

FAKE SCRIMSHAW

Part I: History of Scrimshaw, 'Fakeshaw' and Museum Reproductions

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Little is known by the general public about this elusive topic, and many people are frequently fooled by the 'ivory' cribbage board reproductions sold in the market place. Dealers sometimes even feature these cribbage boards as 'genuine' ivory, making for a more confusing evaluation of the truth.

What is scrimshaw?

Although the term scrimshaw is loosely applied to all scrimmed ivory, bone or tusk products that have been carved and filled in with color of some sort, the true scrimshawed pieces were originally carved by whalers. The whalers frequently spent long, lonely months aboard their vessels, and in the late 17th or early 18th Century, the art of carving the walrus bones, teeth and ivory tusks was developed by one of these talented men. Since many early whalers couldn't read or write, the pieces of art that they created weren't usually signed or dated by them.

According to folklore, the whalers passed along their artistic expertise of scrimshawing to the Inuit natives of Alaska sometime in the late 1800s. Out of this sharing of techniques arose a huge population of talented scrimshanders, the most famous of all indisputably being "Happy Jack". Unfortunately, during the Influenza epidemic of 1917, many of these talented Inuits, including "Happy Jack", met their demise when they contracted the illness. It took years for the Inuit natives to rebuild a sound economy from the art of scrimshandering, but never, never, has another native scrimmer risen to equal "Happy Jack's" fame.

Scrimshawed ivory continued merrily on its way, not gaining a tremendous amount of publicity (nor high pricing) until the early 1960s, when it was revealed that the popular President JFK was a collector of scrimshawed ivory pieces. The market soon went out of sight, and merchants scurried to come up with an acceptable alternative. Thus was born Fake Scrimshaw, better known by ivory collectors as 'Fakeshaw'.

The term 'Fakeshaw' has been used extensively by Stuart Frank¹, the Director of The Kendall Whaling Museum² of Sharon Massachusetts, and his book, which is called "Fakeshaw: A Checklist of Plastic Scrimshaw", was originally brought to my attention by Wilson Gartner (#91). In a recent visit to the museum, I purchased a copy of Frank's book which was updated in 1993, and includes an insert of more recent finds, dated 1996.

What is 'Fakeshaw'?

Fake scrimshaw is machine-produced simulated ivory, usually made from a polymer (plastic) substance with components added to give it the weight of ivory. The color is important, for it lends credibility to the object if it has the characteristics usually found in real ivory and bone pieces. Although most manufacturers machine 'engraved' the designs, most were then colored in by hand. Fake scrimshaw pieces do not have a manufacturer's mark on them.

What is a museum reproduction?

Museum reproductions are polymer (plastic) copies of original whalers' scrimshawed artifacts which are housed in whaling museums. The companies which reproduce them, such as Artek of New Hampshire, place on each piece the mark or symbol of the museum where the original is on display. The manufacturer has manufacturing rights to reproduce the pieces. The Peabody Museum of Salem Massachusetts houses many pieces, including cribbage boards, which have been legally reproduced by Artek.

My primary purpose in visiting the Kendall Whaling Museum was to determine if I could unravel some of the mysteries surrounding our 'Fakeshaw' cribbage boards. They look so authentic that they have fooled many people, even collectors of ivory, into believing that they have purchased an original piece of scrimshawed ivory. I was first introduced to this form of fake ivory several years ago when Ethel Frost (#20) sent me photos of her "JHTA" Plantation walrus tusk. As she recalls, the piece was purchased in Scotland years ago. Since that time, other reproductions of walrus tusk scrimshawed cribbage boards have been located, and the list is growing.

There were four major manufacturers of 'Fakeshaw' listed by Frank in his book, three of them located in England. The lists of reproductions that they manufactured have been carefully

researched by Mr. Frank, and they are included in the second Edition of his book. I have researched one of the companies listed which is/was located in Cirencester, Gloucestershire England, and apparently they no longer produce the 'Fakeshaw' - at least there is none for sale in their current catalog.

I also have documentation on two other manufacturers of fake scrimshaw which are not included in Mr. Frank's book. One of the manufacturers, G. H. Cook Co. of Washington, stopped manufacturing the fake scrimshaw boards in 1993. It is important to note that Cook never claimed that his pieces were authentic reproductions.

A visit the Mystic Seaport Store and Museum, Mystic Connecticut was recently made by me, as there is a Charles W. Morgan walrus tusk listed in Mr. Frank's book. An identical scrimshawed cribbage board was recently offered for sale on eBay. (The Charles W. Morgan whaling vessel was restored at Mystic Seaport and is berthed there. It is the last whaling vessel preserved and in existence, in this country). Unfortunately, according to the old-time salesperson with whom I spoke, the Seaport Store is no longer able to obtain the 'Fakeshaw' stock from England. She didn't recall ever having seen the Morgan cribbage board, just the plain tusk. So, what have we deduced from the research done thus far? What will help you sort fake from real? If you have read closely, there are clues all along the way.

1) Most early whalers couldn't read or write, so 'reproductions' that have writing and dates on them are probably not exact reproductions, just modern works that may or may not have taken their general design from an original artifact.

2) The process of making 'Fakeshaw', in all probability, was first begun in England. Three of the four manufacturers identified were located in England, and several owners report that their boards were purchased in England or Scotland.

3) The process of manufacturing these reproductions began in the early 1970s and probably, with the exception of one American manufacturer, concluded in the mid-1990s. The most recent catalogs listed by Mr. Frank in his book are dated 1987. Although History Craft Ltd. of Cirencester (one of the 1987 catalogs listed) is still in business, there are no 'Fakeshaw' listings in their current catalog.

4) The Charles W. Morgan 'Fakeshaw' board, which was mentioned earlier, may have been purchased originally as a plain scrimshawed tusk, and the holes drilled later to make a cribbage board. The theory for this is weak, at best, but may be proven right by the time that my research has been completed.