

# ANTIQUE

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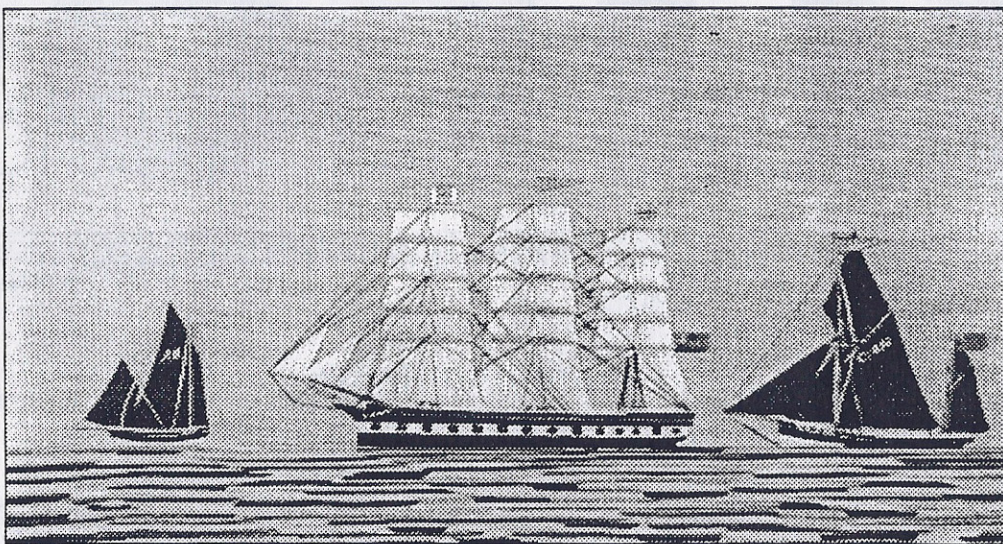
## WOOLIES

### Sailors' Embroidered Folk Art

NEW YORK CITY — Sailors' embroidered woolwork portraits, known as woolies, are one form of maritime folk art that has long been regarded as obscure. However, in recent years and thanks to an active market, woolies have become widely received as a fascinating art form. In fact, prices have achieved record levels in the past few years.

Sailors, by trade, are required to have highly proficient sewing skills. Mending the heavy sails or their own uniforms provided the sailors with practice. Both the traditions of sailors' lore and story telling and the inspiration gained from their life at sea resulted in the sailors' desire for expression.

Another factor in the development of woolies was the influence of Berlin woolwork, a fashionable craft of early Nineteenth Century England, which



As shown in this woolie, sailors would create the effect of billowing sails using "trapunto" work. Also illustrated is the "horizontal lines" sea.

was produced from patterns.

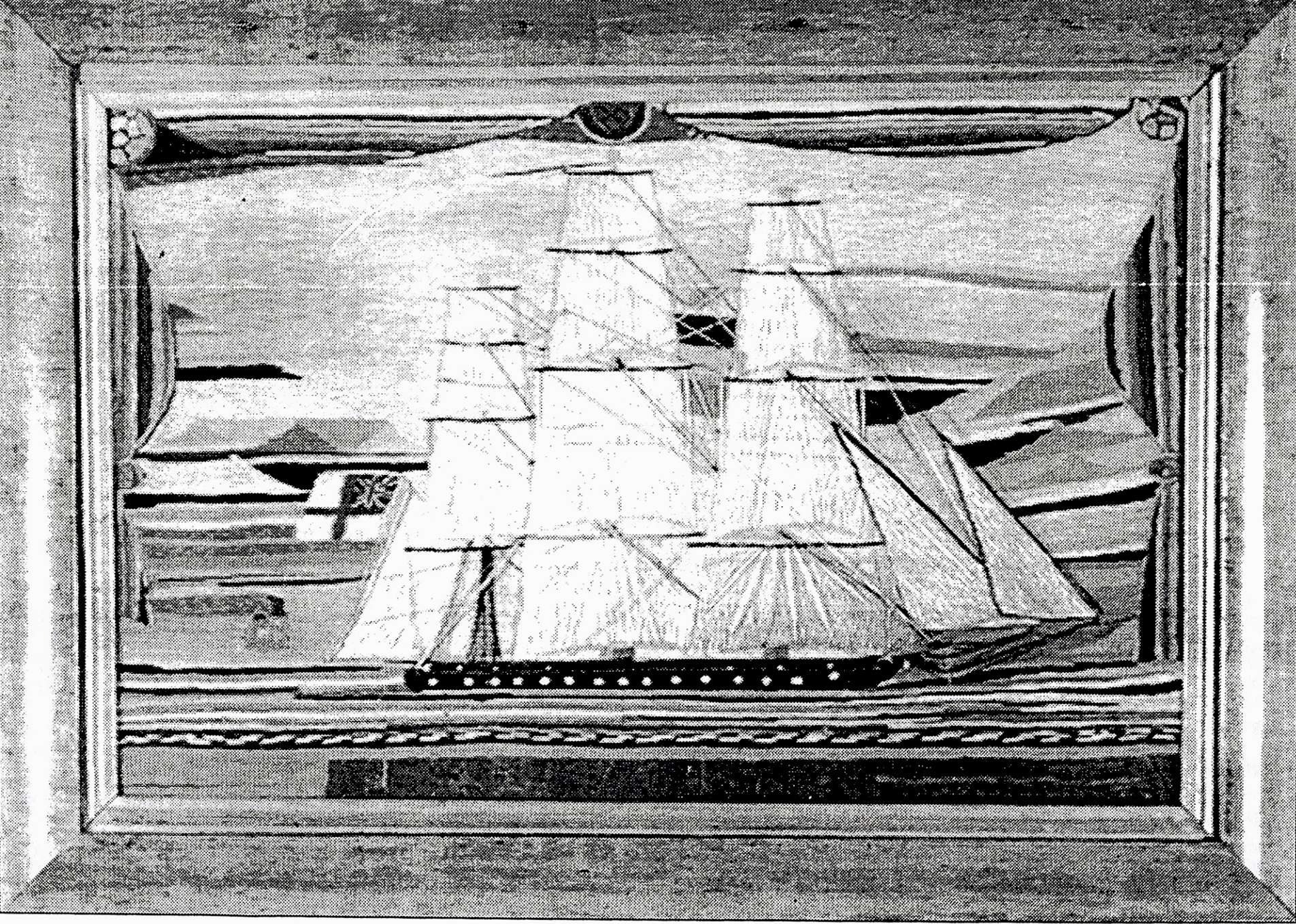
Sailors would buy wool while in port and, working freehand, would initially depict a side portrait of a ship, followed by embellishment. Variations included a great sea with either geometrical or natural features, a dramatic sky, a fully dressed ship, a ship in storm, a fleet assembly, battles, events, or even more personally, memories or loved ones.

These "untrained artists" provided interesting perspective to their art. While the style remained primitive, the sailors fashioned portraits complete with the most technical details of the rigging, due to their working knowledge of the ships. Viewing the woolies provides great insight into the lives and experiences of the sailors.

By Mo Wajselfish

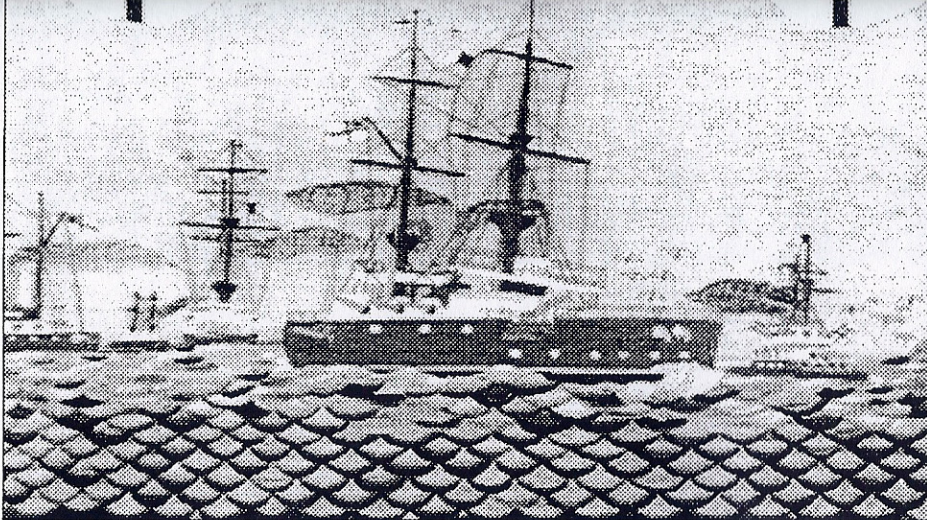
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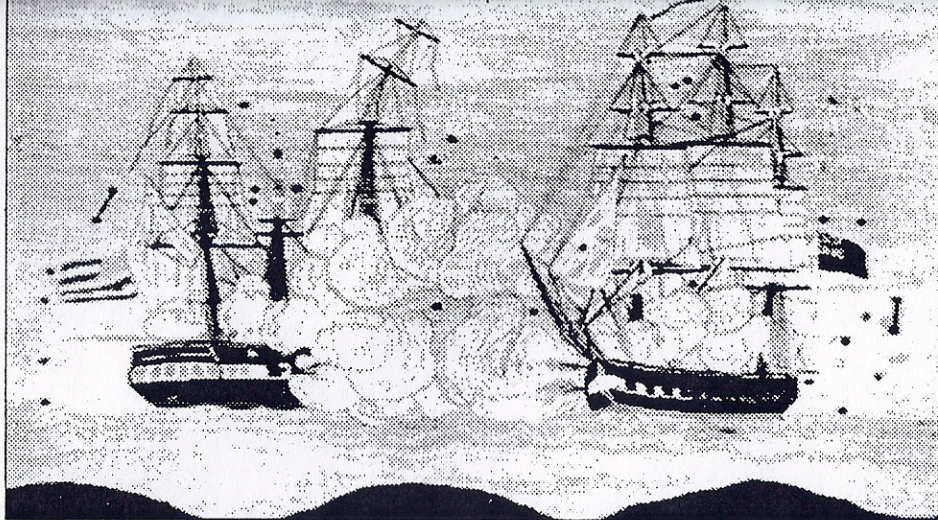


This woolie of *H.M.S. Harrier* features excellent geometric design.





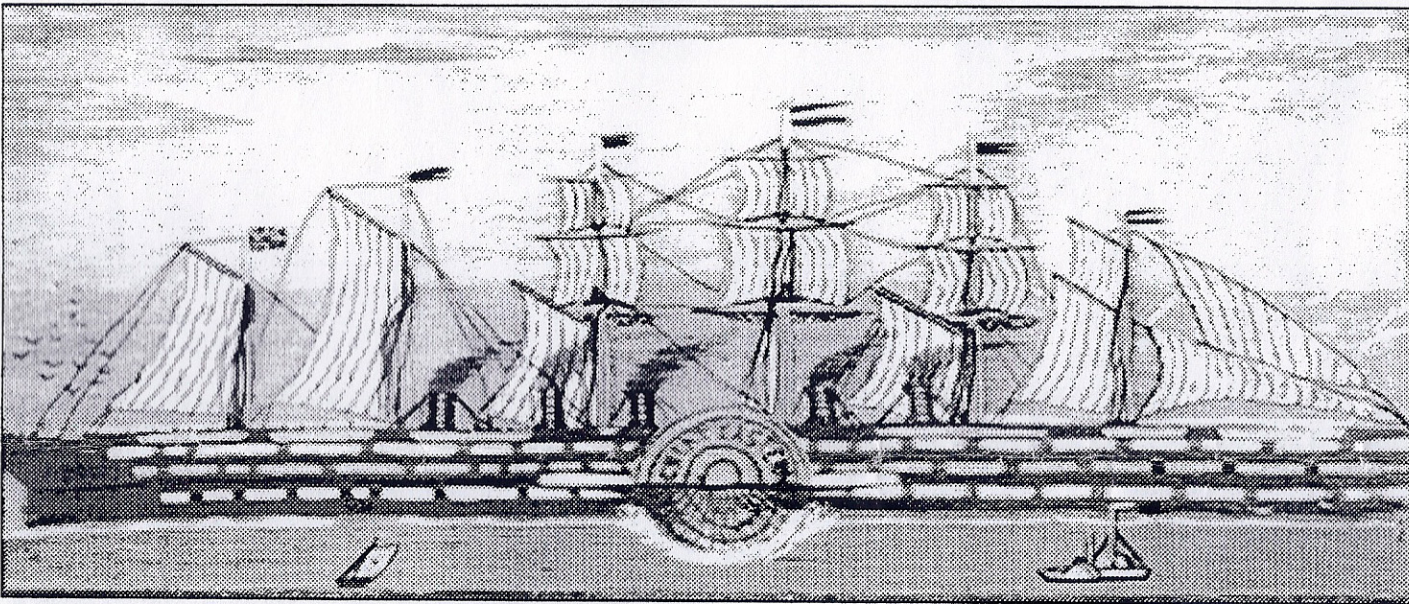
A large circa 1880 woolie depicting a scalloped sea and several ships in different angles.



This rare circa 1860 woolie depicts a battle, as cannonballs surround the ships.

# WOOLIES

## Sailors' Embroidered Folk Art



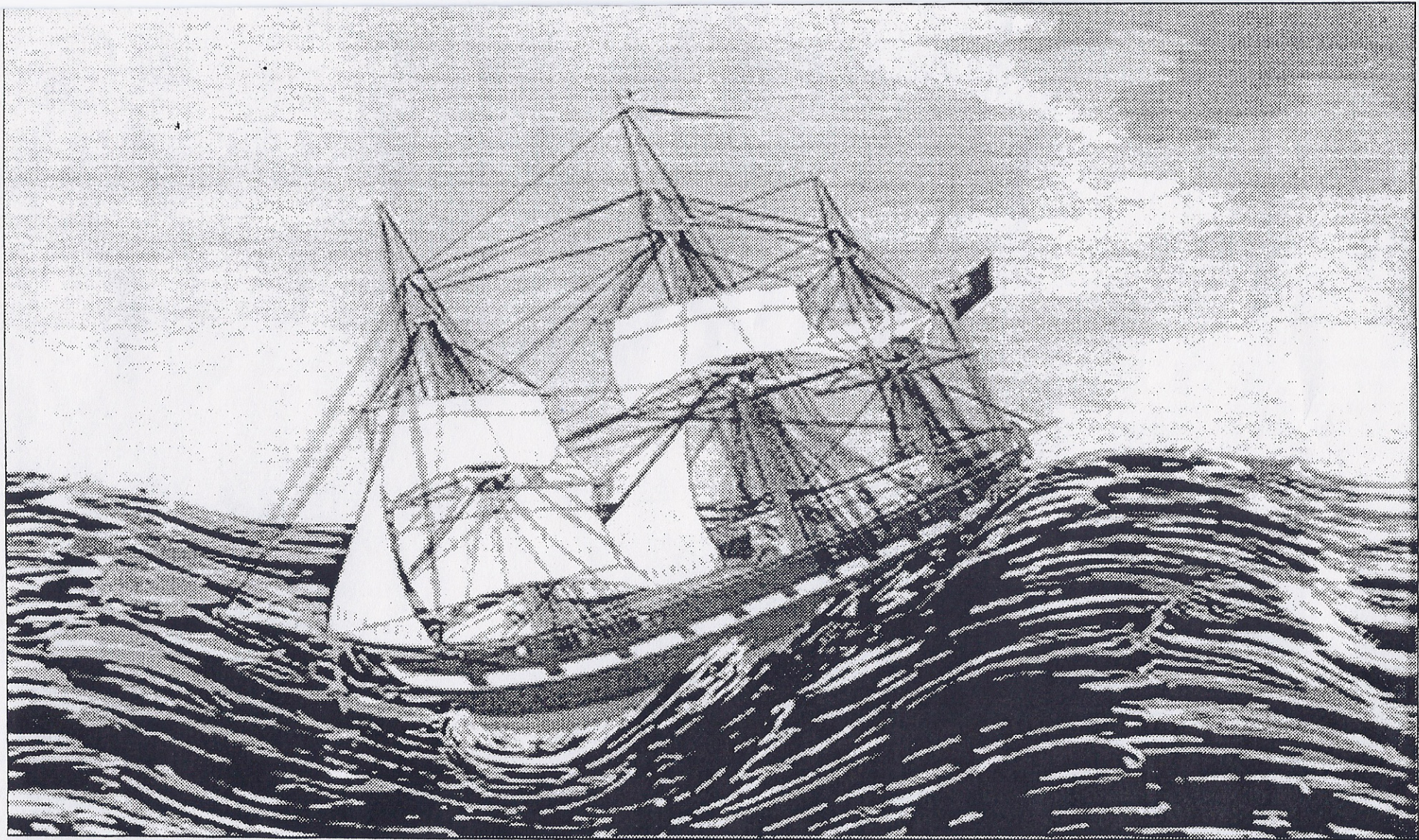
The Great Eastern, a famous five-masted Nineteenth Century ship.

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As woolies have gained in popularity, reproductions and fakes have flooded the market. In particular, a number of woolies done in the 1970s are easy to recognize. Forgeries also depicted more "fantastic" subjects than did authentic woolies. Modern wool is more "fuzzy" than the wool used by sailors in the Nineteenth Century. In most cases, the fake woolies have been smeared with dirt. After cleaning the woolie, the forgery would become clear.

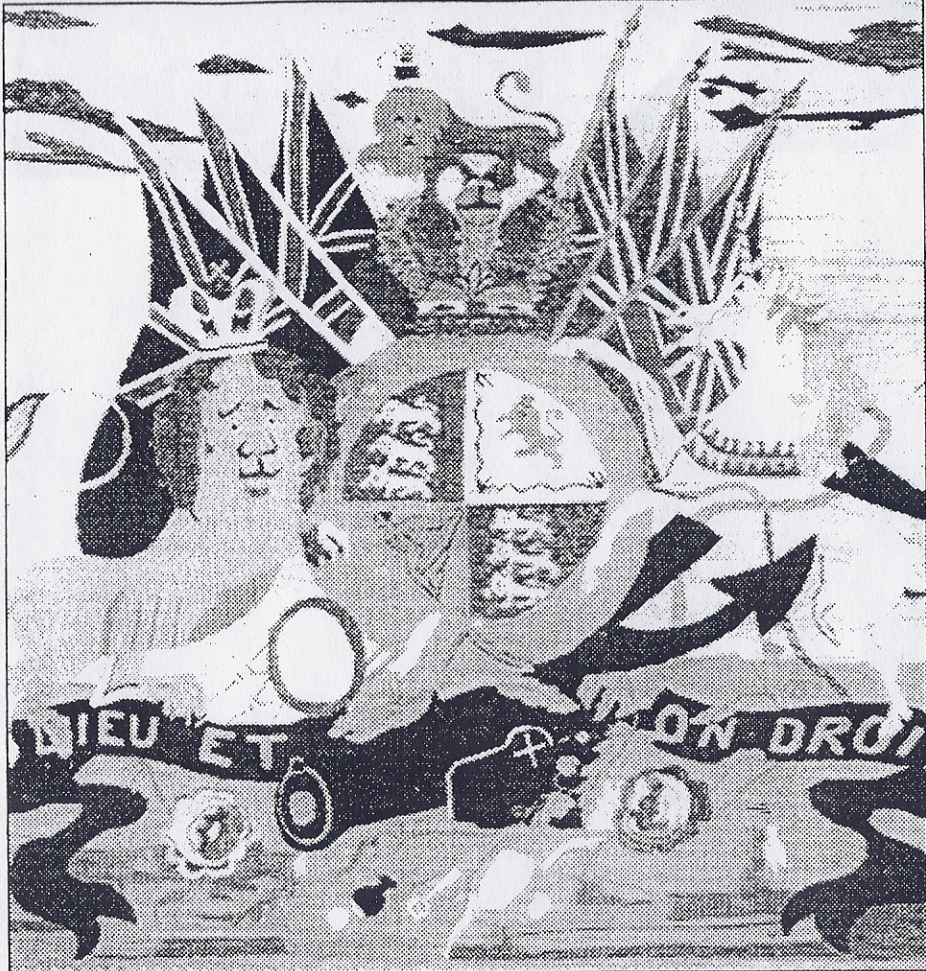
Another simple way to determine the authenticity of a woolie is to look at the reverse. As a rule, the color of the wool on the reverse should be brighter than that of the front, due to the natural fading of the exposed surface. In addition, the vegetable dyes used by the sailors were quite different than any synthetic dyes possibly used in forgeries.





A rare and fine example of a “ship in storm” woolie, circa 1860.



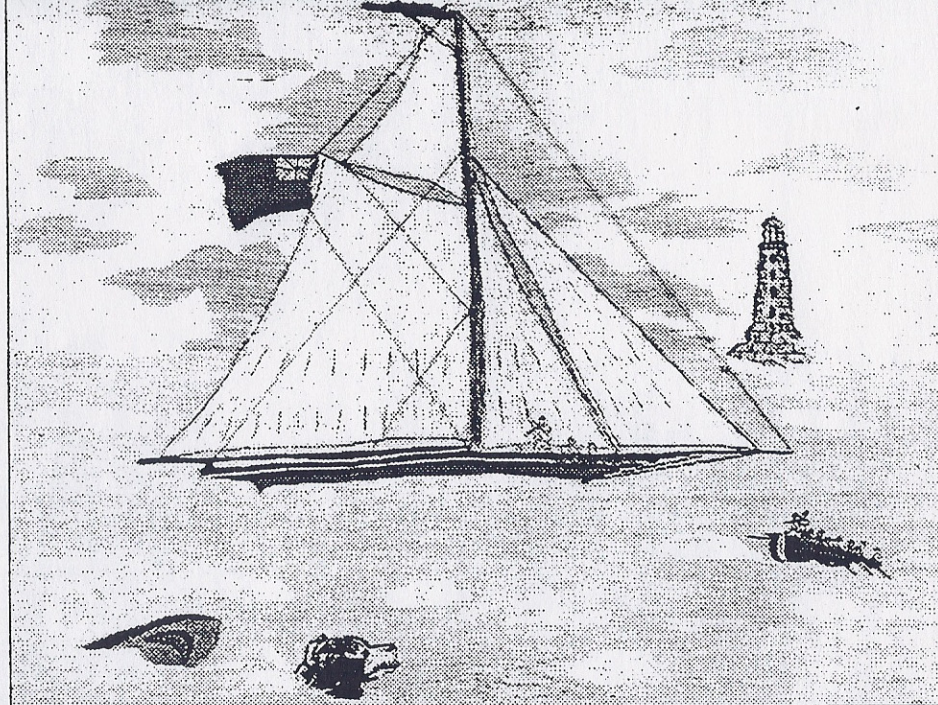
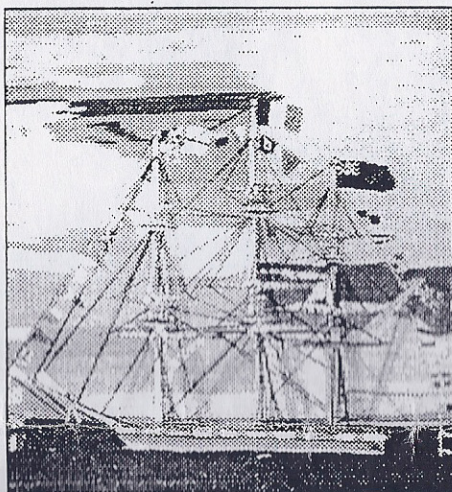


A circa 1850 woolie depicting the royal coat of arms atop a canon, drum and two roses, and next to a unicorn and lion.

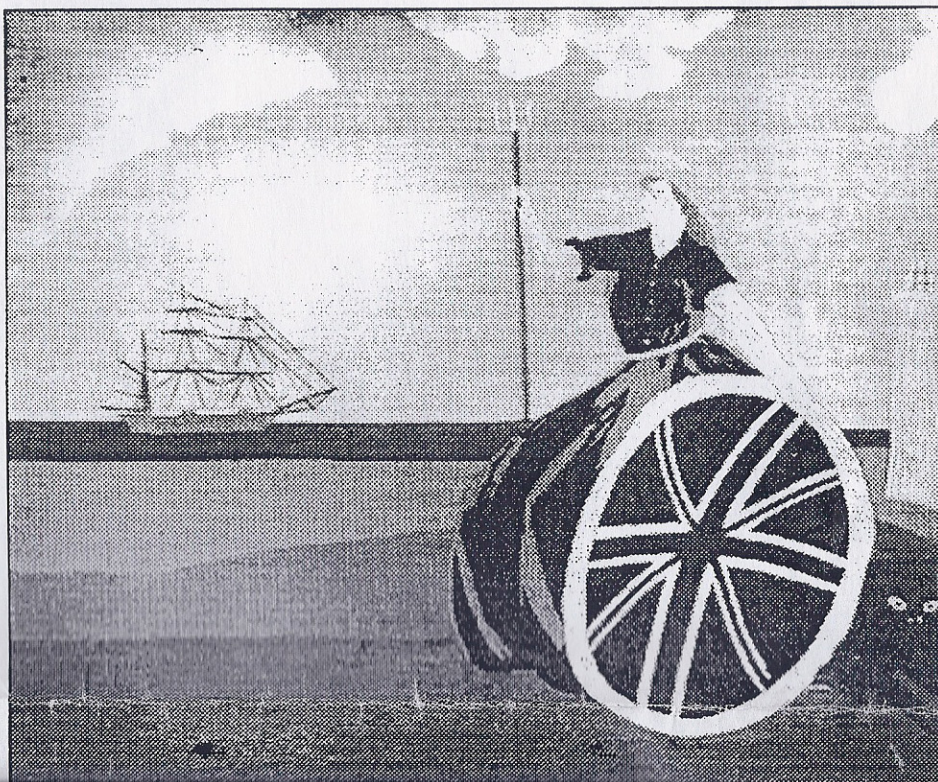
The Seamen's Church Institute is hosting an exhibition which will be of great interest to woolie collectors, and runs through May 30. "Woolies: Sailors' Embroidered Folk Art" comprises a single private collection, spanning 15 years of collecting, in partnership with Leatherwood Antiques. The collection has never before been shown.

Many wonderful examples are included, such as a "story woolie" depicting a shark about to attack a dog, while a sailor aboard tries to save the dog by shooting the shark. Another fine example is a woolie of the *Great Eastern*, a very famous five-masted Nineteenth Century ship.

The Seamen's Church Institute, affili-



The first woolie in the collection, circa 1880, illustrates a launch from a British ship moving to rescue a drowning dog while two sailors train their guns on a threatening shark.





ounded in 1834 to advocate for the personal and professional well-being of merchant mariners from around the world. Through its Center for Seafarers'

celebrate an important event.

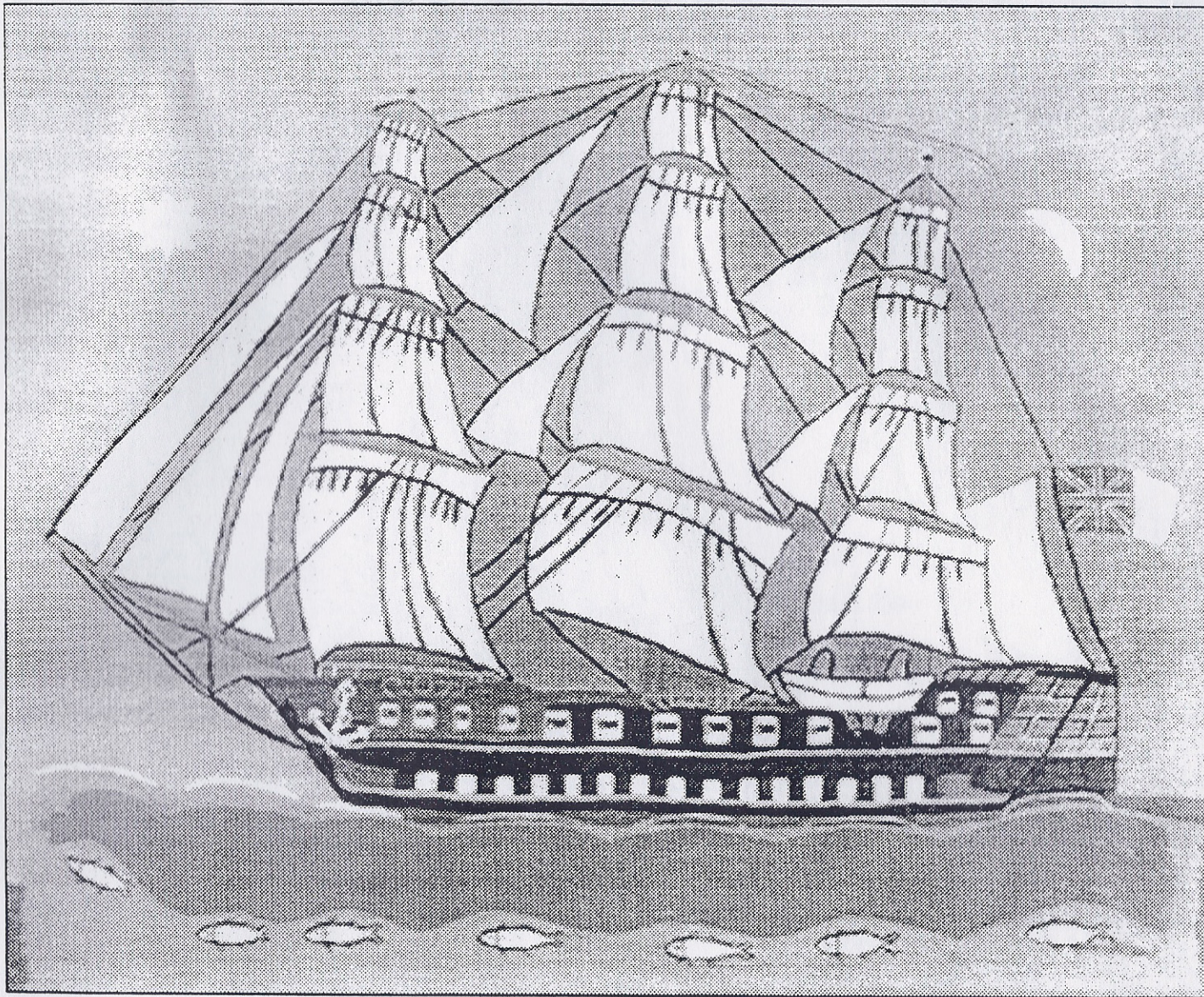
A woolie of Britannia with a lion beside her and a ship in the distance.

Over 50 examples of sailors' handiwork are exhibited at the Seamen's Church Institute.

Services, Center for Maritime Education, Christmas at Sea program, International Training Center and the Center for Seafarers' Rights, SCT promotes safety, dignity and improved working and living conditions for those in the international maritime workplace.

The Water Street Gallery marks the institute's commitment to share its maritime legacy with the public and celebrate the contributions of seafarers to art and culture. The Reverend Peter Laron, executive director of the Seamen's Church Institute, noted, "We see this exhibit as a celebration of the professionalism and dignity of the seamen of the past as well as the consummate and courageous mariners on today's ships, tugs, and towboats."

The Water Street Gallery is located at the Seamen's Church Institute, 241 Water Street (between Beekman Street and Peck Slip). Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 8:30 am to 5 pm. For information, 212/349-9090.



This circa 1880 woolie is whimsical, with a sun, moon, and seven fish.