

Exhibit Review

Compte rendu d'exposition

National Maritime Museum, Reading the Relics: *Titanic* Culture and *The Wreck of the Titanic* Exhibit

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National Maritime Museum, Greenwich,
London, *The Wreck of the Titanic*
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*We have arrived at a new time — and with this
new time, strange methods, huge forces and
combinations — a Titanic world — have
spread all around us.*

Winston Churchill, 1909.

The wreck of the *Titanic* is an epic tale of the twentieth century. On the evening of 14 April 1912, *Titanic* — the essence of modernity and technological achievement — was steaming across the Atlantic on her maiden voyage from the Old World to the New World. On board, her passengers and crew were oblivious to the iceberg's presence and the imminence of destruction and death. Enshrining the values, self-confidence and social fabric of the era, *Titanic* was a microcosm of Western civilization in "a gilded age" before World War I. The *zeitgeist* was reflected and proclaimed, with unknowing irony, in the White Star Line's grandiloquent advertising of *Titanic* and her sistership *Olympic*:

The White Star liners *Olympic* and *Titanic* — eloquent testimonies to the progress of mankind, as shown in the conquest of mind over matter — will rank high in the achievements of the 20th century...the Staterooms in their situation, spaciousness and appointments, will be perfect havens of retreat where many pleasant hours are spent, and where the

time given to slumber and rest will be free from noise or other disturbance...The friendly intercourse, mutual helpfulness and bonhomie of third class passengers is proverbial...The new field of endeavour is looked forward to with hope and confidence. In these vessels the interval between the old life and the new is spent under the happiest possible conditions.

When *Titanic* struck the iceberg her steel hull was opened below the waterline for a length of ninety-one metres. The inrush of water, with which the pumps and systems of hull subdivision could not cope, doomed the ship. The essential tragedy of *Titanic's* sinking was the huge loss of life. There were not enough lifeboats to save all of the 2 201 people on board. There was provision for only 1 178 people, but not even all of the available lifeboats were filled to capacity. Boats were lowered only partly filled with passengers who refused at first to believe that *Titanic* could possibly sink. Almost 1 500 people, passengers and crew, perished in the icy waters of the North Atlantic in the most appalling circumstances imaginable.

The sinking of *Titanic* had a traumatic effect in both Europe and the United States. The great ship, a signifier of the civilized world, now lay fractured on the ocean floor, after plunging down through over three kilometres of freezing water. Millionaires and emigrant poor on board had gone down with her. It was a mighty blow to the self-confidence of the age. An American writer, Bruce Jackson, has interpreted the impact of the disaster from a modern perspective.

The rising star of modern technology had a sudden loss of magnitude, as that sleek and enormous ship that could not be sunk tore its hide and collapsed. It was the major disaster of the era, and it struck the imagination of the

rich, who lost friends and relatives on the ship...and the poor, for whom the ship represented the great shining and glistening world forever denied them and anyone they would ever know.

Public expressions of grief knew no bounds. Feelings of loss, bewilderment and the pointing of lessons were expressed in a cathartic outpouring of popular verse. There was an irresistible urge to string the lyre, invoke the Muse and in the seventeenth-century phrase, indulge in pious ejaculation. Entrepreneurs, catching the mood of emotion, flooded an eager market with mementoes of the disaster. This was the modern *Titanic* industry in embryo, a profitable symbiotic relationship between production and consumption, keyed initially to a prevailing sense of human loss. Commemorative postcards were especially popular as they combined a high level of memorialization with the commercial advantage of low cost. The publication of specially composed *Titanic* sheet music was another commercial activity and market opportunity generated by the disaster. In the United States, for example, the first published song was copyrighted on 25 April 1912 and within twelve months more than one hundred *Titanic* songs had been composed and published in America. Over fifty of these songs were published by the Washington, D.C., firm of H. Kirkus Dugdale, who organized a promotion whereby members of the public submitted lyrics and company hacks set them to music. Overwhelmingly the cultural response to the disaster was popular and vernacular, but artists and writers, most famously Max Beckman and Thomas Hardy, also expressed the catastrophic event in terms of their individual imagination and vision of humanity.

For many in 1912, the wreck of *Titanic* was rich in symbolic significance. Her sinking called into question the established order of things. It deeply troubled those who implicitly believed in a good and merciful God. For others, it confirmed their belief in divine retribution for human conceit and arrogance. It seemed to demonstrate the folly of man's presumption and vanity that nature could be a conquest of science. In a speech in 1909, Winston Churchill had proclaimed the advent of a new "Titanic world." Now in 1912 the Bishop of Winchester preached its nadir:

When has such a mighty lesson against our confidence and trust in power, machinery and money been shot through the nation? The *Titanic*, name and thing, will stand for a monument and warning to human presumption.

The destruction of *Titanic* by a spur of ice shattered popular faith in the supremacy of technology, progress and privilege. The age of self-confident belief in the inexorable progress of society through the appliance of science was over. In retrospect, the utter failure of this microcosmic machine and all that it represented, symbolized the end of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century had begun. The day of Salman Rushdie's "*Titanic Verses*" and other *Titanic* jokes was at hand!

Throughout the twentieth century, *Titanic* has gripped the imagination of people, not only in Europe and North America, but virtually throughout the world. Yet with the passage of time attitudes have changed and, for us today, *Titanic* has a significance beyond tragedy and death. While potent images of the stricken liner have endured for eight decades, the multiplicity of metaphors resulting from the catastrophe have been equally powerful. Cultural processes of absorption, transformation and diffusion began immediately after the disaster and as resonances of *Titanic's* disaster, they perhaps have significance for humanity greater than the event itself. *Titanic* and the mythic proportions of her loss have become the subject, generator and carrier of all kinds of signs, messages and meanings, from the sublime to the tacky. They embrace the cultural spectrum, from high culture to low culture, from popular culture to consumer culture. The *Titanic* litany includes books, verse, vaudeville, religion, songs, music, opera, dance, drama, art, poetry, film, cartoons, jokes, fantasy, graffiti, advertising, satire, politics, pornography, propaganda, romantic fiction, science fiction and, of course, museum exhibitions.

In the north of Ireland *Titanic* has a special significance, for the great liner was built in Belfast and there remains a thwarted pride in her memory. In a retrospective way the tragedy of the ship can be seen as mirroring that of the city itself. But today there is a spirit of optimism in Belfast and new possibilities for the future are being envisioned. With unerring commercial sensibility these include reappropriations of a *Titanic* past. For example, Harland and Wolff, builders of the original ship, are looking to the new millennium with a proposed *Titanic* Technology Park and on 20 June 1994 *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that:

a Northern Ireland construction firm is hoping to launch a *Titanic* twin — by building an exact replica for a mystery Japanese buyer...the life-size model of the 270-metre vessel, minus engines, would be permanently moored in

Tokyo Bay for use as a luxury conference centre...we are talking big, big money.

Within this commercial frame, irony and parody are unconsciously present, and the proposed transfiguration of *Titanic* from substance to pastiche is a retro-visionary proclamation that millennial post-modernity is alive and well in Belfast.

Titanic, or rather *Titanicism*, is an international cultural phenomenon. It shows no sign of abating and indeed it is clear that the scale and potency of *Titanicism* has increased rather than diminished since the remains were located on the seabed in 1985. Despite the magnitude of other twentieth-century horrors, *Titanic* has achieved the status of ultimate disaster symbol, or root metaphor, in our cultural consciousness. *Titanic*, both real and imagined, has become a key icon of the twentieth century, a glittering star of popular culture and one of the great metaphors of our time!

In considering *Titanicism* as an aspect of popular culture, three key and interconnected characteristics can be identified. These are profit, pleasure and memorialization. The first of these, profit, is premised on the mass consumption and commercial exploitation which are endemic to *Titanicism*. This commodification is nothing new. In a sense it was begun by the White Star Line, whose essential purpose in building and operating *Titanic* was to turn a profit. As the lost ship deconstructed on the seabed, it continued to make money for an increasing number of entrepreneurs. With the discovery of the wreck in 1985, its "real presence" created new market opportunities for *Titanic* products, publications and attractions. In short, *Titanic* is a very profitable commercial property!

It has been argued that popular culture is concerned with meanings, pleasures and identities. Pleasure is of course a mainstream feature of *Titanicism*. Part of the continuing consumer appeal of *Titanic* is that simultaneously it makes you feel good and glad you weren't there. The deriving of pleasure and satisfaction from the tragedy of *Titanic* seems to suggest that Freud's pleasure and reality principles can operate in reverse order. But what the hell! *Titanic* is big, it's sexy and it's a star. It's up there with Princess Di, Demi Moore and possibly Joan Collins!

Naturally the keepers of *Titanic's* sacred history tend not to see things this way, for the obsession here is the memorialization of *Titanic* and all who sailed in her. Just as museums are holy temples for *Titanic* relics, so *Titanic* enthusiasts

are custodians of historical truths and gnostic possessors of arcane knowledge. The *Titanic* Historical Society is the largest and most senior enthusiast organization in the *Titanic* pantheon. Based in the United States, but with a worldwide membership, the mission of the Society is that the ship's "memory and history be preserved for future generations." To this end the Society publishes a regular journal, holds conventions and, most recently, organizes *Titanic* Heritage Tours. As the pilgrimage advertising says, "Hurry, Act Now. Get on Board!! We have only a few spaces still available."

Beyond popular culture, *Titanic* continues to engage the imagination of artists and writers in whose work the tragedy takes on meanings beyond the event itself. Poets in particular have explored *Titanic* themes. Perhaps the most compelling contemporary poem is "The Sinking of the *Titanic*" by Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1978). Translated from German into English by the poet, it is an extended metaphorical discourse on human loss and the foundering of Western society.

I can see my fellow beings going down very gradually, and I call out to them and explain: I can see you going down very gradually.
There is no reply. On distant charter cruises there are orchestras playing feebly but gallantly. I deplore all this very much, I do not like the way they all die, soaked to the skin, in the drizzle, it is a pity I am severely tempted to wail. "The Doomsday year," I wail, "is not yet clear/so let's have/so let's have/another beer."

From the thirty-third (final) Canto.

In general outline, this is the cultural frame through which the National Maritime Museum's *Wreck of the Titanic* exhibit can be viewed. Advance publicity made clear its primary focus, with the bold headline "National Maritime Museum Exhibition To Feature Largest Ever Public Display of *Titanic* Artefacts." For the public this was the core drawing power of the show. Here was the real stuff of the mythic *Titanic*, a chance to witness the resurrection of a lost world through the wonders of modern technology. Dr. Stephen Deuchar, Head of Exhibitions and Display at the National Maritime Museum said, "...the range and nature of artefacts on display will bring to life — like nothing else can — *Titanic's* brief but legendary

history and the way things were at the twilight of the British Empire."

Despite the "sea of controversy" surrounding the exhibit, as a Belfast newspaper put it, *The Wreck of the Titanic* has been a block-busting success in terms of visitor numbers and media coverage. The huge popular appeal and commercial strength of *Titanic* could hardly have been a surprise to the Museum. Indeed the exhibit's income generating potential through admissions and shop sales, and hence its capacity to help close museum funding gaps, must surely have been a factor in the decision to go into partnership with the artifacts' owners, RMS Titanic Inc. The recognition of this commercial dimension is of course not a criticism of the exhibit per se. As would be expected from one of the world's leading maritime museums, the exhibit was thoroughly professional and tasteful in the presentation of the relics. However, from a popular culture perspective, the exhibit was also a major manifestation of Titanicism, the ultimate visitor experience in wall-to-wall Titanicana.

From the inception of the *Wreck of the Titanic* exhibit, the Museum became a target for widespread media-carried criticism, ranging from professionally informed views to basic emotional responses. But of course all this had been anticipated. The Museum, led by the Chairman of Trustees, Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Lewin, mounted a strategic and vigorous campaign to defend its position and even seize the high ground, not only in the public domain, but also in the world of *Titanic* enthusiasts, together with the sometimes enclosed circles inhabited by museum professionals, historians and maritime archaeologists. The importance of endorsement by the tiny but influential group of *Titanic* survivors was not forgotten either. Most impressively of all, the Museum incorporated critical comment on its exhibit decision, into the exhibit itself, thus claiming openness of debate whilst annexing the opposition!

Of course the Museum has never denied the importance of debate and criticism, which vary from cool arguments for best practice in maritime archaeology to the hot allegations of *Titanic* grave-robbing and desecration. In a statement accompanying this article, Roger Knight, Deputy Director of the National Maritime Museum, acknowledges the controversial dimensions of the exhibit. He argues the Museum's case for the way in which it has addressed, and continues to address, the important archaeological issues raised by the salvage and display of *Titanic* artifacts. Perhaps not

everyone will be convinced by the strength of these arguments and in the absence of a statement outlining an opposing viewpoint, the key concerns of the International Congress of Maritime Museums should be emphasized. These relate to the importance of ensuring that a proper archaeological record is made of any further work on the *Titanic* wreck, the need for a preservation policy and international agreement on the future of the wreck site and the need to provide an appropriate long-term home for the salvaged *Titanic* artifacts. Clearly these are now also the concerns of the National Maritime Museum, whose policy is to translate good intentions into practical reality.

In its own terms the exhibit was impressive. It deployed modern museum display techniques to considerable educational effect. These included some really terrific models and in particular, an atmospheric tableau of the wrecked *Titanic* on the seabed. A considerable amount of information was presented in accessible and easily understood text panels, images, and video presentations. The latter included extracts from a Northern Ireland television program in which the pros and cons of the exhibit were debated by Stephen Deuchar of the National Maritime Museum, Una Reilly of the Ulster Titanic Society and Tom McCluskie of the shipbuilders Harland and Wolff. Broadcast sound bites included, "the incentive to bring things up is to make money" (Reilly), and "*Titanic* is the most important shipwreck in the world" (Deuchar). Through an interactive computer, visitors had the opportunity to record their own responses to a series of set questions about the *Titanic* artifacts. These of course were the stars of the show, the *raison d'être* for the exhibit. The 150 artifacts were displayed sensitively in a variety of contexts. They were explained exhaustively, especially in respect of their recovery and conservation. In the gallery, low lighting, low ceilings and complementary theme colours of rust brown and dark blue, in carpets and cases, suggested a prevailing mood of sombre dignity appropriate to the display of a relic collection. However, in practice the prevailing mood was one of crush, crowd and chatter as waves of visitors washed through the exhibit and on to the shop. Here a variety of *Titanic*-theme purchases could be made, including a splendidly produced exhibit catalogue. As it says on page 36, the artifacts "sank to the floor of the deep ocean and were thought to have been lost forever. The fact that we can see them again now is little short of miraculous."

Essentially the exhibit comprised nine thematic sections, the first two of which — launch and loss of *Titanic* — occupied less than a quarter of the gallery space. Here the ship's construction, service and sinking were briefly presented and contextualized by means of historic images, text and evocative sounds. Nuggets of information were given, such as "more than three million rivets weighing over 1200 tons were used in the construction" and "*Titanic* was beautiful and luxurious. She seemed to symbolize the triumph of technology over nature." This introductory section was really a warm-up for the main show, to which it was connected by a rather weak two-dimensional timeline, incorporating photographs of poster for the films *A Night To Remember* (1958) and *Raise The Titanic* (1980).

The artifactual core of the exhibit was represented in sections three to nine. Their titles identified the main focus of the show: Searching for the Wreck; *Titanic* Found; Exploring the Wreck; Recovering the Past; Preserving the Artefacts; Learning from *Titanic* — A Lost World Found; Learning from the *Titanic* — the Future. The overall theme of course was a demonstration and chronicle of how modern technology first of all located the wreck of *Titanic*, then retrieved and preserved a whole collection of shipboard material and personal belongings that had been strewn over the seabed debris field in 1912. The Museum emphasized that the remains of *Titanic's* hull had not been penetrated, as these were the true grave sites of the *Titanic* dead. Only a small sample of the total collection was displayed in the exhibit, although perhaps it was the cream of the collection. Certainly the material was extensive

and occasionally poignant. It ranged from *Titanic's* foremast bell to a shaving brush still replete with its bristles. The final section of the exhibit looked to the future of the collection and announced plans for a world tour on board a specially-built *Titanic* reliquary barge.

Fundamentally this was not an exhibit about the past, but about the present and its appropriation of the past. The emphasis was not on the mortality of *Titanic*, but on the miracles of modern resurrection technology. The exhibit was not a requiem for the dead, nor did it address the metaphorical meanings of *Titanic*. Rather it was an enshrinement of the triumphs of deep-sea exploration and the reviving wonders of conservation laboratories. The cataclysmic failure of *Titanic* was, and remains, a paradigm for the inevitable failure of flaunted technology. Ironically, the implicit subtext of *The Wreck of the Titanic* exhibit was the sanctification of technology. This was the essential contradiction at the heart of the exhibit. Just as the design of the leviathan *Titanic* had a fatal flaw, so the celebration of modern technology was the underlying conceptual flaw in this *Titanic* exhibition. There was a failure to recognize that *Titanic*, the sunken signifier, resonates with us today precisely because it symbolizes our contemporary fears about the vanities and frightening possibilities of science and technology. Their titanic advances are out of synchronization with popular trust and confidence. They jar with our fin de siècle anxieties about the precariousness of existence. *The Wreck of the Titanic* exhibit affirmed the feeling that, as the twentieth century draws to a close, we've somehow caught up with *Titanic* and are recreating the future.

Curatorial Statement

ROGER KNIGHT

The history of the *Titanic* has never been free from controversy. She set sail from Southampton on her maiden voyage on 10 April 1912, with over two thousand people on board — a cross-section of society from more than twenty countries. On 14 April, steaming too fast in difficult conditions, she struck an iceberg and sank in two and a half hours; 1 503 people died and 705 survived. There have been greater tragedies at sea in this century, but this is the one that people remember.

Three years before this exhibit finally opened, the National Maritime Museum received an offer of an exhibit of artifacts from the wrecksite of the *Titanic* by a company of commercial salvors, RMS *Titanic*, Inc. The proposal put the museum in a considerable quandary. Had we refused, the chance of dispersal of the collection by sale was very high; it was also probable that another organization could have mounted a high-profile and unprofessional exhibit, probably in London, which

would have done no good to the museum profession, and to maritime museums in particular. What could not be denied, and which the museum's exhibit proved to be the case, was the power and fascination of the objects, brought up from two and half miles below the surface, after eighty-two years on the seabed.

At the same time, we were well aware that there were considerable professional pitfalls, while public perceptions of the "taste" and tone of the exhibit were difficult to predict. The tragic loss of the *Estonia*, three days before the exhibit was about to open, focussed our minds on this latter question. In the end it did not develop any momentum, largely because the objects in the exhibit came only from the debris field and not within the wreck, and because the exhibit deliberately avoided sensationalism.

However, as anticipated, the feeling amongst a considerable part of the maritime archaeological world has been at best sceptical and at worst hostile. At a time when countries are trying to increase the protection of historic wreck sites, and when the international Congress of Maritime Museums passed their Barcelona resolutions in 1993, the museum was seen as flying in the face of professional archaeological opinion. In fact, although the motives of the salvors were commercial, their recording, artifact recovery and conservation methods were of reasonable standard for the great depth of water; the museum would not have gone ahead with the exhibition had they not been so. One of the reasons for supporting RMS *Titanic* Inc., was that they were extremely willing to listen to all these considerations; there are far worse operators out there. By giving this company an opportunity to exploit their finds legitimately, it could continue with maintaining salvage rights over the wreck site and keep less scrupulous operators from the wreck.

The objectives of the design of the exhibit itself were to demonstrate the technical achievement of finding and excavating of the site, to show the conservation techniques and extraordinary survival of objects, and to examine the controversy in detail. (There were, in total, seventeen minutes of video screens and an interactive computer which recorded visitor reaction to the controversy). Finally, we showed some

one hundred and fifty objects in a very simple way. Over half a million people visited the exhibit in its year's run and over 170 000 recorded their views. General press reaction was very favourable.

Professional criticism of the exhibit then moved into the question of the future of the collection of artifacts. It was felt that the salvors would seek to sell the collection after the exhibition, thus securing a favourable price. Early debate established that it was not the salvors' intention to sell items from the collection. They wished to develop long-term exhibit plans, with a world tour, and it was their intention to keep the collection together. The museum has established an Advisory Committee with RMS *Titanic* to plan a final memorial museum after the world tour, which is planned to start in 1996.

When the exhibit opened, the wreck of the *Titanic* lay outside all national protective legislation, and it was not until November 1994 that the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention became international law. For the first time, there was an opportunity for the site to come within the framework of international law. At the very start of the museum's internal debate, we knew that by having the exhibit it would give a priority to getting better protection for sites in international waters. In February 1995 the museum therefore called a conference of international lawyers, as well as bringing together the three United Nations agencies involved — The Law of the Sea from New York, UNESCO from Paris and the International Maritime Organization from London. Although there is a long and complicated road ahead, the Museum is running another conference at the International Maritime Organisation in London in January 1996 to take matters further.

The museum's reasons for involvement can be summarized as follows: we wished to put on a high-profile exhibit on a dramatic maritime subject, in a dignified way; to see if it was possible to work with enlightened salvors and to help them generate income from exhibiting their finds without selling the collection; to draw attention to the controversy over marine archaeological sites; and to provide a platform for a drive for better protection for sites in international waters. So far, we are on course.