

Sperm Whale Teeth

Explore: Look carefully at this carved sperm whale tooth and answer the questions below.



1. Describe what you see carved on the tooth.

2. What is happening in the image?

3. What do you want to know about the person who carved the tooth?

Aboriginal maker once known (Aboriginal Australian, possibly Eden), Dreamtime tooth, 1800s. Engraved sperm whale ivory, 2 5/8 x 5 1/4 in., New Bedford Whaling Museum, 00.195.47.

The “Dream Tooth” was likely executed by an Australian Aboriginal whaler, perhaps from Eden, an area on the South Coast of New South Wales. Whaling ships operated around Eden starting in 1791, and the first shore whaling venture founded in 1828 employed local Thawa Aboriginal people. The tooth pictures six men sailing a proa (boat). One wields a harpoon. A sperm whale lurks beneath. On the other side, a man stands aloft with a boomerang in flight. The outlines are distinctively patterned.

How does this description change your understanding of the carving?

Look carefully at these carved sperm whale teeth.



What do you notice?

What do you wonder?

Maker once known, pear and flower tooth, ca. 1850. Engraved sperm whale ivory, 2 3/8 x 1 x 6 in., New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2001.100.144.



What do you notice?

Maker once known, view of Huahine, Society Islands, 1800s. Engraved sperm whale ivory, 2 3/8 x 7 3/4 in., New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2001.100.1410.



What do you wonder?

Moses R. Denning (ME, US, 1806-1884), Moses Denning tooth, ca. 1840s. Engraved sperm whale ivory, 3 5/8 x 2 1/4 x 10 1/8 in., New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2001.100.581.

Create: What would you carve on a sperm whale tooth?



Consider:

- What choices did you make about your carving?
- How did the shape of the sperm whale tooth influence your carving?
- What would someone else need to know to understand your carving?