

# SCRIMSHAW, ART OF THE AMERICAN WHALEMEN

by Robert E. Spring

My subject is that of Scrimshaw, Art of the American Whalemens. It is my profession, and I propose to point out some relevance to the antique arms field.

Definitions are always difficult and dangerous in any field, and Scrimshaw is no exception. I have never heard the same definition expressed by any two experts in the field. Basically the one that I will deal with here, will be somewhere between the purist and liberal point of view. It is that Scrimshaw is the work by whalemens in any material readily available to them such as whalebone, sperm whale teeth, walrus tusks, coconut shell, some woods, and baleen.

Few art forms are totally new and unique, and it is my feeling that Scrimshaw is not an exception. Working with bone and ivory goes back to the days of ancient Egypt. Man has always been limited to working with materials that were readily available to him, thus, whale ivory and whalebone, which had no commercial value during the 18th and 19th centuries, were very natural choices for the whalerman. It is my belief that the professionally engraved powder horns of the French and Indian War period and the homemade engraved powder horns of the Revolutionary War, are direct ancestors of the decorative or engraved forms of Scrimshaw.

After an exhaustive study done by Mr. Charles Carpenter in 1972, among all the major museums and major private collections he only located 6 pieces that were dated during the 18th century; the earliest being a bone busk dated 1766. The other 5 items were a ruler dated 1769, a pestle dated 1771, a tooth depicting a chart of Boston Harbor dated 1790, another busk inscribed with the date 1792, and a pipe box bearing the date 1794. He did not count any objects which were questionable as to the date's authenticity. In the same survey, he encountered only 9 pieces dated during the 1st quarter of the 19th century that he considered absolutely authentic. It is of particular interest that this earliest dated tooth bears a map or chart quite similar to the type found on Colonial period powder horns. One must remember that the whalemens of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were not born at sea, but in towns or rural areas in New England, therefore, the engraved powder horn would not be unfamiliar to them. In addition, the similarity in shape and color between the whale's tooth and cow horn lends further credence to this theory.



We can break Scrimshaw down into two distinct categories; useful objects and decorative objects.

In the first category we have examples such as walking sticks (figure 1), jaggging wheels (figure 2), busks (figure 3), swifts, inlaid boxes, plus a host of useful tools like gages, seamrubbers, fids, planes, knives (figure 5), clothespins, rolling pins, dippers, (figure 4), and various sewing accessories.

The second category of decorative objects includes engraved whale's teeth, walrus tusks, and porpoise jaws.

As might be expected, there is a considerable variation in the quality of works produced by the whalemens ranging from very primitive but carefully executed pieces to superb intricate and complicated masterpieces of American folk art.

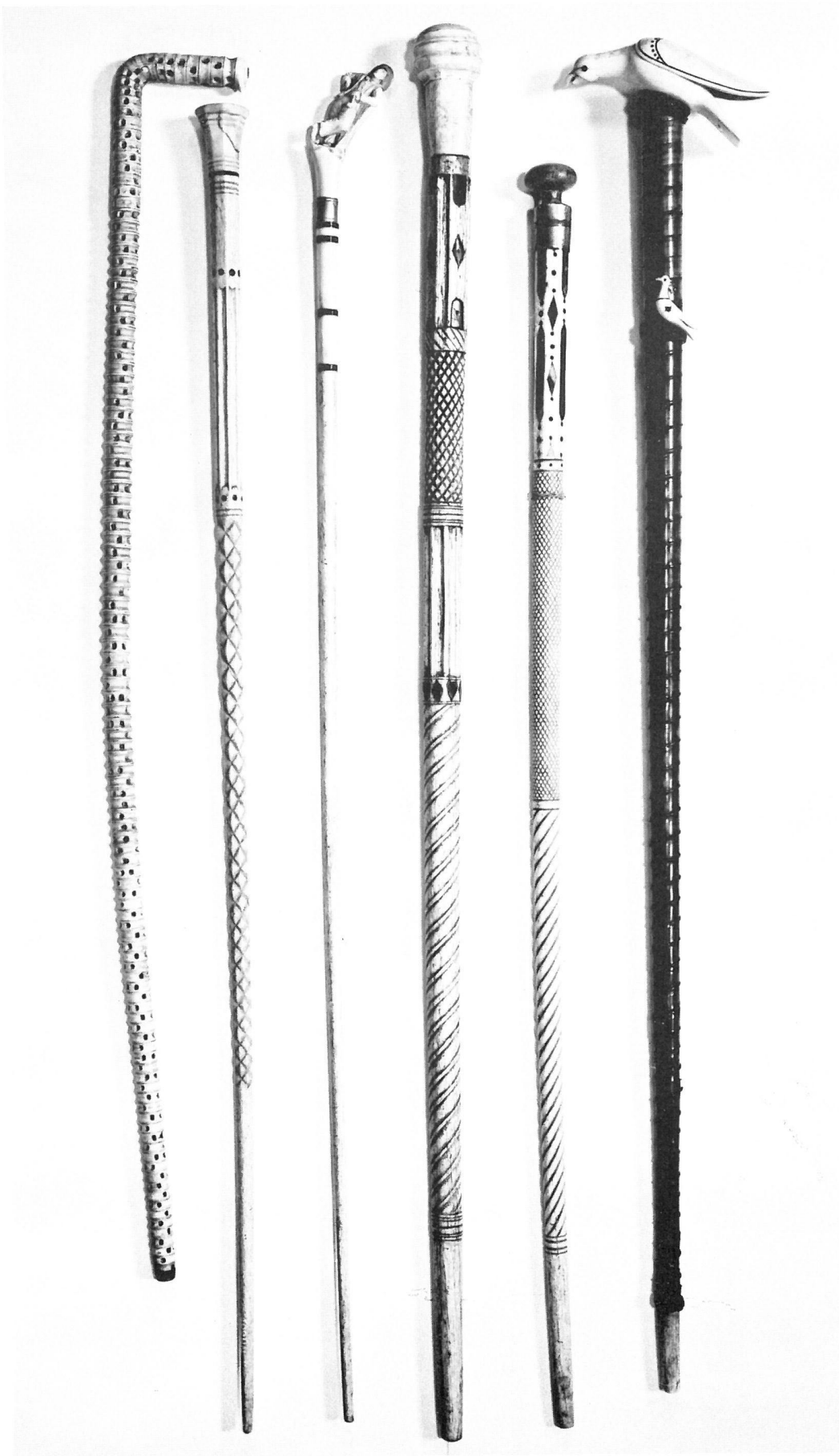
There are three basic types of engraving to be found on teeth, tusks, and whalebone.

First and certainly a minority, is the work of professional engravers. In the normally accepted sense of the word this is not Scrimshaw because it was not done by whalemens.

The second group consists of work done by whalemens but direct copies or transfers of some other artist's work as found in a periodical of the period. The chosen picture was pasted on the tooth or bone, and with the use of a sailmaker's needle, small pin pricks were incised outlining the design. The pattern was then removed, a coloring agent rubbed over the surface, and then the dotted lines were simply connected.

The third group comprises work that is totally the concept of the craftsman involved. These works generally possess charm due to the lack of formal art training which sometimes results in uniquely composed and proportioned compositions. The variety of subject matter depicted on these engraved pieces is extensive; ranging from fashionable ladies and some not so fashionable, to patriotic scenes, and marine subjects.

Figure 1. A group of typical Scrimshaw walking sticks composed of whalebone, whale ivory, wood, and baleen. N. Flayderman collection.



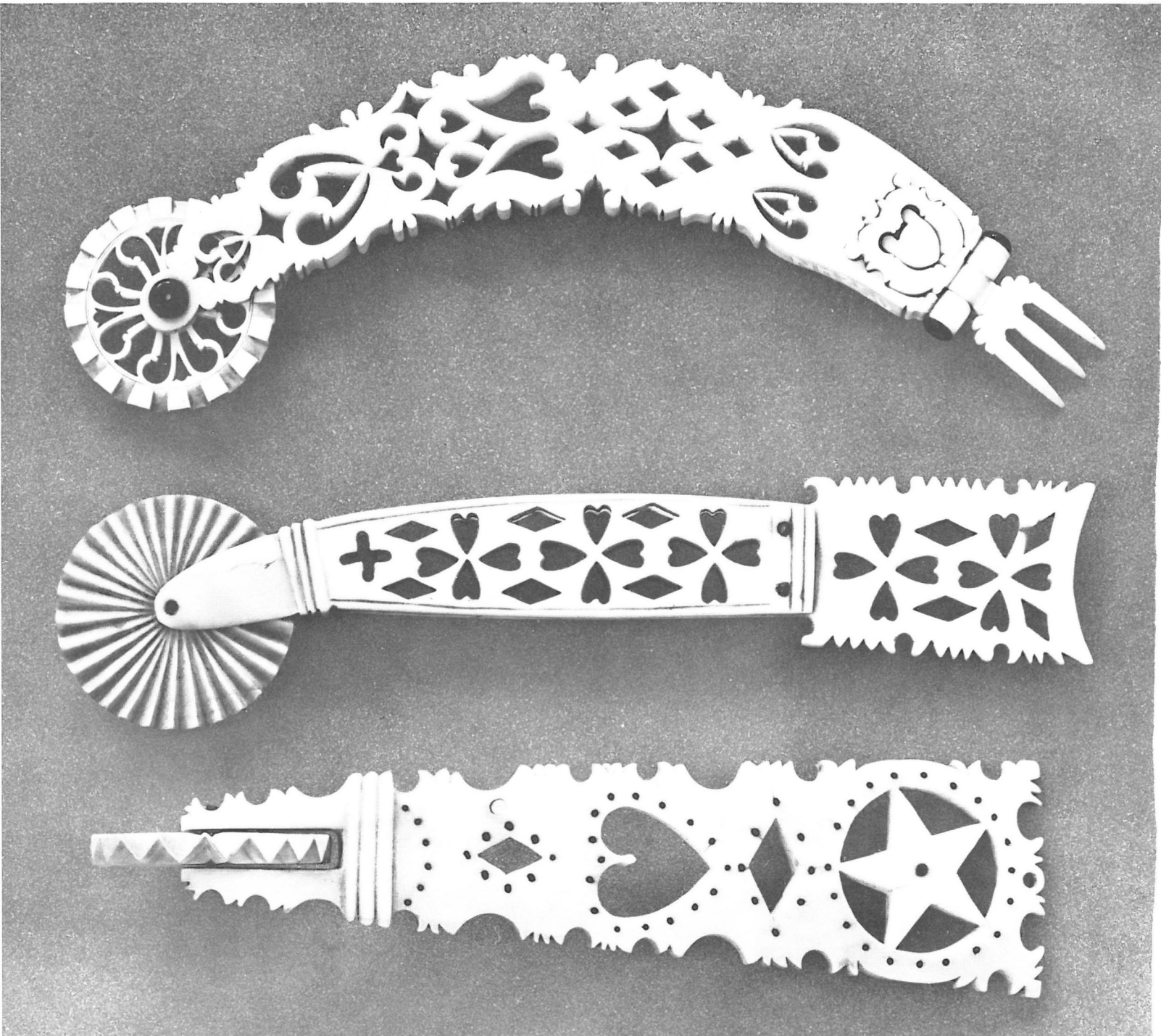


Figure 2. Three superb jaggging wheels (pie crimpers) of the intricate pierced style.

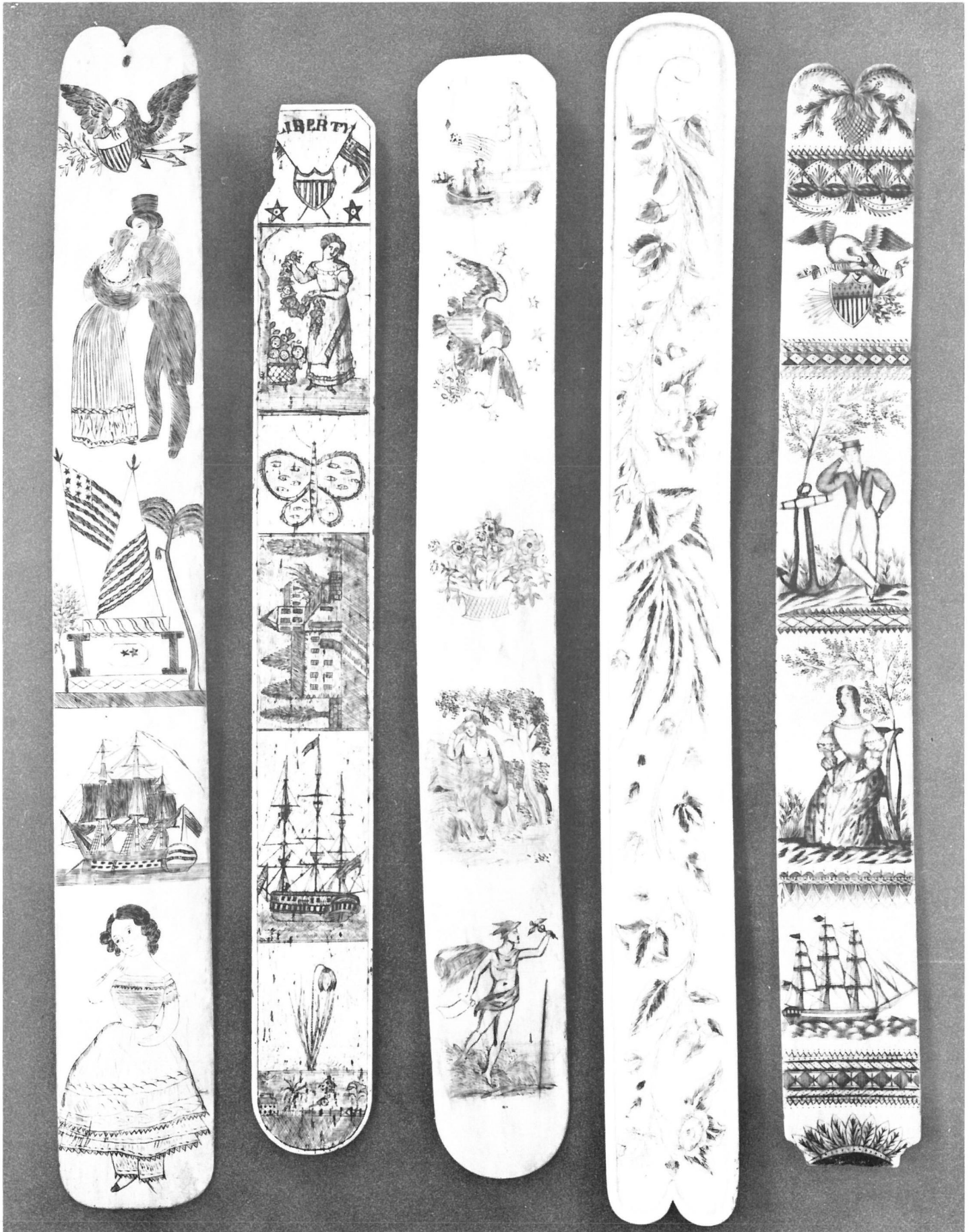


Figure 3. A selection of whalebone busks depicting a few of the popular motifs of the mid 19th century.

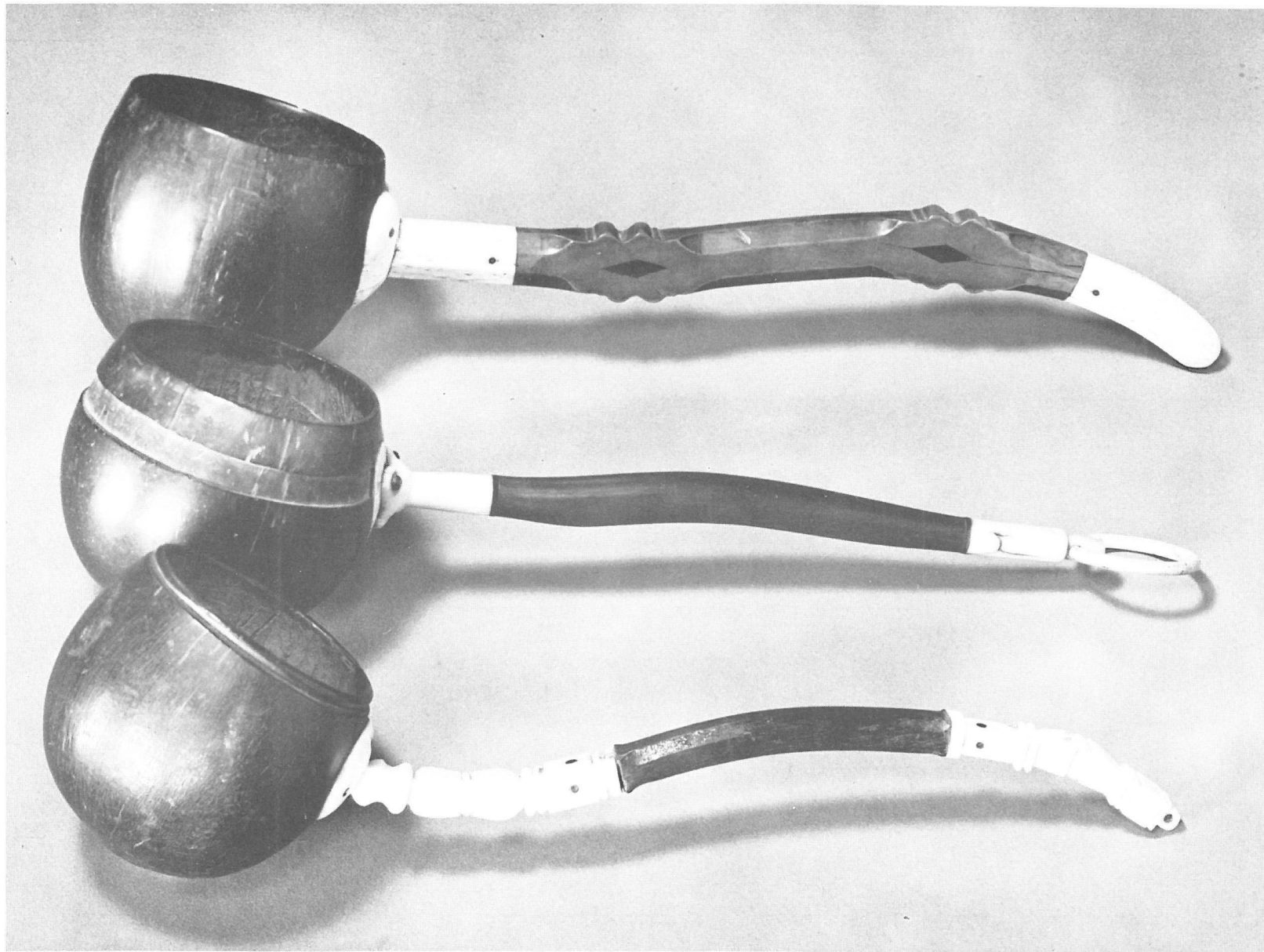


Figure 4. Water dippers – the bowls of polished coconut shell and the handles of wood, whalebone, and whale ivory.



Figure 5. A fine grouping of whaler made dirks – the hilts carved in whale ivory

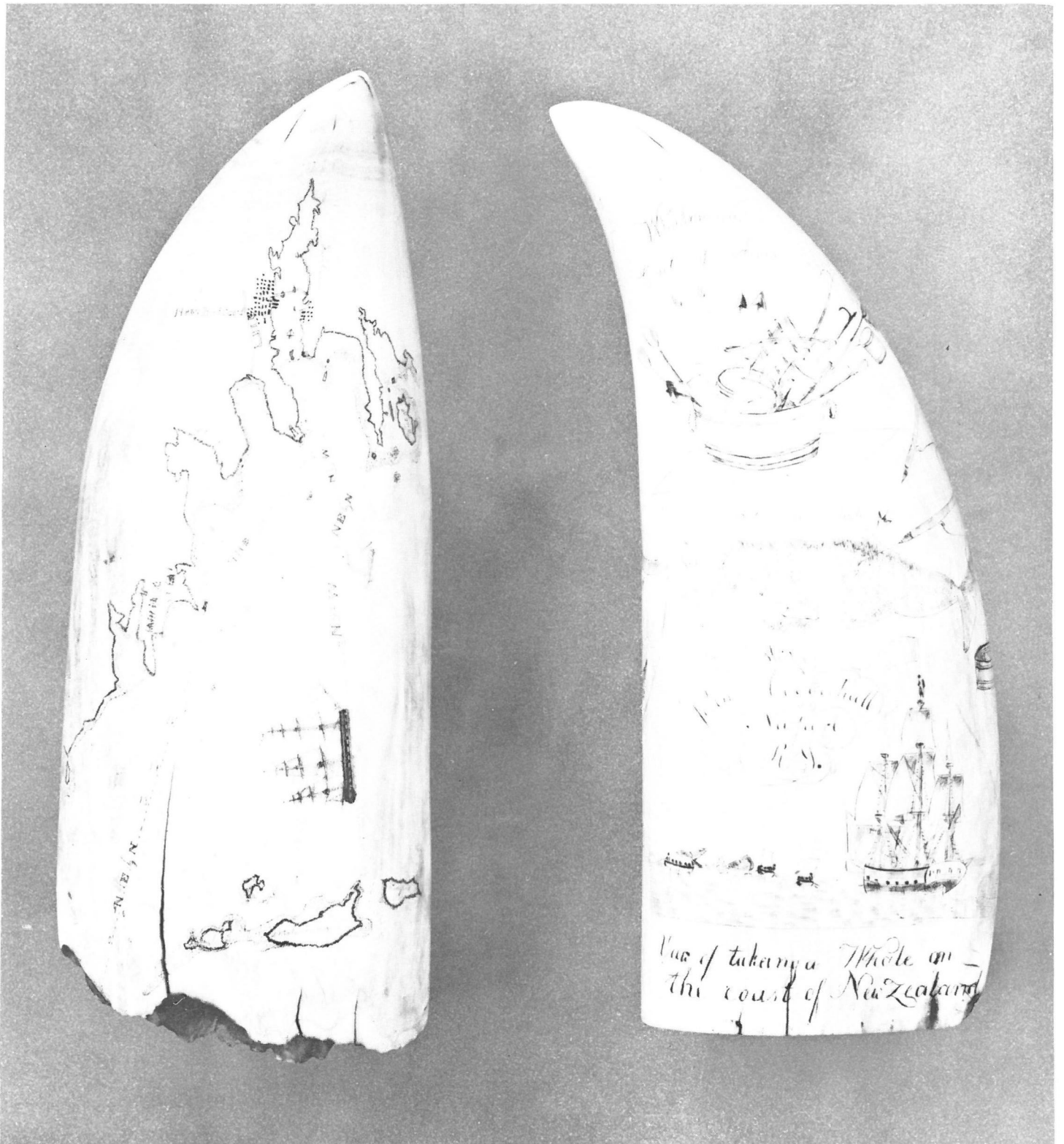


Figure 6. The chart of New Bedford Harbor depicted on this rare tooth is reminiscent of the late 18th century Colonial Map Horns. The very desirable tooth on the right (circa 1840) was done aboard the ship "John Coggeshall" of Newport, Rhode Island.



Figure 7. A pair of well executed walrus tusks embellished with marine and patriotic themes.



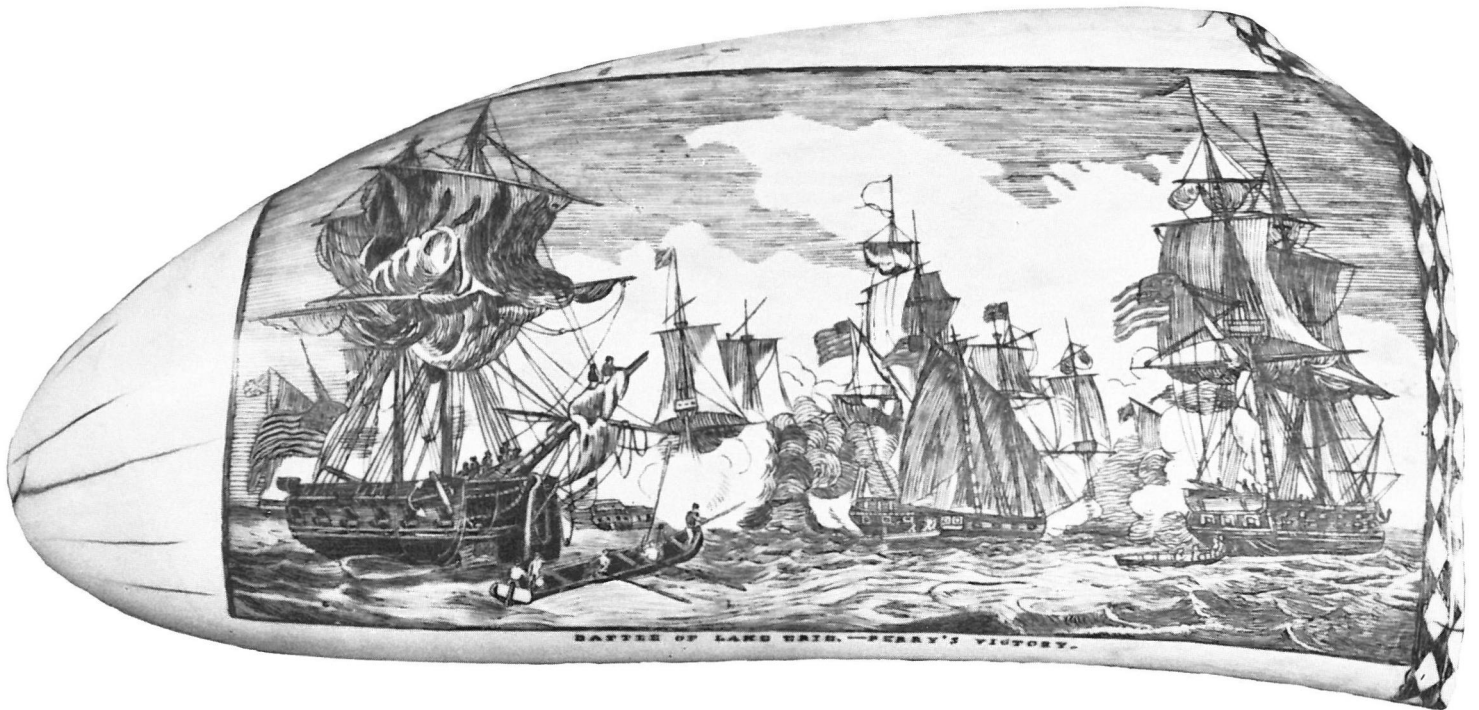
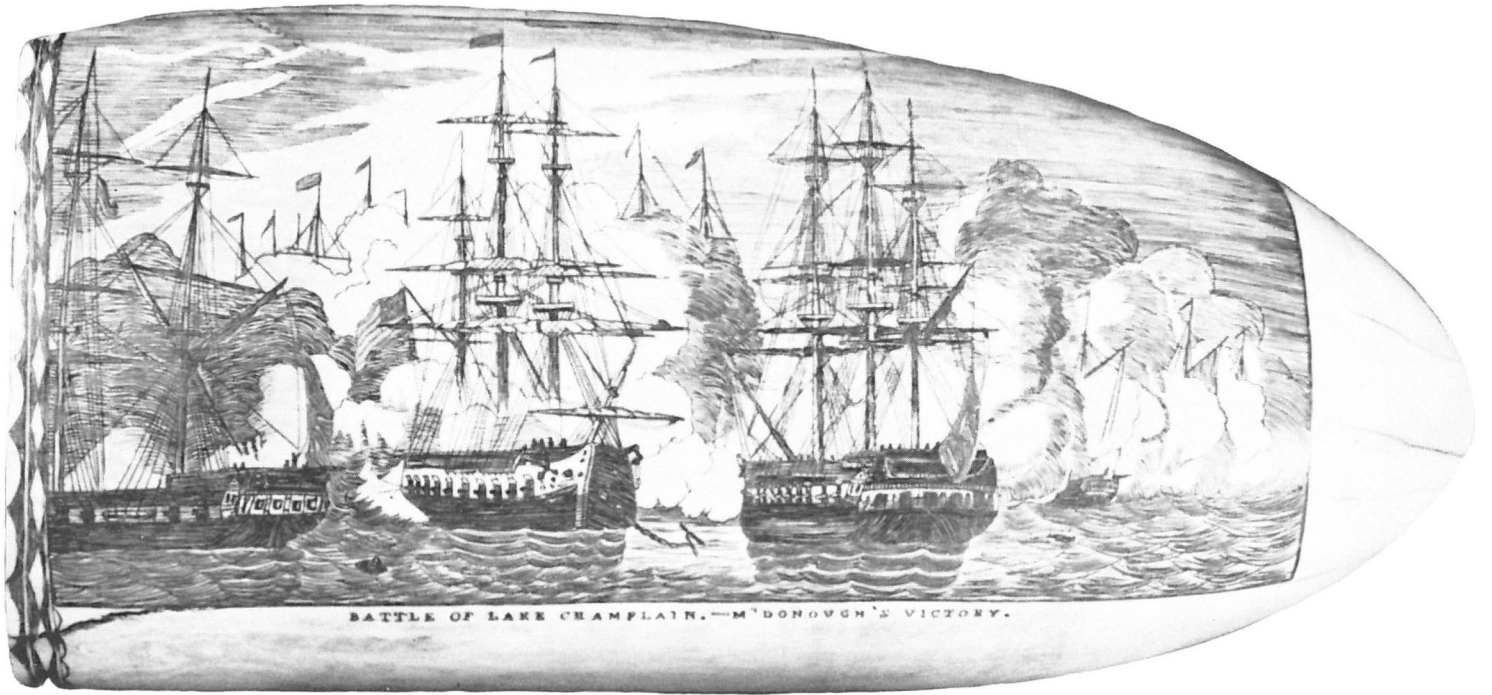


Figure 8. This pair of magnificent teeth depicting the battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain, appear to be the work of a professional engraver and are not in the purest sense of the word, Scrimshaw.

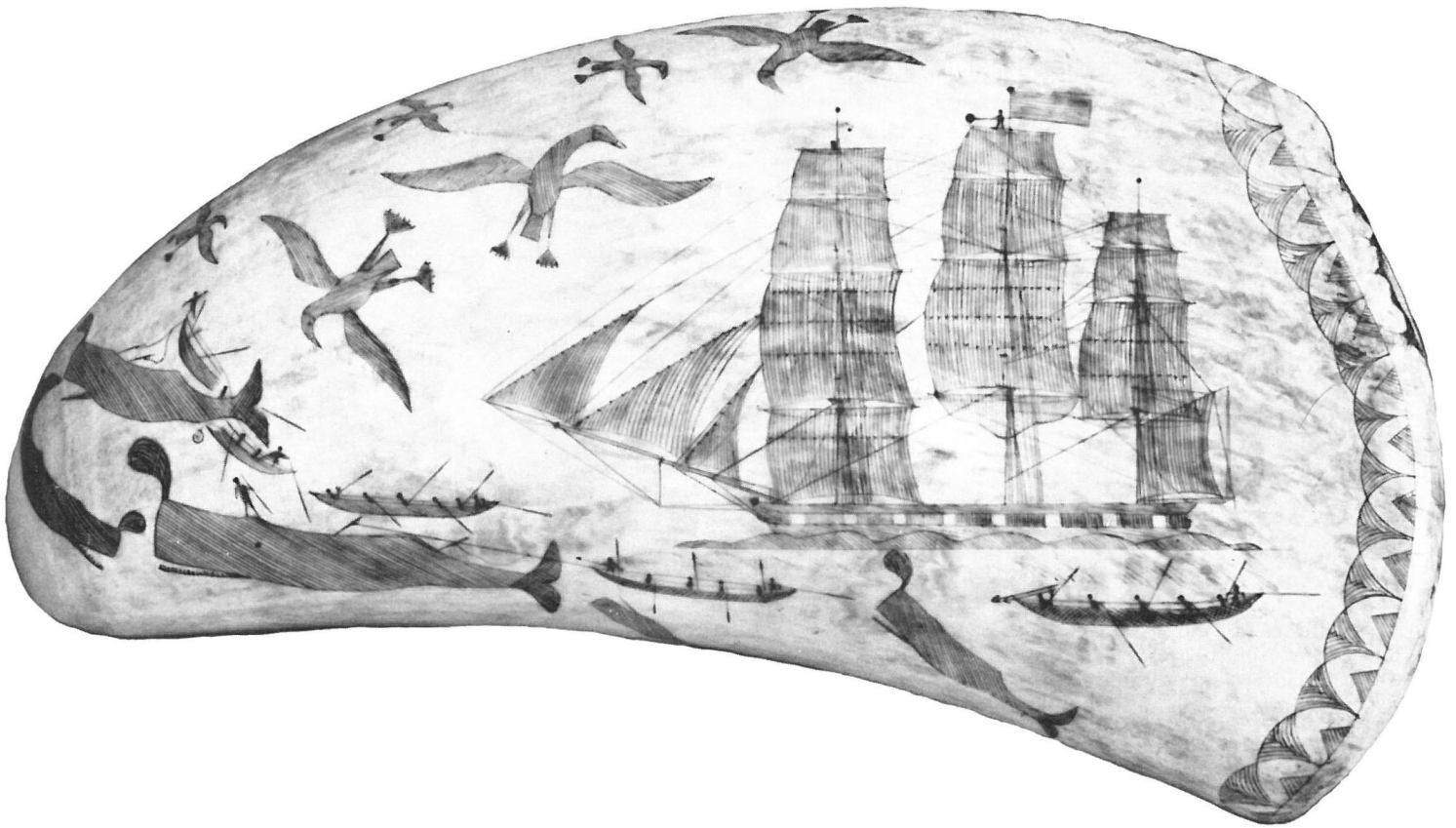


Figure 9. A choice tooth in a rather primitive style, having a tremendous amount of charm and character.

Scrimshaw as an art form began to decline in quality and quantity by the Civil War. This was due to three factors.

First the discovery of crude oil which diminished the market for the whale oil.

Second the depredations on the whaling fleet by Confederate raiders during the course of the war and third the crews of the whalers by the 1850's were largely made up of foreign seamen not having the tradition of producing Scrimshaw at sea.

A few examples of engraved teeth having religious scenes upon them, are for the most part the product of whalers of Portuguese descent serving aboard American Ships.

Before closing, I would like to touch on the subject of fakes and forgeries. The Scrimshaw field abounds with fakes; the most dangerous area being that of the engraved teeth and tusks. Here you must largely rely on experience in judging whether the piece is right or not. General things to look for is the patina to the ivory, whether genuine or arti-

ficially produced, and the general style of engraving. Another dangerous area is that of married pieces such as a cane handle mounted on a shaft that is not original to it, or the embellishment of otherwise plain but genuine objects with additional inlaying of bone, whale ivory, pearl shell, or additional engraving. With the exception of some recently crudely produced jaggling wheels and seamrubbers, most of the utilitarian objects with the exception of the above mentioned alterations, are fairly safe.

In conclusion, I wish to thank Mr. Norm Flayderman for permission to use many illustrations from his very fine book entitled *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders* which I might add is the only book of great merit on Scrimshaw that has been written up to this time. I also wish to thank Mr. Don Upchurch for the loan of several extremely fine pieces of Scrimshaw from his collection which were included in my display, and lastly I wish to thank all of you for your patience and indulgence.