The Scrimshaw of Manuel Cunha: Late Work from Madeira Revealed

Joshua T. Basseches
The Kendall Whaling Museum

The Kendall Whaling Museum
Sharon, Massachusetts USA
1988
The Scrimshaw of Manuel Cunha: Late Work from Madeira Revealed

Joshua T. Basseches
The Kendall Whaling Museum

The Kendall Whaling Museum
Sharon, Massachusetts USA
1988
To my grandmother, who shared Madeira with me.

The Scrimshaw of Manuel Cunha: Late Work from Madeira Revealed
© 1988 by The Kendall Whaling Museum and Joshua T. Basseches.
Kendall Whaling Museum Monograph Series No. 2.
Stuart M. Frank, Series Editor.
The Kendall Whaling Museum, Sharon, Massachusetts 02067 USA
ISBN 0-937854-26-3

Includes catalogue.
Whaling; Scrimshaw; Antiques; Art Fakes and Forgeries.

Cover illustration: Figure 1.
Title page illustration: Figure 2.

This publication is printed on archival quality pH neutral paper.
INTRODUCTION

In 1987, with characteristic foresight, the Trustees of the Kendall Whaling Museum recommended that the museum undertake a mission to Madeira and the Azores, to make oral history videotapes of the surviving participants in the hand-whaling industry that flourished there earlier in this century. The museum, which has always had a profound interest in the whaling heritage of the Portuguese islands and of the Azorean and Cape Verdean communities in North America, was in an unusually advantageous position to act on this mandate. David Boeri—a journalist on staff at the local Boston public television station and author of an extraordinary firsthand book on Inupiat and Yupik (Eskimo) whaling—was an Advisory Curator ideally suited to the technical and cinematic dimensions of the project. And in Joshua T. Bassches, Assistant Curator for Special Collections, we had a museum professional fluent in Portuguese, who had developed his whaling expertise first as a scrimshaw specialist at two major maritime museums, and then in residence at Lajes do Pico, in the Azores, where his many friendships and contacts would be invaluable in mounting such an expedition. It was during two visits to Madeira, in December 1985 and March 1987, that Bassches met and, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, earned the confidence of retired scrimshander Manuel Cunha, who volunteered the startling revelations of his elusive career as a scrimshaw artist. Unbeknown to at least some of the dealers in Britain and America to whom he sold his wares, Cunha kept photographs and some of the correspondence pertaining to a portion of his enormous output of scrimshaw over the years. These he turned over to the Kendall Whaling Museum with explicit instructions that they be published as his work, thus finally laying claim to the production of a lifetime that had heretofore remained anonymous. Cunha’s testimony confirms what has long been suspected: that highly skilled Portuguese artisans produced scrimshaw in large quantities for sale abroad, and that, one way or another, such pieces often appeared on the market as authentic nineteenth-century whalemen’s work, whatever the motives of the original craftsmen may have been. Cunha made no direct allegation or accusation of deliberate fraud; nor did he protest the innocence of the merchants who commissioned his work. He was merely an artisan producing a commodity to order, and only in retrospect did it seem a lifework in danger of being relegated to anonymity. Perhaps it was the apprehension of his own mortality, impelled by an artist’s pride in work well executed, and the desire to connect his name with this great legacy while he still could, that caused him to come forward. Scarcely nine months after granting the interviews, he was dead, with a remarkable opus of scrimshaw as his monument.

Stuart M. Frank, Director
The Kendall Whaling Museum

---

The Scrimshaw of Manuel Cunha: Late Work from Madeira Revealed

by Joshua T. Basseches
The Kendall Whaling Museum

In December 1987, Manuel de Paiva e Cunha died at the age of 77. His death, like his life, went largely unrecognized outside the circle of his family and friends, and the community on the Portuguese island of Madeira where he lived. Yet for whaling enthusiasts—especially those interested in scrimshaw—the name Manuel Cunha deserves recognition. For Cunha was a scrimshander of great talent and productivity. During a period spanning the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, he produced and sent to the U.S. more than five hundred engraved whale teeth. His work so closely resembles certain authentic sailor-made scrimshaw that auction houses regularly sell Cunha teeth as antique, and authors have used his pieces as illustrations of nineteenth-century scrimshaw.2

1 Joshua T. Basseches was a curatorial volunteer at Mystic Seaport in 1983 while enrolled in the Williams College Program in American Maritime Studies, and was a Curatorial Intern at the Kendall Whaling Museum in 1984 while preparing his bachelor’s thesis on scrimshaw at Amherst College. After graduation in 1985, he returned to the Kendall Whaling Museum as Assistant Curator. Awarded a prestigious Thomas J. Watson Fellowship for 1986-87, he lived, worked, and studied the local culture in the whaling communities on Bequia (West Indies) and Pico (the Azores). In March 1987, under Kendall Whaling Museum auspices, he assisted in the taping of a documentary archival film of surviving whalers in the Azores and Madeira, conducting many hours of oral history interviews that have since been incorporated into the audiovisual tape archives of the museum. It is from some of these interviews with Manuel Cunha that this monograph results. Mr. Basseches is currently employed in the public advocacy sector, and serves as Adjunct Assistant Curator for Special Collections at the Kendall Whaling Museum.


In a market where authentic scrimshaw is the exception rather than the rule, and where collectors, dealers, and curators are regularly taken in by skillful fakes and recent copies, one more modern scrimshander hardly seems noteworthy. Yet Manuel Cunha is not just one more modern scrimshander: few if any other twentieth-century artisans have carved teeth so often mistaken for sailors’ work, and no other—at least so far as is known—has placed so many pieces on the American market. In fact, between 1956 and 1973 Cunha produced an estimated 2,000 carved whale teeth, a quarter of which he reports having sent to New Bedford to be sold.3 The pieces he sent to the U.S. alone represent roughly twenty-five times the total known output of such nineteenth-century scrimshanders as Frederick Myrick or Edward Burdett, and is equal to roughly one quarter of all the scrimshawed teeth found in all the maritime museums in New England.

The comparatively early date that Cunha began sending his scrimshawed teeth to the U.S. presents a further reason for potential confusion between his work and genuine sailors’ creations. Scrimshaw only became popular as a collectors’ item in the mid 1960s. Before then it was bought and sold at relatively low prices by a devoted but small group of collectors; scrimshaw forgery or scrimshaw souvenir manufacture could not have been especially remunerative activities at that time. In the late 1960s and 1970s, when scrimshaw became increasingly valuable, making and faking scrimshaw began to pay off. However, many of Cunha’s scrimshawed teeth arrived in the U.S. before 1960. These pieces now have a thirty-year history that predates the emerging desirability of scrimshaw in the ’60s, thereby increasing the likelihood that they might be mistaken for nineteenth-century whalers’ art. Quality aside, Cunha’s work merits attention if only for its sheer numerical volume and comparatively long history on the American market.

Notwithstanding the great number of teeth that Cunha engraved, he did not begin scrimshawing until he was well into his forties. Born in the village of Calheta, Madeira, in 1910, he moved to Funchal at the age of 18 and began working at an import-export firm. At age 33 he took up ivory carving as a hobby, producing devotional objects such as crosses and rosaries. It was not until he

met Antonio Cabral, an antiques dealer from New Bedford, that he first heard the word *scrimshaw*. Cabral probably learned of Cunha through an exhibition of Cunha's religious carving held at Lisbon in 1955. Shortly thereafter Cabral contacted Cunha and commissioned him to experiment with the making of scrimshaw. Cunha claims that Cabral sent him photographs of nineteenth-century whalmen's scrimshaw, as well as a variety of magazine and newspaper illustrations resembling those supposedly used by sailors in engraving teeth; and that Cunha followed Cabral's instructions, copying the images onto teeth.\(^4\) He did his best to make them appear antique, as Cabral allegedly requested that he do, and even agreed to bury some of the teeth in the ground to give them a darkened patina.\(^5\) Cunha's association with Cabral lasted until 1970, and while Cunha was unable to recall exactly how many teeth he sent to Cabral during this period, he estimated the number to be in the hundreds.\(^6\)

Early in his relationship with Cabral, Cunha began initiating his work with a small "M.C." Cabral is said to have objected, explaining that whalmen rarely initialed their work.\(^7\) In later pieces Cunha attempted to hide his initials in different parts of the design. When Cabral objected to this as well, Cunha began simply to incorporate idiosyncratic stylistic features into his work. His most common technique was to carve dots or dashes on either side of the name of a ship or other inscription, a feature which, according to Cunha, enables the discerning viewer to distinguish his work from sailor-made scrimshaw.

In the early 1970s, two other New Bedford dealers, Joseph Paiva and Manuel Macedo, began commissioning scrimshaw from Cunha. Existing correspondence indicates that, like Cabral, both Paiva and Macedo instructed Cunha to choose traditional designs for his work. Macedo further instructed Cunha to leave his teeth unsigned and to make them "look like old work."\(^8\) However, there is nothing in the correspondence directly to suggest either that these pieces were necessarily represented on the American market as authentic sailors' scrimshaw, or that Cunha was knowingly involved in fraud.

About this time, new international agreements, and the subsequent Endangered Species Act prohibiting the importation of whale products into the United States, brought Cunha's work under the scrutiny of the Federal authorities charged with enforcement. In 1972, four of his scrimshawed teeth were confiscated by the U.S. Department of Fisheries and Natural Resources; and as the 1970s wore on, it became increasingly difficult to ship scrimshaw to the U.S. without confiscation.\(^9\) Consequently, Cunha's commissions began to dwindle, and by the late '70s he had largely ceased carving teeth at all—but not before he had sent more than 500 of them to New Bedford.

Even though the vast majority of Cunha's scrimshawed teeth are unsigned, they exhibit stylistic and pictorial similarities that make them relatively easy to identify. His subjects can be grouped into six general categories: whaling scenes; general nautical scenes; military and naval engagements; harbor scenes; historical figures and events; and miscellaneous genre scenes. At first glance, these subjects appear to be the same as those found on the majority of sailor-made scrimshaw. However, there is a major difference: Cunha's images are never generic. Sailors usually depicted their subject matter generically—an unidentified harbor, a whale hunt that could have taken place practically anywhere and which apparently represents a type rather than a specific vessel or occasion, or an unidentified human figure, portrait, or naval scene. On the other hand, almost all of Cunha's images are copied from identifiable engravings or illustrations, and depict specific people, places, and events. While all of the sources have yet to be traced,\(^8\) Macedo/Cunha correspondence, 17 November 1973.

\(^4\) Basseches/Cunha interview, 22 March 1987.
\(^5\) Cabral/Cunha correspondence, 5 January 1955.
\(^6\) Basseches/Cunha interview, 22 March 1987.
\(^7\) Basseches/Cunha interview, 22 March 1987.
\(^8\) Macedo/Cunha correspondence, 16 August 1972, and 31 August 1972, instructs Cunha to certify the legality of the teeth but does not indicate whether or not they were returned. Another letter from Macedo, dated 25 September 1973, instructs Cunha to prepare six teeth "already paid for": to engrave them with pictures of English interest, and give them the appearance of antique English scrimshaw; not to sign them; to ship them to Martin Randall in Sussex, England; and to "declare them as gifts sent by Raymond Parga / Salem, Mass. U.S.A." To this letter Cunha added the notation, "enviado [sent] 13-Oct. 73."
some are readily apparent. For instance, one tooth (fig. 5) is clearly based on Benjamin Russell’s lithograph View of the Stone Fleet Which Sailed from New Bedford Nov. 16th 1861; and another (fig. 8) is easily traced to W. J. Huggins’s Northern Whale Fishery.11

Cunha’s style, like his subject matter, is sufficiently unusual to be easily recognized. His work has a degree of compositional sophistication lacking in most sailor-made scrimshaw. This sophistication is demonstrated in a number of different ways. Rather than engrave a tooth with several unconnected images—a whale along the side of the tooth, a ship near the root end, a fashionable lady on the reverse—Cunha’s images are unified designs. They have a ground plane and horizon, and are compositional wholes: he gives his scenes definition by cropping the edges of the image, sometimes in the middle of a house or vessel. This cropping technique seems more effective in framing a design than any number of the elaborate floral borders which some sailor-artists regularly employed.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Cunha’s style is his engraving technique. The incised lines of his work are bold and authoritative, deeply carved and symmetrical and inked in a dark black. He imparts weight and form to his subjects through a technique far more common in the engraving process than in scrimshaw: rather than using a stippling or cross-hatching technique as is often found in nineteenth-century sailors’ work, Cunha gives the images mass and solidity by incising numerous closely-spaced parallel lines (see figs. 3, 18, 50, etc.).

Yet another identifying stylistic feature is Cunha’s characteristic manner of engraving the inscriptions that appear on the majority of his teeth—for example, “George Washington’s Birthplace” (fig. 67) or the “Battle of Palo Alto” (fig. 51). In Cunha’s work, these identifying texts are invariably centered under the images and engraved in extremely simple, unadorned capital letters, very different from the cursive script or serifed Roman letters sometimes found on sailor-made scrimshaw.

When the identifying features of Cunha’s work are recognized, distinguishing his scrimshaw from authentic whalingmen’s occupational art should, in most instances, no longer present a problem. Cunha can then be appreciated for what he is—an accomplished twentieth-century scrimshaw artist—rather than for what he is not. This is a step in the right direction, but only one step of many. The confusion surrounding Cunha’s work is symptomatic of a broader condition affecting the study of the genre as a whole. For too long scrimshaw has been treated as a mere curiosity, mostly anonymous and wholly inconsequential, unworthy of serious study. Too often scrimshaw has been relegated to a kind of limbo by art historians unwilling to acknowledge its intrinsic merits, and by collectors and curators unwilling to undertake the hard work necessary to discover its historical and contextual relevance. Only when the same rigorous techniques are applied to scrimshaw as are applied to the study of more traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, will the work of Manuel Cunha and other twentieth-century artisans cease to confound, and any true understanding of the art of the whaleman be possible.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the late Manuel Cunha, who generously made his photographs, letters, and documents, available for publication and preservation, and who graciously consented to undergo the ordeal of the videotape interview process; to the Trustees and staff of the Kendall Whaling Museum, for their interest, help, and support; to David Boeri, Carlos Medina, and the Azores-Madeira Project film crew; and to friends and colleagues in Madeira and the Azores, for their hospitality and assistance with many particulars.

10 Published at Boston, 1862; illustrated in M. V. and Dorothy Brewington, Kendall Whaling Museum Prints, Sharon, 1969, #18, pp. 8-9; Elizabeth Ingalls, Whaling Prints in the Francis B. Lothrop Collection, Salem, 1987, #296, pp. 154-55; etc.

11 Engraved by Edward Duncan and published by the artist, London, 1829; illustrated in Brewington, 1969, #187, p. 58 and facing p. 119; Ingalls #105f, pp. 50-51. Huggins’s original oil painting is in the collection of the Kendall Whaling Museum (note contributed by Stuart M. Frank).

12 Of course, Cunha’s skill is significant, and as his work has so often been taken to be the genuine work of sailor-artists, Cunha has had his own knowing and unwitting imitators. Ironically, many of the most common machine-manufactured pieces of plastic “fakeshaw” appear to imitate Cunha’s style and work (see Stuart M. Frank, Fakeshaw: A Checklist of Plastic “Scrimshaw,” Kendall Whaling Museum Monograph Series No. 1, Sharon, 1988).
Whaling Scenes

Figure 1: found on cover.
Figure 2: found on title page.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4. 730g*
Fig. 5. 530g*

Fig. 6. 625g, 20cent*
Fig. 7. 570g, 20cent.*

Fig. 8.
Fig. 9.

Fig. 10. 575gr.*
Fig. 11. 750*
General Nautical Scenes

Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

Fig. 14.

Fig. 15.

Fig. 16.

Fig. 17.

Fig. 18.

Fig. 19.
Harbor Scenes
Naval and Military Engagements
Historical Figures and Events

Fig. 67.

Fig. 68.

Fig. 69.

Fig. 70.

Fig. 71.

Fig. 72.

Fig. 73.

Fig. 74.

Fig. 75.
Miscellaneous Genre Scenes
* These notations were found on the back of the original photographs, apparently written in Cunha's hand.