



The Mariner's Mirror

The International Quarterly Journal of The Society for Nautical Research

ISSN: 0025-3359 (Print) 2049-680X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmir20>

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To cite this article: Lincoln Paine (2016) Connecting Past and Present: Maritime museums and historical mission, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 102:4, 388-399, DOI: [10.1080/00253359.2016.1240968](https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2016.1240968)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2016.1240968>



Published online: 09 Nov 2016.



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The Mariner's Mirror 102:4 (November 2016), 388–399

Connecting Past and Present: Maritime museums and historical mission

Lincoln Paine

This article explores different approaches that maritime museums might consider to enlarge their audience and enhance their mission. In particular, it focuses on how we can incorporate the innovative research into ancient and contemporary structures of maritime trading networks by historians, archaeologists and others to broaden our geographic and thematic focus, and take on a more expansive, global vision of maritime history in ways that benefit the museum public, individual institutions, and the wider community of maritime museums worldwide.

Key words: maritime museums, maritime history, geography, chronology, thematic focus, globalization, human ecology, technology

The greatest challenge faced by maritime museums is how we make ourselves relevant in the twenty-first century. This is a problem that has three components, which we can characterize loosely as geography, chronology and theme or discipline. Foremost of these is, as they say in the real-estate world, location, location, location. Maritime museums have by default allowed our physical location to define and determine the centre and scope of all our activities, whether our focus is a port city; a bay, a lake, or a river; whether it is local or regional, or national or imperial; or even when its focus is on a particular industry or trade.

Imagine, if you will, a British Museum or a Prado or a Louvre whose collection was defined by its location. To take a specific example, what if the Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed only work made in or about New York City, so that the highlights of its collection were paintings of the Hudson River School, some abstract expressionism and pop art, and perhaps a bit of subway graffiti. Taken together and in the right hands, these four genres would no doubt tell us a fascinating story, but it would be one with a limited appeal in the great scheme of things. Moreover, the Metropolitan would not be the world-class institution that it is, with two million pieces in its permanent collection apportioned among 17 curatorial departments that focus on everything from ancient Near Eastern art to European paintings and sculpture, arms and armour, costumes, musical instruments, photographs and modern art. (The number of items in the Metropolitan Museum's collection may be rivalled by that of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, but the Met gets more than three times as many visitors even though it recommends an admission price of \$25 per person and basic admission to the National Maritime Museum is free.)

What is so ironic and confounding about maritime museums' geocentric tendencies is that one of the main reasons for launching ourselves on to the oceans of the world is to make connections with distant places and people. And let us not forget that the theme of the International Congress of Maritime Museums in 2015 was, in fact,

‘connections’.¹ Yet the museums that celebrate maritime history and heritage are almost myopically transfixed by their own bit of ground or water. If the location of an art or science museum does not necessarily define its breadth of vision, why should that of a maritime museum?

The challenge of chronology tends to be closely related to place, as museums usually focus on the period in which a port, an industry or a trade flourished, while neglecting earlier or subsequent periods, including the present. One consequence of this is that the distant past, or any period before the development of writing or state formation, is generally left out of the picture. Virtually every maritime museum sits on a site formerly occupied by an ancient and very often preliterate culture. But as often as not, the people who pioneered the region’s waterways and navigation are all but ignored by the institution that sits on their ancestral ground.

If prehistory presents special difficulties of display and interpretation, certainly the modern period is accessible, if only we have the will to access it. To raise again the analogy of the art museum, how many are known especially for their exhibitions of contemporary or modern art? To see how widespread public interest is in the here and now, you have only to consider the scores of biennial art exhibitions staged around the world from Gwangju, South Korea, to Beijing, Sydney, and Kochi, India, in Istanbul and Venice, or Havana, New York, and my own small city of Portland, Maine. People are very curious to know what’s happening now, especially if it builds on, or connects with, what went before.

The third challenge has to do with the narrow thematic focus on which many museums have elected to concentrate: shipbuilding, or trade, or naval history, or fisheries, or exploration, and so on. Obviously some places are more associated with particular activities at particular times than are others: Liverpool and the slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or the transatlantic passenger trades of the nineteenth and twentieth; Amsterdam in the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; or Guangzhou in the period of the Canton system of trade between Europe and Asia.

But Guangzhou did not become an important port because Europeans and Americans began frequenting it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Guangzhou has been a primary port of entry into China, and a port of departure from China, since the completion of the Lingqu Canal during the Han campaign to conquer the south in the third century BC, 2,200 years ago. This was the last link in a continuous inland waterway from Guangzhou to the inland imperial capital of Chang’an, more than 2,000 kilometres away as the crow flies. The digging of this canal accomplished two things: it completed the spine of China’s internal waterways, a system unrivalled then or now or at any time in between in any other country on earth. It also opened the Chinese to the marvellous goods of Southeast Asia and beyond and thereby fostered the start of China’s overseas awareness and connection.

As one might expect, the long history of Guangzhou is well told in Chinese maritime museums. But in the West, the glories of the Hong merchants of the Canton system appear like the explosive radiance of a commercial supernova – brilliant, brief, and wholly unexpected. One consequence of this is a complete misunderstanding and underestimation of Chinese commercial maritime acumen, some of which

¹ This article is based on the author’s keynote address to the International Congress of Maritime Museums in 2015.

was preserved among overseas colonies of Chinese 'merchants without empire', as Wang Gungwu described them.² It is this ancient cultural tradition that helped its merchant marine grow from fewer than 30 ships in international trade at its nadir in the early 1960s to the world's largest national fleet today. Apart from leaving us with imperfect pictures of the past, excessive specialization has resulted in a Balkanized community of maritime museums in which each articulates a parochial view of the world circumscribed by where it is, the period by which it is bound, and the maritime activities on which it concentrates.

The most narrowly focused museums are museum ships, especially ships as self-contained museums. Some vessels are of unimpeachable significance by virtue of their ability to tell a story otherwise unknown. The bulk of these are archaeological finds like Egypt's Khufu ship, the Viking-age Roskilde ships in Denmark, or China's thirteenth-century Nanhai No. 1 vessel. These are generally the only vessels of their kind to survive and often the written and pictorial record offers little detail about maritime culture of the time, and almost nothing about shipbuilding technology per se. As a result, and by virtue of their antiquity, they have an allure that transcends national boundaries.

Other ships are patriotic monuments, like HMS *Victory*, the USS *Constitution*, the Japanese *Mikasa* or the Russian cruiser *Aurora*, all of which were engaged in one or more conflicts that helped define their countries and which thereby merit, and often receive, state support. *Victory* and *Constitution* even benefit from the legal fiction of being commissioned vessels in their respective navies. Yet one suspects that a lot depends on ships' names. As Martin Bellamy has noted, the Scottish Development Agency and Dundee City Council supported the preservation of the Antarctic research ship *Discovery* because it 'provided a spearhead for a major programme of regeneration and re-branding, with the city calling itself the "City of Discovery"'. Unfortunately for the other ship preserved in Dundee, "City of Unicorn" did not quite have the same ring to it'.³ It is difficult to imagine the British public ginning up much enthusiasm for HMS *Elephant*, Nelson's flagship at Copenhagen, and there are several periods in American history during which people would have cheerfully paid for the privilege of scuttling a USS *President* or *Congress*, two of the *Constitution's* sister ships.

The role of luck in ship preservation cannot be underestimated, and names do not always matter. Cunard's long-retired *Queen Mary* is moored in Long Beach, California – a port with which she had no association as an ocean liner – living out her days as a hotel, convention hall and museum. The *United States*, a vessel of vastly more technological significance, survives in a decrepit state only because a handful of diehard supporters refuse to recognize that the ship has long been beyond reasonable rehabilitation for any use. Had the same energy that has been lavished on trying to ready the *United States* for a productive afterlife gone into an ocean liner museum, how much more of her story, and that of a whole dynamic and fascinating period in maritime history, could have been told in a way that actually appealed to people whose only experience of long-distance travel is by plane or the endless loop of cruise ships.

² Wang, 'Merchants Without Empire'.

³ Bellamy, 'Financing the Preservation of Historic Ships', 358–9.

My impression that there might be something rotten in the state of the maritime history project was brought home while reading *Museum in the Dock*, Bruce Peter's account of the new home of the Danish Maritime Museum at Helsingør. While planning the museum, it was decided that since there was already a Royal Danish Naval Museum in Copenhagen, a Viking ship museum in Roskilde, and a North Sea fisheries museum in Esbjerg, the Danish Maritime Museum would feature collections having to do with Denmark's merchant marine.⁴

The Danes can get away with having a new museum dedicated to their modern merchant fleet because Danish ships carry more than 10 per cent of the world's trade – not bad for a country whose population is less than one-tenth of 1 per cent of the world total. But the point is, if one wanted to get an overview of all Danish maritime history from its museums, one had to go to all four museums, which seemed to be asking a lot of the casual museumgoer. And to get a comparative view of Denmark's place in the maritime world, or even its place in maritime Europe, I am not sure where one would go. The fallibility of this approach became all too apparent when the governing Danish National Museums announced in 2015 that the Danish Naval Museum was to be closed as a cost-cutting measure.⁵

This is not to suggest that the Danes are not a unique people; but insofar as their approach to maritime museums goes, they definitely are not unique. Most of the 75 or so maritime museums that I have visited seem to have comparably restricted ideas of what their focus should be geographically, chronologically and thematically. A few mission statements help confirm the point: the Hong Kong Maritime Museum has a fairly broad mandate to promote 'a greater knowledge of Hong Kong, China and Asia's maritime history',⁶ while the National Maritime Museum at Brest focuses on the 'Arsenal of Brest and the French Navy'⁷ and the Shanghai Maritime Museum contrasts 'the past, present and future of China's maritime industry' with a view to carrying forward the spirit of 'Patriotism, Good-neighbourliness, Friendship and Scientific Navigation'.⁸

We can be grateful that all of these places have maritime museums that celebrate their particular histories. But a question we do not consider often enough is 'What about the places that don't?' Who preserves or interprets, much less celebrates, the history of once-great ports or port polities eclipsed by changing patterns of trade, or that other factors such as weak economies, politics or war have rendered inaccessible? What about places like the ship-breaking beaches of Alang, in Gujarat, ports that are not ports but which are still essential to the world maritime scene? What happens to their stories? In this regard, we have to ask whether the community of maritime museums has an obligation to tell the stories of people who cannot tell their own. And if it does not rise to the level of an obligation, we should still consider whether

4 Peter, *Museum in the Dock*, 15.

5 Its collection and displays were partially relocated to the Tøjhusmuseet in 2016.

6 Hong Kong Maritime Museum, 'History, Mission and Vision', accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <http://www.hkmaritimemuseum.org/eng/about-us/general-information/history-mission-and-vision/40/70/>.

7 National Maritime Museum, Brest, accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <https://museu.ms/museum/details/16163/national-maritime-museum-brest>.

8 China Maritime Museum, 'Introduction', accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <http://www.shmmc.com.cn/english/Museum/Museum.aspx>.

it might not be in our own self-interest to tell these stories anyway, if only to attract more visitors.

Maritime museums face another major source of fragmentation or dissociation. Despite its increasing significance to our very materialistic lives, people are increasingly disconnected from the maritime world. Our audience has a less intuitive appreciation for the role of maritime enterprise in modern society than did people of previous generations. Proportionately fewer people make their living at sea, and this natural constituency of maritime veterans, who helped found and fund the first wave of maritime museums in the twentieth century, is shrinking. Moreover, as maritime activities and the people responsible for them have moved away from urban centres, and in the case of some oil and liquefied natural gas unloading facilities, offshore and out of sight of land altogether, fewer and fewer people are aware of the scope or significance of maritime commerce and the degree to which we are all connected by the sea and sea trade.⁹

How did we get here?

Before considering what stories we ought to tell and how, it might be helpful to retrace our steps to see how we got where we are. The simplest explanation is that maritime museums were born from an antiquarian impulse that compelled us, as Richard Harding wrote in *Mariner's Mirror*, to amass collections of 'ancient ships and boats, ship models, images, ethnography, lexicographical and bibliographical matters and flags', as well as buildings, sailors' cap ribbons, and buttons and other relics and monuments of the recent and not-so-recent past.¹⁰

This worked well enough so long as the primary mission of maritime museums was to promote civic or national identity and to concentrate on a relatively small number of topics, chiefly those relevant to the evolution and achievements of global maritime powers of the day, which is to say subjects of particular relevance to the last 500 years of European and North American history.

These are unquestionably areas of enormous interest and significance. But the world of the early twenty-first century is a far cry from that of even a generation ago. Ground-breaking work by historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, economists and specialists in a host of other disciplines has turned up completely new caches of information, not only concerning subjects with which we were already reasonably familiar, but on completely new topics as well. As important, in an age when people are increasingly aware of the forces and impact of globalization in all its material, environmental, commercial and political guises, fixing our attention on the age of Western expansion, colonization and naval dominance has to be seen as anachronistic, if not actually ahistorical.

Most museums were founded with a more local than national mandate, usually with the intent of celebrating a locale, a group of industries or a single industry, often through the lens of one relatively manageable vessel like the trawler *Arctic Corsair* in Hull, or the Portuguese Grand Banks fishing schooner *Gazela Primeiro*, now in Philadelphia. Regardless, the questions remain: how do we make that story, whatever it is, appeal to the casual visitor, and how do we shape collection strategies

9 Alain de Botton provides an interesting take on this phenomenon in *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*.

10 Harding, 'Organizational Life Cycles', 7.

or curatorial perspectives to accommodate a broader audience? Most obviously, we have to look at the world as it is and not just as it was in some static, idealized past. In some cases this takes the form of explaining why an industry no longer exists, or why it has been transformed out of all recognition.

In 2015 the Maine Maritime Museum revamped its ‘Lobstering and the Maine Coast’ exhibit, which focuses on the maritime industry with which the state is most readily identified today. When it first opened in 1985, Maine fishermen caught 30 to 40 million pounds of lobsters a year. The catch topped 100 million pounds in 2011, and it is now more than 125 million pounds annually. This fourfold increase happened without an appreciable change in gear and techniques and despite the imposition of restrictions intended to maintain the health of the fishery. To explain this change, then, requires looking beyond the agency of fishermen and their tools to see what other factors may be implicated.

This inevitably takes us into a discussion of the environment of the Gulf of Maine, where many other species have declined despite catch limits. In addition to presenting artefacts that illustrate *how* things are done, we have to explore less tangible evidence for *why* things happen – climate, pollution, invasive species and so on, a mode of enquiry that requires a multidisciplinary approach that engages with fisheries scientists, oceanographers and others all but ignored by maritime museums 30 years ago. Having done that, it is no major leap, if we want, to draw comparisons with other parts of the world to see the causes of and responses to environmental change in fisheries elsewhere. To look at the same issue chronologically, we might consider instead the rise and fall of Gulf of Maine fisheries over time, starting not simply with the written record since Europeans reached Maine 500 years ago, but in the millennia since the Red Paint People hunted swordfish there 4,000 years ago.¹¹ Globalizing the local does not mean that all museums should tell the same story, only that they look out from the time and place that has been their traditional focus to put their subject into a broader historical context for their visitors.

What makes maritime history useful and relevant?

Any discussion of what maritime museums should be doing has to proceed from the assumption that maritime history and heritage have something useful to contribute to the way we see the past and how we perceive the present. But it is safe to say that, in general, we assume too much of our audiences, and we do not make as good a case for ourselves as we might. We should keep four fundamental ideas in mind.

Globalization is and always has been fundamentally a maritime phenomenon. As maritime historians know, 90 per cent of world trade travels by sea. This is a good hook to get people interested in the maritime world, but while we trot out this statistic often enough, we have done little to make it a centrepiece of the stories we tell. Some might argue that this is because people are no longer as impressed by the material world as they are by the immaterial world of the Internet – which they use to buy a lot of material goods. If that is the case, we might draw attention to the fact that a mere 300 undersea communications cable systems carry about 99 per cent of all intercontinental data.¹² In other words, a lot of the cloud is actually underwater. And those cables,

11 See Bourque, *The Swordfish Hunters*.

12 Main, ‘Undersea Cables’ and TeleGeography, ‘2014 Submarine Cable Map’, accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <http://submarine-cable-map-2014.telegeography.com/>.

like their nineteenth- and twentieth-century forebears, generally follow maritime trade routes. Either way, between these two essential facts of modern life, maritime museums have an important story to tell us about globalization and its origins.

A second point is that maritime museums are essential cultural institutions: we are uniquely positioned to help people reimagine human history. Enormous advances in various historical disciplines have demonstrated that adaptation to riparian, littoral and maritime environments has been central to human development. Evolutionary biologists have shown that our ancestors' adoption of a fish-based diet was essential to the enlargement and evolution of the human brain.

Archaeology has also revealed that some of humankind's earliest and most daring feats of technological innovation came at sea, as people took watercraft between intervisible islands from Southeast Asia to Greater Australia 50,000 years ago, and went completely out of sight of land, also in the western Pacific, about 15,000 years ago. These undertakings required the development of technologies and skills that even in their most primitive form must be counted among the greatest triumphs of human ingenuity and social organization. These were the precursors of the marvels of more recent historical time that enabled our ancestors to use the seas as avenues of migration and exchange, and ultimately to develop purpose-built warships, cargo ships, fishing boats, vessels of exploration, workboats and pleasure craft.¹³

Nonetheless, conventional wisdom still maintains that the origins of modern human society should be traced to the rise of agricultural societies in the Neolithic Revolution a mere 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Riverside civilizations in Mesopotamia and along the Nile, the Indus and Ganga, the Yellow and Yangzi, and Mississippi and Amazon rivers, we are told, developed solely because their floodwaters nurtured the soil. Little or nothing is said about the importance of rivers as avenues of communication, commerce, conflict, conquest or contagion. If we do nothing else, maritime museums should challenge this historical writ every day.

Maritime museums are especially relevant now because we are uniquely situated to explain the links between human society and environmental change. The first communities to be directly challenged by global warming, ocean acidification, overfishing and solid-waste pollution are those whose history and traditions maritime museums exist to celebrate. While fishermen and mariners may be the proverbial canaries in the coal mine of environmental change, 44 per cent of the world's population lives within 150 kilometres of a sea coast, most of the world's megacities are in coastal plains already threatened by flooding and extreme weather events, and most of the world's population live on or near rivers, often in a floodplain.¹⁴ Thus simple demography tells us that understanding the sea as an environmental and cultural milieu is going to be increasingly meaningful to people worldwide. And the tangled dynamic of humanity's past, present, and, one hopes, enduring relationship with the sea is one that maritime museums can articulate better than most.

The last principle we should keep in mind is that thanks to that tangled dynamic, the maritime origins of human society, and the nature of globalization, we have more – and more compelling – stories to tell, and the collections to illustrate them, than

13 For explorations of the impact of the sea on humankind see Mack, *The Sea*, and Paine, *The Sea and Civilization*.

14 United Nations, *UN Atlas of the Oceans*, accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <http://www.oceansatlas.org/servlet/CDSServlet?status=NDoxODc3JjY9ZW4mMzZmM9KiYzNzIrb3M~>.

almost any other class of audience-centred cultural institution in the world. We only have to figure out how to tell them.

What do we talk about when we talk about maritime history?

In 2014 I spoke at the College of the Atlantic, a small school on the coast of Maine, all of whose students major in human ecology, the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study of how people interact with the natural, technological and social environments. As I pondered what to say to these students, I realized that maritime history is in essence a form of human ecology; that is, the study of how we harness water and wind to get ourselves and our things from one place to another; how we build vessels to do this efficiently and safely, and how we organize ourselves to build and sail ships, to collaborate and spread risk in trade, and to communicate with strangers in foreign places.

Maritime museums have long been accustomed to discussing aspects of the natural environment like currents, tides and winds, and even the movement of celestial bodies for navigation. But most have been reluctant to look beyond these familiar, superficial phenomena to consider less immediately visible environmental issues such as our predatory exploitation of the sea through overfishing and whaling, or mining for subsea minerals and drilling for oil, or the impacts of ship- and shore-based pollution on fisheries, the oceanic food chain and coastal communities.

It is not all doom and gloom, one hopes, and we should not dwell exclusively on narratives of impending disaster, for there are positive aspects to our interactions with the seas: how to harness them for tidal power or by building offshore wind farms, and fostering more benign, and even beneficial, forms of mariculture like oyster and seaweed farms, and growing other sources of food and industrial products as well.

Turning to the sea as a technological environment, our attention lands first and foremost on the creation of rafts and boats and ships, which even in their simplest forms made possible some of our remote ancestors' most ambitious achievements. For too many museums, however, the focus remains on the last century or two of commercial sail, or the most recent centuries of naval history. Little attention is paid either to older technologies, or to more recent ones that have the greatest impact on the lives of our audience.

In many museums, container ships, oil and packet tankers, bulk carriers, car carriers, cruise ships, tugs and barges – in short, the backbone of modern maritime commerce – are all but ignored. So, too, are displays and interpretations of the shoreside infrastructure needed to make the modern maritime system work, from highways and trucks, to railroads, or even pipelines. And what an amazing story there is to tell about how containerization, barely half a century old, has so radically changed the very nature and layout of port cities from New York and London to Hong Kong and Singapore. How many maritime museums even have a container in their collection?

With this in mind, I would like to point out a fact that to the best of my knowledge goes generally unremarked, although it is one that bedevils hundreds of millions of people worldwide every day. We know that shippers' adoption of containerization has led to unprecedented economies of scale and sped up the movement of cargoes into and off ships. Whereas it used to take longer to load or unload a break-bulk freighter than it did for that ship to cross an ocean, now even the largest container ships can be offloaded in a matter of days.

Table 1 Aggregate Length of Containers Offloaded at Selected Ports, 2013

<i>Ports</i>	<i>TEUs (in millions)</i>	<i>Total feet (in millions)</i>	<i>Kilometres</i>	<i>Miles</i>
Shanghai, China	33.62	672.4	204,947	127,348
Singapore	32.60	652.0	198,730	123,485
Shenzhen, China	23.28	465.6	141,915	88,182
Hong Kong, China	22.35	447.0	136,245	84,659
Busan, South Korea	17.69	353.8	107,839	67,008
Rotterdam	11.62	232.4	70,835	44,015
Los Angeles/Long Beach	14.60	292.0	89,002	55,303
Mumbai	4.12	82.4	25,115	15,606

Source World Shipping Council, 'Top 50 World Container Ports', accessed 30 Oct. 2015, <http://www.worldshipping.org/about-the-industry/global-trade/top-50-world-container-ports>.

Most people relish having access to an indescribable array of material goods at phenomenally cheap prices, and are awestruck by the fact that a 19,200 twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU) ship requires half the fuel of a vessel with a quarter the capacity.¹⁵ But what about the other consequences, like road traffic. Laid end-to-end, all the containers handled just at the three biggest ports in China in 2013 would circle the equator 12 times (see table 1).

While we acknowledge the brilliance of merchant shippers in bringing about such prodigies of efficiency, we must also acknowledge that speeding things up on the pier transferred much of the inefficiency on to the rest of us. Clogged roadways and railways brought about by the container revolution have imposed an enormous cost on the public at large in terms of time, money, pollution, and frustration. It may not be a flattering story to tell, but it is a necessary one.

Perhaps the easiest way to summarize what needs to happen at most maritime museums is that we need to catch up with the maritime industry that we celebrate by becoming multimodal, not to shift the burden of our mission to others, but so that we think more about how we can connect whatever narrative our core collections focus on with the more penetrating, if less obvious, influences of today's maritime world.

Equally overlooked in many museums are the newest technologies that make possible our fuller exploitation of the sea, for good or ill, and which, for all their apparent novelty, have evolved over a long period. These include synthetic lines and netting, deep-sea submersibles and remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), diving suits and scuba gear, underwater extraction technology, communications cables and structures for living underwater. These fall beyond the ambit of most museums as originally conceived, but they are essential instruments of modern maritime enterprise and they are of critical importance to a proper understanding of the maritime world as it is, rather than as it once was and we might wish it still were. Paying inadequate attention to contemporary maritime matters has consequences not only for our educational obligations to the public. It is especially vexing given that on the whole, the myriad companies that comprise the contemporary maritime industry constitute an underexploited source of contributed revenue.

¹⁵ 'Container Shipping: The big box game', 60-1.

This brings us to the third prong of the human ecology triad: the social environment of the maritime world. One of the loveliest expressions of this comes from John Ruskin's description of the ship as the supreme achievement of man as 'a being living in flocks, and hammering out, with alternate strokes and mutual agreement, what is necessary for him in those flocks, to get or produce'.¹⁶ Ruskin draws our attention to the artefact of the ship, and secondarily to that of the people who build and man them. Most maritime museums do likewise. Yet maritime enterprise requires the organization of vast numbers of people of diverse, specialized talents who are involved not only in building, crewing, navigating, and piloting ships, but also in the infinite variety of supporting activities: maintaining harbour channels, shoreside infrastructure and lighthouses; supplying ships with hardware, machinery and provisions; immigration, customs and consular officials; cartographers; logistics specialists; cargo handlers, crane operators and truckers; freight forwarders; environmental, health and safety inspectors; admiralty lawyers, and the like. It is only by considering all of these communities, individually and collectively, that we can begin to see the extent to which maritime enterprise requires us to organize ourselves 'in flocks, and hammer out, with mutual agreement, what is necessary to get or produce'.

And to return briefly to an earlier point about our seagoing and river-running ancestors, if we think along these lines, and replace Ruskin's pastoral 'flocks' with a more maritime metaphor like 'company' or 'crew', it becomes apparent that what we might term a maritime model of social organization must have existed alongside the hunter-gatherer one, and well before the agricultural hierarchies ushered in by the Neolithic Revolution. Such communities almost certainly had greater mobility than hunter-gatherer clans, more diverse and technologically advanced specializations than agricultural communities, and a propensity for networking and social problem-solving that anticipates the pluralistic world in which we live today.

If maritime museums do not encourage the public to consider what a maritime model of human society might tell us about ourselves, our past, our present, and our prospects for the future, who will?

What role should maritime museums play before the public?

This brings us to the existential problem of defining the role, or roles, of the maritime museum as a public institution and deciding what it is we want our museums to accomplish. Should we make a conscientious effort to integrate our museums into a larger, overarching narrative of maritime history? Do we want to educate people about the particulars of maritime history? Do we want to foster civic engagement, perhaps, by suggesting calls to action about environmental issues, waterfront development or sailors' labour conditions? Do we want to create a congenial and aesthetically pleasing setting in which people of different ages, temperaments and backgrounds can pass the time?

We can group these options under the headings of education, entertainment, engagement and enlightenment, and most maritime museums try to do all of these to at least some degree.¹⁷ Devotees of and specialists in maritime history might want our priorities to centre on educating our audience about some aspect of our museum's

¹⁶ Ruskin, *The Harbours of England*, 17.

¹⁷ For a slightly different take, see Weil, 'Museums: Can and do they make a difference?', 64–74.

primary area of emphasis. But educating people by didactic means and insisting on what they should know has long been regarded as *passé*. Generally speaking, museumgoers no longer see museums as centres of authority, and as often as not they are just as interested in being entertained in pleasant surroundings as they are in absorbing a set of curated facts.¹⁸ To the extent that we are interested in learning, most of us want information that confirms our pre-existing ideas. As educational institutions, then, the best that maritime museums can expect is to present people with new and surprising ideas about the world, and hope for the best.

In order to entertain museumgoers from school children to senior citizens and everyone in between, we have to engage them in the stories we tell at the broadest level. If we do that properly, we will leave them enlightened, partly by giving them new information they might not have known previously, but chiefly by offering them new ways of seeing that allow them to think about the world in ways they had not considered before. The point here is not necessarily to challenge people's preconceived ideas, because that is always an uphill battle. Rather, it is to give people a completely new orientation. Instead of nudging museum visitors to bring their terrestrial perspective to gaze on particulars of the maritime world, we need to give them a maritime lens through which to look at their own world anew.

There are many ways to do that, and what engages a child is likely to be quite different from what engages their parent or grandparent, or even their older sibling. Expanding our audience is not simply a function of using new technologies. Indeed, the learning we impart comes not only from the study of artefacts, paintings and other documents, but also from teaching venerable skills like boatbuilding. Museums cannot ignore technology and new media, of course. What is important is how we use these tools to tell our stories. Whether museums change the way the public sees the world depends not on whether our props take the form of a two-dimensional image, a three-dimensional object or a screen, with or without an accompanying soundtrack. Our success depends entirely on the curatorial imagination and organizing principle that informs our exhibits.

While many maritime museums have made slight course corrections to take advantage of shifts in the prevailing winds and currents of popular expectation, we have been less aggressive in seeking out or embracing the new interpretive tools being fashioned by our counterparts on the cutting edge of maritime historical studies. If we do not avail ourselves of new strategies for explaining our collections, those millions of objects so lovingly acquired, preserved, and displayed will speak only in a dead language, or remain entirely mute.

We must do a better job of connecting with the academic community of historians, archaeologists, scientists, economists and urban planners to bring recent findings to bear on how we interpret our collections, archives and exhibits. This will do much to expand the multidisciplinary, multicultural and comparative nature of the stories we want to tell, regardless of the temporal or geographic scales at which our institutions operate.

To answer the existential questions I raised earlier, we do need to make a concerted effort to integrate our stories into broader regional, national and world historical narratives that link all maritime museums and make our work complementary and

¹⁸ Weil, 'The Museum and the Public', 202.

mutually reinforcing. We do want our public to see the world from a perspective to which they have probably not been exposed by either their education or the media. And while encouraging our visitors to become activists carries its own risks, at the very least, we should provide people with tools that enable them to think critically about the world in which they live.¹⁹ And certainly we want to create an environment that is not only informative for those who seek to be informed, but pleasing in aesthetic and other ways for visitors of all types.

In closing, I would urge museums to develop more nuanced and expansive approaches to what we mean by maritime history and to our understanding of the people who have written that history with their own lives. Museum mission statements should acknowledge an awareness of the institution's place in the wider world both chronologically and spatially. We should not ignore the core collections or founding principles, but to the extent possible, we should treat these as tools with which to connect the local to the global and the past to the present as we articulate deeper, richer, and more cosmopolitan narratives than those to which we are accustomed. Finally, maritime museums must promote themselves as essential cultural institutions with compelling stories of great relevance to a contemporary audience, and to encourage people to see maritime museums not only as destinations for our visitors, but as points of departure for them as well.

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19 Ibid.