

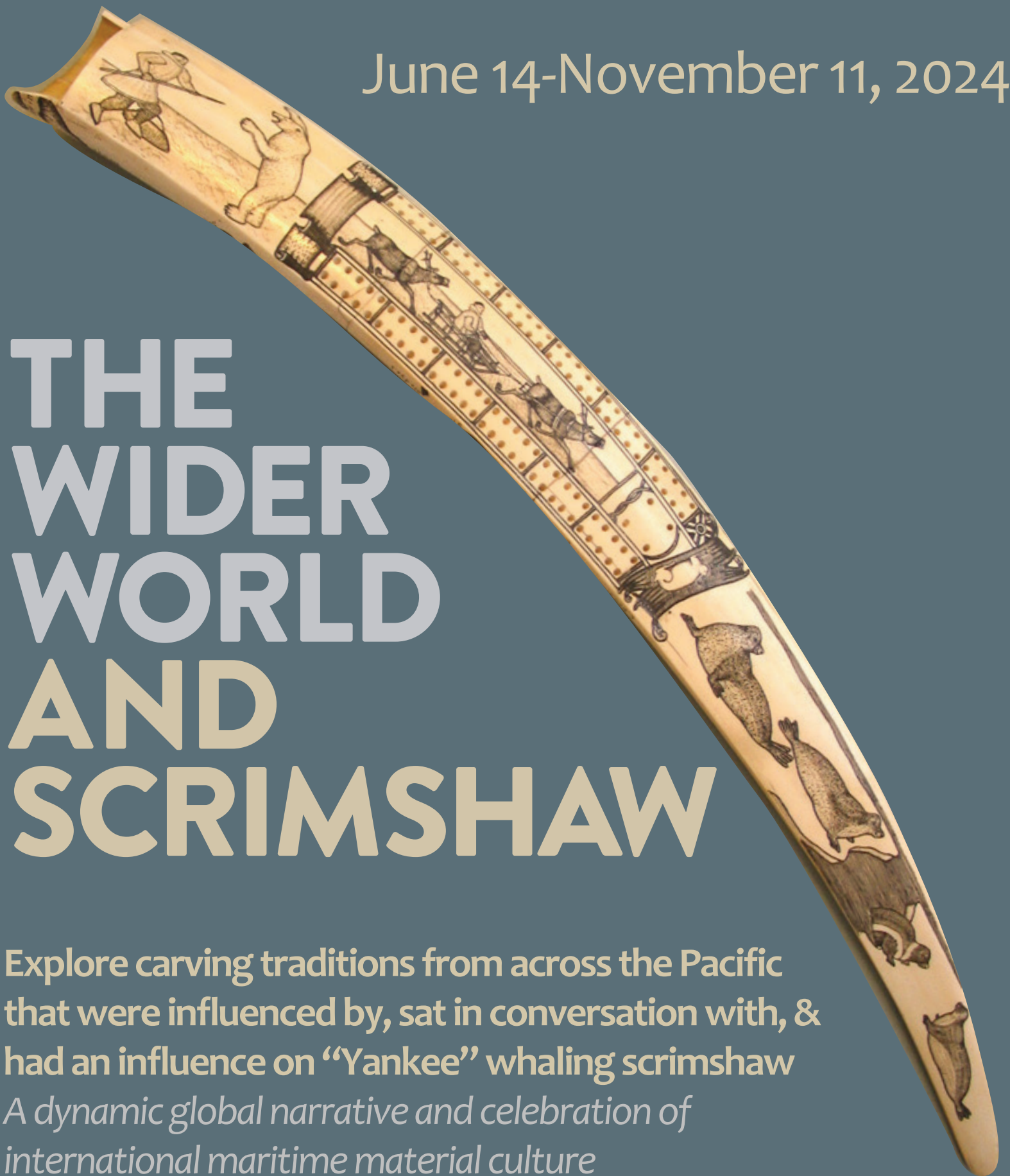
June 14-November 11, 2024

THE WIDER WORLD AND SCRIMSHAW

Explore carving traditions from across the Pacific that were influenced by, sat in conversation with, & had an influence on “Yankee” whaling scrimshaw

A dynamic global narrative and celebration of international maritime material culture

new bedford
whaling museum



EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The Wider World & Scrimshaw explores carving traditions that emerged alongside subsistence and commercial whaling routes around the Pacific, from New Bedford, MA to Oceania and the Arctic. The New Bedford Whaling Museum (NBWM) holds the largest collection of “scrimshaw” in the world, defined as a decorative, folk, or vernacular art made by whalers from the byproducts of whales. General audiences frequently misconstrue maritime history and scrimshaw specifically as linked only to white, male, New England makers. *Wider World* overturns these assumptions by placing our incredible scrimshaw collection into conversation with Indigenous material culture from across Oceania, the Pacific, and Arctic. Native communities have cosmologies related to whales, distinctive maritime traditions involving marine mammals, and vibrant carving styles; they were also impacted by commercial whaling ventures.



Fig. 1. Haida maker once known, possibly Charles Edenshaw (c. 1839-1920), pipe, c. 1880. Argillite, NBWM 00.200.283

This exhibition brings together over 300 objects, the majority carved decorative arts, from different cultures around the Pacific world made between 1700 and today. Thematic groupings animate areas of connection, and query how people have related to one another through carved material culture and marine mammals. *Wider World* demonstrates how “Yankee” whaling scrimshaw was influenced by and in turn influenced the creation of other carving from the Arctic, Pacific, and Oceania. How did communities in the Pacific encounter whalers and influence items produced, and how did whaling (internal or external) impact these communities and their unique art forms?

The exhibition challenges visitor expectations about different cultural products from Oceanic material culture and Arctic carvings to engraved sperm whale teeth, and explores issues related to trade, markets, taste, and patterns of popular consumption; assumptions about materials (coconut shells, whale teeth, walrus ivory, human hair), their circulation, and animal agency; differences between cultural and commercial value systems; disciplinary hierarchies related to craft traditions, folk-art, anthropology, and “fine” art; and gender roles, for making and consumption. *Wider World* encourages audiences to see scrimshaw as one of many active carving practices that emerged in cultural contact zones across the Pacific world between 1770 and today, and understand the rich traditions that developed, collided, and were shaped by various forces in this period.



Fig. 2. Art Thompson (b. 1938; Nuu-chah-nulth), *Not a Good Day*, 1993. Serigraph, NBWM 2001.100.8963

Introductions

Wave sound in a darkened entry create an immersive audio experience, and frame the ocean as a connective space, underscoring oceanic ecosystems and suggesting maritime encounter across sea faring cultures in the Pacific world. Model boats from New England, Iñupiat territories, the Cook Islands, Kwakiutl, Haida, and Tlingit lands, Hawai'i, and Niue underscore diverse maritime cultures. Wall text introduces themes, key ideas, and terms. Three maps present different ways of knowing in the Pacific world. A custom map of the Pacific identifies Indigenous lands, the distribution of marine mammals and materials, and traditional whaling routes. A circular calendar illustrates how the Arctic ecosystem is integrated, and territories, people, and animals move with the seasons. A third map by famed Tahitian navigator Tupaia, made while travelling with James Cook, uses Oceanic traditional knowledge to present space. A serigraph by Art Thompson (b. 1938; Nuu-chah-nulth) visualizes the import of whales to Indigenous coastal communities and underscore how traditional carving was materially translated in the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation. It also introduces a sustained engagement with living communities, traditions, and contemporary art forms. The exhibit follows a circular format mirroring maritime navigation, paths of whaling, and the continuity of cultural encounter and currents of influence that typify cross-cultural exchanges. Displays intermix regions and objects to delimit hierarchies, dismantle preconceived ideas of cultural value, and allow audiences to engage with questions of contact and hybridity. Sections are accompanied by text and audio interpretation and labels co-written with scholars and culture bearers.

SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

PACIFIC ENCOUNTERS: *HYBRID OBJECTS*

Hybrid objects demonstrate cultural exchange with and Pacific Islander involvement in New England whaling ventures in the 1800s. A Marshall Islands navigation chart and busk incised with similar markings, and a busk and Austral islands paddle with similar chip carving, bring ocean navigation, maritime traditions, and cross-cultural contact to the fore, and inspire significant questions about identity and influence. How do we define the geography of the seas from a nation-state perspective? Who were “American” whalers and how can we understand the exchanges that occurred around the Pacific?



Fig. 3. Fijian maker once known, Kinikini (paddle-like hardwood club), 1800s. Hardwood, NBWM 00.200.567

PADDLES, WANDS, AND CLUBS

Oceanic carving for ceremonial and utilitarian purposes, like paddles, clubs, and dance wands, were created along sea-faring routes in the Pacific from wood or whalebone. Examples from the Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, Gilbert Islands, Papua New Guinea (Buka and New Ireland), Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand, Kiribati, and Austral islands illuminate traditional carved forms, while calling out unusual hybrid objects that combine the trade axe form with dance wand or were made for trade.



Fig. 4. Maker once known, “E.C.C. busk,” c. 1830. Whale skeletal bone, silver, wood, and baleen, NBWM 2001.100.27

BUSKS

Corset busks of panbone and baleen invite consideration of maker and user, gender, and the distances of maritime life and domestic longing. A busk is an intimate item inserted at the front of a corset and is associated with romance, carved, decorated, or inscribed with messages, and traditionally given by men to women. Busks include Pacific scenes and coconut palms, hearts, flowers, and couples, and imperialist iconography of ships, eagles, flags, and forts. Motifs speak to life in the Pacific, and telegraph desire, longing, and translocation during the long whaling voyage, which lasted on average 3-5 years.



Fig. 5. Maker once known, Coconut dipper, c. 1850. Coconut shell, pewter, wood, and walrus ivory, NBWM 2001.100.725

COCONUT DIPPERS

Coconut dippers were ubiquitous across the US in the 1800s for drinking water. Their construction varied (half a coconut shell and handle) and includes walrus and elephant ivory, whalebone, abalone, tortoiseshell, rare woods, baleen, copper, and silver. Made by whalers, sailors, Iñupiat people, and Pacific Islanders, coconut dippers and their wide adoption in the US illuminate global histories of colonialism, maritime trade networks, and imperialist projects.

CONTAINERS

Work baskets, sewing, or “ditty” boxes were made to accommodate personal belongings, like needles, thread, and soap by Iñupiat, Pacific Islander, Azorean, and New England makers, of whale or walrus ivory, panbone, or baleen and wood (and in one case African porcupine quills) and inlaid with whimsical decoration in abalone, ebony, and other materials. Carved baskets and boxes are often fancifully incised or pierced fret or latticework. Examples illuminate different styles of work, identify makers or users (when known), and show a transoceanic exchange of materials and forms.



Fig. 3. Manuel Machado (Azorean), Work basket, c. 1850s. Whale skeletal bone, NBWM 1986.5

SPERM WHALE TEETH



Sperm whales have about 46 teeth, which were prized for scrimshaw. Crewmen kept, traded, or decorated them freehand or using a template on shipboard or for the mass market. Over 40 examples with Pacific connections by Azorean, New England, Māori, and Australian Aboriginal makers, depict Arctic or Pacific Islands landscapes, record where a whale was taken, or highlight individual exploits or identities. The Dream Tooth rendered as Dreamtime pictures includes a hunting scene with Oceanic proa and sperm whale, and a man with boomerang in flight, suggesting how Aboriginal Australians became involved in US commercial whaling ventures, while the Wiscasset tooth records the successful capture of one sperm whale on January 7, 1836 off the coast of New Zealand as engraved by a young whaler from the small town of Wiscasset, Maine.

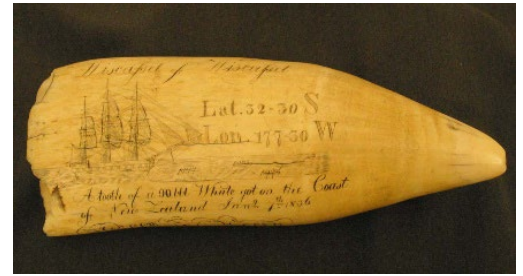


Fig. 4. Left: Australian aboriginal maker once known, Dream tooth, c. 1850. Sperm whale tooth, NBWM 00.195.47

Fig. 8. Above: William H. Acorn (American, 1809-1852), Wiscasset of Wiscasset tooth, 1836. Sperm whale tooth, 4 5/8 x 9 1/16 inches, NBWM 2001.100.1654.

PERSONAL ORNAMENT

Human hair, fiber cords, and materials like whalebone and ivory, were used across the Pacific and US for important objects of adornment, ritual, status, and commemoration. In the 1800s, items like Victorian hairwork, Marquesan hakakai (ear ornaments) of whale bone, Māori niho taniwha (mako shark teeth ear ornaments) of porcelain, whale ivory, and shark tooth, and Fijian Tabua made from polished, whole sperm whale tooth attached to coconut sinnet cord held cultural value. These objects illustrate how materials from animal bodies (hair or ivory) held spiritual significance for different cultures, marking important events or individuals.



Fig. 9-11. Māori maker once known, niho taniwha (mako shark teeth ear ornaments), c. 1850s. Made of shark tooth, whale ivory, and porcelain, NBWM 2001.100.2128-2120.

DOMESTIC LONGING: CRIMPERS & GENDERED LABOR

Sailors made domestic objects like pie crimpers from marine mammals for domestic use by mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. These artifacts supported the domestic comforts of home and labor mostly embodied by women. The manufacture of such objects opens up a consideration of how absent women – their bodies and the intimacy of physical connection – occupied an imaginary space on shipboard. A small group of pie crimpers and engraved whale teeth that picture women or erotic scenes allows visitors to imagine what physical separation meant for whalers and wives or partners. Teeth that show Hawaiian or “exoticized” Pacific Islands women – some with a Victorian parlor scene on the verso – indicate a more illicit maritime trade and the sexualization of Native women.

SEA TOOLS: FIDS & NEEDLE CASES

Simple and highly decorated fids and needle cases made by sailors, Pacific Islanders and Iñupiat hands from whale bone and unusual materials like Albatross, walrus ivory, and baleen are contrasted. A Marquesan decorated whale bone fid is a rare example of cross-cultural hybridization.



Fig. 12. Maker once known, Crimper with coastal scene, c. 1850. Whale ivory, NBWM 1942.3.7



Fig. 13. Makers once known, Marquesan Fid, c. 1840. Whale skeletal bone, NBWM 2001.100.1977

WHALE COSMOLOGIES: *the whales give themselves*



Fig. 5. Tlingit maker once known, Mortar, 1800s. Whale skeletal bone, NBWM 2001.100.2221

Located at the spatial and theoretical heart of the exhibition is a section on the import of marine mammals for diverse cultural groups across the Pacific world. Work by contemporary artists, audio clips of community voices, and cultural belongings, such as a Chumash soapstone whale carving, Nuuchah-nulth pommel thunderbird head club from whale panbone, Māori Kotiate parāoa, and Tlingit whale vertebra mortar, underscore the interconnectedness of whales to the lifeways and cosmologies of Native communities, demonstrate how whales were and remain part of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in the Pacific world, and evoke whale ancestors. A bottle of whale oil and US banknote present a juxtaposition between ongoing sustained relationships with whales in the Pacific, and US whaler's motivations.

TOTEM POLES: REAL & IMAGINED

North American Indigenous coastal Pacific and Arctic carving traditions are explored in the next three sections. Totem carvings disrupt expectations. A Makah whale bone carved into stacked animal forms inlaid with abalone and a Tlingit totem on whale panbone are set in conversation with examples created as trade goods by Native artisans or to simulate Native artistry. One carved on hippopotamus tooth was made to look like Kwakiutl work. Another carries the label of the Hudson's Bay Fur Company, whose history with Indigenous communities is highly complex. What is "authentic" culture and who decides? Such examples demonstrate the cultural violence perpetuated by non-Native entities as the market for Native-made goods intensified. The popularity of collecting Native and Non-Native carvings arose concurrent with the adoption of increasingly aggressive assimilation policies in the US and Canada that caused significant harm to Native communities.



Fig. 6. Maker once known, distributed by the Hudson Bay Fur Co., Seattle, WA, Souvenir Totem Pole, c. 1900-1940. Wood, NBWM 2001.100.3434

TRADE GOODS & THE NOME SCHOOL

An active Arctic carving tradition developed for internal cultural and spiritual use and was adapted for outside markets through trade and then tourism. Walrus tusks with a hole drilled through the tip, typical of Iñupiat use, were acquired in trade or barter, and then carved on shipboard by whalers. One carved with floral motifs and blooming roses counters the Arctic environs, another includes scenes of Rio de Janeiro. Such examples demonstrate the circulation of materials and goods across the Pacific that facilitated cultural production in various locales and at sea on shipboard.

Items made for the early 20th-century souvenir trade in Nome, Alaska similarly demonstrate creative adaptations by Native artists to meet changing market conditions. The "Nome school" of Iñupiat carvers incised walrus tusks with figurative imagery of arctic animals and quirky decorative motifs, including oversized houseflies, human hands, and exotic non-native species (like Indian elephants), making sly commentary on the illusionism of carving, the physical material support, and the "trade" in "Native" souvenirs that supported their livelihood. Cribbage boards, carved timepieces, letter openers, salt and pepper shakers, and umbrella handles speak to tourist interests, and highlight how artisans adapted to demand as tastes shifted.



Fig. 7. Billy Komonesek (Iñupiaq), Cribbage board, c. 1910. Walrus tusk, NBWM 2001.100.2255

Angokwazhuk ("Happy Jack") (Iñupiaq, c. 1870-1918), Umbrella handle, c. 1910. Walrus ivory, NBWM 2001.100.2305

SEEING EACH OTHER | SEEING OURSELVES



Fig. 8. Niue makers once known, *Hiapo (Tapa Cloth)*, c. 1880. Fiber textile, NBWM 00.200.452



Fig. 9. Cora-Allan Lafaiki Twiss (b. 1986; Māori, Niuean), *Hiapo (Tapa Cloth)*, 2023. Fiber textile, courtesy of the artist.

US and European prints, paintings, and publications demonstrate an interest in solidifying the myth of discovery and conquest of the Pacific world through visual means. Such scenes constructed visual imaginaries about far-off territories colonial audiences would never physically reach, and regularly primitivize Indigenous cultural groups and traffic in Native stereotypes. Rarer examples turn the mirror back, revealing how explorers, whalers, and other colonizers were seen and recorded on the visual and material culture produced by Indigenous makers.

An 1880s *hiapo* from Niue is signed and includes a whale ship with human figures on the deck and masts. It is installed alongside a contemporary *hiapo* made in response. A walrus tusk shows reindeer, seals, and whales, Iñupiaq hunters with firearms on dog sleds and fishing from umiaks, and US whaling ships and whalers. A group of mission school drawings by Iñupiaq children record the intimacies of community life. A gift album of albumen photographs of Hawai'i made by Elizabeth Keka'anui La'anui Pratt (1834-1928) and sent to a sister in 1889 reveal daily life amid the pressures of colonialism. A print of Lahaina made by Kepohoni in a missionary print studio in 1830 shows the island of Maui copied after a painting by a female missionary. Such objects question the directions of the gaze (who looks at who), and reframe cultural contact as a space of negotiation and exchange that is not in the past but continues today.

BREACH: Logbook 24 | Scrimshaw COURTNEY M. LEONARD

The legacies of colonialism explored in *Wider World* prevail today; climate change and natural resource extraction disproportionately affect island nations and Indigenous communities. *BREACH: Logbook 24 | Scrimshaw* is an entirely new work by contemporary installation artist Courtney M. Leonard (b. 1980; Shinnecock) and is part of an ongoing artistic exploration of whaling, Native cultural heritage, and contemporary issues related to Indigenous land rights, gentrification, coastal erosion, and climate change. The multimedia work probes the multiple definitions of "breach," as connoting different ideas about penetration, surfacing, and breaking.



Fig. 10. Courtney M. Leonard, site-specific installation *Intermodal BREACH: Logbook 19*, 2019. Ceramic, glaze, paint, sinew, wood, and two-channel video projection. Commissioned by the Pomona College Museum of Art



Fig. 11. Art Thompson (b. 1938; Nuu-chah-nulth), *Tackle Box*, 1992. Cedar, leather and paint, NBWM 2001.100.3433

ACTIVATING NARRATIVES

Videos explore carving techniques, artist stories, and the meaning of materials like bone and tooth and enliven objects. Custom incised, carved, and patterned clay tablets allow tactile engagement, as visitors touch a marked surface. Similarly, audiences are invited to touch a selection of materials, such as whale ivory, tortoiseshell, baleen, and abalone. An interactive map and feedback station encourage exploration of key themes, while a close looking exercise and teacher resources expand on content in different ways.