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“They’re not going to find this at Wal-Mart”

A Local Man’s revival of a Forgotten American Art

The little shop feels smaller with the constant foot traffic; people are dodging into Scrimshanders to escape the crowds outside but curiosity invites them to stay creating a new crowd inside. Everyone makes a lap around the store following the display cases to their left along the wall like a guide. The cases contain different items: canes, jewelry, cufflinks, knives, pipes, lighters, display pieces and more. The varieties of objects are all linked by a surprising fact: almost every item is made from bone or ivory. Upon closer inspection people notice each piece is engraved with a design; intricate depictions of mermaids and ships are scratched into the surfaces. The owner, Brian Kiracofe, hangs back behind the cases, leaning slightly against the wall with his knee bent, letting his customers explore the store. People compliment the quality of the work as they walk by him. He tells them in a soft voice that each design is handcrafted; he even engraved some of the pieces himself. The typical reaction is to get closer to the glass, some practically pressing their noses up against it to get a better look. Knowing that each piece was done by hand intrigues people; you cannot get these items just anywhere, they are truly unique.

“I’m also an artist and I’m impressed,” says a customer.

She should be. Kiracofe is not a typical artist. He is a scrimshaw artist.

Scrimshaw is the art of engraving whalebone or ivory, although other material such as walrus and elephant bone can be used as well. American whalers developed the practice during the 1700s. Whaling expeditions could last anywhere between three to five years leaving the whalers with a lot free time and a desperate desire for a hobby. Whales were being hunted to make oil from their blubber but their bones and ivory teeth were not needed and often thrown overboard. Eventually whalers began keeping the

bones and teeth to carve in their spare time; scrimshaw became their new hobby. Today scrimshaw is considered to be one of the few American folk arts.

“To take a tooth of a whale scrape it down, scratch a design and rub the lampblack into it, that was really unique,” says Kiracofe. “As humans we’d been carving ivory since day one but no one really took a whale tooth and did what we did. So that’s why it’s an American art form.”

True to the folk form Kiracofe’s style of scrimshaw is not much different from the traditional whalers; better tools are used but the process remains mostly the same. Kiracofe is working on a piece in his store at a small desk between the wall and a display of cufflinks. The room is busy with the bustling of people and a few stop to observe him work; completely focused he never looks up. The piece is a knife with a handle made from whalebone. Having previously sanded down the bone with different levels of sand paper and polished it with an electric buffer, Kiracofe has moved onto the actual engraving of the material.

“I do ships and lighthouses and whales tales. Everyone associates scrimshaw with those,” he says.

His tool of choice is a scribe, which is actually a red drafting pencil he attached a metal point to. He holds it in his hand like a pencil and begins scratching the surface of the bone. Kiracofe’s height requires him to arch his back as he bends over the desk, holding the bone beneath a lamp. Looking out from beneath the rim of his glasses he scratches individual lines across the surface; the noise is similar to the sound of a dentist tool scraping plaque from a tooth. Slowly the faint lines merge together to form a lighthouse overlooking a ship sailing across the water. Kiracofe’s fingers are indented from his grip on the scribe.

A bottle of black ink is grabbed from the shelf on the wall to the left of the desk. Kiracofe dips the blade of a knife into the ink and then wipes the ink onto a cloth. Moving the cloth in small circular motions over the bone he begins rubbing the ink into the freshly sketched lines. With the clean part of the cloth he wipes away any excess ink. Polish, engrave, ink and clean, this is the process of scrimshaw. The freshly inked material

reveals a more intricate image than the lines were able to show on their own. Small details within the lines of the water and the ship become noticeable with the help of the black ink. Leaning back in his chair Kiracofe stretches with his hands behind his head.

“Lots of little lines,” he says with a smile referencing the newly revealed details.

Despite this acknowledgement Kiracofe is modest about his work calling it commercial and part of a production process. He does not consider his pieces to be fine art.

“Compared to a handful of scrimshaw artists that I work with that may only do 50 pieces a year or 30 pieces a year, you know, those guys are doing the fine art version of that,” he says. “With mine I might be able to do 50 pieces in two weeks. I’m making so many small pieces so I do those designs over and over again.”

Kiracofe may spend less time on his pieces than other artists but according to his long time employee, Taylor Clary, this does not affect the quality of his work.

“He’s constantly making something new. It’s time consuming but he makes good products,” she says. “Sometimes he complains, ‘ugh I just made that’ so I tell him if he stops making such good products people will stop buying them.”

Kiracofe grew up in the small farming town of Gratis Ohio and was the youngest of four boys. He was first exposed to scrimshaw while he was still in high school after his older brother Daniel moved to Boston and picked it up as a hobby before opening up a store in Faneuil Hall. Despite his interest in the art he decided to attend Lake Superior State College in Michigan to pursue business. During college his interests moved back to scrimshaw and he managed his brother Gary’s scrimshaw store in northern Michigan, while also apprenticing with both brothers to learn the trade. Scrimshaw became a one-generation family business.

“Everybody wants to hear that my dad was a whaler or my grandfather was a whaler but no. We’re a farming family turned scrimshaw,” Kiracofe says.

After graduating in 1981, Kiracofe went to work in Daniel’s store in Boston. He was recruited by the developers of Baltimore Harbor and opened a store there in 1982. After

a few years Kiracofe needed a change in setting and began looking for a new store location including all options from Mystic to Maine. Eventually he settled on Newport Rhode Island and opened Scrimshanders in 1986.

Despite him and his brothers' success in the business, Kiracofe considers scrimshaw to be a dying art. Scrimshaw had actually already died in the early 20th century but experienced a revival during the 60s and 70s after it was discovered that John F. Kennedy was a collector; he was even buried with a whale tooth. The newly enacted Endangered Species Acts, however, made it difficult for people to access materials and many people dropped the art. Due to the laws, scrimshaw artists are limited to antiques, buying already owned material from collectors. This requires many years of hunting down collectors and forging connections.

"There's not that many of us in this business so it's about developing a network," Kiracofe says.

The difficulties caused by the restrictive laws surrounding endangered species lead Kiracofe to acknowledge the unlikelihood of new generations joining the scrimshaw business. Scrimshaw artists face five years in prison and a half million-dollar fine if they violate these laws.

"If I was a young person I'd be going: 'really they put you in jail for this? Yeah I don't think so.' That's why a lot of them don't want to mess with it," he says.

Even more upsetting than the dying of scrimshaw is the unfortunate result of the death of craftsmanship. Our lives today are a product of mass production and importation. Items are not made in America and they certainly are not made by hand.

"It's sad to see," Kiracofe says. Kiracofe wants to bring people's attention back to the beauty of craftsmanship with the pieces in his store.

"Our approach is to engage because if you just let people walk in and walk out some of them have no idea that it's hand done or they think it's from China," he says.

In his store Kiracofe takes the time to answer questions, always making himself available to customers. When people come into his store Kiracofe helps them to understand what they are buying and exposes them to the history surrounding his work. He wants customers to recognize the uniqueness of his products.

“They’re not going to find this at Wal-Mart or anywhere in their hometown,” he says. “I want them to come away with the fact that they bought something made here that was originally from this region.”

Moving back to his work desk Kiracofe returns to the piece he was working on earlier. His scribe moves in linear motions to create the faint image of the Newport Bridge stretching across the background of the scene. What could be a more local image than that around here? Looking around it becomes apparent he depicts it in a lot of his pieces. Suddenly the image feels symbolic. Maybe the bridge that connects people with the past of a historical city can also help reconnect people with the lost art of scrimshaw. For now, Kiracofe keeps the American folk art alive with every stroke of his scribe.