

AN OCEAN LINER MUSEUM IS BORN BUT FOR A BERTH

If all goes according to plan, New Yorkers will soon hear a powerful, piercing blast that has not been sounded in more than 40 years.

It was a half century ago that the giant steam whistle of the liner *Normandie* was first blown in the port of New York. In those days the liners were an essential part of the city's form and style. With their skyline of funnels and towers, their mechanical substructures and dense hierarchies of inhabitants stacked above one another, they seemed to take a bit of New York with them wherever they went. (As Anita Loos once put it while boarding the *Queen Mary*: "When does this place get to Europe?") It was the liners that made New York and its great harbor so clearly the front door of America, the crossroads between old world and new. One day, it seemed, they were gone, their massive reality—almost overnight—an evanescent memory. But when the *Normandie's* whistle blows again this fall, it will not just be recalling the past; it will also give notice that a new cultural institution, dedicated to the history of the passenger ship, has arrived in New York.

In formal existence since 1981, the Ocean Liner Museum, Inc., is the product of a group of determined East Siders led by Stephen S. Lash, executive vice president of Christie's.

They have sought to create an institution that will, in Lash's words, "capture a moment in history." The museum's founders include noted collectors, scholars, writers and enthusiasts such as Walter Lord, author of *A Night to Remember*; Frank O. Braynard, former president of the Steamship Society of America and mastermind of Operation Sail; John Maxtone-Graham, author of *The Only Way to Cross*; and Anna Glen Vietor, the noted philanthropist. Since its inception the group has been busy preparing exhibits like "Ships of State in the Port of New York" (for whose anticipated opening at the New-York Historical Society the *Normandie's* whistle will blow), amassing its collection, expanding membership (now up to several hundred people), issuing a quarterly newsletter and planning additional programs. It is missing only one thing: a building.

One site that has always seemed especially appealing is the rotunda space in the old Custom House on Bowling Green. The Custom House, Lash points out, was designed with maritime motifs and is situated at the base of Broadway, once called "Steamship Row." In addition, the rotunda itself was decorated by the noted regionalist painter Reginald Marsh in the 1930s with murals of ocean liners. Says Lash: "There's even Greta Garbo being interviewed as she arrives in

Steered by Anna Glen Vietor, Walter Lord, Stephen Lash and John Maxtone-Graham, the Ocean Liner Museum will open its doors as soon as it has a home.



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port." At the same time, the museum is looking into the Battery Maritime Building and the new Convention Center near the Hudson River. There's even been some talk of permanently mooring an old liner like the *America* (now in Greece) and housing the museum on it, much the way the *Queen Mary* survives in Long Beach, California, and the *Intrepid* on Pier 85.

At the moment, the museum's permanent collection is housed in a most impermanent way. Scores of original travel posters, ship models rescued from traveler's aid societies and mural studies are in one trustee's apartment on East Seventy-ninth Street. Photographs of ships under construction, at port, on voyages and at the scrapyard are with Frank Braynard, and Norman Morse has the largest and most complete collection of ships' deck plans and sections in the world. A piece of paneling from the *Olympic* (sister ship to the *Titanic*) sits in a living room on West Seventy-eighth Street, while the propeller indicator from the 1920s *France* is in the basement. The complete minutes of the Atlantic Charter, donated by the Holland America Lines, are being stored in a Long Island squash court.

Concern for the preservation of all

this historical material was a major impetus for the museum's creation. "One of the aims of the museum, as with any museum," Maxtone-Graham says, "is preservation, in this case of artifacts and items that are so rare and hard to find and that are not preserved anywhere else. The only collections that exist are in private hands, and we are all afraid that if those collections aren't sought out and assembled, they'll vanish." Adds Lash: "The 1980s are a moment when, happily, there are still bits of ephemera—old posters, travel agency ship models, furniture from the vessels themselves—that have survived the test of time; I don't think, knowing what I do about the world of collecting and the life of objects, that they would survive many more decades. So we want to pull all of this together while we have the opportunity."

But the museum, when it is finally completed, will be more than simply a collection. It will serve as a resource for scholars, students and the general public. Maxtone-Graham, whose *The Only Way to Cross* is one of the best books on ocean liners (and who is issuing a companion volume on cruise ships in the fall), points out the need for such an archive: "I'm continually getting calls from people who want

to know 'What was it like on the *Normandie*?' or 'Would the following have happened on the *Ile de France*...?' There's a gross shortage of information on the ocean liners, things so recently in our past. It's a curious thing that you would be harder pressed to find out something that happened on a steamer than you would on a sailing ship."

There is little doubt that interest in the liners has been rising each year, cresting, ironically, just as the boats themselves are dying off. To Walter Lord the reason is simple: "You never miss anything until you can't get it anymore, and now that they're gone, everybody loves them!" Auctions for memorabilia and furniture from the passenger ships (which could be had for flea-market prices just a few years ago) now command huge figures, while each year brings a spate of new picture books on the liners and their decoration. Says Lash: "The liners encapsulated tremendous excitement, tremendous romance, tremendous intrigue—a lot happened aboard the liners—and they became more than liners themselves, they became national symbols." Maxtone-Graham downplays their glamour and speaks of "their special combination of steel and veneer, the mechanical pleasures of the huge pistons, engines, and propellers, the fact that [they moved] at such speed across a dangerous ocean."

It is with the aim of capturing the spirit of the ships that many of the museum's future programs are designed. "It's dangerous in a museum," Maxtone-Graham warns, "to always be looking over your shoulder and saying we're preserving something from the past. We're also building something for the present and future." He describes a whole set of planned programs, starting with an exhibit next year on Cunard's three *Queens* (it will be the *Mary's* 50th anniversary). Other proposals include a scale section of the Chelsea piers showing a day and night cycle with sound and lights ("As it went dark," says Maxtone-Graham, "the porthole lights would come on, and maybe a ship would leave at midnight and sail down

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the Hudson"); an engine room telegraph (which children could work) that would include the propeller indicator from the 1920s *France*; scale models of cabins from various periods; all manner of memorabilia—baggage labels, tickets, deck chairs; and a show on traveling second class (in Maxtone-Graham's words, the "class of neglected remembrance"). "One nice thing about ocean liners," Maxtone-Graham says, "is that they parallel the rise of the art of photography, both still and moving, so you have a parallel visual resource, which is also disappearing. Films of ship launchings should be collected and put on videotape, and films of ship voyages, drawn in part from tourist films."

The goal of the permanent collection is to sum up the ocean liners' short, dazzling history. That story will trace how the liners rose in the late 19th century to become a reliable system of transport, how Germany took a quick lead at the turn of the century with ships like the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, how they were soon supplanted by Cunard and White Star's brilliant (and partially ill-fated) generation of sister ships—the *Lusitania/Mauretania* and the *Olympic/Titanic*—which ushered in the modern era of the ocean liner, and how France broke new design ground with the *Ile de France*, shedding period decor for new, modernistic fashions, which were further refined in the sleekest of liners, the *Normandie*. It will look at Italy's ornate, retrograde entries, the *Rex* and the *Conte di Savoia*, at Germany's speedy *Bremen* and *Europa*, and at the greatest pair of them all, Cunard's *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*. Final entries will include the *United States*, fastest of all to date, and, probably, forever; the 1962 *France*, the longer liner, which is still sailing as the cruise ship *Norway*; and, of course, the *Queen Elizabeth II*, which continues to ply the Atlantic as a living reminder of the express liners. The boats now being built are designed exclusively for cruising and don't hold the special magic of the "crossing ships," which, in Maxtone-Graham's words, "carried, besides their higher speed, a sense of purpose

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and urgency quite different from the sense of languid indolence on board a cruise ship."

Although the greatest liners were European vessels with home ports in Southampton, Le Havre, Genoa or Hamburg, they all converged in New York—the finish line for their attempts at the "Blue Ribbon," the special pennant flown by the fastest liner at any given moment. New York's size and its status as an ocean-side port made it the premier city of the liners, which became part of the fabric of its daily life. It was the maiden arrival in New York—especially, as in the case of the *Normandie*, after snatching the Blue Ribbon from another ship—that marked a liner's true baptism. A flotilla of pleasure craft and fireboats, shrieking and sending up plumes of water, would greet the new ship in the harbor, while thousands of New Yorkers would line the Battery and the West Side piers to watch the newcomer and compare her merits and design with those of her dozen or so rivals. When the classic *WPA Guide to New York City* began its description of Manhattan, the very first words were of an ocean liner as it moves "through the Narrows . . . heads for that narrow strip of water and steams dexterously towards it, turning precisely toward the slender island to the north. . . ." In his *Here Is New York* E.B. White poignantly recalls when he "heard the *Queen Mary* blow one midnight, and the sound carried the whole history of departure and longing and loss."

The great passenger ships helped shape the city. Like the skyscrapers and the suspension bridges, they arrived toward the end of the 19th century, and like them, too, they helped to give New York its unique scale, its visual power and its sense of dynamic movement. The skyscrapers have since become landmarks; the bridges have just had their 50th and 100th birthdays fêted with fireworks; but the liners are gone. The goal of the new Ocean Liner Museum is to keep alive their memory as a critical part of New York's—and America's—coming of age.

—James Sanders

A model of the Rotterdam sits landlocked beneath an ocean liner travel poster.

