In This Issue

- Collectors' Corner
- Market Report: Recent Scrimshaw Sales
- Summer Scrimshaw Auction Action

Scrimshaw Observer

Spring 2017
A publication of the Antique Scrimshaw Collectors Association

Volume 1, No. 1
©All Rights Reserved 2017

William W. Britt,
Scrimshaw Artist and Engraver on Wood
by Stuart M. Frank

On his only known voyage, sperm and right whaling in the Indian Ocean on the ship Martha of Fairhaven (1836-1838), a young seaman of barely seventeen engraved a splendid tooth and signed it in the formal manner of a professional engraver, “W.W. Britt, Sculp.” It has a fresh and original whaling scene, prominently featuring a breeching sperm whale in the foreground, with one whaleboat “fast” and approaching under paddles, another approaching under oars, a third readying to strike, and a ship hove-to in the background. The scene is framed in a rectangle, expertly labeled below. The official logbook (in the New Bedford Whaling Museum) notes the ship’s position on the previous day as 34°15’ south, 83°30’ east, which is actually nearer to Amsterdam Island than St. Paul’s, records the capture of that particular whale, presumably somewhat farther southwest, and twice mentions the whale producing 70 barrels of oil. A crew list written into the journal in 1918 by the then-owner, New Bedford collector Andrew Snow, Jr., clearly lists “Wm. W. Britt” among the seamen; so too does a reportedly contemporaneous crew list in the Nantucket Historical Association archive.

Legislation Report
by Jim Vaccarino

As spring arrives bringing with it fresh flowers and warm weather, we can also expect the arrival of new legislative sessions—reminding us all that we have to take the bad along with the good in life.

Legislators will tell us of their commitment to protect certain wildlife species and prohibit their commercial exploitation. It certainly sounds like a reasonably good concept when termed in that fashion and consequently it would be hard to find many people objecting. However, the difficulty lies in the details and definitions of the proposed measures. Sweeping, broad legislation can have dramatic effect and unintended consequences unless it is very narrowly drafted.

For example, certain states presently have laws on their books prohibiting the “sale,” “trafficking,” and “possession” of “ivory,” with no distinction made as to the types of ivory or the age of the species (items) to be protected. The use of the word “possession” is also highly concerning.

The 2017 legislative session in a few...
Scrimshaw Market Report
by Andy Jacobson

Expect the unexpected. The top lot at Eldred’s April 8, 2017, sale of Part II of the Mittler Collection was Lot 1040, the Lady Wellington Engraver’s Shannon & Chesapeake battle. It blew by the $25,000–$35,000 estimate to sell for $72,000.

At the other end of the spectrum, the much-admired and rare night scene attributed to Moses Denning (shown on the left), estimated at $30,000–$50,000, went for $18,000.

* * * * *

The centerpiece of Ernie Helides’ scrimshaw collection, the Frederick Myrick portrait of the New Bedford whaleship Frances (Lot 116), sold for $110,700 (including the 23% buyer’s premium) at Skinner’s March 4, 2017, sale. Estimated at $100,000–$150,000, the tooth opened at $60,000 and stumbled and was nearly hammered down at $65,000 before a rapid bidding flurry stopped at $90,000 hammer.

Myrick cranked out over three dozen “Susans,” but there are only two of the Frances. If size matters, at 8.3” this is the largest by far of Myrick’s work. The clarity, condition, layout, and execution of this unsigned and undated tooth clearly place it among the finest examples of the “Susan” genre.

Most of us don’t have a spare six figures to acquire a spectacular Myrick, but there was plenty of material at reasonable prices for the alert collector in 2016. How about a near pair of crimpers from the Mittler Collection sold on October 15, 2016? Admittedly, feet are a weird subject for crimpers or for pretty much anything other than shoes, but Lot 8 sold for $750. That’s the lowest price known for a legitimate pair of jagging wheels. In fact, when was the last time a legitimate pair of crimpers appeared?

Continued on next page
Scrimshaw Market Report, continued

Here are some more examples of perfectly good scrimshaw that sold last year. Many were plucked from Osona’s extremely successful August auction, but there were fair trades in every sale.

Wheelbarrows anyone? In my book, this is truly a great piece of Americana with an incredible provenance. Lot 95 in Rafael Osona’s Memishian Collection sale on August 6, 2016, sold for a reasonable $5,400. Its previous track record was: Rafael Osona, Nantucket, MA, 08/07/99, Lot 444, $10,080 net; Barbara Johnson, Sotheby’s, NY, 09/25/82, Lot 533, $7,425.

Three 4¼-inch clothespins (Lot 245) went for $240.

Six hundred seemed to be the magic dollar number. Lot 167, a heart-topped busk decorated with an eagle, the Boston State House, and a ship went for $600.

Six hundred dollars also claimed Lot 168, a whale ivory crimper with open-work heart and diamond decoration and a crown finial.

An L-shaped whalebone 32¼-inch cane (Lot 175), banded with exotic wood and whalebone separators, cost $600.

A 4-inch monogrammed whalebone seam rubber (Lot 246) sold for $240 (ex-Bourne, 10/21/92, Lot 16).

A 14¼-inch monogrammed geometric and foliate-decorated busk (Lot 182) sold for $480.

A 7¼-inch jagging wheel with a testing fork, fluted wheel, and stepped baleen separator (Lot 257) sold for $300 (ex-Paul Madden).

A 6¼-inch ring turned crimper with a fluted wheel (Lot 258) brought $240.

A 7-inch memorial tooth (Lot 456) showed “Mary Anne” beside a monument under weeping willows and realized $480.

The market is filled with opportunity. This is especially the case for those who make the effort to actually attend sales, shows, and shops.

Images courtesy of Eldred’s, Skinner’s, and Rafael Osona.

Andy Jacobson is the owner of Andrew Jacobson Marine Antiques in Ipswich, MA, selling a full line of quality marine antiques for 39 years. He also provides auction consultation services and qualified appraisals of collections and estates.

Request from Jonathan Blum on behalf of Martha’s Vineyard Island Heritage Center

Jonathan Blum is working on the Martha’s Vineyard Island Heritage Center, a 501(c)3 owned by the Martha’s Vineyard Preservation Trust. This new facility will be housed in the old Carnegie Library building on Water Street in Edgartown. The project is about island life, including every aspect from whaling to agriculture.

The project is looking for anyone interested in donating or selling at a modest cost the following objects for the whaling section:

1. vibrant whaling scene
2. try works pot
3. try works catcher on pole
4. two harpoons
5. one spade
6. 3-5 eel gigs (for island fishing section)
7. an antique/vintage large whale ship model

Jonathan Blum, Chair, Heritage Center Campaign jonathan.d.blum@gmail.com
Legislation Report
Continued from page 1

states offers some hope as well as some increased concern for those of us who collect antique scrimshaw. In Connecticut, for example, a proposed bill prohibits the sale of ivory (again without any distinction) but adds “while preserving the commercial viability of the antiques industry in the state.” Clearly, the drafter has been influenced by the antiques lobby and has seen the need to define the application of the law more narrowly. Similarly, in New Jersey and in Maryland bills are proposed to prohibit trafficking in certain species, but in both states the list of species has completely omitted any reference to whales or walruses. However, several other states are considering legislation to amend existing prohibitions with more severe penalties for violations.

As in recent years, 2017 promises to be yet another term of uncertainty at the state level, with no clear indication of a trend to carefully draft legislation with language to exempt certain species and certain categories of antiques.

Where do we go from here?

1. Contact any Secretary of State to determine if any effort is afoot to draft bills relevant to the protection of certain species of wildlife;
2. If such is found, get a copy and read it carefully to determine if it is favorable or unfavorable;
3. If unfavorable, contact the sponsor and explain the cause we represent and the need for clarification of the bill’s language;
4. If a hearing is scheduled, make sure you attend and bring along competent representatives of the favorable position.
5. If you can’t attend, plan to send a letter to the clerk of the appropriate legislative committee. Email affords the ability to attach photos or other graphic materials to support your position.

Remember three things:

1. One carefully drafted bill can become the template in many other states because legislatures often pirate (borrow) the work of other legislatures in their efforts to create new laws.
2. Legislators always have only one real goal—to satisfy their constituents—so the drafted language must never be inflammatory and should always explain the rationale for exemptions sought.
3. If you know your representative supports your position, you don’t need to pressure him/her to do the right thing, but it’s important to offer praise to ensure that s/he continues to do so.

Your contact will provide valuable positive reinforcement.

The following references to states and draft legislation are current as of 04/21/17:

- Alaska – HJR8, SJR4
- Arizona – HB2104
- Connecticut – HB06335, HB06338, SB00284, SB00942
- Delaware – HB95
- Massachusetts – S450, H419
- Maryland – SB560, HB686
- North Carolina – H768
- Nebraska – LB39
- New Jersey – A2447, S977
- New York – S01415, A01492
- Pennsylvania – HB248
- United States – HB226
- Vermont – H0220, S0117

Has a bill been introduced in your state?
Follow these easy instructions to get updates on pending legislation where you live.
2. Click on “Search” near the top right corner of the page.
3. When the Search page opens, look at the search box at the left side of the page. Select your state, and enter a search term (e.g., “ivory”) in the box entitled “Full Text Search.”
4. Click on the Search button below that box.

A page will appear with search results. If your search yields bills that have been introduced, you’ll see them listed. You can then click on any bill to get details, see who is sponsoring the bill, the bill’s status, and other important information.

8th Annual Nautical Antiques Show at the New Bedford Whaling Museum
Friday, May 12, 2017
Noon – 5pm | Early admission 11am – Noon

Browse marine antiques, scrimshaw, nautical instruments and tools, whaling logbooks, ship models, photos, paintings, prints, and more.

Free with Museum admission for Scrimshaw Weekend attendees and Whaling Museum members. Early admission for an extra $5.
whalingmuseum.org | 508-997-0046 X100
Collectors’ Corner

Seximshaw . . . By the Light of the Silvery Moon?
by Gregg Hurwitz

Those of us who appreciate scrimshaw crafted by the 19th-century hands, hearts, and minds of the men (and women) who braved the dangerous journeys and hunts of sperm whales for a living must, from time to time, have to marvel at the sheer scope of the engravings on the trophy teeth acquired and brought back home. From depictions of people, the famous, the infamous, and the forever anonymous, to the animals, locations, edifices, day-to-day objects, fierce battles, and even the occasional mundane geometric shapes we’ve seen etched with Spyrograph-like precision onto the smoothed, curved surfaces of sperm whale teeth oft yellowed and mellowed with age: these are the whalers’ recordings of what they experienced with their own eyes or conjured via their minds’ eyes. Interestingly, with all the variety that appears, I’ve yet to see another period scrimshaw tooth that depicts this specific type of unusual astronomical event, so I thought it worth sharing.

After studying this whaleman’s work to try to determine what exactly he was trying to convey and lacking any text identification on the tooth that would have made it potentially obvious, it eventually hit me like a frying pan to the face. I later ran my theory (and photo) by Dr. Stuart Frank and he seemed to agree it was a very reasonable hypothesis and thus, possibly, a unique depiction.

This is different from an Albro, smiling sun face, and different from a mere crescent moon hanging in the night sky above a coastal landscape scene. I believe this tooth is depicting a stylized version of what must have been to sailors at sea an awe-inspiring event: a partial solar eclipse. With a tooth as your canvas, how better to capture the majesty of the moon slowly passing in between the earth and the sun, at sea, from a sailor’s perspective?

Have a gaze and imagine the gulls overhead and the waves lapping against the hull as you consider the possible validity of this hunch. Am I reading too much into this image? Is it nothing more than another smiling sun and wishful thinking? Or is it the final eclipse phase just before the “diamond ring effect” is revealed and the sun’s corona ignites into full view, only made possible by the perfect alignment of earth, moon, and sun at just the right viewing location, at just the right time. Could it be? This (likely) Yankee whaler knew the answer we may never confirm . . . but can enjoy, at least in theory.

Gregg Hurwitz, collector of scrimshaw for more than 40 years residing in Los Angeles, CA.

This scrimshaw tooth is 5.5 inches tall, straight line measurement, tip to base. There is a three-masted ship on verso also flying the stars and stripes off the gaff, showing no false gun ports, and at full sail on a calmer sea. There is nothing depicted in the clear skies above the ship on the back side of this tooth. Photo by Gregg Hurwitz.

Collectors’ Corner by Michael Gerstein: We will learn the identity of the woman who is depicted on this tooth in his collection, as well as its history and source information. If you have a piece of scrimshaw with an interesting story, please contact us about submitting an article.
Auction Action
Mittler Scrimshaw Collection Centerpiece of Eldred’s July Marine Art Auction

East Dennis, Mass. – The final 60 lots from the Thomas Mittler Scrimshaw Collection, widely regarded as the best scrimshaw collection to come to market in 30 years, will go on the block at Eldred’s Marine Art Auction on July 20, 2017. The lots being offered include a Susan’s Tooth by Frederick Myrick as well as teeth by the Britannia Engraver, W. L. Roderick, the Pagoda Artisan, the Bank Note Engraver, and other known and unknown scrimshanders. The sale will also include whaleman-made utilitarian items like crimpers, watchtowers, and whalebone blocks.

Scrimshaw from other collections will also be included, highlighted by a whalebone plaque engraved by W. L. Roderick with a whaling scene titled “The Death,” two teeth by the Lady Wellington engraver, an 8.25” tooth with a polychrome scene of warships on the obverse and a portrait of a Victorian lady on the reverse, and a tooth engraved “Ship Lion Nantucket” with a portrait of the ship on obverse and an image of a scantily clad woman on reverse.

All lots from the Marine Art auction can be viewed online at www.eldreds.com. Catalogs are available for purchase for $23 including shipping and handling ($24 for Massachusetts and Connecticut residents).

The sale will begin at 10 a.m. EST on Thursday, July 20, 2017. Eldred’s is located at 1483 Route 6A, East Dennis, MA. Interested bidders can visit www.eldreds.com or call 508-385-3116 for more information or to register to bid via phone, absentee bid, or online. Online bidding hosted by Invaluable.com will also be available.

Rafael Osona Americana, English, Fine Arts & Marine Auction

Rafael Osona’s August 5 auction will feature three historic hall of fame scrimshander artisans, among others.

• Fine large Frederick Myrick (1808-1862) Susan’s tooth, dated March 27th 1829 – initials “SCC” (possibly Coffin family). Length 5¾ in. Width 3¾ in.

• Fine Britannia Engraver (fl. circa 1816-1830) tooth, engraved with two views of the London whaler Elizabeth, c. 1828. Length 5¼ in. Width 2¼ in. (not pictured).

• Signed Edward Burdett (1805-1833) of Nantucket tooth, inscribed “Pacific of Nantucket.” Length 5 in. Width 2¼ in.

The bounty will also include a fine selection of 19th-century whaleman made ditty boxes, the Barbara Johnson bonnet box, canes and walking sticks, nautical woolworks and marine art.

Note: Fine consignments still being accepted.

The auction begins at 9:30am at the American Legion Hall, 21 Washington Street (a short walk from the ferry) Nantucket Island, MA.

Two-day advance preview 08/03-08/04 from 10am-5pm and by appointment. Absentee and phone bids accepted. Illustrated color catalog online early July and in print July 10. Call or email to request a copy. (508) 228-3942 ~ OsonaAuctions@gmail.com.
William W. Britt, Scrimshaw Artist and Engraver on Wood

Continued from page 1

What is especially interesting about this fellow is that he later became a professional wood engraver in New York City from 1842 to 1889, and he characteristically signed his engravings much as he signed the scrimshaw, “W.W. Britt, Sc.” This suggests that prior to going whaling he had likely undergone a formal apprenticeship (or a portion of a formal apprenticeship) as a wood engraver, which accounts for the sophisticated composition and extremely refined technique of his scrimshaw. It also explains a signature that is uncharacteristically formal for scrimshaw but is the exact conventional type for an engraving.

Britt’s lifespan was precisely coeval with that of Herman Melville (1819-1891). He was born in New York City, and after his whaling voyage he returned there and to his original occupation. He married a woman named Mary around 1840 and in 1850 they had an eight-year-old daughter and were still living in Manhattan, but by 1855 he was widowed and living with his daughter in Brooklyn. Neither of the standard reference works on American artists—that is, neither Croce & Wallace nor William Young—lists Britt as active after 1850. However, the 1860 census has him living in Hudson, N.J., working as an engraver and recently married, for the second time, to a New Jersey native named Lucy Swayze (1825-1901). By 1862 they had moved to Jersey City, just across from Manhattan; and the 1880 census identifies him, at age 62, as a wood engraver living in Jersey City with Lucy and, now, two daughters. This indicates unequivocally that various later wood engravings signed “W.W. Britt, Sc.” and many that are unsigned are by his hand, including illustrations in books and periodicals, notably in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. Prominent among the latter are “Personal recollections of the war. By a Virginian,” by David Hunter Strother, using the pseudonym Porte Crayon (in the August 1867 issue); Ernest Ingersoll’s “La Villa Real de Santa Fe” (April 1880); and Constance Fenimore Woolson’s “At Mentone” (January 1884). In conformity with Harper’s usual policy regarding staff artists and occasional contributors, most of Britt’s best efforts were published without a byline or credit—perhaps including “A Summer in New England. Illustrated by Porte Crayon,” which appeared in the June, August, and November 1860 issues and includes a series of whaling-related pictures of New Bedford waterfront activities and characters sketched by Strother in May 1859.

Britt only went whaling the one time, and only the one piece of scrimshaw is known. But his quiet career as one of Harper’s best utility illustrators yielded an impressive legacy of Americana pictures of which the scrimshaw forms a deserving part. By 1889 he was mostly retired (though at least one engraving was published in St. Nicholas Magazine in 1891) and wife Lucy was working as a nurse (which may have been her original career). After William’s death in 1891 she lived in Jersey City with one of their daughters, a music teacher also named Lucy. And while the art-history authorities lost sight of Britt somewhere along the way—just when he was coming into maturity as an illustrator—we in the scrimshaw community now know enough about his early days and his later career to regard his accomplishments with respect and admiration.


Stuart M. Frank is the founder and director of the Scrimshaw Forensics® Laboratory, the founder and organizer of the annual Scrimshaw Weekend at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and author of Ingenious Contrivances, Curiously Carved and several other books and monographs about scrimshaw.

1 In a private collection, originally reported by Peter Bump, a descendant; offered but passed at Northeast Auctions, Aug. 15-17, 2008, #1449.
2 The back of Britt’s scrimshaw tooth also has the name “Richard / Mae / L,” crudely engraved by another, later hand: his relationship to Britt has not been ascertained.