Scholars and Dollars: Scrimshaw Collectors' Weekend by Jeanne Schinto "The group assembled here has not bought for investment; they bought for love," Stuart M. Frank, founding organizer of the Scrimshaw Collectors' Weekend, told me shortly after my arrival at this year's event, held at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts, June 9-11. Yet the record-breaking prices of recent auction seasons have not gone unnoticed by the three dozen or so collectors who, along with museum professionals

and members of the trade, consistently attend this

annual gathering at the museum.

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New Bedford, Massachusetts

Several of the regular attendees, who come from New England and from California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, and other faraway states, are engaged in serious amateur scrimshaw sleuthing. "We're all Sherlock Holmes at heart," said Frank, whose title at the museum is senior curator and director of the **Scrimshaw Forensics Laboratory.** Although the detective work is also for love, those scholarly labors may unintentionally stimulate the market. "Price rises are one of the unfortunate spinoffs of scholarship," said Judith Navas Lund of Dartmouth, Massachusetts, author of, among other books, Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages Sailing from American Ports, and a former curator of the museum. The prices were certainly high enough to alert the trend-seeking Missy Sullivan, who reported on them in her on-line Forbes column (www.forbes.com) of December 26, 2005, much to the dismay of at least a couple of the collectors I met over the weekend. "The sleepy little market for scrimshaw...got three seismic jolts in a four-month period this year," Sullivan wrote. The first jolt was felt at a Bonhams & Butterfields sale in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 1, 2005, when a tooth scrimshawed by Edward

Burdett (1805-1833) sold for \$182,250, setting a

American engraver of sperm whale's teeth. "That

It seemed like one to her until the Burdett record was

record for a piece by the earliest documented

broken a few months later. It happened in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, when Ronald

seemed a fluke," Sullivan continued.

Bourgeault's Northeast Auctions sold another Burdett tooth at its annual August maritime sale for \$193,000. Two flukes or a genuine market development? Sullivan thought she had her answer when, at that same sale in Portsmouth, an unsigned tooth by the socalled Pagoda/Albatross Artist fetched \$303,000, making it the most expensive piece of scrimshaw ever sold at public auction. "Thar She Blows," went Sullivan's headline for her column, whose conclusion was that investors should "keep an eye out" for these and other nautical materials, including ship's figureheads. Sullivan's rather simplistic advice notwithstanding, what does that big price bump mean? Should collectors with less-than-extravagant spending habits despair? Or, conversely, are these prices a market

adjustment of sorts, coming none too soon, since other types of American folk art-weathervanes, for example-have been catching up to fine-art price ranges over the last few years? **Andrew Jacobson of Andrew Jacobson Marine** Antiques, Ipswich, Massachusetts, addressed those questions in a lecture on Saturday afternoon, "Current Market Trends and the Future of Collecting." It was followed by a panel discussion with Bourgeault and dealer John Rinaldi of Kennebunkport, Maine.

Formal market talk is infrequently part of the

weekend program that was inaugurated in 1989, when

Frank was executive director of the former Kendall Whaling Museum in Sharon, Massachusetts. "We do

it when the market changes or when there's a lot of interest in new market phenomena," said Frank. "Right now, we're in the midst of one of the revolutionary moments in scrimshaw price structuring." If anyone had expected Jacobson to provide a scholarly discourse, with a step-by-step speculators' guide to buying what is loosely defined as works of occupational art carved, engraved, or fashioned out of marine ivory, bone, baleen, and other found materials, they were disappointed. What this well-respected dealer, in business for nearly 30 years, did offer was far more trustworthy: a retrospective account of scrimshaw collecting that relied on personal anecdotes for illustrations and auction records for documentation. He began his narrative by evoking the image of John F. Kennedy's desktop collection, seen by millions when the President addressed the nation on television from the Oval Office. That exposure "pushed the

concept of scrimshaw into the national mind and

post-Kennedy collectors who were not following

scrimshaw. "They seemed to have had a family

Camelot's lead, had other reasons to collect

Pre-Kennedy-era collectors, along with a number of

eventually expanded collecting circles."

interest or connection to the whaling period," Jacobson said. "They were people who enjoyed the romance of the sea, or they were people seeking knickknacks for their summer homes." In any case, prices in that period "seemed to be very reasonable, and for the most part they were." A change occurred in the early 1970's, when scrimshaw started being offered by "a couple of rogue auctioneers," as Jacobson called them-the late Keith Kittredge was one, who held sales in Salem, Massachusetts. On Cape Cod there was auction action too, when Richard Bourne Inc. and Eldred's began to organize regular, mostly seasonal, marine sales that featured scrimshaw. Mail-order catalogs, now considered quaint, were a primary marketing tool of antiques dealers of the period, and some of them began offering scrimshaw, Jacobson recalled. He named E. Norman Flayderman's and John Rinaldi's catalogs as the two best. (Rinaldi's is still published today.) These and the auction catalogs, said Jacobson, became the reference tools for "the small, incestuous scrimshaw market," made up of people who had "a good idea of what

things should cost," and "the price structure was

In 1972 Flayderman published *Scrimshaw and*

collectors had "an instant bible," in Jacobson's

phrase. "To this day a premium is paid for objects

priced; used copies were listed for \$125 to \$750 on **Internet sites in June while this report was being**

than a specific book reference and an illustration," said Jacobson, noting that a tooth pictured in the

top-selling tooth by the Pagoda/Albatross Artist.

Scrimshanders: Whales and Whalemen, and all at once

illustrated in it." (The out-of-print book itself is high-

written.) "Nothing validates a collector's choice more

Flayderman book (on page 107) closely resembles the

Jacobson looked back with obvious nostalgia to a time

when the business was very different. "There were plenty of antiques. You could learn while doing and replace what you sold, neither of which is possible now. The parking lot at Bourne's was the scene of major wheeling and dealing," he recalled. "A lot of times the scene out there was more interesting than what was going on in the salesroom. I used to pull up

stable for a long time."

in a 1971 Ford Econoline van right by the entranceway and sell out of the back of it. I wasn't alone. I did better there than anywhere else on the face of this earth for many years. Bourne changed everybody's life. It was tailgating, auctioning, buying, selling, seeing what was going on." Then, in the 1980's, a series of landmark auctions "allowed new people to come in." Jacobson referred, of course, to the four Barbara Johnson collection sales at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1981-83, and the sale of the Jeffrey and Francine Cohen collection at Bourne's in 1988. "Dealers still competed successfully at auctions then," Jacobson reminded his audience, "and offered items directly to customers through catalogs, in shops, or at shows." The following decade brought the collapse of Bourne's operation, creating what Jacobson characterized as "a major market void." In short order, however, the vacuum was filled. Eldred's grew; so did Bourgeault's Northeast Auctions, along with Rafael Osona on Nantucket. "Meanwhile, the rest of us in the trade were playing alongside, in, and around them," said

All this time, what collectors of scrimshaw

traditionally had been paying the most for, besides teeth engraved by Burdett, were ones by Frederick Myrick (1808-1862), the first known scrimshander of

any nationality to sign and date his art. Collectors

have particularly coveted the three dozen or so known teeth by Myrick, the majority of which he decorated with images of the whaleship Susan in the 1820's. "A Susan's tooth was always the collectors' standard," Jacobson said. "It was what people strived to have."

And yet until the late 1990's, what they were willing to

pay for one was, at least at public auctions, strictly limited. In 1971, for example, Bourne sold a Myrick tooth for \$11,000. In 1979 Sotheby Parke Bernet sold one for \$21,000. In 1979 Bourne sold the same one for

Jacobson.

\$24,000. In 1981 Osona sold one for \$35,750. In 1997 that same tooth sold again at Osona for \$50,600. As Jacobson pointed out, considering what real estate and other markets were doing during the same 26year period, those price jumps were hardly colossal. It wasn't until January 19, 2003, that any scrimshawed tooth, appropriately one by Myrick, broke the Osona record of 1997 and the \$100,000 barrier, when it sold at Sotheby's to dealer Alan **Granby of Hyland Granby Antiques, Hyannis Port,** Massachusetts, for \$102,000. The same tooth had previously been sold, in the Barbara Johnson sale of 1982, for \$44,000. It was, as well, the centerpiece of Everett U. Crosby's privately printed, exceedingly rare, 74-page monograph Susan's Teeth and Much About Scrimshaw (1955). "It was bought by the trade and rumored to have been resold for close to cost," Jacobson said. "Assuming that happened, was it a case of the buyer

being ahead of the market and dumping it

Jacobson rhetorically asked.

other years.

was it a bargain," because marine antiques are habitually undervalued, even at record prices?

prematurely, before the market caught up with it? Or

A third possibility is, of course, that Granby executed a marketing move, raising the scrimshaw stakes in a publicity-savvy way. A one-man market trend of his own in recent years, buying high and selling high, he did not attend the weekend program, although he has

At any rate, the record for a tooth was held by Myrick until the Brookline sale of May 2005, mentioned above, when a private collector paid \$182,250 for the **Burdett.** Myrick's work is celebrated for its documentary qualities; Burdett's is prized for its graphic excellence. The \$303,000 tooth by the Pagoda/Albatross Artist appealed graphically and historically. "Fresh from a local estate, never out of the family, it was one of the finest pieces any of us has ever seen," Jacobson said. "If you're going to pay too much for something, this is the thing you should pay too much for." That piece was unquestionably a "bargain," in Jacobson's view. He later would assert that scrimshaw icons are being sold for relative "chump change," compared to prices lately paid for paintings.

Whether one agrees with that assessment, even the

names have not always performed predictably. At **Bonhams & Butterfields' latest sale in Brookline on** May 7, 2006, a tooth attributed to Burdett failed to

sell at all, going only in a post-sale deal to an unidentified East Coast collector at \$47,800.

straightforward, upward value trajectory, and the big

It's also true that, during auctioneer James D. Julia's

"historical as historical could be but graphically only

Granby was the buyer of the Sheffield teeth. Was he

three-day sale, January 25-27, 2006, in Fairfield, Maine, a pair of numbered teeth scrimshawed by Josiah Sheffield-pieces that Jacobson described as

so-so"-realized an astonishing \$109,250.

best material has not always produced a

acting the part of market maker once again? As for the Burdett tooth that did not sell in Brookline, it was not as finely executed as the one that had smashed the Myrick record the year before. It was smaller (5" long, as opposed to 7¹/₄"), monochrome, unsigned, and its subject was non-whaling and British. Will lesser **Burdett items consistently realize lesser prices from** now on? Jacobson wisely refrained from trying to answer such open-ended questions. Instead, he drew some carefully worded conclusions, beginning with the most irrefutable. "Graphically fabulous, with impeccable provenance has made a great leap," he said, "but there's enough depth to the market that people are willing to open their wallets for historically important objects too. "The top-tier items have seemingly gone berserk," he

continued, "but if you examine what they've done, it's been a great stumble forward that may or may not be

offered, it almost goes without saying. "New and great

assumes continued collector interest, which Jacobson

"We clearly need more people," he said, segueing to a problem endemic to the antiques market in general,

Everybody knows each other too well. We need some strangers roaming around. We'd even be happy to see some new old collectors, in addition to young ones." Riffing on the age theme, Jacobson ventured, perhaps half-seriously, "If I were to pick the most logical thing

namely, the phenomenon of the aging collector.

to collect it would be scrimshawed canes, and if

anyone has a scrimshawed walker, you'll inevitably

But new collectors, no matter what their description, don't automatically make the marketplace any more predictable than it is right now. "There's an entire strata of people who have an unbelievable amount of discretionary spending money," Jacobson said. "If they enter a market, they can dominate it. But they may or may not become serious collectors. They can swoop in, scoop something up, and go away again."

"There are not enough people in this room.

material will bring new and great prices. The same old material won't." But that confident statement

Where the market is going will necessarily be determined by the quality of the material being

sustainable."

also addressed.

see some action."

Considering the attention paid to teeth, and the prices that attend them, it's easy to overlook not only canes, but also swifts, busks, and other forms. Because these objects don't get the lion's share of interest, they can often be bought for good value, said Jacobson. True, a swift was sold at Northeast Auctions in August 2004 for \$118,000, but this remarkable piece, made by a named whaleship captain, remains the most expensive non-tooth scrimshaw ever sold. There are "swifts, as well as teeth, busks, tusks, you name it, at the two-thousand- to five-thousand-dollar level," Jacobson told his audience. "These are legitimate antiques of quality. No matter what financial situation you're in, there are opportunities." During the panel discussion that followed Jacobson's talk, Bourgeault, similarly, talked about the scrimshaw that doesn't make headlines. "I love to see people coming to auctions to buy pieces for six hundred or seven hundred dollars," he said. "There

are wonderful things, and it is up to us, people in the

appraisal day in which there aren't at least ten pieces of 'fakeshaw' brought in," he said. "We often hear stories of the people who go to a little flea market in England, where the dealer says, 'Oh, your accents sound American. I have a great piece of Americana here.' And they pull out a 'fakeshaw' and sell it to these people. I think fakes have hurt the market."

John Rinaldi, in his turn on the panel, told a story

trade, to let new collectors know about them."

Bourgeault also addressed the topic of fakes. "I guarantee that I don't do an Antiques Roadshow

that could serve as a cautionary tale to everyone concerned about dwindling interest in antiques of any kind. It may also serve as a goad to people tired of all their volunteer work for collectors' clubs. The story was about H. Harrison Huster, a collector from the first generation of scrimshaw lovers. (See an article on scrimshaw that he published in *Antiques* in August 1961, pp. 122-125.) "He was mostly finished with scrimshaw collecting in the early 1950's," said Rinaldi. "It was years later that I went to his house, when he was quite elderly. I asked him why he had stopped collecting scrimshaw. He said there was nobody to talk to. There wasn't any society of collectors. He put it all away in boxes and switched to decoys." **During the question-and-answer period, an audience** member asked about the market for whalemen's journals, logbooks, and other ephemera of the scrimshaw era, and Jacobson replied, "The manuscript market is extremely strong. Anytime a really superior whaling journal comes on the market,

ten thousand dollars is no money anymore."

Sold as a group, together with the scrimshaw, are those extra materials worth even more? "If the

collectors are sophisticated, they are," Jacobson said.

What do auctioneers do when there's an intact bunch of material? "I would like to see things kept together," said Bourgeault. "The swift I sold for the record price had two collectors who loved it vying for it. They were

folk-art collectors who both used the same folk-art

situation," he added as an aside. "The next lot after the swift was the daguerreotype of the captain [who made the swift], and neither of these collectors had any interest in it at all. It went to a photography

frustrating. I would really have preferred selling the

two things together, but the photograph probably would have gone into a drawer and gotten lost."

A question about logbooks specifically and whether they should be donated to museums drew an adamant

dealer as an advisor, and it was a very awkward

dealer for eight hundred dollars. And that is

response from Frank. "Logbooks are the one kind of object that I believe private owners have no business having, at least not for very long," he said. "These logbooks contain historical, anthropological scientific information that is indispensable. People are all over the world counting whale and bird populations, tracking hurricanes, studying tsunamis and global warming, and these logbooks are the only records we have pre-1870. These logs go back to 1550. Enjoy the art, give us the artifacts." Scrimshaw Collectors' Weekend typically includes reports on recent scholarship, along with less formal, show-and-tell presentations. Laura Mathieu of South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, who recently completed a master's degree at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, presented a paper on fashions depicted on pictorial scrimshaw. It has often been proposed that scrimshanders copied illustrations from popular women's magazines of the period, but until now no scrimshawed design has ever been traced to a specific published image. Mathieu, in fact, has matched two pieces with the same portrait of a woman embracing a little girl, a cat, and a dog. The original appeared in the August 1850 issue of Godey's Lady's Book, published from 1830 to 1898, a period that includes scrimshaw's heyday. Just as knowledge of historical dress is used to date photographs, it can also help in dating scrimshaw, Mathieu's innovative study showed. Leg-o'-mutton sleeves were popular in the 1830's; pointed bodices

predominated in the 1840's; bustles and Dolman sleeves were the style in the 1870's; corsets pinched

temporal hints, since it changes more slowly over

Richard Donnelly of Richard's Antiques and Art,

his research on scrimshawed works by Captain

Barn Antiques, Fall River, Massachusetts, on November 23, 2005. Rhode Islanders from East

Barrington, Rhode Island, shared the early results of

Spencer Pratt of Bristol, Rhode Island, who served once as first mate and twice as master of the ship

Mechanic over the course of three multi-year voyages in the 1830's and 1840's. Donnelly's interest in Pratt began with the \$4400 purchase of a wooden, inlaid,

hinge-top box sold at auction by Bob Sowersby's Gray

Providence, who are descendants of Pratt, consigned

among other clues found in libraries and archives, led

the box. The inlaid initials on the top, "S.A.W.P.,"

to Donnelly's discovery that the box was made by

Then, on February 9, 2006, Donnelly learned that a logbook from the Mechanic was being offered by an on-line auction house, Historical Collectible Auctions

Carolina. The chances were highly unlikely that it would be from one of Pratt's voyages on the ship. Well, it was, and Donnelly bought it for \$7187.50.

On April 27, 2006, Bob Sowersby's offered more material from the East Providence consignors who had earlier consigned the box. The new lots included family photography. For \$225 Donnelly bought it all,

including daguerreotypes of the Captain and Mrs.

Pratt.

the sea.

tooth."

(<u>www.hcaauctions.com</u>) of Burlington, North

Pratt for his wife, Sarah Ann West Pratt.

waists in the 1890's. Men's wear may be more practical than women's, but it provides fewer

Donnelly's collector's luck redounded to the benefit of the New Bedford museum, where the dealer works as a volunteer, cataloging and photographing scrimshaw. Just prior to buying the Pratt box, he happened to be working on hinge-top boxes at the museum. "I saw something like sixty to seventy-five boxes," he said. "I stored those images in my mind and remembered some of the features on an unsigned box in the collection. At the time, the museum didn't know who made it. Its provenance was miniscule. Looking at my comparison, Stuart Frank agreed that it was strong enough to make an attribution that both boxes were made by the same hand." Another participant (who asked that his name not be published in M.A.D.) shared a recent purchase with the gathering. They were scrimshawed walrus tusks signed "N.S. Finney"-that is, Nathaniel Sylvester Finney (1813-1879), who had a three-decade career as a whaleman and spent his last years in San Francisco.

He may be the only former whaleman to have become

a professional scrimshaw maker after retiring from

Tusks have "always been a fabulous bang for the

buck," Jacobson had earlier told the group. "You can get great works for short dough." A pair by Finney, he

noted, was sold at Bonhams on May 21, 2006, in San Francisco for \$38,837.50. "It's a reasonable price,

when compared to the equivalent in a sperm whale's

Those very Finney tusks were the ones the collector

had brought that day to New Bedford.

Dating from the 1870's, they were engraved with historical portraiture, which is one of Finney's hallmarks. The likenesses included portraits of Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, George and Martha Washington, General Lafayette, and Lajos Kossuth, a 19th-century Hungarian statesman, along with an unidentified man and woman in mid-Victorian dress. These presentation pieces were probably commissioned by or for those unnamed subjects. The collector acknowledged that purists would not consider Finney's onshore output "true" scrimshaw. "They define the term narrowly, as a whaleman's art produced on whaling voyages in idle time with no wind and no whales in sight." But he was drawn, nonetheless, by Finney's workmanship and also by "the historical questions that are raised by his subject matter," he said. Regarding these particular pieces, the collector has been asking himself: why the

inclusion of the relatively esoteric Kossuth? And who are the unidentified people, who may or may not have

busy pursuing these questions as he continues to hunt

requested the inclusion of the Hungarian? He'll be

for other Finney pieces.

On the idea that publicizing Finney scholarship can and will affect the Finney market, this collector said, "I suppose that publicity probably goes both ways. One, it raises awareness, and so there may be more competitors for future pieces. But two, I suppose, it raises the value on ones already in a collection. But I am collecting for interest, not for value." The publicity could also have a third, clearly advantageous effect, according to this collector, who has tried to trace and/or examine every piece by Finney in private and public collections. "There may be pieces that just might end up, because of that publicity, seeing the light of day. They may be in families who are descended from somebody who publicity may bring more pieces forward." is typically part of the Scrimshaw Collectors' Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, the first institution in the country to accession scrimshaw into its permanent collection.

other treasures, a Susan's tooth purchased by the museum in 1921 for \$10. For more information about next year's Scrimshaw Collectors' Weekend, contact Stuart Frank at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, 18 Johnny Cake Hill, New Bedford, MA 02740; or phone (508) 997-0046, extension 146. To submit scrimshaw for non-invasive analysis at the museum's Scrimshaw Forensics Laboratory, send hardcopy photos first, including complete measurements and details (i.e., whatever you know about the piece, as well as how you obtained it). There is no charge for this service except the cost of shipping and insurance in both directions.

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commissioned or was the recipient of one of these. The A field trip to a public or private scrimshaw collection Weekend. This time, on Sunday, the group went to the These objects include teeth by Myrick and Burdett that were given to the museum prior to 1831, while the two men were still living. Daniel A. Finamore, who is PEM's Russell W. Knight curator of maritime art and history, gave the group a private tour of the new maritime galleries, followed by an even rarer treat, a visit to museum storage. Down in the building's basement, the group saw, among

The New Bedford Whaling Museum Web site (www.whalingmuseum.org) features a comprehensive catalog of polymer resin scrimshaw fakes. Click on "Research Library," then on "Search Fakeshaw." © 2006 by Maine Antique Digest