Fifth Grade Art Smart Lesson Plan  

Scrimshaw

Project Summary: Students will carve their own scrimshaw from a bar of soap.

Art examples: Currier and Ives, “Whale Fishery”; Mariner’s Museum, “Scrimshaw Photo”; replica of sperm whale tooth sculpture. Additional info can be found in 5th grade Art Awareness – pg. 5-20.

Materials needed: soot from a fireplace; soap (Tone recommended), toothpicks; sketch paper; pencil; Ziploc bags; spray bottle of water; spoons; paper towels

Things to do before class: Gather soot from fireplace

Lesson plan:

Script –
Today we’re going to talk about a special kind of Folk Art created in America. (Refresh folk art) People in the new country, America, were too busy trying to survive, they were too busy trying to survive. There was not time to study formal art at school.

Scrimshaw was created by the whalers in Early America. Does anyone know why whaling was so important in Early America? Whale oil was used for lamps, cooking and industrial products. Remember, this is before electricity. So whalers hunted whales for the blubber which was boiled down to make oil. Whale products were in great demand. In the 1800’s ship designs were improving, there were bigger and stronger ships. Sailors began hunting out in deeper waters. The reason for this; they were in search of sperm whales. They were much bigger than the inland (baleen) whales, so they produced more blubber which = more oil. But sailors had to go farther out to find sperm whales. These whaling voyages could last from 3-5 years. The sailors were told to fill their cargo areas with whale oil (not to return until) so it took a long time. There was a lot of waiting, even for just a whale sighting. (Show Currier and Ives print) “Whale Fisheries” was published in 19th century by an American Printing Firm.

Notice in the background the big boat, it is a whaling ship. The small boat was dropped off the side when the whale was spotted. An interesting fact is that sperm whales can hold breath for 75 minutes and then they come to the surface to get air, where they blow out water. This is where the
saying. “Thar she blows” comes from. The person in the smaller boat would shout this out and then the boat would drop from the large boat’s side and go paddle out to attack the whale. However, their weapons were rather small and crude so this was a very dangerous job. Often these boats were attacked by sperm whales and crushed in their massive jaws. But if they succeeded, they’d stab the wheel many spears. Once the whale was killed, it was pulled to the big ship, lifted up by a pulley and carved of its blubber. The blubber was boiled in large pots on the deck and stored. The fishermen had to be careful to clean up the oil, which the phrase “swab the deck” comes from.

(Show bone sample and prints) The word scrimshaw came from the slang expression used to refer to anything that was the product of seaman’s idle time. (items made while loafing) Today an example would be whittling a stick. Of course there were not sticks out at sea so they would need something to do to pass the time. It could be a long time between whale sightings so the sailors practiced scrimshaw. Since they were hunting for whale oil, the whale teeth were just a discarded by-product. So they found that the teeth were made of ivory and were perfect for etching into.

The tool they used to carve was called an awl. It’s pointed like an ice pick. After the design was carved, black was added to highlight the design. Where did the black come from? They used the soot from their oil lamps. It was called lamp black and they rubbed the excess into their designs. The name for these artists were, scrimshanders. Today we will be scrimshanders. Scrimshaw today is very collectible but whales are no longer hunted in the US. They are endangered species and we do not need the oil anymore from their blubber.

Lesson –
1- Sketch on your paper what you would like to draw on your bar of soap (Remind students that they are scrimshanders and they may want to draw something they would see if they were out at sea)
2 – Pass out bags of soap and a few toothpicks per table. Each students should have a paper towel and an awl, a metal carving tool (from the art teacher).
3 – Students can begin carving when they are ready. Do not etch too lightly! S
4- Ashing station - First students should spray their soap with a mist of water. With newspapers underneath, have baggies of ashes with teaspoon to ash their design. May want to do over a box so ashes stay contained.
5- Back at seat, rub off excess ashes with moist paper towel.
6 -Send home scrimshaw in baggies.

**Parent letter:**

Dear Parents:

Today your fifth grader participated in an Art Smart presentation on Scrrimshaw. Scrrimshaw was a prevalent form of art in early America, primarily because early settlers were too busy trying to survive and did not have the time or money for formal art training. Our focus was on the *Scrimshanders*, sailors on whaling ships out of New England that spent their spare time etching intricate designs into whale teeth using an *awl*. After their engravings were complete they would rub it with a combination of oil and soot (called *lampback*) to define the lines of their etching.

Instead of carving into ivory, like sailors of the past, the students carved their designs into Tone soap using toothpicks. We then lightly sprayed the soap with water and rubbed fireplace soot into the etching in order to highlight our own scrimshaw designs.

Your *Scrimshander* can show you how this project can be easily duplicated at home!
Sincerely,