

Tooth & Bone



Miniature Paintings and Scrimshaw from the Collections of the Newport Historical Society

by Ruth S. Taylor

For over one hundred fifty years the Newport Historical Society has been a depository for objects and materials of all kinds that were bought, sold, used or loved in Newport Rhode Island. Since beginning a year of close review of our artifact and fine art collections, we are rediscovering the stories of Newport's history (Fig. 1). This summer, items from our scrimshaw collection and a selection of miniature paintings on ivory will be displayed at the 2010 Newport Antiques Show in an exhibition entitled *Tooth and Bone*.

Miniatures and scrimshaw have much in common. Both use a natural material—animal bone and tooth—as a base for art, and they take advantage of the properties of the material in the creation of the work. Created out of a desire to bridge time and distance, miniatures were made to capture and keep an image of a loved one who might not always be near (Fig. 2). Scrimshaw, crafted on whaling boats often at sea for years, could also reflect a longing for loved ones or companionship; even those items that commemorate a vivid event or individual, or are purely whimsical, were generally intended as gifts for family at home (Fig. 3).

In the early eighteenth century, three brothers of the Huguenot DeBlois family emigrated from England to New England. A descendant,

Continued on page 86

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Fig. 1: Peggy Champlin, artist unknown, circa 1780. Watercolor on ivory, 2 x 1¼ inches. (NHS 30.6.3). Margaret (Peggy) Champlin is famous for having danced the first dance with General George Washington at a ball celebrating his 1781 return to Newport after the successful battle at Yorktown with Rochambeau and the French troops. Miss Champlin, who was known for her grace and charm, recorded this dance and others during the night in her diary.

Fig. 2: Major John Handy, by Edward Greene Malbone, 1796. Watercolor on ivory, 5 x 2¾ inches. (NHS 76.1.1 3). Both the artist and the subject of this painting are Newport luminaries. On July 20, 1776, a young military recruit, John Handy, read the text of the Declaration of Independence to the citizens of Rhode Island from the Colony House in Washington Square. In 1826, retired Major John Handy read the Declaration again from the same spot in celebration of 50 years of independence. Artist Edward Greene Malbone was born in Newport in 1777. The illegitimate son of John Malbone (himself the son of a wealthy Newport merchant) and his housekeeper, Edward Greene petitioned the legislature to take his father's name as a young man, and with his father's permission, become Edward Greene Malbone. He developed quickly into a prominent painter, and his works have stood the test of time. Primarily a miniature portraitist, his small paintings are among the best in the collection. Four will be shown in the exhibit.

Fig. 3: Swift base or Pin cushion clamp, artist unknown, ca. 1850. Whale ivory, 5¼ inches. (NHS 01.336).



LEFT TO RIGHT:

Fig 4. Scrimshaw portrait teeth on bases, possibly depicting John and Henrietta DeBlois, artist unknown, ca. 1856. Whale tooth with whale panbone and sealing wax bases. H. 6½, Width: 3½ in. (NHS 71.6.1 and 71.6.2). The letters sent between the couple and referenced in the article are in the collection, a facsimile of which will be in the exhibit.

Fig. 5: Miniature Portrait of Stephen DeBlois. Artist unknown, ca. 1770. Watercolor on ivory, 1½ x 1¾ inches. (NHS 01.370).


Tooth & Bone, continued from page 84

John S. DeBlois, lived in Newport in the middle of the nineteenth century and hunted whales for a living, sailing, for the most part, out of New Bedford in Massachusetts. Barely educated, he married a schoolteacher who tutored him in reading and writing. John wrote to his wife, Henrietta, with great frequency while at sea, painting a picture of an extremely loving husband who missed his wife terribly. An equally devoted wife, Henrietta agreed to accompany her husband on a three-year whaling voyage on the bark *Merlin*. Her chatty, descriptive, and emotional journal of the voyage is in the collections at the Historical Society. While a personal record, the journal also includes notations of scrimshaw items and furniture made by the crew during the voyage.

The DeBloises collected scrimshaw from the *Merlin's* and other voyages; many of the items are now in the Society's collections, and several will be in the exhibit. One tooth, which will be displayed, was taken from a whale that wrecked an earlier ship captained by DeBlois, the *Ann Alexander*. When Melville's *Moby Dick* was released shortly after the event, DeBlois was frequently compared to Ahab because he

had continued to chase the whale after it destroyed two of the vessel's whaling boats, only stopping when the whale turned and stove a hole into the *Ann Alexander*. The tooth was given to DeBlois while on the *Merlin* by the crew of another vessel who had subsequently encountered and killed the whale, identifiable because it still had harpoons from the *Ann Alexander* in its back and bits of ship's timber in its brow. Two other scrimshaw teeth from the DeBlois collection (Fig. 4), which may also be from the avenging whale, are decorated by an unknown artist with portraits believed to be that of John and Henrietta DeBlois.

During the Society's collection review this spring, we discovered that Stephen DeBlois, one of the original three Huguenot brothers and Captain DeBlois' ancestor, is depicted in one of the earliest miniatures in the collection (Fig. 5), and will also be included in the exhibit.

Today these and other examples from the collection bridge time rather than distance, offering us a glimpse of the faces of Newport's past. To view the illustrated examples and others in the exhibit, visit the Newport Antiques Show, August 13 through 15, 2010 at St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island. The Newport Historical Society, open year-round, is located at 127 Thames Street in Newport, Rhode Island. For information about the show or the Society, visit www.newporthistorical.org or call 401.846.0813. 

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