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FIGUREHEADS

By John Frayler, Historian



∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
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Completion of the figurehead for the replica Salem East Indiaman *Friendship*, 1797, draws attention to the subject of figureheads and the reasons why ships have figureheads in the first place. The following information attempts to answer some of the most basic questions.

Figureheads aboard ship are a tradition reaching back into prehistory. Stone Age rock paintings depict decorations on boats where the figurehead goes at the top of the stem at the front of the hull. Although it is not possible to be certain, they may be carved representations of the heads or actual skulls of animals significant to the culture.

The early peoples considered a ship to be a living thing and traditionally feminine (a ship is she). As a living thing, she required eyes, and it became traditional practice to paint or carve representations of eyes on the bow of the ship or boat, the "head" of the vessel. This motif is found on ancient illustrations of Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek and Roman vessels and is still found on boats today as a talisman intended to ward off evil and danger.

The use of images of gods, animals and objects of significance to decorate the head and other areas of vessels, such as the dragon and shields commonly associated with Viking long ships, combined to give a

ship individual "personality" and cultural identity. To those who continued in the old beliefs, certain images were (and are still) believed to acknowledge the presence of spirits and placate the unpredictable demons of the sea. To others, some of the practices are considered superstition, but are so ingrained in tradition that they have endured to the present day.

During the Middle Ages the formal development of heraldry added a new dimension to the identification of ships. The decoration of ships also closely paralleled architectural styles. Artistic trends during the late Renaissance and Baroque periods greatly influenced the adornment of ships. Figureheads based on classical themes appeared, became increasingly popular and remained so for centuries. Certain characteristics became common to vessels belonging to the navies of the various nations during the 17th and 18th centuries. The rampant lion in any number of variations was widely used. The English preferred a crowned golden lion; the Dutch favored a similar version in red. Royal lions and the larger- than- life wooden heroes of antiquity guided warships through their appointed rounds as protectors of empire.

Privately owned vessels were not as constrained by custom to the use of a national emblem as ships directly in the service of a sovereign, although they

often resembled and functioned as naval vessels, under contract or as privateers.

In the Middle East, Islamic tradition discouraged the use of images portraying the human figure. Ottoman vessels tended to use geometric representations and calligraphy as decorations; however, the cosmopolitan nature of the Sultan's empire embraced subjects of many nationalities, not all of whom were Muslims. Sources do show examples of otherwise conventional figures, such as eagles, lions, and wolf heads, adorning vessels flying the Ottoman crescent. In the Far East, human and animal totems commonly ornamented craft sailing the Indian and Pacific oceans.

The figurehead in maritime America was based on the European tradition. The use of figures from classical history, mythology, and the Bible survived well into the 19th century, side by side with more modern interpretations of animal themes, such as the federal eagle. Allegorical motifs symbolizing the name of the vessel (such as the figure of a woman presenting a bouquet of flowers on the bow of Salem's *Friendship*) were commonplace. Carved portraits of the owner, or members of his family, frequently graced the stem of a vessel named for them. American war heroes and patriots joined the list, as did idealized versions of native Americans.

The figures, as an art form, encompassed a wide range of styles, complexity and detail. Curiously, only a small number of the thousands that once existed survive. Prominent among 18th and early 19th American shipcarvers (the skills often were shared by ship carpenters and architectural craftsmen) were William Rush of Philadelphia, Simeon Skillin and his sons, of Boston, Isaac Fowle, also of Boston, and Samuel McIntire of Salem. Joseph True, carver of the Custom House eagle, carried on the Salem tradition following McIntire's death in 1811, carving figureheads between orders for furniture components.

With the rapid expansion of American maritime industry following the end of the American Revolution, the demand for carving work was so great during the last quarter of the 18th century that occasionally specialized tradesmen called head builders were contracted to install the finished figureheads on the ships.

Figureheads were made in a number of functional styles. The hind legs of the naval lions of the 17th and 18th centuries frequently straddled the upper sides of the head knee, upper bodies leaning forward in a graceful, reaching attitude with the rear legs extending back on either side. Other figures, particularly human images, were sometimes distorted to match the shape of the head and looked much more uncomfortable on

their perch than four legged subjects, mermaids or sea serpents.

Complete separate figures, carved full length in the round and mounted as statues in a niche on the forward edge of the beak head, provided a second approach. Another very common practice was the use of a bust only instead of a complete figure.

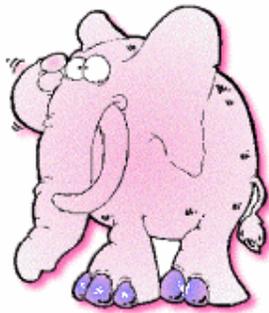
The use of the carved head of an animal on the end of a projection, or beak, carries the earliest tradition into modern times. A final simplification in this direction is called a billet head, a scroll motif carved into the beak itself.

Examination of surviving figureheads indicates that the usual practice was to paint them in full color and as lifelike as possible when appropriate. Occasionally they may be found painted white to approximate marble statues.

Some 20th century steel hulled vessels continue the tradition, only the figures may be cast in bronze or welded from steel, or just painted on the bow of the ship. Shields of various configurations are commonplace, containing the logo of the company that operates the ship.

With the revival of the popularity of "tall ships" in recent years, the traditions of the ship carver are likewise being revived. Traditional figureheads are being reproduced for use on modern replicas of specific original ships, and modern interpretations in the old tradition, while not exact duplicates, are built in the spirit of their historic predecessors.

Friendship's figurehead, as illustrated on the cover and carved by Wolfboro, N.H. artist and sculptor Kim Gilbert, is adapted from that shown in the finely detailed 1805 ship's portrait of *Friendship* by Salem artist George Ropes, which may be seen at the Peabody Essex Museum.



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