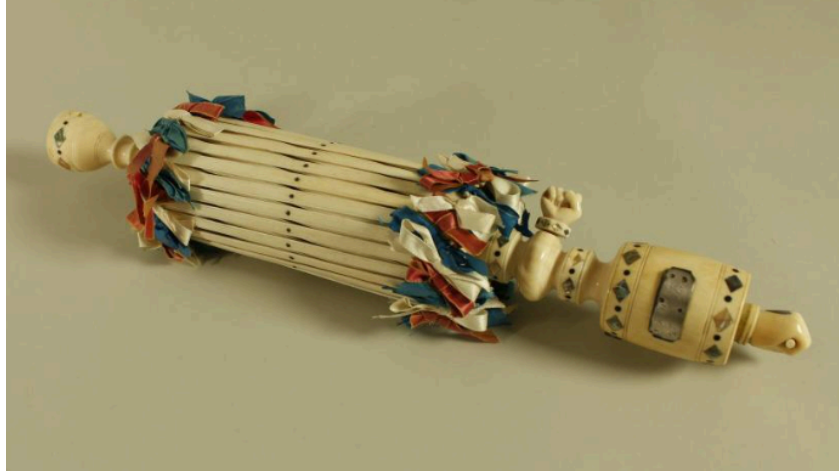


Fig. 6, Capt. James M. Clark, *James Clark Swift*, ca. 1853-1875, whale ivory, silk, silver, baleen, metal, abalone, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

*Yarn swifts are contractible objects used to wind yarn or thread. It would be fastened to the edge of a table using the bottom clasp. This swift was gifted to a “R. W. Vose” from the maker James M/ Clark as indicated by the silver plaque on the handle. Rachel Wild [Faxon] Vose was the wife of the minister in the town which Capt. Clark resided with his family.<sup>36</sup>*

*The swift is made of sculpted whalebone and baleen, secured with metal pins and embellished with red, white, and blue silk ribbon and abalone geometric accents. Along the handle are two sculpted fist motifs; one underneath the body of the contractible swift and the other at the bottom end of the handle. The closed fist was a common motif in sculptural scrimshaw.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> “Description,” James Clark Swift, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accessed December 15, 2025, <https://newbedford.emuseum.com/objects/187165/james-clark-swift>.



Fig. 7, Southworth, *Southworth Napkin Ring*, ca. 1840, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

*Pictured above is a sculpted napkin ring. Pierced-work patterns of stars encapsulated within concentric circles adorn the piece. This work of scrimshaw is attributed to the Southworth brothers, Edward or Luther, who were both whalers during the 1840s. In the object's provenance, the napkin ring is "Said to have belonged to Captain King of New Bedford," speculated to be Captain Edward A. King, who mastered ships in Bedford during the period in which scrimshaw napkin rings were popular (late 19th to early 20th century).<sup>38</sup>*

To fashion a decorated whale tooth, or pictorial scrimshaw, the process generally begins with scraping incised lines directly into the surface of the tooth to form the desired pattern or composition using whatever tools the whaler would have on hand, whether that be a jackknife, awl (a small pointed tool used for piercing holes in leather), or sailor's needle. Once the tooth has been incised to satisfaction, the whaler would smooth the surface of the tooth

<sup>38</sup> "Description," Southworth Napkin Ring, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accessed December 15, 2025, <https://newbedford.emuseum.com/objects/200156/southworth-napkin-ring?ctx=ac82d6bb6035caba99d975711b4b939a2612a9d3&idx=0>.

with either sharkskin or sandpaper before further polishing the exterior with pumice or ashes to give the work of scrimshaw its signature sheen.<sup>39</sup> Using a blackening agent of either ink or soot, the whaler would fill the incised lines to reveal the engraved image. The process for fashioning a piece of functional scrimshaw is less easily explained as there is notably less scholarship on the process of creating scrimshaw objects other than for engraved whale teeth. Though it can be assumed that the fundamentals are generally the same: using any sharp materials that the whaler would have on hand, they would sculpt the object into its desired shape, then smooth and polish the surface with the named materials.<sup>40</sup>

Depending on the skill level of the scrimshander or their source of inspiration, the whaler may use reference material as a template for their engravings, a method which is referred to as the “pin-prick method”. Using illustrations from books or periodicals, the scrimshander would place the desired image over the whale tooth and using a sharp object, create small holes along the lines of the illustration, thus tracing the image. Once fully traced, the paper would be removed and the whaler would connect the dots to create a fully formed image. This style of engraving can usually be distinguished by works of scrimshaw which have visible dots along the lines of the engraving, illuminated by the blackening agent.<sup>41</sup>

## 2b) Common Motifs and Iconography

Spending extended periods of time adrift at sea, limited to the confines of the boarded walls of the ships which whalers worked and lived, scrimshanders often drew inspiration from the sights and scenes that they would encounter on a daily basis; mainly being ships at sea,

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<sup>39</sup> Helman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 25; Luecke, “Exploring the Sea as Studio”, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Helman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Helman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 25.

whales, and whaling expeditions. An example of such depictions can be seen in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, *Susan's Tooth 30 S-1*. This dual sided engraved whale tooth was executed by Nantucket born whaleman Fredrick Myrick (1808-1862), one of the earliest known scrimshaw artists and the first recorded pictorial scrimshander to date their work. The tooth comes as a part of a series of more than a dozen of its kind illustrating the ship *Susan*.<sup>42</sup> On the one side is a monochrome engraving of the ship *Susan* sailing over thin undulating lines representing ocean waves with an inscription above it reading: "The *Susan* cruising for whales". To the right of the ship, approaching the tip of the tooth, is an engraving of an eagle with a bundle of arrows and an olive branch in its talons—emblematic of the United States seal—hovering above two crossed American flags. In its beak is a banner in Latin reading "E PLURIBUS // UNUM" meaning "out of many, one" the national motto of the United States.<sup>43</sup> On the reverse is another monochrome engraving of the ship *Susan* at sea, however to the right off in the distant horizon, a light house and accompanying building can be seen on a small patch of land. An inscription above reads "The *Susan* on her homeward bound passage." An anchor entangled in rope is pictured to the right of the ship scene, close to the apex of the tooth. Similar themes are explored in the example of Fig. 10, the *Moses Denning Tooth*, which on one side depicts a ship in the open waters carrying a massive billowing American flag at its stern. Four small whaleboats have been deployed, beginning to close in on a pod of whales, harpoons at the ready. Overhead flies a hot air balloon carrying two American flags.

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<sup>42</sup> Stuart M. Frank, *Dictionary of Scrimshaw Artists* (Mystic Seaport Museum, 1991), 96.

<sup>43</sup> "E Pluribus Unum. from A gazetteer of the United States of America," Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, Accessed November 21, 2025, [https://www.si.edu/object/e-pluribus-unum-gazetteer-united-states-america%3Asilgoi\\_68301](https://www.si.edu/object/e-pluribus-unum-gazetteer-united-states-america%3Asilgoi_68301).



Fig. 8, Frederick Myrick, *Susan's Tooth 30 S-1*, ca. 1829, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

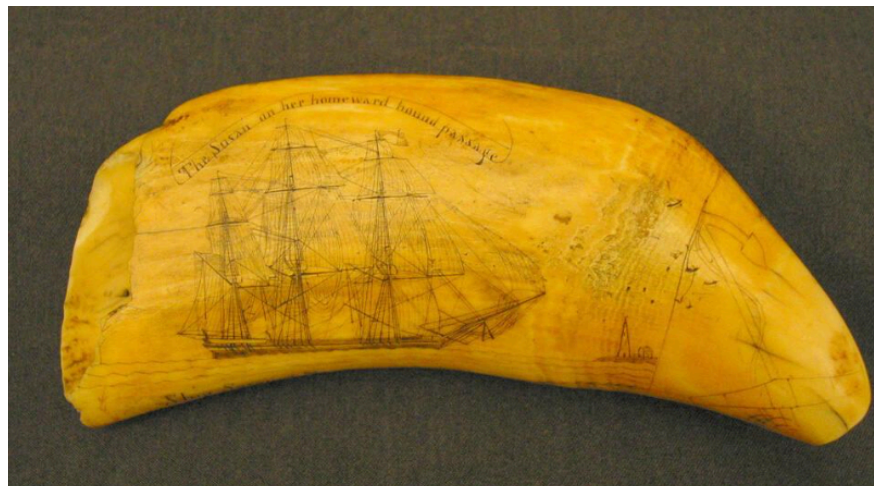


Fig. 9, Frederick Myrick, *Susan's Tooth 30 S-1* (verso), ca. 1829, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts



Fig. 10, Moses R. Denning, *Moses Denning Tooth*, ca. 1840s, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

Captured on the surface area of this barely three by seven inch whale tooth are many of the common motifs, symbols, and messages found in pictorial scrimshaw—that is imagery reflective of a whaler’s labor and his environment. More symbolically, the engravings also reflect sentiments of patriotism, American pride, and more generally longing; longing for community and hope for return to the land. This is seen in the emphatic use of symbols of a nation—that being flags, color choice (i.e. red and blue) and the United State’s seal—signifying a connection to place and community even if not immediately accessible to the whalemens inscribing these motifs. Especially in regards to how the American flag is instrumentalized in relation to whaling ships, marking these vessels and the people who worked them as distinctly American, representing the United States; a powerful allusion to national identity even while estranged from said nation. As people estranged from their countries of origin, yankee whalers expressed nationalistic pride and identity through scrimshaw with patriotic symbolism as seen through the use of American flags, the Latin motto alluding to values of unity, solidarity, and independence—symbolic of the optimism for, and attributes associated to, the newly developed

United States. In this way, yankee whalers remained connected to the land which they fought incredibly hard to return to with a worthy bounty. This strong will to return, and yearning for life outside of labor is seen in the reverse image (Fig. 9) as the ship Susan returns to the land, ushered in by the guidance of a light house.

These themes are similarly explored in the scrimshawed tooth engraved by Edward Cartwright Starbuck (1798-1841). On the one side is a monochrome engraving of a framed whaling scene; land is within view in the top left corner. Along the frame are the words “Liberty and Unity”, drawing connections to American values.<sup>44</sup> Inscribed on the reverse and along the underside of the tooth are poems which more explicitly call upon themes of loneliness at sea and longing for return to land and loved ones. Of the three poems inscribed, one is a full transcription of the hymn “Star of Peace to Wanderers Weary”, or also known as “Far at Sea”, by Jane C. Simpson (1811-1886). The poem is written like a prayer for a sailor at sea, calling upon stars for the wellbeing and encouragement for lonely and weary sailors at sea far from home. The other two poems tell comparable stories of sailors visiting distant lands, living out on the open waters, discontent with the lack of community and feeling of belonging, recalling friends and loved ones back home. One stanza of a poem reads: “While on the sea [my days] are spent, // in [anxious care, oft] discontent // No social circles here are found, // Few friends of virtue here abound: // I long for home, sweet home denied, // With her I love near by my side.”<sup>45</sup> The imagery and written prose engraved in this work capture sentiments of longing expressed through common

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<sup>44</sup> Refer to Fig. 11.

<sup>45</sup> “Engraved Whale Tooth: Starbuck, Edward Cartwright, 1798-1841, engraver,” Nantucket Historical Association, Accessed December 15, 2025, [https://nantuckethistory.org/webcat/request/Action?ClientSession=-614c567:19af4d9611b:-6067&UniqueID=6000\\_3635\\_3&TemplateProcessID=6000\\_3635&PromptID=&ParamID=&TemplateProcessID=1003\\_1051\\_1051&PromptID=&ParamID=&CMD\\_\(DetailRequest\)\[0\]=&ProcessID=1003\\_1518\(0\)&KeyValues=KEY\\_m2661](https://nantuckethistory.org/webcat/request/Action?ClientSession=-614c567:19af4d9611b:-6067&UniqueID=6000_3635_3&TemplateProcessID=6000_3635&PromptID=&ParamID=&TemplateProcessID=1003_1051_1051&PromptID=&ParamID=&CMD_(DetailRequest)[0]=&ProcessID=1003_1518(0)&KeyValues=KEY_m2661).

motifs of nautical imagery in relation to, or in its separation from, land. Land which carries associations of home and connections to a life prior to whaling, one that isn't consumed by work at sea. These themes transition well into the next set of common motifs relating to land, that is domesticity and gender.



Fig. 11, Edward Cartwright Starbuck, *Engraved Whale Tooth*, 1835, whale ivory, Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts

*Quartered into a vegetal patterned decorative frame is a whaling scene. Four whaleboats have been sent out from the larger vessel pictured in the center to the right, closer to the base of the tooth. The boats pursue two whales; one of which rears its head, it has been caught in the lines of the harpoon as seen by the three diagonal lines attached to the whaleboat that lead to the whale. At the tip of the tooth, outside of the frame, is a monochrome engraving of a whale and the words “Liberty and Unity” written perpendicular to the framed scene.*



Fig. 12, Edward Cartwright Starbuck, *Engraved Whale Tooth (verso)*, 1835, whale ivory,  
Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts

*The reverse image shows a port city, evident by the ships stationed in the bottom left corner of the composition and the seaman's bethel, or chapel, pictured in the center; a two storied brick building with a front central clock tower, a flag billows atop the roof reading "Bethel". Behind the bethel is another large building, five chimneys are lit, blowing smoke. Outside of the pictorial composition closer to the tip of the tooth is a short poem. It reads "In foreign lands I often meet*

*// Temptations strong, they often greet // Come, come, they say, and go with me // My darling*

*pleasures you shall see; — // I think of home, sweet home, denied // With her I love near by my*

*side"*

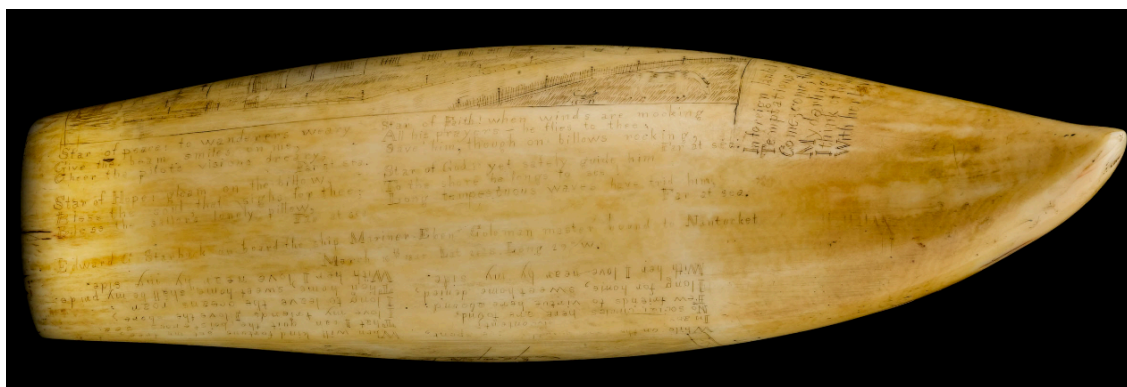


Fig. 13, Edward Cartwright Starbuck, *Engraved Whale Tooth* (underneath), 1835, whale ivory,  
Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts

*Engraved on the underside of the tooth are two poems; one being “Stars of Peace to Wanderers Weary” written by Jane C. Simpson in 1830, the other an unnamed poem which follows similar themes and literary devices to the small poem previously explored on the reverse side of the tooth. Like the short poem on the reverse side, the unnamed poem ends each stanza with lines recalling home and repeating the phrase “With her I love near by my side”, surfacing sentiments of yearning for home, community, and loved ones missed dearly. In between the two poems is an inscription which reads “Edward C. Starbuck onboard the ship Mariner Eben Coleman master bound to Nantucket // March 16th 1835 Lat 26° S Long 29° W.”*

Across both forms of pictorial and functional scrimshaw, themes of gender and domesticity are equally prominent to whaling and nautical scenes. I will be focusing the majority of my visual and comparative analysis on these motifs relating to the home. The ways in which these themes materialize is usually through portraiture of women, as seen in Fig. 14. *Woman and Children*, a pinprick transfer engraved whale tooth depicting a well dressed woman holding a book in her left hand.<sup>46</sup> Her right hand rests on the rope of the swing on which an excitable young boy sits, while a young girl is pictured facing the young woman with her back towards the viewer. Her left arm is lifted, apparently eager to relay something to the young woman who’s possibly her older sibling, mother, tutor, or some sort of caretaker. On the reverse (refer to Fig.

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<sup>46</sup> While the types of garments worn were somewhat consistent across class lines, women of higher classes could afford to wear more complicated outfits made with expensive materials and more highly adorned with accessories. The woman appears to be of middle class standing, seeing how her dress has been adorned. A repeated dotted decorative pattern can be seen along the sleeves and trim her waist coat. Fastened to her collar is an oval brooch. Atop her head is a veiled, wide brimmed hat, which she lifts gently with her right hand; “Women’s Fashion in the 19th Century,” Women’s History, Historic Hudson Valley, Accessed December 16, 2025, <https://hudsonvalley.org/article/womens-fashion-in-the-19th-century/>.

15) is a full body portrait of a young girl holding a small bouquet of flowers in her left hand. The scrimshander who executed this piece would have copied this image from a circulating magazine from the mainland or any of the port villages which his ship would have visited, perhaps feeling nostalgic for days of idleness and childlike whimsy observable in this piece.



Fig. 14, *Woman and Children*, ca. 1850s, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts



Fig. 15, *Woman and Children* (verso), ca. 1850s, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum,  
New Bedford, Massachusetts



Fig. 16, Unidentified, *Engraved Whale Tooth*, ca. 19th century, whale ivory, Nantucket Historical  
Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts

*Above is a full body portrait of a finely dressed woman. She wears a bell shaped skirt ornately decorated with horizontally striped, alternating gingham and solid colored fabric. Her skirt and bishop sleeves are generously adorned with lace. In her left hand she holds an open book, she points upward with the index finger of her right hand.*

Such themes of domesticity are explored more explicitly in the scene depicted in Fig 17. *Domestic Happiness Tooth*, completed by William A. Gilpin circa 1834, an artist accredited to several works of scrimshaw in the New Bedford Whaling Museum's collection. Framed within an ornamental, geometric border, a husband and wife are seated in a highly decorated interior space, complete with intricately patterned carpets, curtains, wallpaper, and furniture. The woman has taken a momentary pause from her embroidery work to listen in to the conversation her husband is having with their young child; a paper in his hand indicates he too has been interrupted from his work. Another young child is playing independently on the floor, deeply immersed in their activity. On the wall behind the quaint family is a framed text reading "DOMESTIC HAPPINESS". As demonstrated so clearly in this example, whalers frequently reminisced about their life and families (real or imagined) back on land, exploring themes of manhood and gender more broadly through the lens of domestic, family life.



Fig. 17, William A. Gilpin, *Domestic Happiness Tooth*, ca. 1834, whale ivory, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

Though whalers yearned for more than the life of a family man as seen through the visual motifs present in scrimshaw busks, often expressing feelings of romance, desire, and longing for which they wished their beloveds would hold on to, both metaphorically and physically through the objects they fashioned from the spoils of their conquest<sup>47</sup>. Common motifs would include symbols of love, including roses, pairs of hearts, or pairs of birds,<sup>48</sup> occasionally writing short verses or rhymes indicative of the scrimshander’s feelings of affection for the busk’s recipient as exemplified in Fig. 18, *Fenelon Busk*. Pictured from top to bottom separated by ornately decorated horizontal dividers, is a winged angel carrying a scroll reading “Love”, below which is

<sup>47</sup> Davidson and Duggins, *Sea Currents in Nineteenth-Century Art, Science, and Culture*, 244; Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Refer to Fig. 19, an example of a scrimshaw busk illustrating common motifs executed by William H. Acorn, a whaler hailing from Maine, who is thought to have worked aboard the *Wiscasset*; Frank, *Dictionary of Scrimshaw Artists*, 2-3.

a monochrome engraved ship at full mast with a banner above that reads “Fenelon”; the name of the ship. Following is an inscription and a pair of arrows framed by twisted ribbons: “When this you see // Remember me”. Underneath is an eagle holding arrows and olive branches in its talons, carrying harp framed by a garland—a symbol of Ireland.<sup>49</sup> In the last section at the bottom of the composition is a basket of roses atop a table; a knife and loosely strewn roses hint that the arrangement had been recently worked on. It can be assumed that the scrimshander working on this piece, crafted this piece whilst thinking of his beloved to give as a gift or forget-me-not, in hopes that his lover would keep him in her thoughts even while apart.



Fig. 18, *Fenelon Busk*, ca. 19th century, whale skeletal bone, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts



Fig. 19, William H. Acorn, *William Acorn Busk*, ca. 1834-1841, whale skeletal bone, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts

<sup>49</sup> “Description,” *Fenelon Busk*, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accessed December 15, 2025, <https://newbedford.emuseum.com/objects/187847/fenelon-busk?ctx=88e5edd66ff9119ca771d151f610398eb2be8cce&idx=43>.

*Pictured above in an engraved busk made of panbone. Floral motifs and vegetal patterns are evident throughout the composition. At the top of the busk (left on the image) are two crossed roses, invoking symbols of love and romance as the intersection of the pair allude to the connection between lovers.<sup>50</sup> Sprawling vines lead downwards to another pair, but of birds, who face each other. This scene appears to be calling upon symbols of fidelity and loyalty, as the birds resemble mourning doves, commonly known to have one mate for life.<sup>51</sup>*

### **Section 3: Ties to Greater Historical Landscape**

#### 3a) Nineteenth Century American Labor History

The emergence of scrimshaw as an art form coincided with growing shifts in the economic and cultural landscapes of the time. As surfaced by economist Christopher W. Calvo in his historical survey of the development of capitalist thought in Antebellum America, citizens of the newly independent nation were eager to distinguish the United States from its competitors, rich with hope spurring American exceptionalist thought. Under these conditions, capitalist economic theory gained traction as a radical, liberal method opposing residing bourgeoisie powers and the feudalist systems of the British colonial past.<sup>52</sup> Riding on this cultural spirit and economic vigor, following the American Revolution emerged an economic revolution that would alter the trajectory of the young nation's relationship with the world as a growing global economic power. New developments in transportation technology in the form of canal

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<sup>50</sup> *Flowers, Their Language, Poetry, and Sentiment, with Choice Extracts from Poets, A Dictionary of the Sentiment of Every Flower, Botanical Descriptions, &c,* (Porter & Coates, 1870), 200.

<sup>51</sup> "Mourning Doves," *Birds in Massachusetts*, Mass Audubon, Accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.massaudubon.org/nature-wildlife/birds/mourning-doves>.

<sup>52</sup> Calvo, *Emergence of Capitalism*, 22.

construction, the advent of river steamboats, and increased railways brought greater accessibility to farther reaches of the country and reduced shipping costs, expanding import and export economic potential. This also facilitated and helped accommodate a burgeoning industrial economy and the rapidly growing, urbanized population. Within a fifty year period from 1810 to 1860, the amount of manufactured goods produced practically increased by tenfold, totalling to \$2 billion worth of goods. In tandem, the total population increased exponentially from 2.1 million residents in 1776—when the United States transformed from British colony to independent nation—to 31 million residents by the time of the Civil War in the 1860s.<sup>53</sup> Within the span of a lifetime, the nation’s population increased fifteen fold. The American landscape was growing and becoming more interconnected than ever before, bringing about new labor dynamics complicating the relationship between employee and employer.

Laborers, artisans, and craftspeople traditionally lived in community with their employers under the existing feudalist systems. As historian Mirelle Lueckes notes, industrialization and urbanization facilitated and necessitated disparities between employee and employer, changing the relations that would develop from being in close quarters with one’s beneficiary. More people were commuting to their place of employment and work days were structured around efficiency and productivity on the company’s time, leading to less personal relationships between laborers and their employers, and clearer distinctions between work and leisure time.<sup>54</sup> This brought concerns over worker alienation to the public consciousness as these new structures centered around productivity were thought to have the potential to infringe upon worker autonomy, as individual needs could be sacrificed for the benefit of the company. Such sentiments inspired a growing labor movement in the mid nineteenth century advocating for more leisure time and the

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<sup>53</sup> Calvo, *Emergence of Capitalism*, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Luecke, “Exploring the Sea as Studio”, 61.

perceived benefits that came from productive leisure for worker productivity and state of mind.<sup>55</sup> Engagement in productive leisure activities was seen as a moral imperative, to detract from feelings of tension and anxiety, and potential vagrancy, as it was thought that a relaxed state of mind would be the harbinger of success.<sup>56</sup>

While marketed as for worker autonomy and benefit, the insidiousness of capitalist thought is apparent in these early conceptions of leisure in relation to labor, as it is specifically productive leisure that is encouraged rather than leisure for the sake of rest. Productive leisure is supposed to be healing for the mind, promoting improved moral and work ethic if the worker can occupy themselves enough to momentarily forget about the oppressive and alienating work that they routinely endure. Complete idleness on the other hand is delinquency; devoid of purpose, direction, or use, suggesting that one can't be achieved without quelling the other.<sup>57</sup> The working American can't solely work or else they will fall into depression, their mind arrested by the constraints of their labor, but they aren't allowed to fully rest either as idleness is comparable to moral depravity. The conversation then still centers around work and the need for productivity; a mentality shaped by the developing capitalist systems of labor, shifting public perception of labor in relation to the laborer, and employee in relation to the employer. This mode of thought is reflected and further complicated by how whalemens see themselves in relation to their labor, as whalemens reportedly lamented over the lack of work. Whalemens frequently expressed feelings of boredom and grew weary of long sea voyages. In anxiously awaiting a catch, they yearned to

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<sup>55</sup> Luecke, "Exploring the Sea as Studio", 62; Gleason, *The Leisure Ethic*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew L. Knighton, *Idle Threats: Men and the Limits of Productivity in 19th-Century America* (New York University Press, 2012), 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Luecke, "Exploring the Sea as Studio", 61; Knighton, *Idle Threats*, 6, 30.

be occupied by some activity; anything to fill up the time.<sup>58</sup> While motivated foremost by their dissatisfaction with the dull monotony of life at sea, and not the virtue of work, these sentiments reflect developing social and labor norms which value productivity. Productivity, that is being occupied with a laborious task which one can extract external benefit from, is still the desired state even if a result of ennui. This cultural climate would drive whalers to pursue scrimshandering as a means of keeping busy.

### 3b) Scrimshaw in Relation to Labor

The growth of the whaling industry—as an enterprise that profited on the exploitation and decimation of ocean life—coincided with changes in the early American political economy, transitioning from one that was predominantly feudalistic into a more capitalist system. In the process of which, so changed perceptions of commodity, as the ocean and its inhabitants became increasingly more marketable in the American economy. New advances in transportation technology, greater access to sea travel, and a growing industry based economy brought more potential for the commodification of oceanic objects. This is evident in the increased demands for oceanic objects in cosmetic, fashion, and decorative industries, not only in the use of baleen and ambergris for commercial products (i.e. perfume, umbrellas, and corsets) but in the implementation of mother of pearl, coral, and other items derived from the ocean.<sup>59</sup> The ocean and its spoils were increasingly valued for its economic potential as manufactured commodities, explaining the growing profitability and success of the whaling industry during this period, in turn contributing to the growth of the United States as a global economic power. The “yankee”

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<sup>58</sup> Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 100; Davis, Gallman, and Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan*, 48-49.

<sup>59</sup> Davidson and Duggins, *Sea Currents in Nineteenth-Century Art, Science, and Culture*, 8.

whaling industry emerged as a product of economic and cultural systems that encouraged the commodification of oceanic products. Adopting profit driven systems of production led to the mass killing of whale species across the globe for American capitalist ventures, resulting in the accumulation of excess industry byproduct in the form of whale bone that would be used for scrimshandering.

Scrimshaw developed as a widely practiced mariner art form from the expanded reach and scope of the whaling industry, which resulted in excess byproduct in the form of whale bone. Furthermore, developments in labor culture—most pointedly growing perceptions of productive leisure as a moral imperative—enabled whalers to engage in creative pursuits in ways that were socially acceptable and encouraged. It is under these social conditions of shifting labor conventions, whereby the concept of productive leisure was beginning to be embraced in the American public consciousness, that scrimshandering was encouraged as a desirable use of a whaler's time. Under different circumstances, scraping away at the veneer of a whale tooth may seem like a waste of time, a trivial pursuit, or a distraction from one's work, but within the context of nineteenth century American labor culture, leisure activities or hobbies were promoted as a productive use of one's time over staying completely idle. It is through the development of these social norms that scrimshaw had the potential to grow as an art form and communal practice, widely practiced by whalers aboard various sea vessels over the course of decades as whalers were given the space and leniency to pursue creative endeavors while at sea.

The need for productivity and the demonization of idleness are ever present under these capitalist systems. Art making—scrimshandering—was only accepted insofar as it was viewed as a productive use of time. Concurrently, whalers observably scrimshanded not only as a means of passing time but as a means of seeking fulfillment outside of their labor; momentarily distancing

themselves from the work which consumed their lives. The whaling industry is peculiar in that while the labor conditions aboard a whaleship closely resembled the pre-industrial conventions—where boundaries between a “work life” and an “at home life” are less easily defined as there was no “home” for whalers to retire to while at sea—the economic pressures of manufacturing profit and maximizing productivity were characteristically capitalist. These conditions necessitated leisurely practice outside of one’s labor, as a whaleman couldn’t “clock out” in the way that an industry laborer would be able to. While scrimshandering operated within the capitalist structures which facilitated its production, scrimshaw became a reprieve from the oppressiveness of those overbearing conditions, giving whalers an opportunity to creatively express themselves outside of the labor that dictated and seemingly defined their lives.

### 3c) Exploration of Identity Through Scrimshaw

As the physical manifestations of whalemen’s exploration of identity outside of their profession, the visual motifs expressed in scrimshaw reveal how whalemen viewed their relationship with the outside world and expressed their identity as individuals. Feelings of longing for land, interpersonal relationships, and community tied to place are identifiable through visual themes related to domesticity and gender. Such indicates a major way in which whalemen found meaning outside of labor was through their connections to land and loved ones made inaccessible by the nature of their working conditions.

Whaleship crews were predominantly male, aside from the captain’s wife who might have chosen to live on board with her husband.<sup>60</sup> Despite the industry being a hyper masculine one, entangled in themes of power, conquest, and domination over nature, the art which whalemen created was overtly feminine in design and purpose. This is evident in how

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<sup>60</sup> Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 136.

scrimshanders commonly drew inspiration from the female form in their engraved portraits.<sup>61</sup> In creating decorative objects to be viewed and admired, women become the subject of viewership. The objectification of women is not new, however, I would argue the way in which the female form is engraved into objecthood through the medium scrimshaw is not only indicative of whalers' sexual inclinations—that is the admiration of women's bodies—but of a desire for domesticity and relationship dynamics representative of the social norms of the time; what is unachievable within the confines of a whaleship. Ideas which would have been reinforced by popular circulating periodicals intended to market an ideal image of the home which would be used as reference material for works of scrimshaw.<sup>62</sup> Works like that of Fig. 14, Fig. 16 and Fig. 20 below depict well dressed women in finely decorated outfits, projecting an image of the ideal woman and with it, desire for the socialized woman, that which is currently inaccessible to the whaler. In a male dominated work environment which whalers inhabit, living in close, often unhygienic quarters, this image of the well groomed, mannered, and educated woman (see Fig. 14 and Fig. 15) is a far off ideal. The imagined ideal of the feminine on land comes in stark contrast to the hyper masculine and life at sea, leaving whalers with feelings of yearning for what is out of reach. The engraved woman's portrait becomes a vessel for escapism from the undesirable labor and living conditions at sea to what would be its diametric opposition; the imagined feminine, which scrimshaw was the medium for expressing. In short, it is under the extraordinary circumstances and atypical labor environment that evoked whalers' yearning for the seemingly mundane of domestic living.

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<sup>61</sup> Refer to Fig. 14, Fig. 16, Fig. 20, and Fig. 21

<sup>62</sup> Slipp, *The Wider World and Scrimshaw*, 64; Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 25.



Fig. 20, Unidentified, *Engraved Whale Tooth*, ca. post 1843, whale ivory, Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts

*Above is a pinprick engraved whale tooth depicting a full portrait of a neatly dressed woman.*

*She fashions a dress with a bell shaped skirt and bishop sleeves. Atop her head, she wears a bonnet decorated with long, striped ribbons and small, red flowers. Her head is turned over her shoulder as she reaches out with her left index finger to point forward. In her right hand she holds a handkerchief.*

This imagination of the feminine wasn't limited to the female form, as seen in the various functional domestic objects crafted by whalers. In a work environment where women were scarce, pie crimpers, yarn swifts, corset busks, objects associated with women's work and fashion, were plentiful. These objects were made with the thought of specific women in the lives of whalers and their intent to return. In crafting domestic objects, whalers' minds were momentarily reminded of the loved ones whom they sought to gift their items to, consumed with thoughts of seeing their loved ones once more. Their minds were elsewhere, detached from

responsibility or affiliation to labor, because they did not intend to remain at sea. Through these domestic objects, we can see how whalers imagined their lives upon returning to land, met with the feminized, domestic labor which they were estranged from while at sea. This is further supported by works like *Domestic Happiness Tooth* which explicitly call upon themes of the domestic home and harmonious family relationships, seeing husband and wife in blissful marriage with two young children they care for in partnership.<sup>63</sup> A small engraving of a ship is pictured in the frame above the domestic scene but is secondary to the home and the constructed family dynamic.

What do these art objects communicate then, but whalers' identity as not in isolation to land but instead shaped by their desire for a return to land and loved ones. A whaler as a lover and a family man, real and imagined, is brought to the forefront in these images. This exposes the life of a whaler to not only be engaged with the dangers that come with adventuring open waters, but the loneliness that comes with a life of isolation, and days consumed with the dull monotony of inactivity. The intent to return home has shaped whaler identity as potently as their experiences at sea. Using scrimshaw as a visual archive for whalemens' externalized desires, their visual motifs reveal the inner thoughts of these working men, giving insight into sectors of their identity not extensively explored in the common narrative around whaler identity.

## **Conclusion**

Sailing on open water for years at a time, detached from familiar people and places, brought a profound sense of loneliness for many whalemens, inspiring longing for an idealized vision of the harmonious domestic home. These sentiments seemingly contradict the standing narrative around whaler identity, that is usually limited to the boundaries of their labor and the

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<sup>63</sup> Refer to Fig. 17.

pervasive image of the “working man”, “adventurer”, and “whale slayer”. It is a hyper masculine image which has largely remained uncontested in the study of whaler culture and more broadly in the perception of the public consciousness as informed by popular media. It is through scrimshaw—and whalers’ engagement with feminine media and forms—that these narratives are obscured, revealing the ways in which whalers sought fulfillment outside of their labor. As an occupational art form, scrimshaw and scrimshandering is one of the few instances where we can see art and labor interact so explicitly and tangibly communicated.

In my survey of nineteenth century labor history in the United States, I contextualized scrimshaw within the sociocultural and economic landscape of its time to critically analyze its development as an art form alongside the rise of the whaling industry and popular sentiments around the necessity for productive leisure under capitalist systems of labor and production. In doing so, I surfaced scrimshaw’s relevance to this striking period in American labor history and more pointedly, the significance of scrimshaw as an art form born out of, and in retaliation to, oppressive labor conditions. Through these nuances, we can see how the study of scrimshaw bridges the gap between the fields of art history and labor history.

In this redefinition and recontextualization of scrimshaw as an art form, my scholarship reveals how whaler identity is shaped not only by their labor, but by their alienation from nation and interpersonal relationships, inspiring longing for romance and domesticity as made apparent by the visual motifs expressed in scrimshaw. I argue then that scrimshaw becomes a physical manifestation and enduring archive for whaler identity shaped by creative expression and desire. In this interpretation of scrimshaw, highlighting its significance to whaler culture and American labor history, I see my work as giving relevance and modern precedent to the under-studied art form.

These findings have profound implications for how we may analyze art in relation to labor. Growing attention has been placed on the study of material cultures, exposing the limitations of traditional art historical analysis. The longstanding approach of almost exclusively emphasizing visual interpretation of iconographic elements for the pursuit of higher meaning leaves little regard for the materiality of art objects. In the case of scrimshaw, its visual motifs and symbols cannot be interpreted independently of its material form. Its very medium being whale bone—the exploits of whalers' voyages—is in itself a symbol of labor, power dynamics, economic struggle, and empire. It is only by examining the physical medium in conversation with its historical contexts of labor, do we derive meaning from the visual motifs communicated through incised lines and ink.

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