

# Soap Scrimshaw

## National Museum of the American Sailor Activity

### What is Scrimshaw?

Scrimshaw is a type of art that was popular among sailors of the 1800s. 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.



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

### Sailors and Scrimshaw

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 was most popular among sailors serving on whaling vessels, because of their access to whale teeth. However, sailors in the U.S. Navy also enjoyed scrimshaw and typically etched their naval pride into their scrimshaw designs.



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



## Soap Scrimshaw Activity

### Supplies Needed:

- Bar of soap (we prefer Ivory, but use whatever you have at home)
- Cuticle stick, toothpick, plastic knife, paper clip, or pushpin
- 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. We suggest lightly carving at first and then going back 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. Make sure the soap shavings are removed before adding soot.
6. Sprinkle soot on your design. If you do not have fireplace or fire pit soot available, black paint or shoe polish can be substituted.
7. Use a damp paper towel to remove excess soot or paint.

