

Thou Shalt Knot: Clifford W. Ashley

A major New Bedford Whaling Museum exhibition

July 2017-June 2018

Opening Reception July 7, 2017

Wattles Family Gallery and Dr. Gilbert and Frima Shapiro Gallery



*There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new
Purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover.*

– Clifford W. Ashley

The New Bedford Whaling Museum (NBWM) will celebrate the work of the master knot tyer, maritime artist, historian, and author **Clifford W. Ashley** in a monumental exhibition opening in July 2017 in two of the Museum's most prestigious galleries. The exhibition will include the premier of a recent gift to the Museum of Ashley's private knot collection with interpretative material from the Museum's private collection as well as the artist's paintings, prints, and works by other knot tyers and artists inspired by his work.

In 2016, Ashley's daughter, Phoebe Chardon, donated her father's collection of knots to the NBWM. This includes many of the knots Ashley used as models for the almost 7,000 illustrations in his encyclopedic magnum opus, *The Ashley Book of Knots*, in continuous print since 1944. This unique collection greatly broadens the Museum's capacity to represent Ashley in a new light and adds to the significant holdings of decorative and utilitarian knots acquired by the Museum over the last hundred years. *Thou Shalt Knot* celebrates Ashley's contributions to this most fundamental and ancient of tools within a larger cultural, social, industrial, artistic, and utilitarian context.

Knots are woven into the human experience, to our success as a species, and they permeate every part of our lives. They are integral to the ships we sail, the clothes we wear, the hair we braid, the memories we keep, our colloquial expressions, the games we play, the shoes we tie, the presents we give, the fish we catch, the social contracts that bind us. They keep us at anchor, exercise our minds, bind prisoners, and help us climb mountains. They have spiritual, religious, social, and historical connotations in story-telling, rituals, fertility, counting, record keeping, and mapping. We tie one on, we spin yarns, we tie the knot, we get tongue-tied, we measure speed in knots, depths in fathoms, we get tied up in knots, we are fit to be tied.

Knot Exhibition Highlights

The Ashley collection of knots will be a focal point of the show. In addition, the exhibition will include a broad range of fascinating objects with which to interpret the material drawn from the NBWM permanent collections, partner institutions, and private collections, including "Turk's Head" knotted scrimshaw canes, sailcloth, sailmaker and knot tying tools, examples of various fibers, Victorian braided mourning hair wreaths and jewelry, portraits, textiles, knots collected worldwide by whalers and merchants, rare books on rigging and knot tying used shipboard, decorative knots, paintings, prints, and original book illustrations that predate and postdate Ashley. Videos of knot tying, rope making, and interactives on the mathematics of knots will be on view, and rope making machines and other tools will be on hand for visitors to explore. The exhibition will also include modern works in various media that speak to a contemporary understanding and meaning of knots,

including macro views of rope in large graphite works on paper and static ceramic sculptures of rope and sailcloth.

Clifford W. Ashley: The Artist and Illustrator

Together with the Museum's extensive complementary material on knots, a contiguous exhibition focus will feature Ashley's works on canvas and book illustrations to give a comprehensive perspective on one of New Bedford's most interesting and influential citizens. Ashley was an accomplished artist who studied under Howard Pyle, one of America's greatest illustrators, at what came to be known as the Brandywine School. Ashley and his fellow student and friend N.C. Wyeth worked as illustrators to help with their tuition. This landed Ashley his life-changing post aboard the whaleship *Sunbeam* for a piece on whaling commissioned by *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, an experience that informed much of his later work and publications. While Ashley continued to illustrate books and journals for many years, his passion for painting moved him almost exclusively to canvas after 1913, focusing on his beloved New Bedford waterfront and local landscapes around South Dartmouth. He published one of his most important books, *The Yankee Whaler*, in 1926 on the whaling industry; the elegantly illustrated *Whaleships of New Bedford* in 1929 with a foreword by Franklin Delano Roosevelt; and his pivotal *Ashley Book of Knots* in 1944, the latter of which encompassed over 12 years of his career.



Knots are ubiquitous, sculptural, and mathematically elegant. Billions of possible knots and weaves have been discovered by mathematicians, some of which have potential as building blocks for exciting new materials of great strength, economy, and efficiency. Knots have been tied at the molecular level for over 25 years, the tightest and smallest ever created just this year with a "rope" 500 times smaller than a blood vessel. Scientists at MIT explore the strength of knots from simple cordage to the hyper elastic wire nitronol and the meaning behind ancient Andean knot records of the *quipu*. Artists worldwide in all media are exploring themes related to knots and knot-tying, and organizations like the International Guild of Knot Tyers preserve the knowledge of and passion for traditional tools, materials, and techniques. Riggers of historic ships from Mystic, CT to Spain to Washington State keep the heritage of this most fundamental and integral skill intact, and fishermen work continuously with their local and federal regulators to develop nets that balance efficiency with minimal impact on protected species. Knots are relevant, ancient, and modern, and there is much left to discover. Imagine a world without them; we might just come undone.

At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano, addressed the knotter:

"What are you knotting there, my man?"

"The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.

"So it seems; but what is it for?"

"For some one else to undo," muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.

- Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, 1855

Additional Programming and Events

Additional Programming will be scheduled to connect the exhibition with themes throughout the Museum. Visitors will learn about knots and rigging on the whaleship *Lagoda*, whale entanglements and rope design in the Museum's conservation exhibitions, net making in the *Following Fish* exhibit, about knots in literature through a partnership with The Melville Society, and textiles and weaving in the New Bedford manufacturing exhibition *Energy and Enterprise*. The Children's Discovery Center will have demonstrations and a knot tying station for kids, who can also take soundings off of the fo'c'sle exhibit to check for speed (knots) and depth (fathoms).

An **exhibition catalogue** will accompany the exhibition with the following proposed themes:

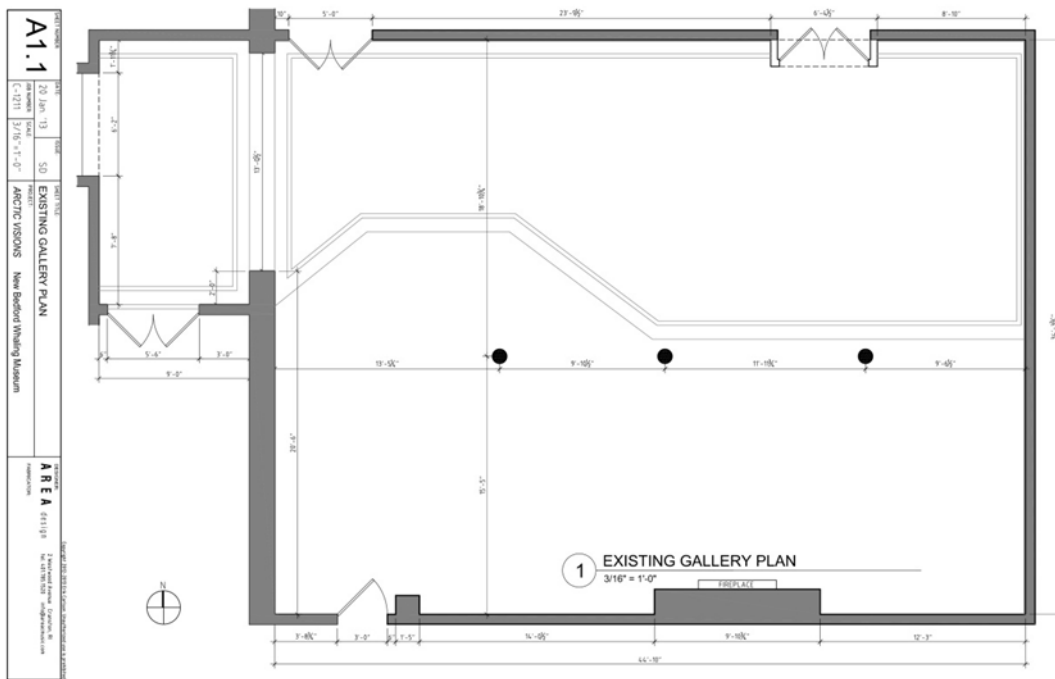
- Clifford Ashley Biography – Artist, Author, and Entrepreneur
- Clifford Ashley Paintings and Drawings in the NBWM Collections
- Clifford Ashley in context: A history of knot tying manuals
- Knots in the literature of Herman Melville and Others
- Knot Making Tools and Materials
- Cultural and Practical History of knots and rope
- Decorative Objects with Knotty Themes
- Textiles
- Current research in knots: The Tightest and the Smallest

A **Symposium** will be organized for fall 2017, and workshops will be scheduled throughout the year. Please check the NBWM website for updates.

The exhibition is to **travel** to partner institutions in part or in its entirety, the parameters and venues for which are currently being defined.



The Wattles Family Gallery



The Dr. Gilbert and Frima Shapiro Gallery

