

heavily on the meagre resources of maritime museums, resources which are already being scattered to the limit.

In conclusion I am glad to say that the symposium was a great success. Again, thanks are due to Dr. Geneviève Sainte-Marie and

Garth Wilson, and also to Marc Bourgeois of the NMST staff, who was responsible for the flawless arrangements. I can only hope that Canadian maritime museum curators will have the chance to meet on a regular basis in the future despite of ever-tightening budgets.

List of Delegates

Sonia Chassé
Musée maritime Bernier

Robert Elliot
New Brunswick Museum

Robert Grenier (Guest)
Canadian Parks Service

Niels Jannasch, Director Emeritus
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic
Conference Chairman

John MacFarlane
Maritime Museum of British Columbia

Marven Moore
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

Trude Oliver
Prince Edward Island Museum

Walter Peddle
Newfoundland Museum

Maurice Smith
Marine Museum of the Great Lakes

John Summers
Marine Museum of Upper Canada

Joan Thornley
Vancouver Maritime Museum

Guy Vadboncœur
Musée David M. Stewart

Garth Wilson
National Museum of Science and
Technology

VII International Congress of Maritime Museums

GARTH S. WILSON

*A report on the VII International Congress of
Maritime Museums, 26 August - 4 September
1990, Stockholm.*

The VII triennial conference of the International Congress of Maritime Museums, hosted by Sweden, was an organizational tour de force, a magnificent sea-going experience and, all in all, a truly memorable event. However, this fulsome praise, offered freely and in good faith, does not come without some serious reservations as to the museological value and general philosophical tenure of the congress. For this delegate, attending his first ICMM conference, the joy of taking part in this event, in such invigorating company and circumstances, was

offset by a sense of philosophical and intellectual inertia and of general museological decline.

The conference, attended by some 200 delegates, ran from August 26 to September 4 and was preceded by a two-day preconference tour in Denmark. This year's gathering was greatly enhanced by the wonderfully appropriate use of a charter cruise ship, the Finnish-registered MV *Kristina Regina*, as accommodation and, more importantly, as a means of conveying the delegates around to various cities and maritime museums in the eastern Baltic. The Baltic cruise, which followed three days of formal sessions at the new Vasa Museum, complemented

by regal Swedish hospitality, took the conference to Mariehamn in the Åland Islands, the fortified town of Kotka (Finland), Kronstadt, the famous and hitherto restricted Russian naval base, Leningrad, Tallin, and finally Helsinki, where the conference closed.

This programme, skilfully conducted by our Swedish hosts, set the VII triennial conference apart from all other ICMM conferences and arguably put it among the finest of all ICOM meetings. For this, a great debt of thanks is owed to both the executive council of the ICMM and the Swedish host institutions. Yet in spite of all the enjoyment and value which can be accrued to the opportunity to visit historic Baltic ports, and all the admiration one must feel for those responsible for planning and hosting such an event, the importance of this conference to the preservation and promotion of maritime material culture remains, sadly, very much in question. In the opinion of this delegate, the operation was a magnificent success, but the patient remains gravely ill.

Coming at the start of the final decade of the twentieth century, it is hard to resist the temptation to attribute some prophetic qualities to this conference, and in this case the omens are not encouraging. For if one were to try to qualify the tenor of the meeting, one would have to note a certain degree of anxiety, in the confusion of which the fundamental value of material culture appears to have been obscured. Much of the informal discussion made reference to the rather abstract notion of the museum of the nineties and much of the concern expressed related to financial solvency and venue popularity in the decade to come. Today, perhaps more than ever before, these are pressing and important concerns and nothing that follows is meant to denigrate their legitimacy. There is a danger, however, that these concerns have now so absorbed the institutional energy and imagination of museums that they have seriously begun to neglect their primary responsibility, indeed, their *raison d'être*: the collection, preservation and interpretation of material culture.

While this issue is in no way unique to maritime museums or the ICMM, this conference set the magnitude of the problem in stark relief. To begin with, the conference consisted of a very high percentage of directors. In this regard this ICMM meeting was by no means unusual, but at a time when our definitions of museums and their functions are in contention (and I dare say few of the directors present would deny that this is so), it

seems appropriate, if not imperative, that greater voice be given to the various professional functions and their concerns. This could be done in two ways: either by directors sending their professional staff in place of themselves, or by setting professional issues front and centre on the agenda of the formal sessions.

With respect to the former, it was interesting to note that lip-service was paid to the need for wider representation by professional staff. Nevertheless, when the issue was discussed, the walls seemed to this observer to ooze disingenuousness. The truth is that the triennial conferences are essentially directors' conferences, events too exotic, interesting and enjoyable to be missed. Admittedly, some of the larger museums were represented by several of their staff. Even so, there is sometimes a stifling effect caused by the simple presence of one's immediate superior, an influence that might prevent a fully open and vigorous exchange of ideas. However, as funding becomes more critical, it is important that the question of attendance be seriously addressed. Perhaps the ICMM should consider instituting an official policy encouraging directors to send staff members to selected meetings. The urgency for this is even more apparent when one considers that as a result of the forces of change influencing museums today, more and more directors are being hired primarily for their fund-raising and management skills. If this trend continues, the ICMM triennial conferences may someday be reduced to little more than exotic management seminars by the sea.

With respect to the second possibility, the dedication of formal sessions to pressing professional issues, the same logic applies. Without the full participation of a wider cross-section of professional staff, it is highly improbable that the discussion of professional issues will be substantial or useful. At the VII ICMM conference some sessions were dedicated to professional concerns, specifically documentation systems, contemporary collecting and the educational function of museums. Unfortunately, several of the papers given under these headings went off topic or dealt with their subject matter in a very superficial manner. Moreover, quite often the perspective given was little more than an administrative overview. Thus, important topics such as the current tension between curatorial and public programming functions were not properly addressed; the closest to this issue the conference came was in incidental references to "subject" versus "object" oriented ap-

proaches to exhibits. Ultimately, the ICMM should ask itself whether its triennial conferences are intended to promote a higher standard of maritime museology, or whether their function is essentially social and diplomatic.

On the matter of the papers themselves, the quality was disappointing. One notable exception was a very lively talk entitled "Can Contemporary Collection be Objective?" given by Dr. Robert Anderson, Director of the Royal Museum of Scotland. Intended as a general introduction to the session on "The Collecting of Contemporary Objects and the Future of Maritime History," Dr. Anderson's paper addressed some of the essential difficulties of collecting technology and, using historical examples as a measure, cautioning us against the temptation and the hubris of assumed objectivity. In general, though, a disproportionate number of the papers were little more than "show and tell" presentations. Topics that by title appeared to be of great interest often turned out to be institution-specific recitals of programmes or events—items one normally expects to find in brochures and public relations material, not in the formal sessions of a triennial, international conference.

Some of the more senior members of the ICMM with whom I spoke assured me that the quality of papers at this meeting was, if anything, above average. Then, as if in apology for this, they hastened to note that the real value of such gatherings was not the formal lectures but the many informal sessions which occur during these meetings. This is indeed the case, and the contacts one makes at such meetings often do provide the richest return on the investment of attendance. Nevertheless, it remains a rather poor excuse for condemning the delegates to several days of formal proceedings that are low in museological substance. In fact, the truly distressing aspect of this trend is not so much the ennui caused by an endless parade of slide images designed more to attract the paying public than to inform one's peers, but, rather, the loss of a unique opportunity: a chance to debate openly with colleagues from around the world those problems, concerns, ideas and policies which are closest to heart and mind.

Perhaps the most provocative address was that given by Peter Neill, the Director of the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City. Indeed, this paper did much to draw current trends in museum management into focus, though in a manner that was hardly encouraging to those seeking proper recognition and protection of material culture in difficult times. The paper, presented during a session on "Maritime Settings in Connection with

Maritime Museums," became a messianic museological cry of justification by fiscal buoyancy and popular appeal alone. As for tensions among professional staff, Mr. Neill assured us that such problems did not exist at his site for the simple reason that he does not tolerate any disagreement. The brilliance of this approach was quickly noted by the delegates. Mr. Neill urged museum directors to cultivate the endless possibilities of private financing and strongly suggested that if their institutions could not capture their requisite share of the market, then they had little reason to exist.

But are these the only true measures of the value and worth of museums to society? If we in the profession begin to believe this, then who will be left to speak for material culture? In the course of his presentation, Mr. Neill castigated Dr. Anderson for his encouragement of what he perceived as Victorian curatorial tendencies, noting that the nineteenth century was an era best remembered for its hypocrisy. Ironically, Mr. Neill's condemnation of Victorian values was delivered in the same breath as his veritable call to arms for a resurrected nineteenth century liberal approach to the management of museums. Unfortunately, the ramifications of this were lost on Mr. Neill, as were all the exceptional market circumstances which constitute the setting in which South Street Seaport exists. The sermon was not followed by the singing of hymns.

Mr. Neill's paper constituted an exaggerated reflection of a certain subtle element of fiscal self-righteousness, which was sometimes apparent among the American delegates. The difference in philosophy underlying the difference in traditions became quite evident early on when, following an introduction to the Swedish SAMDOK project, an American delegate rose to suggest that museums had enough to do just running day-to-day operations without getting involved in research and the pursuit of truth. After all, the delegate added, did we not have universities for such esoteric activities? Several Europeans rose in objection, but the obvious connection between the public trust, in this instance a higher educational purpose, and the necessity for continued public funding was never made. For many American museums, the private sector has long been an important partner. Thus, while not immune to the current adversity, the prospect of further dependence on private funding is much less daunting for them than for the continental Europeans, who now find themselves confronting a similar reality. In the face of this, the European delegates appeared concerned but strangely dumbfounded. There is

undoubtedly much of value which can be learned from the American experience, but patronizing attitudes do little to create an environment of constructive exchange. Thus, such issues as the connection between the retreat from arguments for public funding and the growing perception that museums are essentially centres of entertainment, were never properly explored.

Indeed, the defence of state funding for museums that was offered was surprisingly apologetic, disjointed and lacking in conviction. Have all the traditional institutional values and mandates become completely irrelevant or untenable to museums today? What are the responsibilities of museums to the public? How do we measure accountability and success? What price do we put on the presentation of our material heritage? Whatever the approach taken to these questions, viable solutions can surely be more readily found through vigorous debate, ideally within an international context where all can benefit from the wide range of experience available. Nevertheless, at the VII ICMM conference these issues remained largely in the background, often implicitly referred to but seldom appearing as the focus of discussion. Even when the spark of debate was struck, no substantial fire was lit.

Throughout the congress the politics of popularity, so forcefully articulated by Mr. Neill, remained extremely compelling and were seldom challenged. And among the strategies proposed to improve the popular appeal of maritime museums, the hope for a new building was high on the list of stated aspirations. The tremendous public response to the new Vasa Museum, the site of most of our formal sessions, did much to reinforce this. The need for new buildings is, again, a legitimate and sometimes pressing concern. Moreover, the attraction of new buildings is easy to understand; an injection of fresh capital, a dramatic increase in public attention and the

inspiration derived from a general sense of a renewal. However, such expensive projects can be full of pitfalls and are by no means a panacea for the long-term problems and challenges which maritime museums face today, though they may temporarily relieve some of the symptoms. Many of these problems are clearly economic, but surely just as many are rooted in attitude and ultimately in the way in which museums are defined and portrayed to the public. The more esoteric functions of maritime museums may well be difficult to explain and to defend to the general public, but an acknowledgement of that difficulty must not be taken as a licence to stop trying. Indeed, more energy and imagination needs to be spent on finding new ways to promote the importance of museum activities which are not so readily apparent to the public. It was a very great disappointment to me to find that such matters were not so much dismissed as simply ignored.

The *Kristina Regina* was certainly no ship of fools. Nor was her voyage without profit to those of us lucky enough to have been aboard her for the conference. However, the pleasures of the trip may well have served to mask the absence of museological rigour and to distract delegates from a serious philosophical consideration of the long-term issues effecting the future of maritime material culture. Indeed, at a time when public awareness of the importance of shipping and seafaring to society is generally in decline (a fact readily admitted by the delegates), the task of those entrusted with maritime heritage preservation is more important than ever. With this in mind, it is hoped that future ICMM meetings will take full advantage of the very great opportunity for professional enrichment and inspiration through vigorous debate, which only conferences of this sort can provide.