



11-15-1996

## Scrimshaw

John Erickson Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Erickson, John Jr. (1996) "Scrimshaw," *Westview*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol16/iss1/13>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



## SCRIMSHAW

*by John Erickson, Jr.*

Scrimshaw is an art as well as a craft. It is the scribing of a design onto ivory, bone, horn or even man-made materials such as plastics or polymers. Regardless of the medium, the technique and results are all similar. A design is drawn on the polished surface and scribed with a needle or small sharp blade. Once the design is incised, ink, dye, or oil paint is applied to the lines or dots and wiped away. After allowing time for the pigment to dry, the surface is once again polished with fine steel wool. The area incised will hold the color revealing the desired design.

Scrimshaw as an art form has been with us for the better part of three centuries. Usually associated with the Maritime industry of whaling, scrimshaw became the folk art of the American whaler. The average time at sea in pursuit of whales was three years, and on those extended voyages, time was a commodity. When the men were not caught up in the excitement of the chase and capture of the whale, there were long periods of shipboard routine and boredom. Scrimshaw was a relief from the tedium and monotony that occupied the sailor's daily life. Indeed, the word scrimshaw seems to have its root in the Dutch word "skrimshander," meaning one who spends much time laying around or a "lazy fellow." Obviously, most of the scrimshaw produced during those lulls was of a nautical theme, depicting harbor scenes, great battles at sea, or men and ships in pursuit of the mighty whale.

Generally speaking, there were three types of whale ivory used by the New England whalers in their

scrimshaw: teeth, panbone and baleen whalebone. The Sperm whale is the only one with teeth, from 24 to 40 in its lower jaw. These teeth were usually scrimshawed whole or were cut into smaller pieces for inlay work and smaller articles. These teeth were considered the whaler's trophy from the hunt, and often the designs scribed on them reflect a definite masculine character: whaling scenes, grand ships, or naval battles. Scrimshawed Sperm whale teeth are among the most prized and valuable examples of whaling art collected today.

The panbone is the bone from the lower jaw. The large, heavy pieces are often twelve to eighteen feet long but comparatively thin. This was the "hardware store" of the scrimshander. Not only could carvers have a large surface for whaling or other scenes, but also the bone could be cut into pieces for clothes pins, needle cases, knife handles, mallets, or even yard sticks.

Baleen whalebone is an appendage that is actually a giant sieve used to strain plankton and shell crustacea from the sea water. Once removed, it was scraped, cleaned, and dried or "seasoned." Baleen was commonly used in women's corsets. In fact, some of the more romantic type of scrimshaw became the frontal stay or "busk" of a lady's corset. Often, these "busks" would display verse, geometric designs, or designs symbolic of the home and lady left behind.

The discovery of "rock oil" (kerosene as refined from petroleum), spelled the end of the whaling industry. Sperm oil as used for lubrication and oil



lamps and spermaceti wax as used in the manufacture of candles now had serious competition. Although the petroleum industry was in its infancy, it rapidly replaced those products associated with the whaling industry. That, coupled with raids by the Confederate Navy on Union whalers during the American Civil War and the disasters to the Arctic Fleet, contributed heavily to the end of American Whaling. With the demise of the whaling industry, scrimshawed ivory from the whales virtually ceased, closing a colorful chapter in American maritime history, as well as art.

Another form of scrimshaw from early America is the powder horn. Though not normally associated with the nautical theme, some examples do exist. Engraved or scrimshawed powder horns of antiquity are rare. These horns are usually classified into the categories of those made prior to, and those made after, 1800. These categories can be further divided by style, architecture, and the engraving or scrimshaw on them. As with any art form, the work often reflected the individual's thoughts, emotions, and times in which they lived. Many of the horns produced were engraved by professionals, just as was the nautical art described earlier. However, the vast majority of the horns were done by the soldier, trapper, or hunter who used them in daily life. As with the whaling scrimshaw, these horns vary from the unattractive to the absolutely exquisite.

Engraved powder horns prior to 1800 are usually from the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War period and are considered to be from the "Golden Age Of Horns." During this period that spans approximately fifty years, horns produced are considered by collectors to be the ultimate in style, elegance, and decoration. Horns of this period are of

many themes. Many are military campaign horns and are documented as significant sources of history that may otherwise have been lost. Map horns (as there were few maps and fewer roads) are especially valuable from the historical viewpoint, as are horns showing forts (or fortifications) and facades of towns that no longer exist. Rhyme horns were also a popular theme. These horns had a brief verse (two to six lines) that ranged from the patriotic to the tender, followed by the name of the owner and the words "HIS HORN." Some of the horns had ships, flowers and vines, Indians, trees, animals (real and mythical), or combinations thereof. Many of these horns saw very little practical use and have survived the years because they were made as keepsakes or mementos and are in excellent condition. Even the plainer, less decorative horns that have seen the usage that they were intended for have survived due in large part to the durability of the cattle or oxen horn.

In rather sharp contrast are the horns made from 1800 up to the American Civil War, when powder horns were replaced by metal flasks, cartridge pouches and the rolled cartridge. Horns of this period were carried in the westward expansion and exploration of America. These horns were essential, functional equipment as centers of commerce were few and far between. Consequently, they were plainer than those of the earlier era, as keepsakes were a luxury. These were the horns of explorers and trappers of beaver such as John Colter (who discovered the Yellowstone country), Kit Carson, Jediah Smith, James Beckworth, Jim Bridger, and Hugh Glass to name but

a very few. Some of the horns from the Fur Trade Era were scrimshawed, probably around a campfire or cabin while waiting out the winter.



*Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders, Whales and Whalers*, by E. Norman Flayderman. These books allowed the reader to tour and inspect

The vast majority, however, were inexpensive and produced in quantity for the pilgrims headed west. Though not as attractive to the collector, these horns of the fur trade era retain an important place in history. Horns of this period can still be found in antique shops and are usually relatively inexpensive. I have a horn I found in Stillwater, Oklahoma about three years ago. The only design on the horn is "4T." Typical of horns after 1800, there is no reference as to the maker, no date as to when it was made, and no significance to the "4T" has been found to date. It may be interesting to note that when this horn was purchased, it was about one-third full of gunpowder, dry and still viable for the purpose intended.

Just as technology had closed the door on the whaling industry and its associated art, the same became true for the powder horn. The metallic cartridge and the repeating rifles of Spencer, Henry, and Winchester rendered the single shot muzzle loading rifle obsolete in a very short time, and once again an interesting chapter in American folk art all but disappeared. Scrimshaw as an art form faded into mild obscurity, sought only by collectors and kept somewhat alive by oriental artists producing trinkets for the tourist and mass marketing with little regard for fine art. For almost one hundred years, very little was produced and public awareness was minimal at best.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's two events of note revived the interest in scrimshaw. The first event was the publication of two books entitled *John F. Kennedy: Scrimshaw Collector*, by Clare Barnes and

collections of scrimshaw, thereby creating an awareness of this unique art form. The second major event came in the form of legislation: the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. These two pieces of federal legislation controlled, and in some cases, prohibited traffic in ivory artifacts and art work. This legislation also created more interest and awareness in this almost lost American folk art. With the awareness this legislation created, scrimshaw became collectable and valuable as an investment in art.

In addition to the awareness in maritime scrimshaw, the renewed interest in muzzle loading rifles for target shooting, "living history" exhibitions and sport hunting sparked a renewed interest in the powder horn. The National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association sponsors competitive shooting events, and participants are encouraged to dress in costume of the times complete with the proper accouterments. Similar events are carried out by the Oklahoma State Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, and it's quite a spectacle to behold some bearded geezer with flintlock, powder horn, and 'hawk dressed like he just stepped out of 1830. Most states now have big game hunting seasons specifically for primitive arms, and this has also been a great contributor to interest in powder horns, but mostly to the traditionalist. Some collect the art, never to take the engraved horn to the range or the field.

My interest in scrimshaw began seventeen years ago when I wanted a powder horn to compliment my muzzle loading rifle. Being a "user" rather than a col-

lector, I wanted a nice, personalized horn in the style of the fur trade era with some decoration that is not usually found on horns of that period. To my surprise and amazement, I found that they were available, but the cost was much more than I could afford. I decided then that I would make my own powder horn and scribe it with whatever I wanted. I had no idea of where this path would lead and the events that would follow.

Initial research for this project was difficult. Few museums have powder horns in their collections to view and study. Similarly, libraries have little if no literature on the subject. In fact, there is very little in the way of available literature anywhere on this specific subject. The few books that are available are excellent in every respect in this field of American folk art. From a muzzleloading supply house, I purchased half a dozen raw cow horns and two books, one on scrimshaw and one on old powder horns. After reading the books, I assembled a small quantity of sand paper of various grades, fine steel wool, an exacto knife and the blades I thought most appropriate. From these modest beginnings, I began.

Having no real artistic training, progress was a little slow. I experimented with different blades, styles of typography, inks, and technique. One of the nice things about working with horn is that if you don't like the results of your experimentation or if you make a mistake, you can sand the horn and begin anew. I probably worked those six horns to destruction before settling on a technique and style. I also used those horns to work on the ends (butt and spout) that were similar to horns from the post 1800 period. The butt end was filled with a close fitting wood plug that was glued and nailed in place. Turned fittings or wrought

nails provided a place to attach the strap. The spout end was drilled and formed or capped with brass or copper as those metals will not spark. A very close fitting cap or tapered stopper completed the spout end. I purchased more horns and sought out horns from local sources to further pursue this endeavor.

As time went on, I was making horns for friends who were fellow shooters and was encouraged to diversify. Ivory from any source is expensive, and the legality of the ivory must be established before purchasing. White paper micarta can be substituted for ivory and is generally more accepted by the public. It is also more available, less expensive, and legality is never an issue. Cast polymer can also be substituted for ivory and lends itself to larger scenic motifs. I've purchased and used these three mediums for a variety of work ranging from earrings and pendants to wildlife portraits and land/seascapes. As my horizons broadened with diversification, my library grew accordingly, as did my artistic ability.

Currently, I work with all of the mediums mentioned and incorporate exotic woods or metals into the project. Scrimshaw today is no longer bound by the traditional themes and is as innovative as the artist that creates it. All forms of wildlife, creatures of fantasy and mythology, American Indians, portraiture, and nudes have become fare for the contemporary scrimshander. The range of contemporary scrimshaw is quite vast, and the expansion of themes by the innovative artist is responsible for the growth and widespread acceptance of contemporary scrimshaw. ❁