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Scrimshaw Observer

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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."¹ It has a fresh and original whaling scene, prominently featuring a breaching 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



Scrimshaw sperm whale tooth inscribed "SPERM WHALING SCENE OFF THE ISLE OF ST. PAULS. INDIAN OCEAN. / By the crew of the ship *Martha* of Fair Haven / Nov. 11th. 1837," and signed "W. W. Britt Sculp." Photo by Richard Donnelly.

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.²

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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

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Our mission: To promote and protect the trade, collection, and study of antique scrimshaw, the historic and culturally important folk art of the whaleman.

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To learn more about the organization or to become a member, please visit www.antiquescrimshawcollectors.org or write to info@antiquescrimshawcollectors.org.

The next meeting of the Antique Scrimshaw Collectors Association will be held on Saturday, May 13, 2017, at the New Bedford Whaling Museum during Scrimshaw Weekend.

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 jaggng 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 4³/₄-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 32¹/₂-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 14¹/₂-inch monogrammed geometric and foliate-decorated busk (Lot 182) sold for \$480.



A 7¹/₂-inch jaggging wheel with a testing fork, fluted wheel, and stepped baleen separator (Lot 257) sold for \$300 (ex-Paul Madden).



A 6¹/₂-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

Collectors' Corner

Scrimshaw . . . 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.



© Gregg Hurwitz

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.

Next Issue



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 5¾ in. Width 2¼ in. (not pictured).



- Signed Edward Burdett (1805-1833) of Nantucket tooth, inscribed "Pacific of Nantucket." Length 5 in. Width 2¾ 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

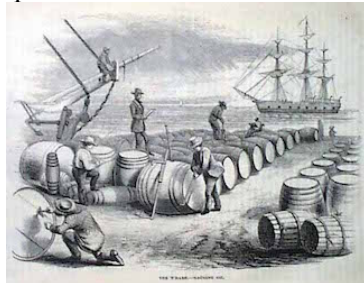
Continued from page 1

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.

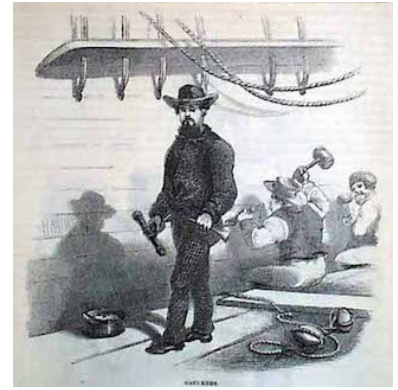
Britt’s lifespan was precisely coeval with that of Herman Melville (1819-1891). He was born in New York City, and after his whaling voyage he returned there and to his original occupation. He married a woman named Mary around 1840 and in 1850 they had an eight-year-old daughter and were still living 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 & Wallace³ nor William Young⁴—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)⁵ 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.



“New Bedford Wharf. The Gauger of Oil.” Drawn by David Hunter Strother (“Porte Crayon”) in May 1859; engraving attributed to W. W. Britt for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, June 1860.



“Caulkers.” Drawn by David Hunter Strother (“Porte Crayon”) in New Bedford in May 1859; engraving attributed to W. W. Britt for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, June 1860.



“Jordan is a Hard Road to Travel.” Drawn by David Hunter Strother (“Porte Crayon”), engraving attributed to W. W. Britt, from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, March 1867.

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.

³ George C. Croce and David H. Wallace, *The New-York Historical Society’s Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 82.

⁴ William Young, ed., *A Dictionary of American Artists, Sculptors, and Engravers: From the beginnings through the turn of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: William Young & Co., 1968), p. 66.

⁵ “In a Blizzard” (Winterthur Museum, http://findingaid.winterthur.org/html/HTML_Finding_Aids/col0868.htm).

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.*