

SAILORS AND SCRIMSHAW

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read the brief history on scrimshaw in the U.S. Navy.
2. Design your own scrimshaw on the next page!
3. Tag the National Museum of the American Sailor on social media with your finished scrimshaw:



National Museum of the American Sailor



@ntlmuseumamericansailor



BRIEF HISTORY

Sailors in the 1800s often experienced boredom on long voyages. At that time, ships could be at sea for months on end and sailors did not have the luxury of television or video games to keep them busy.

As a result, art was a popular leisure activity for sailors. **Scrimshaw** is a type of art that was popular among sailors. Sailors created

scrimshaw by engraving or carving beautiful designs into bone or ivory. The most common materials used were the bones or teeth from sperm whales. Occasionally, sailors used walrus tusks or bones from porpoises.

Sailors used needles, usually large sailmaker's needles, to etch their designs into pieces of bone. Scrimshaw artists then brought the design to life by filling the cuts with candle black, soot, tobacco, or ink. The most popular scrimshaw designs showcased sailors' lives at sea. Ships, anchors, marine animals, and flags are among the most common scrimshaw designs.

Today, the Endangered Species Act protects whales and other marine mammals from hunters. As a result, modern scrimshaw is very rare. At the museum, we treasure the few remaining pieces of this lost art.



Left: A large, full-rigged ship carved in 1867. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Museum.

Right: A piece of scrimshaw depicting naval hero, Captain John Paul Jones. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command



This activity kit has been provided by the National Museum of the American Sailor

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SAILORS AND SCRIMSHAW



CREATE YOUR OWN SCRIMSHAW

Supplies:

- Bar of soap
- Toothpick, pushpin, plastic knife, or paper clip
- Soot or black paint
- Damp paper towels
- Newspaper

Instructions:

1. Cover your workspace with newspaper.
2. Choose your design. Practice drawing your design on paper before beginning to etch your soap. Traditional sailor designs include ships, anchors, and other nautical images.
3. *Optional: Scrape off the soap's brand name by placing the soap under warm, running water and gently rubbing off bits of soap until the name is removed.*
4. Create your design. Using a pushpin, plastic knife, or paper clip, lightly carve your design in the soap. Go back in to carve deeper when you're happy with the design. Take your time! It isn't easy to fix mistakes.
5. Use a damp paper towel to gently polish the soap, remove shavings, and prep for soot/black paint. *Make sure the soap shavings are removed before adding soot.*
6. Sprinkle soot on your design or paint it with black paint.
7. Use a damp paper towel to remove excess soot or paint.



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