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SOTHEBY'S TO OFFER EXCEPTIONALLY RARE SCRIMSHAW WHALE TOOTH ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM A. GILPIN IN SALE OF IMPORTANT AMERICANA ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2008



New York, New York – On September 26, 2008 Sotheby's New York will offer for sale one of the most important works of scrimshaw whales teeth to be discovered in the last decade, and certainly one of the most important to have appeared on the auction market in recent years: **A Rare and Important Engraved Scrimshaw Sperm Whales Tooth, William A. Gilpin, On Board the Ship Ceres, Wilmington, Delaware.** Engraved by William A. Gilpin in 1835 while at sea, the Gilpin Tooth has been proclaimed as a key source in unlocking the mysteries of an historic and highly regarded series of scrimshaw sperm whales teeth. The work is estimated to bring \$40/60,000* and will be on exhibition in Sotheby's New York galleries beginning September 20, 2008.

Dr. Stuart M. Frank, Senior Curator of the New Bedford Whaling Museum and founder of the Scrimshaw Forensics Laboratory® said, “Every now and then a watershed piece shows up that is not only an aesthetic tour-de-force but has unique and enduring historical and iconographical significance that, in addition to being “A Thing of Beauty,” enlightens the genre and informs research. The so-called Ceres Tooth by William Gilpin is just such an outstanding piece.”

The tooth was received by the current owner as a holiday gift from an elderly friend, with no knowledge of its true significance, but as an American history enthusiast he was struck by its beauty and obvious age. After more than twenty-five years on display in the present owner’s home, when an amateur antique collector suggested that the tooth should be appraised and researched, he contacted experts for help. When photos were sent to the New Bedford Whaling Museum for analysis at the Scrimshaw Forensics Laboratory®, scholars Donald E. Ridley and Stuart M. Frank immediately recognized the significance of the inscription, and after 170 years, William A. Gilpin came back to life.

Historically, scrimshaw attribution has been fraught with difficulty as very few examples are signed. With the



watershed discovery of the signed Ceres Tooth, scrimshaw historians have been able to identify by name the previously anonymous scrimshaw master dubbed “Ceres A.” Named for the sailing vessel *Ceres* upon which much of the artist’s scrimshaw iconography is based and on which vessel he was a member of the crew, “Ceres A” has been lauded by scholars as the greatest of the four Ceres artisans for his craftsmanship, style, and technique. After

careful examination of the W.A. Gilpin tooth in comparison with known works previously attributed to “Ceres A,” along with analysis of whaling ship registers and personal diaries of Gilpin’s compatriots kept aboard ship, scholars were able to confirm that William A. Gilpin was indeed “Ceres A.” The Ceres Tooth is one of only nineteen known examples of Gilpin’s work and represents a rare opportunity for collectors to acquire a superb work of art of such historical significance.

The masterwork was engraved aboard the sailing vessel *Ceres*, which sailed from Wilmington, Delaware, with Gilpin in the crew at the age of twenty-nine. The tooth is an iconic *tour de force* of American folk art

with important references to the War of 1812 and the golden age of American Whaling. It incorporates many of the distinguishing features of the work of the four Ceres Artists such as a windswept Jack Tar sailor figure, and a stern-quarter view of a sailing ship along with the motto “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” – a motto of seamen during the War of 1812 – in a flowing banner. Microscopic analysis reveals that the tooth was exquisitely decorated in the traditional pinprick method, where the artist’s image on paper was dampened and laid across the ivory tooth and a series of dots was made with a needle to outline the drawing. A knife was then used to draw lines to be filled in with lampblack, a greasy carbon product of burning whale oil.

This extraordinary Americana landmark will be offered during the September 26, 2008 sale of *Important Americana* at Sotheby’s New York alongside a **Fine Carved and Painted Pine Cigarstore Indian, Probably Thomas V. Brooks**, estimated at \$100/150,000 and will be exhibited with *Property of Rear Admiral Edward P. Moore and Barbara Bingham Moore*.

*Estimates do not include buyer’s premium

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