

Scrimshaw Record Is Unexpectedly Smashed By A Burdett Tooth

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Bonhams & Butterfields

Surprising the scrimshaw world, a scrimshawed sperm whale's tooth sold for a record price during the marine portion of Bonhams & Butterfields' fourth annual auction in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 1. The new price, \$182,250 (includes buyer's premium), was paid by an American collector who bid in person without an advisor in sight. The underbidder on the phone was "another private American client," said auction house CEO Malcolm Barber.

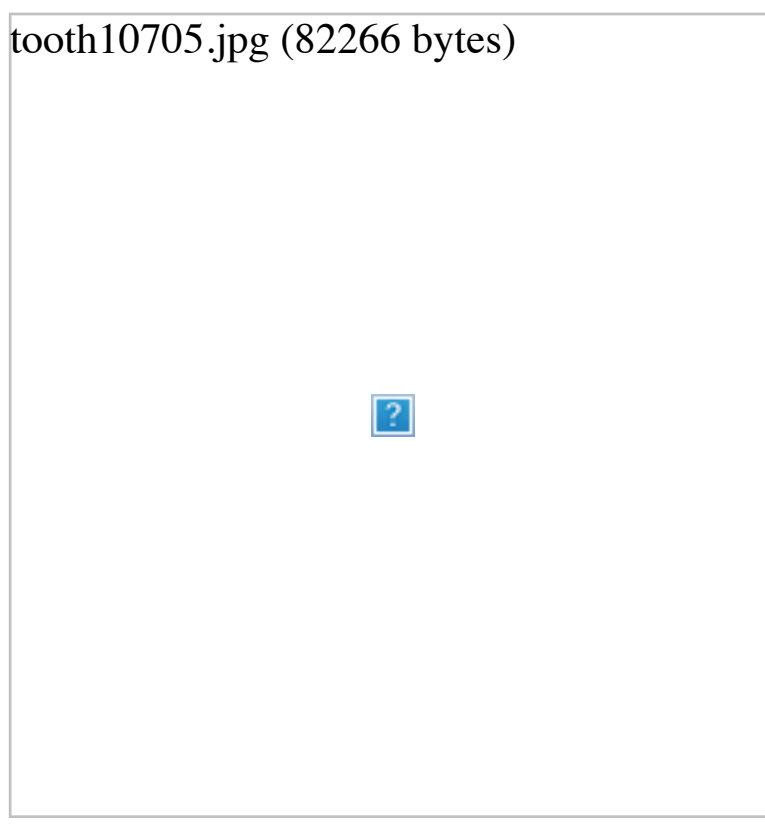
The tooth, 7¼" long, is a pictorial piece, the work of Edward Burdett, who was born on Nantucket in 1805. Burdett is considered to be the earliest documented engraver of pictorials. A heavy, highly detailed imagining, the tooth depicts a whaling tale from the South Pacific circa 1828.

The former record price, \$102,000, was paid at Sotheby's in New York City on January 19, 2003, for a tooth scrimshawed by the hand of another early 19th-century Nantucket-born sailor, Frederick Myrick. The buyer of that one was dealer Alan Granby of Hyland-Granby Antiques, Hyannis Port, Massachusetts.

"People had expected the Myrick tooth to bring a world record," Granby said by phone a couple of days after the Brookline sale. That's because it already had brought a world record when it was sold as part of the Barbara Johnson collection at Sotheby Parke Bernet in New York on September 24 and 25, 1982, for \$44,000. "But this [Burdett] tooth, although it was expected to do well because it's a good, authentic example, was not seen as the one that would not only break but *smash* the world record. Everyone I knew who was interested in it had it priced at a lower level." (The auction house itself had set the estimate at \$25,000/35,000.) "But I'm very excited for the purchaser, because he clearly had a very keen interest in it."

Our interview with Granby, who did not attend the Bonhams & Butterfields' sale and did not bid on the new record-breaker, was one of about a dozen post-sale phone conversations he said he'd had with people all over the country who were wondering, as we were, if the scrimshawed tooth market as a whole had reached a new level. "It's an exciting new number," he said. "But I have a feeling that at the end of the day it will be viewed as an aberration." That's because the likelihood is "extremely strong" that both the buyer and the underbidder are new collectors, said Granby, basing his hunch on the fact that their bids went as high as they did. "None of the old buyers would have paid that price."

Of course, nobody can predict with complete confidence what this market will do, Granby added. Signed scrimshaw teeth like the Burdett and the Myrick are becoming extremely desirable, he said. "Even though it's folk art, people increasingly like to know who did it." The demand may make big spenders of old and new buyers alike.



This sperm whale's tooth (three views shown), scrimshawed by Edward Burdett (1805-1833), actually broke two records when it was sold by Bonhams & Butterfields for \$182,250. Besides the record for teeth, it broke the one for scrimshaw in general. The old record in the latter category was set at Northeast Auctions in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on August 21 and 22, 2004, when a whalebone swift on a whalebone and abalone inlaid sewing chest made \$118,000.

"That wild price for the swift last August was in a way almost more shocking" than the price for the Burdett at this sale, said dealer Alan Granby. "We never expected a swift to hold the record; we always assumed a tooth would. This record may hold for a while."

An averted tragedy is the subject of the tooth's illustrations. It's the tale of the Daniel IV and the Elizabeth, a pair of London whaling ships that were headed home from Tahiti in 1828, each with a full cargo of oil, when the Daniel IV caught fire. There is scant chance of extinguishing flames being fed by freight like that; the ship was swallowed whole by the conflagration. But the Elizabeth rescued all on board.

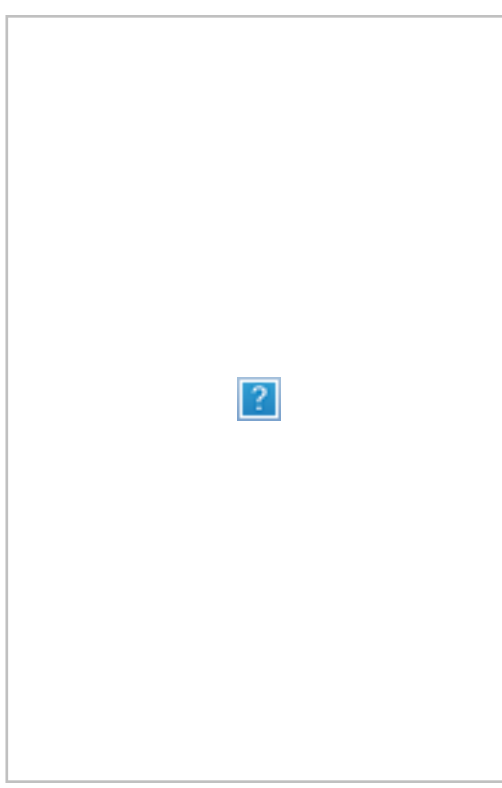
One side of the tooth shows the Daniel before the fire, its harpooners in pursuit of already wounded whales. On the other side, the Daniel is engulfed in smoke and flames, with the rescuing Elizabeth in the distance.

At the final preview, moments before the sale began, Bonhams & Butterfields' Jon Baddeley said, "Burdett is known for his deep, deep gouging, which he customarily filled with red sealing wax," as he did in executing the port holes, the Union flags, the whale blood, and the flames on this one. "He had very original, vigorous style. It's a real piece of American folk art."

And these signed pieces are rare. Burdett's work life was short. Eleven years after going to sea at age 17 he was drowned when he became entangled in a harpoon line attached to a whale under pursuit.

The one other significant lot at the sale was described in auction house ads as "the only known example of a third-class menu postcard from the *Titanic*." According to the catalog, it was passed down in the family of disaster survivor Sarah A. Roth, a 26-year-old London seamstress who boarded at Southampton and was rescued by the *Carpathia*. Bonhams & Butterfields' marine expert Jon Baddeley said he had sold the same piece in 2000 while he was working for Sotheby's in London. The hammer price then, he recalled, was £22,000. It hadn't changed hands in the meantime; the consignor this time was Baddeley's buyer last time: a U.K. collector.

The size and weight of a postcard (and intended to be mailed as a souvenir), the menu sold in Brookline to an anonymous phone bidder, with competition from three other phones, at \$44,650, near the lower end of the estimate.



Much is made of the last meals served to the doomed passengers of the Titanic. On December 2, 2003, at Sotheby's in London, a lunch menu sold at £28,800. A postcard, like the one sold at this sale, it was bought by a private museum in Belfast, where the ship was built. The menu was given by Titanic senior officer Charles Lightoller to his wife before the liner left Southampton. Dated April 2, 1912, the day of the Titanic's first sea trials, it describes a meal served to crew and captain only; no passengers were yet on board. Happily, Lightoller survived the disaster, the last person to be taken aboard the rescue ship, Carpathia.

In 1999, a collector paid \$74,750 for a first-class Titanic menu sold by Houston's Hart Galleries. That's the current record. But Edward Kamuda, founder and president of the Titanic Historical Society in Indian Orchard, Massachusetts, said then and maintains now that the piece is a reproduction printed by his organization in 1962. "People dip them in tea and write on them in charcoal, then try to pass them off," said Kamuda, who has been collecting Titanic stuff since 1952. For further details about this controversy, see the story in M.A.D., November 1999, p. 9-A, and Kamuda's Web site (www.titanichistoricalsociety.org).

Kamuda also disputes the claim by Bonhams & Butterfields that the menu pictured here is unique. He said his museum has had a third-class menu postcard from the Titanic for 20 years. "It's water-stained—it was taken off one of the bodies—it was given to us by the widow of a friend of the survivor who was with the man when he died."

Kamuda, who hadn't known the Brookline sale was scheduled until we informed him, pronounced the estimate (\$40,000/50,000) "sickening," since he cannot afford to buy at that level and must depend on donations of material. The menu sold for \$44,650.

A friend who owns what is considered to be the finest private menu collection in the country often complains about crossover collectors, who always seem to have deeper pockets than his—or maybe they merely have more intemperate collecting habits. Whatever the reality, we can deduce that this menu was bought by a collector of Titanic memorabilia rather than a culinary enthusiast, because the same bidder bought other *Titanic* items offered that day. Among them were a memorial program for a service honoring two survivors at Carnegie Hall; a rate and sailing card for the *Titanic* that anticipated its future voyages; and a program for a theater matinee benefit "in aid of *The Daily Telegraph* 'Titanic' Fund." The respective prices were \$1233.75, \$1175, and \$564.

In all, 30 *Titanic* lots were brought to Brookline to be sold under a massive turreted white tent on the grounds of the Larz Anderson Auto Museum where, the day before, classic cars had been the highlight. In keeping with current collectibles market behavior, only the rare Titanic memorabilia did well. Half of the items were bought in. Malcolm Barber said the 15 unsold lots would be reoffered at a Bonhams & Butterfields auction elsewhere.

As for the other 99 marine lots, they included four pieces of unremarkable scrimshaw (none of which sold) and navigational instruments from the 20th century. Just prior to the marine sale, Bonhams & Butterfields offered about 250 pieces of estate furniture and decorative arts that did not look overly enticing in the catalog. When we arrived, at the tail end of it, the high note was being struck: \$18,800 for a 41" tall Art Nouveau carved marble allegorical figure inscribed "F. Vichi, Firenze." We were there for the opposite extreme too: \$23.50 for a 5½" x 8¼" Renaissance-style bronze casket.

Busy conquering other parts of the world (i.e., New York), Bonhams & Butterfields had obviously failed to land another New England estate comparable to last year's—the collections of Françoise Hermann (1919-2003) of Falmouth Heights, Massachusetts. As late as March, the auction house was still soliciting consignments from the locals with a mass mailing, apparently without much success. The Burdett tooth, like the *Titanic* menu, was from a U.K. collection. Still, thanks to those two items, we didn't have to write the headline "*Titanic* Sinks Again."

For more information about next year's sale in Brookline or any other Bonhams & Butterfields events, contact the auction house through its Web site (www.bonhams.com/us) or by phone at (800) 223-2854.