

- Collection of Meylert Armstrong
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# Scrimshaw Observer

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## The *Ann Alexander* Scrimshaw: Source-Critical Research Debunks the Myth

by Stuart M. Frank

In August 1851 in the Pacific Ocean, the ship *Ann Alexander* of New Bedford, commanded by Captain John S. Deblois of Newport, R.I., was stove and sunk by an angry sperm whale. As far as anyone knew, this had only happened once before: the notorious sinking of the Nantucket whaleship *Essex* by an outraged sperm whale in 1821—the episode that inspired the ultimate destruction of Herman Melville's *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*. The *Ann Alexander* calamity, reported in the fall of 1851, corroborated for skeptics the fateful outcome of *Moby-Dick*, which had been published earlier the same year.

Three expertly scrimshawed teeth are supposed to have come from that same whale, with the scrimshaw done aboard the ship that later captured the whale. The story has long been accepted as gospel. According to the archives of the Nantucket Historical Association,

After being struck [and sunk by the whale], Captain Deblois loaded his crew into two whaleboats, which were eventually rescued by the passing ship *Nantucket*. Five months later, Captain William Jernegan, of the ship *Rebecca Simms*, killed a large sperm whale,



*Ship Ann Alexander of New Bedford* by Giuseppi Fedi (fl. circa 1792-1820), 1807  
18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" (47.6 x 67 cm). New Bedford Whaling Museum 1978.24.1.

and discovered a harpoon bearing the stamp of the *Ann Alexander*. His men removed the teeth and created three elegant scrimshaw pieces, which he presented to Captain Deblois in memory of his disaster.

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## Collecting Ancient Scrimshaw

by Sanford Moss

Five years ago, I became attracted to early Arctic harpoon heads carved from walrus ivory and found that they can be easily purchased at auctions and from dealers in Inuit and Eskimo materials. I soon bought my first group of harpoon heads at a Connecticut auction, including a few that had been decorated with engraved designs. They were scrimmed! And, having blades made with chipped flint or ground slate, some of these heads clearly pre-dated the nineteenth century. I now know that the most ornate and beautiful of these Arctic ivory engravings date back to at least a couple of hundred years BC.

They are ancient, archaic, complex, and masterful. When you see the delicacy of the engraving, it is hard to believe that these were carved with stone-tipped tools, many hundreds of years before Yankee and British sailors engraved ivory with their pocket knives.

The history of early walrus ivory engraving is seen best in the western Arctic, particularly in the region of the Bering Strait, both on the Asian and American sides. The earliest examples

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## Collectors' Corner

### 2000 Pieces of Scrimshaw?

### The Collection of Meylert Armstrong

by Paul Vardeman

In November 1944, *Antiques Magazine* published an article by Claggett Wilson titled "Scrimshaw, The Whaleman's Art." The author himself was not a collector, so he illustrated his article with some beautiful examples of scrimshaw from the collection of Meylert M. Armstrong, who, along with Henry Kendall, W. W. Bennett, and Harrison Huster, was among the pioneers of scrimshaw collectors.

Meylert Melville Armstrong was the scion of a wealthy family in the paper making industry. He was born on October 17, 1905, and died March 28, 1978. He married Natalie Burleigh Conkling on May 22, 1928, and had homes in Darien and Greenwich, Connecticut, and New Hope, Pennsylvania.



The picture above, provided by Gregg Hurwitz, shows Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong standing in front of some shelves containing part of the collection. Careful inspection of the photograph reveals twenty or more items now residing in public and private collections.

The *Antiques Magazine* article prompted further research on Meylert Armstrong who, it turns out, may have owned the largest and finest private scrimshaw collection ever assembled. The *New York Times* on April 25, 1955, under the headline "Greenwich Home Clings to Sea Art" reported:

"A landlocked home in suburban Connecticut seems hardly a proper museum for what is probably the world's largest collection of scrimshaw. Yet 2,000 engraved whale teeth and whalebone carvings cover the basement walls of Meylert M. Armstrong's Greenwich house."

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## Collecting Ancient Scrimshaw, *continued from page 1*

occur from Point Barrow and Point Hope in the northeast down to Norton Sound on the Bering Sea. Saint Lawrence Island, the Diomed Islands near the Bering Strait, and the nearby shores of the Chukchi Peninsula are well known for their early engraving styles.

The oldest engravings often feature sculpted busts and human figures—sometimes small (an inch or two high)—with peculiar almond-shaped heads. Many of these figures are female, and even though the sculptural quality is high, the engraving itself often consists of fairly simple straight, or slightly curved, lines. This material often has a dark, sometimes black, patina that speaks to long burial in an organic-rich substrate, locked in by permafrost. This earliest “scrimshaw” is generally dated from about 200BC to 200AD. It is described as from the Okvik culture, in the style known also as Old Bering Sea I (OBS I). Illustrated is a small scraper used to remove fat from seal or walrus intestines prior to their use in Eskimo rain gear.



This scraper, shaped like a narrow turtle shell, is only 3½ inches long and 1 inch wide. Note the smooth sculpted surface of the scraper and the graceful engraved curves, consisting of double lines with short spurs. The rough surface is the pith of the ivory tusk.

Another example in the OBS I style is this old and highly mineralized walrus ivory kayak. Less than 6 inches long and



1½ inches wide, it was most likely made as a toy for a child. The vision of a man, seated by his blubber lamp in a semi-subterranean hovel, carving this kayak two thousand years ago for his child is a haunting one. On the smoother, uncorroded surfaces, you can even see the tool marks left from scraping this piece.

Following OBS I, a more elaborate engraving style developed, which emphasized curved lines joined to produce closed ovals, sometimes terminating in elongated points or triangles (OBS II). This art is found on harpoon heads and other tools and implements. The engraving is more complex than in the OBS I material.

The harpoon heads have blades of chipped flint, sometimes on the sides of the point, sometimes on the upper and lower surfaces. These are toggling heads (anticipating Lewis Temple by about two thousand years), with the basal barbs sometimes extended into one, two, or three points. The foreshaft of the harpoons fits into an open side of the rear of the body, not into a drilled hole. There are rectangular slots through which passed hide lashings to hold the head onto the foreshaft. The engraving style of the period characterizes OBS II, and this style is dated usually from about 100AD to perhaps 300AD. The items engraved and carved often include animal-like figures with teeth and contortions that probably had some spiritual meaning. These would include harpoon foreshafts and nose pieces, as well as ulus, scrapers, combs, bag handles, and other tools.

This harpoon head has no tip blade, just provision for two chipped flint blades on the upper and lower surfaces. The lower blade has been lost.



The final stage of the Old Bering Sea (OBS III) style is the ultimate in Eskimo engraving. The lines can be heavy or light, with curved lines, concentric ovals, and circles, and the “canvas” is well covered. Pairs of concentric circular lines enclose slightly raised “humps,” the centers of which are drilled or sometimes inlaid with wood, baleen, or pyrite. These “eyes” are quite diagnostic of OBS III and are applied to harpoon heads, animal forms, scrapers, harpoon parts, etc. The animal forms from this period often feature large canine teeth. The “eyes” have reminded some observers of the nucleated “form line” eyes in Northwest Coast Indian art, but they surely preceded the latter style by many hundreds of years. OBS III carving seems to have ended by about 500AD. This harpoon head (from the collection of Ladd Thorne) is a good example. It is not provided with a slot for a blade. Many OBS III harpoon heads are like this.





Sometimes the drilled “pupils” of the “eyes” of OBS III are found with inlays of wood, baleen, or even crystals of pyrite.

This tiny effigy of a bowhead whale, with drilled fluke, has been well covered with inlays of pyrite (some of which have been lost). It likely dates from the OBS III style and may have served as a hunting charm or trophy.



The ensuing engraving style of the Bering Sea Eskimos was retrograde in the sense that it was simpler, with curved lines replaced by straight lines having small offshoot spurs, and line ends and junctions marked by drill holes and sometimes small circles. Diagonal lines were often engraved along the sides of elongated forms (knives and sewing kits) to indicate internal vertebral or rib structures. The most used motif was the small circle with a small central dot. Harpoons still featured open foreshaft slots. Side blades, when present, were often shell or slate. The terminal harpoon blades are usually ground slate. The harpoon blades were inserted just before use, so there was no pin fixing them to the head. This simpler style is called the “Punuk” phase of Eskimo decoration. It is thought to mark the emergence of “Neoeskimos” from “Paleoeskimos.” The name refers to the Punuk group of small islands found off the southeastern end of St. Lawrence Island, where middens are rich in this style. The Punuk style of engraving waned and then merged into the modern Eskimo style of engraving that has mostly decorations of a few simple lines, or none. The harpoon heads feature closed sockets for the foreshaft. The end of the Punuk phase is thought to have occurred about 1500AD, the modern or contemporary style being an outgrowth of the influence of American whaling scrimshaw to which the Eskimos were exposed after about 1850.

This Punuk style harpoon head is of bone and has top and bottom blades fashioned from shell.



Another example of the Punuk engraving style is this brooch, probably made to be sewn to a jacket or dress top. The brooch is interesting because it retains the original red ocher rubbed into the engraved lines. Examples of this treatment are found back to at least the OBS II

engravings. In addition to red ocher, engravings were sometimes enhanced with black pigments made of soot mixed with blood, producing early polychrome “scrimshaw.”



A final example of early Eskimo scrimshaw is this large toggling whaling harpoon head, fashioned from bone. This harpoon was made to have a chipped-stone blade lashed into its nose, but it likely post-dates the Punuk era and belongs to the Recent time, 17<sup>th</sup> century or later. The simple decoration features four parallel lines that diverge into pairs around the line hole. The pairs of lines on this example are connected in



certain places by vertical “tie” lines between them. This pattern is seen on many examples of Eskimo whaling harpoons that used chipped-stone or ground-slate blades. Their similar, yet distinctive, form argues that the tie lines (or sometimes short external “spurs”) were owner, maker, or community marks, perhaps to settle ownership of a disputed captured whale.

With this kind of information, and with enough specimens, time, and study, perhaps someday we can make attributions such as the “Puffin Artisan,” or the “Tic Tac Toe Engraver.”

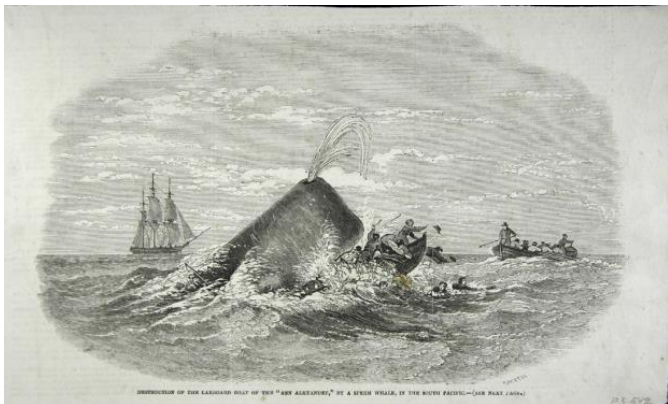
*Sanford “Sandy” Moss is a retired marine biologist who spent 40 years teaching about fishes, animal behavior, and vertebrate anatomy at Cornell, Yale, and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. For the last 20 years he has collected antique hand tools, and for the past 12 years he has served as a volunteer at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, being a weekend docent and a member of the Scrimshaw Forensics Group®.*

## The *Ann Alexander* Scrimshaw . . . , continued from page 1



Three teeth allegedly from the whale that stove and sank the ship *Ann Alexander* (1851): the whale was later taken by the ship *Rebecca Sims* under Captain William Jernegan, and the fine scrimshaw was given to Captain Deblois of the *Ann Alexander*. Nantucket Historical Association #1979.57.1

Melville had published his epic *Moby Dick* shortly before the news of the *Ann Alexander* reached land; when he heard of the incident he wrote ‘Ye Gods, what a commentator is this *Ann Alexander* whale... I wonder my evil art has raised this monster.’



“Destruction of the Larboard Boat of *Ann Alexander* by a Sperm whale in the South Pacific” engraved by William Raymond Smyth, *Illustrated London News*, November 1851. 6 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>” (16.2 x 26.7 cm). New Bedford Whaling Museum 2001.100.8532 (reprinted as “Destruction of a Whaleboat from the ship *Ann Alexander* of New-Bedford” in *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, Boston, 1852; and “Perils of the Pacific Whale Trade,” anonymous, 1857).

Charming, but the story *cannot* be true. The pictures on the trio of scrimshaw teeth are based on source images that were published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1856—almost *five years* after the disaster itself, *four and one-half years* after the rescue, and *three years* after the rescue ship had returned to New Bedford and paid off the crew. They are very fine scrimshaw and the teeth *may* have come from the whale that sank the *Ann Alexander*, but they *could not* have been done by one of Captain Jernegan’s crew on the *Rebecca Sims* prior to the *Sims* returning to New Bedford in June 1853; and the teeth could not have been presented to Captain Deblois until more than *at least three years after that*.

The bottom line is: we don’t know who did the scrimshaw or when, but it was no earlier than the summer of 1856—that is, sometime after the pictures were published and at least five years after the event. This calls the whole yarn into question—and whether they are in fact teeth recovered from that particular obstreperous sperm whale.



## The Ann Alexander Scrimshaw . . . , continued



**“LA MIGNENE.”** From *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, May 1856, p. 389.



**[The Fortune-Teller.]** From *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, June 1856, n.p.



**“POLKA JACKET.”** From *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, March 1856, p. 202.

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## Scrimshaw Market Report

### The Never Ending Winter Market Report

by Andy Jacobson

Unlike the New England winter, this will be a sharp short update.

Due to the vagaries of life and weather, I never ventured beyond the great frozen local north to the Maine fringes. Therefore, my comments on Julia and Thomaston are not drawn from life.

The top scrimshaw lot among an otherwise uninspiring marine offering at James Julia's February 2018 sale was Lot 2167, a pair of signed N. S. Finney 27 1/4" walrus tusks decorated with vignettes of famous actors. Market fresh and estimated at \$6-\$8,000, the usual suspect purchased them for \$91,960.

Scattered through Thomaston Place's February sale were a few lots of scrimshaw. Among the more interesting



pieces was Lot 826, a 12" whalebone and exotic wood "sailor-made cruet set" sporting a Freeport, Mass. Capt. Nathan Nye provenance to the collection of Edmund P. Skillin. For what it's worth, Capt. Nye was not a listed American whaling master. There was a non-ship captain



Nathan Nye who was a big shot in the early days of Freeport, Maine. At any rate the lot sold for \$5,400.

Lot 827, an 8 1/4" crimper from the Skillen Collection sold for a strong \$5400.



Lot 827, a 13 3/4" busk decorated with a bustling harbor view cataloged as Salem included a lighthouse and sold for \$4,800. There was a "professional repair" to one ship and the left edge was marred.



Skinner's March 3<sup>rd</sup> Americana sale was also a tad thin on the scrim. However, Lot 200 contained two of Ernie Helides's Narwhal canes. There was a plain-Jane silver-topped example along with a 39" stick topped by a snake-entwined fist. At \$3,321, it was two for the price of one.



Skinner's March 15<sup>th</sup> Country Americana sale was loaded with more of Ernie Helides's sticks. There were more than 200 canes sold in about 43 lots. Quite a few were of marine interest. A typical example was Lot 51, which had seven mostly whalebone canes estimated at \$500- \$700. It sold for a more realistic \$2,952.



The auction month ended on St. Paddy's day at John McInnis's



everything was fairly estimated at \$2-\$2,500 and sold for \$4,560.

The previous day, the best cane in the sale, Lot 337, a 34" spiral-carved and fluted example made \$1,800.



Amesbury, Mass., auction hall. Featured were a couple hundred lots advertised as a Maine Collection. Among the varied offerings was a couple of scrimshaw surprises. Apparently, the swift market is unknowable. Lot 1089, a perfectly acceptable 19"-high ribbon-tied swift with a normal

*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.*





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*Scrimshaw lap desk once belonging  
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