WHY KNOT?

NEW BEDFORD’S FIT TO BE TIED

In the 19th century, during a time of unprecedented opportunity and prosperity created by whaling and related endeavors — such as whale oil refinement — the City of New Bedford flourished. At one time, it was among the richest cities in the world.

Ryder, William Bradford, Clement Nye Smith and Albert Bierstadt (born in Germany and relocated to New Bedford at the age of two).

Born in 1881, Clifford Warren Ashley was the youngest of the notable New Bedford painters of the era. He secure commissions, Ashley became a successful illustrator, creating fanciful imagery for magazines such as Leslie’s, McClure’s and Harper’s Monthly, for which he also wrote a lengthy two-part article on whaling. He became a well-respected painter of the nautical and was regarded for his unromanticized scenes of men hard at work in and around the ships and waterfront docks, shops and streets.

But throughout the world, he is best known for his 1944 comprehensive reference work, The Ashley Book of Knots, rich with handsome illustrations, detailed directions and wry quips. It is that book — along with a distinct no-nonsense philosophy, related materials and ephemera — that forms the basis for an impressive exhibition at the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

And if the book is the basis, Ashley’s daughters’ (Phoebe Chardon and Jane Ashley) 2016 donation of their father’s private knot collection to the museum formed the impetus. The collection — displayed in the museum’s Wattsles Family Gallery alongside Ashley’s paintings and prints and knotwork by those who preceded or followed him — is remarkable. And a bit dizzying.

But as arranged and buttressed by the museum’s chief curator, Christina

Review

THOU SHALT KNOT:
CLIFFORD W. ASHLEY

NEW BEDFORD
WHALING MUSEUM
18 JOHNNY CAKE HILL
NEW BEDFORD,
MASSACHUSETTS
THROUGH JUNE 2018

Clifford Ashley, Illustration.
Connett, the artifacts, artwork and the knots — oh, so many knots — all tie together. No pun is intended.

She prods us toward the metaphysical with this deft bit of writing about knots from the catalogue: "They have spiritual, religious, social and historical connotations in storytelling, rituals, fertility, counting, record-keeping and mapping. We tie one on, we spin yarns, we tie the knot, we get tongue-tied, we measure speed in knots, depths in fathoms, we get tied up in knots, we are fit to be tied."

Along with counting to 10 and learning the alphabet, learning to tie our own shoes is one of the most significant early childhood achievements. Scouts are rewarded a badge for their proficiency with knots. Little girls learn to braid each other's hair. Fathers teach their teenage sons how to tie a Windsor knot, avoiding the embarrassment of the clip-on tie. Each knot forms a literal and figurative bond.

Knots are scientific precision, miracles of fiber engineering. Some knots are elaborate. Some are simple. They are utilitarian. They are sentimental. They are factual. They are life-affirming. They are deadly.

Knots are the tool of the fisherman, the trapper, the hair stylist, the wrangler, the hangman, the rock climber, the vasectomist, the longshoreman, the lumberjack, the truck driver, the gift wrapper, the magician, the tailor and the sailor.

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition devotes a section to (Herman) Melville's "Complicating Knots," authored by six members of the Melville Society Cultural Project, in which they note that Melville "seems to recognize the romance in tying knots." Quoting Melville's Pierre, they inject this: "far out at sea, no more the sailors tied their bowline-knots; their hands had lost their cunning; will they, nil they, Love tied love-knots on every spangled spar."

Lovely.

The exhibition contains rope ladders and braids of human tresses, rope-fastened tools and spears, macramé and brooches, and wooden boards displaying myriad knots with wonderfully esoteric names: The Constrictor Knot, the Monkey's Fist, the Turk's Head, the Double Matthew Walker, the Bowline on the Bight and the Captain Hardy's Eye Splice.

Displayed related items lean heavily and not surprisingly toward the nautical, from becket (elaborate rope handles fastened to the ends of a sailor's sea chest) to hawser (heavy duty mooring or towing ropes). There are two remarkably large-scale charcoal drawings of a hawser by Huguette Déspault May, hung alongside the 75 pound, 16-foot long, 12-inch circumference rope that inspired them.

And it all centers around The Ashley Book of Knots — often abbreviated to ABOK — which indicates various knots with fascinating descriptions as to their usefulness: Important, Strong, Practical, Easy to Untie, Dangerous and Of Theoretical Interest.

This is an intriguing exhibition not only for aficionados of Ashley the painter/illustrator and serious students of knotwork, but also for the novice to the complexity, history, lore and marvel of knots. And all they hold together.

| Don Wilkinson