

## Lesson Plan: Scrimshaw Medallions

**Exhibition:** Chasing the Whale, Matt Kish and Robert Del Tredici

**Grade Level:** K-4

*This lesson plan can be adapted for multiple age groups.*

### Vocabulary:

Scrimshaw  
Whaling  
Engraving  
Sperm Whale

### Materials:

Plaster  
Paper cups (6-9oz)  
Wax Pellets  
Skewer/Pointed carving tool  
Images of scrimshaw and a whale tooth or sperm whale  
Tempera paint or ink  
Plastic straws  
Yarn/string



**Objective:** Students will explore images from artist Matt Kish and discuss his interest in the novel Moby Dick. Students will learn about scrimshaw, how it is made and it's relation to the history of whaling.

### Beforehand:

- Prep images or laminated copies of the artwork from Chasing the Whale, as well as examples of scrimshaw and a whaling ship.
- Create the mold for the plaster "whale bone" medallions.\*
  - Punch a hole in the bottom of a small paper cup (along the edge).
  - Cut plastic straws into two inch pieces and stick each piece into a paper cup hole
- Make the plaster medallions.
  - Mix the plaster and pour a small amount into each cup (1/2 – 1 inch deep). Allow 12-24 hours to dry depending on the brand. Once dry, pop the plaster pieces out of each cup (cups can be reused for a second batch).
  - Heat up a small amount of wax pellets in the microwave until the wax is in liquid form. Coat each plaster medallion with the wax (a foam paint brush works well).

\*Students can also create their own "whale tooth" by molding air dry clay, letting it harden over night and covering it in the warm wax. Less prep time for teachers this way!

### Discussion:

- Talk with your students about the artist Matt Kish, who created a work of art for each page from the iconic novel Moby Dick, which took him 543 consecutive days to complete.
- Tell the class that the inspiration for Moby Dick came from Herman Melville's experience on a whaling ship in the Pacific Ocean.

- Explain that before electricity, people used oil to light their homes. One form of oil used was whale oil and whalers went on long sea voyages to hunt whales for their valuable oil.
- On these long voyages sailors would look for things to do in between whale sightings. Ask students what they do on long car or plane rides? What is the longest trip they have ever been on? Explain that sometimes these voyages would last 2 to 5 years! Whalers would spend a lot of that time missing their family or home.
- Sailors would often draw things they saw while away at sea (ocean creatures, sailboats) or things they missed from home (family, fresh flowers, yummy food). Invite students to think about what they would draw if they were on a long voyage.
- Often sailors would draw directly onto a whale tooth. Explain that sperm whales have 50 teeth in their lower jaw! However, a whale tooth is not very sharp because it's used to grab their food, not chew it. Sperm whales swallow their food whole!
- Show students examples of scrimshaw and ask them how they think they're made. What tools would you use? Describe the process to them. Sailors would sand down the scrimshaw and then dig or scratch a design into the tooth using a knife or needle. When done carving, they would rub ink, dirt or charcoal into their engravings, in order to make their drawing stand out.

### Procedure:

- After discussing the scrimshaw process pass out the plaster medallions and pencils. Allow students to lightly sketch their design. Encourage them to draw images that remind them of home or examples of things they might have seen on a long trip.
- Pass out the engraving tools (younger students can use wooden skewers rather than needles or metal carving tools). Have students carve on top of their sketches and remind them that the harder the press the darker their lines will appear.
- When finished carving have the class rub paint or ink into their engravings. Use a dry paper towel to rub off the excess color that remains.
- If making a medallion, cut off strips of yarn to turn it into a necklace or ornament by stringing it through the hole.
- Have students share their scrimshaw designs with the class and explain how it relates to a trip they took or a memory from home. Encourage them to share something new they learned from the lesson.
- Explain to the class that Matt Kish often felt overwhelmed taking on such a large project (creating a new work of art based on Moby Dick every day for 543 days in a row). Ask them how they might feel taking on this task? Excited? Bored? Exhausted? How might Kish's journey be similar to a sailor's journey on a whaling ship?

### Evaluation:

- Evaluate the student's participation in the class discussion.
- Evaluate the student's effort in designing and executing their artwork.

