

Early Modern Japanese Whaling: An Iconographic Study

Michelle Damian (University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Assistant Professor of History)

ABSTRACT

Small museums can be the repository of mighty collections. The New Bedford Whaling Museum (NBWM) in Massachusetts, USA, is one such example. The NBWM holds a significant collection of artwork depicting early modern (17th – 19th c) Japanese whaling. A systemic analysis of the imagery in these pieces allows us to learn more about the equipment and strategies used in whaling in the early modern period. This paper provides an initial review of those collections, highlighting the types of vessels used, tools and other equipment, and important shoreline infrastructure associated with whaling that are depicted in the artwork.

Keywords: Whaling, Japan, Museums, Artwork

Abbreviations: NBWM (New Bedford Whaling Museum)

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, a small museum in Massachusetts (USA) does not appear to be an ideal location to conduct research on early modern (17th – 19th c) Japanese whaling. And yet the New Bedford Whaling Museum (NBWM) is just that. Their collections naturally focus on New Bedford as a port city and the history of whaling culture in the New England region. In 1843, however, a whaling ship returned to New Bedford with a Japanese castaway, sparking a strong relationship between Japan and this Massachusetts coastal town. Furthermore, the museum also enjoys a close association with Taiji, a town in Japan famous for its modern whale hunts. The curator of the town of Taiji's historical materials serves as an advisory guest curator for the NBWM.¹ With these ties in mind, it becomes clearer why

¹ Frank Sowa, 'Seaside Communities in Crisis: On the Construction of Collective Identity in a Japanese Whaling Town after the Moratorium,' *Annals of Marine Sociology/Roczniki Socjologii Morskiej* 23 (2015): 33. The Taiji Whale Digital Museum (<https://kujira-digital-museum.com/en/categories/12/articles/>) further notes that several scrolls depicting whaling near Taiji are owned by both the Taiji museum and the NBWM, and the NBWM also holds reproductions of some of the scrolls owned by Taiji.

the NBWM has nearly nine hundred Japan-related items in its museum and library collections. This paper will provide some examples of what we can learn about early modern Japanese whaling and its infrastructure from those artifacts.

THE NBWM COLLECTIONS

For the purposes of this study, I focused on the NBWM sources related to early modern Japanese whaling. My intent was to learn more about the strategies of whaling in the early modern period via the artwork created at the time, and to catalog the vessels and equipment, capture and processing techniques, and evidence of shore support. I was able to view approximately 50 items at the museum.² 19 were scrolls, 17 were woodblock prints, and the remainder were a variety of engravings, sketchbooks, and other types of artwork.

The medium mattered for content analysis. Woodblock prints featuring whales generally fell into the ‘landscape print’ genre, showcasing scenes with whales as a novelty. When whale hunts were shown, usually the images were less detailed and the scene was depicted from afar, as though an observer was watching from shore. Woodblock prints were mass-produced for a popular audience, commemorating a notable scene, and so they were perhaps trying to recreate that outsider, observer’s view. Scrolls, however, appear to have been made more for insiders, used as a means to disseminate information about whales and whaling. They could be as long as approximately 10 meters, though many were shorter. Many begin with a brief textual introduction and a scene consisting of a whaleboat, a harpoon, and a spear – effectively showcasing the tools of the trade. This was often followed by depictions of several types of whales, likely the ones most hunted in that region. Some scrolls included more details of whale anatomy, providing diagrams of how to butcher it. Still others showed scenes of the whale hunt itself, from the chase to the kill, then towing it back to shore and processing the carcass, and in some cases even showing the celebrations after a successful hunt. Many of the scrolls are very precise in their detail, providing a type of manual for whaling. The scrolls appear to be more representative of whaling hunts overall, and provide information on the types of vessels and equipment used in whaling.³

Perhaps the most important scroll is the *Isanatori Ekotoba*. Published in 1832 in Edo (modern Tokyo), it recounts details of whaling done by the Masutomi whaling group based in Ikitsukishima (modern Nagasaki prefecture).⁴ Far more detailed than most of the other scrolls preserved in the NBWM, the illustrations are more complex and also include brief descriptions of the equipment, locations, and whales themselves. The range of depictions of whaling throughout all of the artistic examples are rich fodder for information about early modern Japanese whaling. The following sections will provide some examples of what we can learn through careful study of the museum collections, focusing particularly on whaling boats and equipment.

WHALING VESSELS

Nine scrolls include standalone depictions of whaling vessels, simply presented as a representative boat out of context (Figure 1). The most commonly depicted vessel is the chase boat (*seko-bune* 勢子船) and some scrolls also include net boats (*ami-bune* 網船 or *sōkaibune* 双海船). In most cases the chase

² Although the museum does have close to 350 Japan-related items in their artifacts collection, and nearly 600 documents in the library, many of them were more modern objects, or alternatively were items brought back from Japan by New Bedford whalers. Early modern items depicting Japanese whaling were more limited.

³ The analysis includes only items that the author was able to view at the museum. There may be more depictions, but if a scroll was on exhibit, for example, only portions of the scroll were visible.

⁴ Jakobina Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 128–29. The version in the NBWM is incomplete.

boats are presented at the beginning of the scroll. They are almost uniformly colourful, with flowers and stripes adorning the hull. Most images include a ‘hashtag’ (#) on the stempost, indicating that they were affiliated with the Taiji whaling fleets.⁵ While most of the depictions are relatively simplistic, two construction features do stand out: the sharp raked stempost with a decorative end, and the washboard. The latter comes to an end as it nears the stern, and other depictions of the chase boats in action show that that open area was where the rowers gathered to propel the vessels using sculling oars.⁶ The *Isanatori ekotoba* suggests throughbeams are also present in these vessels, though most other depictions do not have that level of detail. As these boats needed to be fast and maneuverable to corral the whale and get close enough to launch harpoons, it stands to reason that the stempost/cutwater would be the most distinctive feature. The tall washboard likely provided some stability for the harpooners as they hurled the weapon at the whale.



Figure 1. A typical representation of a chase boat. Maker once known (Japanese). Geigyo Hinshu Zukan [Fourteen Varieties of Whales], 1760. Watercolor on paper, 10.5 in. x 20.25 ft. (26.7 x 6.2 m.) New Bedford Whaling Museum, Gift of the Kendall Whaling Museum, 2001.100.4456. Image courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

As of the seventeenth century the prevalent way to hunt whales was through using nets to surround and capture the creatures.⁷ The fact that only two scrolls specifically depict the net boats out of context is therefore somewhat surprising. One is somewhat amateurly drawn, while the other is in the array of boats depicted in the *Isanatori Ekotoba*. These boats are larger and wider than the chaser boats, since of course they would need to transport the net and maintain stability after the whale was trapped. Unlike the chase boats, the net boats have a rudder and what appears to be a mast. The masts are unstepped and lay across a horizontal beam supported by two upright posts at the stern of the vessel, and none of the scrolls depict the masts being stepped and used to sail. One scroll appears to show a sailor tugging at the mast as though to step it, perhaps to set a sail to counteract the tugging of the trapped whale, but

⁵ Hayato Sakurai, ‘Whales Caught on Paper Waves: Scroll Paintings of Whales and Old Japanese Whaling,’ in *Whaling and History III* (Sandefjord, Norway: Vestfoldmuseene IKS, 2010), 43.

⁶ Yuyuken Kizaki, *Shoni no Moteasobi Kujira Ikken no Maki*. New Bedford Whaling Museum, accession # 2001.100.4426

⁷ Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan*, 63–64.

there is no evidence of a sail in sight. Solid throughbeams are placed at regular intervals in the stern especially, providing stands and support for the rowers.

WHALING TOOLS

Eight scrolls have detailed depictions of the harpoons and spears used for whaling. These are often found at the beginning of the scroll, showing the tools used for the hunt. In most cases only the blade is shown, without a handle. The reasons for this are unclear, though if these scrolls were indeed meant in part to be a ‘manual for whaling,’ it may be to reveal the holes in the tang and base of the spear blade that would be used to attach it to the pole. One scroll, ‘Whales Caught at Kumano-ura (Ki Peninsula),’ does have labels saying ‘the handle should be attached through this hole,’ indicating the holes in the tang, and another notes the hole in the base as the point to thread the rope through (Figure 2).⁸ These are the exceptions rather than the rule, as most scrolls have minimal text associated with the tools beyond a brief description of the ideal length.

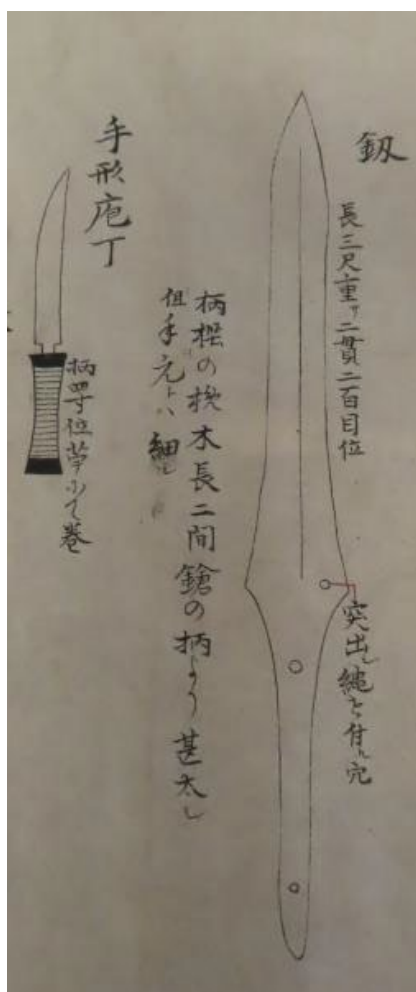


Figure 2. Spearhead with tang revealed, showing holes for ropes and fasteners. After Yuyuken Kizaki (Japanese). *Shoni no Moteasobi Kujira Ikken no Maki* [Net Whaling in Hizen Province, Kyushu], 1817. Watercolor on paper, 10.5 in. x 27.5 ft. (26.7 cm x 8.4cm)

The harpoons depicted have an asymmetrical head, with one point longer than the other. There seems to have been no set length, as some are described as being between 2 and 3 *shaku* (60 – 90 cm) long,

⁸ Anonymous, ‘Whales Caught at Kumano-ura (Ki Peninsula),’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, accession # 2001.100.4462; *Shoni no Moteasobi Kujira Ikken no Maki* #2001.100.4426

and others suggest over four *shaku* (120 cm).⁹ Two scrolls, the *Isanatori ekotoba* and a second untitled scroll, show a range of different harpoons, and so the different lengths may have been affiliated with various harpoon styles. The *Isanatori ekotoba* also displays a remarkably detailed range of rope knots used to secure the harpoon and allow for its recovery.

Nets are another critical part of early modern Japanese whaling, yet they are depicted far less often than the harpoons or spears. Only three scrolls show details about whale nets, including how to knot or fasten the ropes to weave the net, and also how to attach the nets to their wooden floats. Two of the three provide dimensions for the floats as well. The *Isanatori ekotoba* further includes a scene where villagers are weaving the net on shore. Over twenty people are involved in uncoiling the individual ropes and spreading the net out as they weave it. Based on the spectators shown viewing the process, even weaving the nets appears to have been a major endeavor in the town.

ONSHORE INFRASTRUCTURE

A full analysis of the maritime cultural landscape involved in early modern whaling is beyond the scope of this paper, but two onshore structures should be noted here. Several pieces of artwork include lookouts or winches, both critical parts of the whale hunt and processing experience.

Five pieces of artwork (three scrolls, one woodblock print, and one wood engraving) represent lookouts. They are small, permanent structures atop a shoreline hill or mountain. Various means of signaling were used to notify the boats at sea. Some depict a man swinging long white paper strips on a pole, others show flags, and still others suggest that fire/smoke signals were used to signal the presence of a whale. Many have some combination of the above. One of the more notable items in the NBWM collection is a wood engraving from ‘Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion,’ published in Boston in 1855.¹⁰ The engraving shows 17 boats surrounding a whale, but the lookout is also clearly visible, with two men standing atop the roof of the lookout building, one waving a flag (Figure 3). Accompanying text reads in part, ‘Whaling is an occupation of large numbers of the Japanese, and they are exceeding expert in it, though we will venture to say by no means to be compared with our “Long Tom Coffins” of Nantucket and New Bedford.’ This is followed by a brief description of the whale hunt.¹¹ In 1855, formal diplomatic relationships between the United States and Japan were just beginning, as Matthew Perry had first arrived in Edo just three years prior. Yet there was obviously interest and awareness of Japanese whaling in Boston at this time, accompanied by a seemingly good-natured sense of rivalry.

⁹ Niwa Shohaku, ‘Illustrations of Whales,’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accession # 2001.100.4465; Anonymous, ‘Geigyo Hinshu Zukan,’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accession # 2001.100.4456; ‘Whales Caught at Kumano-ura (Ki Peninsula),’ #2001.100.4462

¹⁰ The scene is copied from a work published in 1832 by Phillip Franz von Siebold, a German physician who accompanied the Dutch delegation stationed on Dejima (modern Nagasaki prefecture) from 1823 to 1829. Peabody Museum of Salem, *Whaling Prints in the Lothrop Collection*, Salem: Peabody Museum of Salem, 1987. 146.

¹¹ Anonymous, ‘Whaling Scene on the Coast of Japan,’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accession # 2001.100.10758

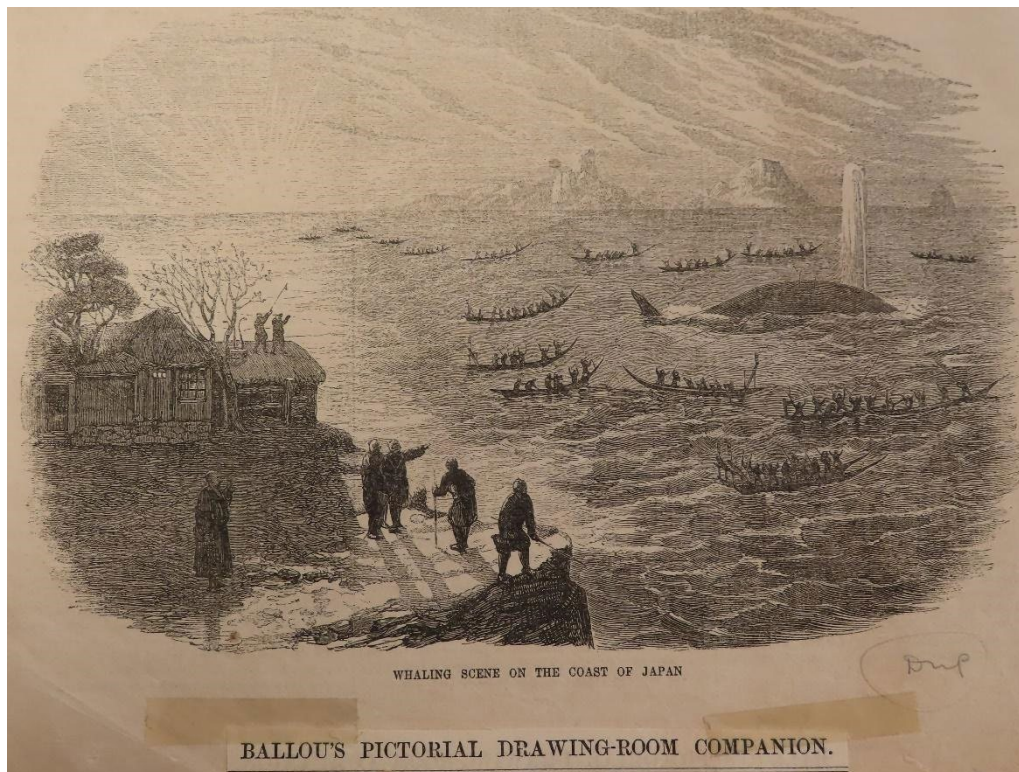


Figure 3. Maker once known. Whaling Scene on the Coast of Japan, 1855. Engraving on paper, 6 x 9.25 in. (15.2 x 23.5 cm.) New Bedford Whaling Museum, Gift of the Kendall Whaling Museum, 2001.100.10758. Image courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Winches appear in three scrolls and three woodblock prints. They are large, wooden structures with four arms, and two or three men push each arm to wind the rope and drag the whale or its blubber on to shore. All three versions of the woodblock prints – all by different artists – focus on the men pushing the winches, some with facial expressions indicating the effort expended to haul the massive whale. One is part of a triptych, with the other two panels showing a graphic offshore flensing scene. The triptych is labeled as part of a series on ‘Japanese Famous Goods’ in Hizen province, and another is labeled as one of ‘The Great Illustrated Japanese Products’ series (Figure 4).¹² It suggests that the winches were emblematic of whaling and the efforts put in to processing the whales.

¹² Kuniyoshi, ‘Nihon Meisan Zukushi. Hizen no Kuni Goto, Hirado, aruiwa Kishu niwa Shoshoura nite Kujira wo Toru Zu.’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accession #2001.100.6668; Hiroshige Shigemasa III, ‘Kagura nite hikiageru zu,’ New Bedford Whaling Museum, Accession #2001.100.6666



Figure 4. Hiroshige Shigemasa III (Japanese, 1843-1894). *Kagura Nite Hikiageru Zu* [Pulling in by a Kagura Winch], c. 1877. Woodblock on paper, 6.25 x 9 in. (16.1 x 22.5 cm.) New Bedford Whaling Museum, Gift of the Kendall Whaling Museum, 2001.100.6666. Image courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This preliminary look at the collections of the New Bedford Whaling Museum suggests the rich potential in using artwork to understand more about early modern Japanese maritime cultural heritage. While perhaps not generally useful to understand specific aspects of ship construction for whaling vessels, the array of associated tools, weapons, and infrastructure detailed in the scrolls reveal more about the full maritime cultural landscape associated with early modern whaling in Japan. This is but one group of sources, and museum collections in Japan have additional whaling scrolls that should be brought in for a more comprehensive comparison. The NBWM provides an excellent example of the potential for small museums to hold important collections, and is a reminder not to overlook these types of institutions when conducting research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Jordan Berson, Emma Rocha, and Mark D. Procknik at the New Bedford Whaling Museum for opening their collections to me, pulling a large number of items out for viewing in a short period of time, and providing space in the research library for me to take photographs to my heart's content. I could not have made the trip to conduct this research without financial assistance from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and Dean Frank Goza. I also thank Dr. Jenny Craig for her flexibility with my submission of this paper, and Dr. T. Kurt Knoerl for always being a sounding board, editor, and providing moral support.

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