

## A Whale of a Tale [ME]



\*Adapted from KinderArt\*

**Grades:** 9-12

**Time:** 45 minutes to 1 hour

**Goals:** To delve into the history of whaling by learning the time-old tradition of scrimshaw.

### **Objectives:**

Students will be able to: understand the whaling industry from the point of view of the whaler; learn the art of scrimshaw carving; and describe the International Whaling Committee's goals with creating a moratorium on whaling.

### **Materials:**

- Soft plastic lids (yogurt cups, butter cups, etc.)
- Plain, non-scented bar soap
- Pine wood blocks
- Push pins or nails
- Blue or black paint (acrylic or tempera)
- Wood furniture polish
- Foam paint brushes
- Pens/pencils
- Rags or paper towels

### **Procedures:**

1. Pre-Activity (introduction): Introduce the whaling industry and the types of products that came from whales at one time. Discuss the controversy surrounding whaling and the eventual creation of the International Whaling Commission. Explore the drive towards extinction of the Right whale that was the "right" whale to hunt and what method was used in hunting. Explain scrimshaw and how it was used to detail a whaler's life at sea, even using the whale's bones.
2. Activity: Have the students choose which material they'd prefer to use for their scrimshaw. Each student will use a pencil or pen to draw out their design, a push pin or nail to engrave their design, and foam paint brushes. They can share the paint and/or wood polish. Give the students approximately 10-15 minutes to design their scrimshaw using the pen or pencil. Advise them that engraving will be more difficult with more detail, so they should keep their designs as simple as possible. Next, have them carefully scratch their material with the push pin or nail. Make sure they get deep enough into the material that the paint and wood polish will work. Use the paint or wood polish sparingly, but enough that it goes into the grooves they've made with their push pin or nail, and wipe the excess away with the rags or paper towels.



3. Post-Activity (review): Once they have created their scrimshaw, begin a discussion on the use of animal ivory for this art form. Ask them to come up with other, more eco-friendly, ways to produce the same art without having to use ivory or any animal bone. Discuss ways they might create a full moratorium on the whaling industry (aside from Sea Shepherd and Paul Watson).

**Key Words:**

Whaling	Blubber	Harpooning
Scrimshaw	Scrimshanders	Ivory
International Whaling Committee	Moratorium	Migration

**Background Information:**

\*Adapted from KinderArt and Hops' Scrimshaw\*

The art of scrimshaw dates back to before the whaling ships first began sailing, but was popularized by whalers in the 1800s. The craft is an art where scrimshanders carve, scratch, and etch designs into bone or ivory. They usually depicted a life at sea and contained images of anything from fish to sea monsters to the very whales the bones and ivory came from. The most popular and easily accessible to use were sperm whale ivory teeth, because they had no commercial value and would have been wasted with the remainder of the whale that was not processed.

The ivory teeth were not smooth when they were first removed from the whale, so they needed to be sanded down with sharkskin or pumice and then polished with a cloth. On most ships, the engravings were completed with a simple pocket knife. After the image was engraved into the ivory or bone, the scrimshander would rub a pigment into the design using soot from the cooking ovens or a mixture of grounded gun powder and whale oil.

When the whaling industry began to decline at the end of the 1800s, whale oil was being replaced by natural gas and other petroleum-based products. Those left in the whaling industry began perfecting their weapons and processing. Using cannons to launch their harpoons, they became much more accurate in securing whales at greater distances. As time progressed, scrimshanders began to market their crafts and soon scrimshaw had commercial value.

In the 1960s, President Kennedy took a liking for the art of scrimshaw and increased its popularity in the U.S. By this time, the whaling industry had severely depleted many species almost to extinction. This created not only a high demand for the sperm whale teeth used in scrimshaw, but a more expensive market. By 1970, most whale species, including sperm whales, were placed on the Endangered Species List, and scrimshanders moved to other ivory and bone markets. Any animal with ivory tusks, such as the African elephant, became a new target for their commercial industry. In 1989, even the African elephant succumbed to the Endangered Species List, virtually ending scrimshaw's popularity. Scrimshaw is still available today, but they are now synthetically made and do not use the bones or ivory of animals.