



## SEA HORSE JAGGING WHEEL

Artist unidentified

New England; c. 1870

Whale ivory and ebony with silver pins;  $2\frac{3}{4} \times 6 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ "

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.306

## CANE WITH FEMALE LEG HANDLE

Artist unidentified

Probably eastern United States; c. 1860

Whale ivory and whale skeletal bone with horn, ink, and nail;  $29\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ "

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.320

## BUSK WITH SHIP AND ANGEL

Attributed to A.V. Booth (dates unknown)

Probably eastern United States; c. 1840

Ink on whale skeletal bone;  $12\frac{5}{8} \times 1\frac{11}{16} \times \frac{1}{16}$ "

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.312

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The art of scrimshaw—embellished keepsakes made from organic materials taken from whales and other marine mammals—is largely a by-product of the American whaling industry. Whaling flourished from about 1830 through the early twentieth century. Voyages often lasted years and required multiple crews to track and slaughter their prey, then render its remains into useable form. As a result, far more seamen were carried aboard a whaling ship than were needed to sail and maintain the vessel itself. As a pastime, the making of scrimshaw helped to diffuse the boredom, persistent hunger, and complex emotional dynamics that characterized months and even years spent in confinement on a ship.

Because of their simple shapes, busks, canes, pointers, and riding crops were often a whaleman's first scrimshaw project. In the all-male environment of the whaling ship, the decorative handles and shafts sometimes took suggestive forms. Aggressive, sexual, or bawdy symbols such as snakes, fists, and ladies' legs were not uncommon.

The *Busk with Ship and Angel* combines the patriotic with the romantic. Tender inscriptions, indicating the maker was on a voyage far from his sweetheart, appear alongside the classic American motifs of an eagle and draped flags in addition to what appears to be a warship.

Many whalers preferred the jaggings wheel—or pie crimper—as a showcase for their originality. A common kitchen device with a crenellated wheel to trim and perforate piecrusts, it may have been made by scrimshanders in response to a longing for home and decent food. The glorious sea horse transcends its utilitarian purpose and exemplifies the art of scrimshaw at its most elegant and refined.

## RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

[www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)

Brouwer, Norman, and Nina Hellman. *A Mariner's Fancy*. New York: South Street Seaport Museum in association with Balsam Press, 1992.

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

McManus, Michael. *A Treasury of American Scrimshaw: A Collection of the Useful and Decorative*. New York: Penguin Studio, 1997.

# SAILOR'S FANCY

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## QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What strikes you about these images?
- What can we say about the way these were made?
- What can we say about the way these objects were used?
- What comparisons can we make between these objects?

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Aspiring scrimshaw artists, or scrimshanders, usually started with simple projects and eventually developed more complicated pieces as their skill increased. What degree of difficulty do you imagine each of these pieces presented to the maker? What do you see that leads you to your conclusion?
- Many examples of scrimshaw were born from a dire sense of homesickness. How do the scrimshanders communicate this sentiment in their works?
- What do these objects reveal about life on whaling ships? What do these objects reveal about life in nineteenth-century America?

## QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- Men on years-long whaling expeditions carved these pieces in an attempt to stave off boredom. What are some other creative responses to boredom? What do you do when you are bored?
- What products emerged from the whaling industry? What materials do we use today in lieu of whale materials?
- What was the social context for the whaling industry? Whom did the industry most benefit? Who worked on the ships?
- What were the consequences of widespread whaling? Do we still feel the effects today?
- Are there jobs today that are comparable to those of the whalers? What similarities do you see?

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students assume the identity of a nineteenth-century whaler and design a decorative card using printmaking, drawing, or collage techniques to send overseas to a loved one. In the card, write a letter addressing the conditions and emotions of daily life on the ship.
- Find passages in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* that illustrate daily life aboard whaling ships to gain perspective on whalers' day-to-day lives.
- If your school is near a seacoast, schedule a trip to visit a sailing ship or go on a whale watch to contextualize the experience of the whalers.