

Artist Statement

The Harsh Reality of our Heritage:

Does this waterline diorama make you uncomfortable? Is it hard to imagine the ravage that we humans have wreaked on the natural world, particularly the ocean and its inhabitants?

For many years I have spoken about the production of my artwork as my way of safeguarding a part of our maritime heritage. We usually think about heritage as a positive legacy, but unfortunately we must acknowledge that, under financial and resource profiteering for human kind in the name of progress, we have committed incredible atrocities against not only our environment and the flora and fauna, but people as well.

This waterline diorama stands for a reminder of this reality. Its historical accuracy makes me uncomfortable. It is hard to swallow the fact that men sailed to every corner of our oceans to slaughter whales for whale oil, spermaceti oil, baleen, and bone, nearly wiping out species of whales and eradicating many local sub-populations.

My diorama of the whaling bark *Sunbeam*, from New Bedford Massachusetts, hunting bowhead whales in the Arctic provides the viewer with an accurate glimpse into the past. The highly detailed model itself is accurately built from plans, historic photos, and descriptive references. The whaling process is fully depicted, from the whaleboat chasing under sail, to the towing of the whale after the kill, the removal of its blubber alongside the ship, and the rendering of blubber into oil.

The United States whaling industry began in the 17th century and continued into the beginning of the 20th century. The majority of the sailing ships hailed from New Bedford and Nantucket, Massachusetts. By the mid 1800's with the decline of the whale populations, ships went farther afield, sailing through treacherous seas on voyages that lasted on average between 2 to 4 years. For the crew onboard, this work was dangerous, arduous, not well paid, and time demanding. While agents and captains profited highly and made their fortunes, a crew could return even after a "successful" and profitable voyage to receive pittance wages or even find themselves indebted to the agent. What does this say about our treatment of each other?

Whaling has left populations on the verge of extinction. In the arctic Sea of Okhotsk where many New England whaling ships were engaged, the Bowhead whale's population is estimated to exceed no more than 400, a number shared by the population of the Northern Right whale. With a lifespan of over 210 years, the bowhead whale is the oldest living mammal on this planet.

This "white man's greed" of the western world has also left the indigenous people to suffer the consequences, though they did not create the problem. In many places, non-commercial indigenous subsistence whaling is banned, destroying the fabric of their community and culture and blocking access to their nutritional needs.

So when we discuss "our heritage," these enduring traditions, historical achievements, and cultural legacies that are so important in defining ourselves, we cannot overlook the distasteful, destructive, and reproachable side of this heritage, or we may soon find ourselves in a world that is no longer suitable for any life. I want this diorama to evoke a response from the viewer to bring into question the activities of our past that has brought about suffering to our natural world and to avoid repeating similar undertakings. This piece is a call to you to never forget, and work to get better.

By: Gabrielle Rogers