

Scrimshaw

THE ANNA SAFLEY HOUSTON COLLECTION

The first people to carve pictures and decoration on walrus and ivory bones were the Inuit of the Arctic. This art form, called scrimshaw, was a whalers' art from the mid 1700s to the early 1900s, when whaling was a thriving industry in New England.

Tusk: *Probable late 19th century Inuit fossilized mammoth tusk decorated with a cribbage board and Arctic animals.*

Scrimshaw is carved or incised on whale bone, ivory teeth of whales, and tusks and bones of walruses. Whaling captains encouraged their crews to spend their spare time on scrimshaw, as voyages would last for months or even years.

Scrimshaw reached its peak in the mid 1800s. By the early 1900s, electricity was replacing the need for whale oil; the whaling industry and scrimshaw nearly vanished.



Houston Museum
of Decorative Arts

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201 High Street, Chattanooga, Tennessee 37403

Anna Safley Houston, pioneering businesswoman and antiques collector, curated a remarkable collection of over 15,000 items, spanning glassware, pottery, textiles, furniture, and much more.



Tusk: Carved in the round to form an alligator with a parade of elephants marching into its mouth.



Umbrella handle: carved with grapes, leaves and banded decorations.



Whale tooth: picturing a soldier on horseback and an American eagle.