



*Attacking the Right Whale, c. 1835*  
Ambroise Louise Garneray (1783-1857)

Peabody Essex Museum  
Salem in History, 2006

## Attacking the Right Whale, c. 1835

Ambroise Louise Garneray (1783-1857)

Le Havre, France

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. John E. Abele

M15688



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Killing a whale in the 19th century was an elaborate and dangerous endeavor, involving first the harpooning of the whale and then the eventual puncturing of its lungs with a lance after it had exhausted itself. Once dead, the whale was processed to harvest its blubber, which was rendered into oil. Whaling was a very important industry for the Northeast.

Right whales were named by whalers because they were the "right" whales to hunt. These whales swam slowly, lived close to shore in shallow waters, floated when they were killed, and provided large quantities of thick, high-quality blubber. Because of intense hunting and fishing of right whale in the Atlantic throughout the 19th century, Northern right whales have been on the endangered list since 1973, and are the rarest of all whale species.

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This image is a signature image of the 19th century whaling industry. Garneray's painting inspired a series of Currier & Ives prints, one of which, *Whale Fishery. Attacking a Right Whale*, became the 19th century's most popular whaling print. It was described by Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* as "by far the finest, though in some details not the most correct, presentation of whales and whaling scenes to be anywhere found..."<sup>1</sup>

Garneray's painting captures the whaling expedition at its most dramatic moment as a group of whalers approach the right whale in order to spear it and tow it ashore. The artist makes use of his composition to highlight the activity in the front, accented by spurts of blood coming from the whale, while also showing the large whaling ship at a distance with black smoke floating up from the deck, presumably from burning the blubber of a previously killed whale.

### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe the important elements of this painting. How many different activities and characters are depicted? How does the artist's use of color and composition enhance the image?
- What do you think the outcome of this whaling expedition will be? Why did the artist choose this exact moment to depict in his painting?
- Why do you think that this image became the most popular whaling image for the 19th century?
- Why was whaling such an important industry? What has happened since the over-hunting of whales in the 19th century?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Read excerpts from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. How does Melville depict the whaling industry? How did people relate to the whales they killed? Discuss with students the most salient images from Melville's novel, and have them create their own version of either a passage from *Moby Dick* or of Garneray's image.
- Have students write a letter home to a family member as though the author were a member of a whaling ship crew. Students may reference elements from this painting, but also may include political and economic concerns of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> From Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*: chapter 6.