A TITANIC TASK: Confronting the Controversy of Salvaging Artifacts

Mr. Marshall is a maritime artist whose paintings of the Titanic have earned him worldwide attention and whose 30 years of study have made him an authority on the subject. His art is showcased in Titanic: An Illustrated History, and he is a collaborator in RMS Lusitania: Triumph of the Edwardian Age.

Security safe door from the purser’s office was found near the aft section of the wreck site.
sence to me that it would be. I remain amazed at some colleagues who seriously felt the massive wreckage never would be discovered.

Some feared that the finding of Titanic’s remains would prick the romantic bubble of her legendary story and reduce the mystery and drama forever to just another pile of rusty metal on the ocean floor. I felt, on the other hand, that it couldn’t help but galvanize our attention and interest even further, inevitably making the ship and her story more real and tangible. No longer lost, just old pictures in books and facts on a page, the Titanic still exists.

The discovery of any wreck, however, opens a Pandora’s box. If we have the technology to visit and photograph it, we also can salvage and otherwise disturb it. That artifacts from the most famous shipwreck in history eventually would be retrieved is a foregone conclusion. It was only a matter of when and by whom. Would fly-by-night salvors pilfer willy-nilly, blasting the historic hull apart to sack it for valuables? Or would a responsible, highly trained team carefully document objects in situ before delicately lifting them to the surface and conserving them in respected laboratories?

Many nighttime, blustering, and greedy salvage scenarios could have unfolded. Yet, given the inevitable fact that Titanic artifacts would be brought up sooner or later, it appears—from what I have seen and heard, and again from the article, “Titanic Today” (USA Today, March 1995)—that RMS Titanic, Inc., is doing about as responsible a job as could be hoped for.

We can quibble over details. One wonders, for instance, why they didn’t settle for bringing up one or two of the dishes pictured on p. 60 of the issue. I understand they have retrieved virtually the whole pile of the identical dishes, which does appear greedy and would not seem to be the best use of their limited time.

Moreover, despite publicly promising early on that salvaging would be confined strictly to the debris field—that nothing would damage the hull or be plucked from the remains of the ship itself—temperament did get the best of them in the beginning. The electric lamp on p. 60 seen still firmly attached to the fallen foremast (and definitely still on the ship) was retrieved during the 1987 dive, and—for worse—the submersible *Nautilus* accidentally bumped the fragile crew’s nest, sending perhaps this most historic part of the Titanic falling in shards to the deck below.

That first year of salvage, I had reservations about bringing up so many objects so soon. I agreed with Robert Ballard, the man behind the discovery of the Titanic, who pleaded for a public forum on the subject.

The ship and her artifacts, he said, had lain on the ocean floor in a remarkable state of preservation for more than seven decades, teacups resting gently on the sand as if they had been put there yesterday. Surely, little would change in the next 10 or 20 years. What was so rush to bring them up?

As there were such strong opinions against salvage on this particular ship, and as several Titanic survivors still were alive (a few of whom condemn the salvage work), would it not be proper, Ballard asked, at least to delay any retrievals from the wreck site until the last objecting survivor passes on? (Not all survivors have been against salvage. Of the 10 or so remaining alive, several are fascinated by the technology and yearn to have some of their lost possessions back.)

The benefit of the doubt

Eight years after salvage began, at least one objecting survivor still is with us. Perhaps it could be argued that you can’t please everyone. Not a single bone has been found at the Titanic, no “grave” unearthed. Had RMS Titanic, Inc., not worked the site, some other outfit, perhaps less responsible, would have. Again, some sort of salvage was inevitable with a public so fascinated in this ship. I am grateful that the present team appears to respect the historic spot, is seeing to the artifacts’ proper conservation and restoration, and promises not to sell any of the recovered objects. This, at least, is what we are told. Until we see blatant and unapologetic violations of their stated standards, I think we should give them the benefit of the doubt.

No matter where one stands on the issue of salvage, one has to marvel at the wondrous, formerly impossible achievements of the recovery team. As author Gillian Hutchinson says so well in the “Titanic Today” article, the Titanic and her artifacts “sink to the floor of the deep ocean and were thought to have been lost. That we can see them again seems little short of miraculous.” Indeed, who would have ever believed it only a few years ago?

What could be more extraordinary than retrieving a lost suitcase or steam trunk from more than 12,000 feet beneath the sea, that it may be examined by or even returned to its owner or descendants thereof? The salvagers have stated publicly that they will offer to sell persons any artifact for which a claim can be substantiated. In fact, several personal possessions have been positively identified, and the rightful claimants have made themselves known.

However, through what I feel is an astonishing public relations mistake, RMS Titanic, Inc., has decided that no recovered object will be returned permanently without significant payment being made by the claimant amounting to the actual prorated cost of salvaging that item, its conservation, etc. This, of course, is many thousands of dollars, effectively torpedoing the whole happy idea.

A camera has been retrieved, one of surely dozens on the ocean floor and still within the hull. Several years ago, scientists at Kodak looked into the long-term stability of nitrate film exposed to decades of seawater under great pressure with, I understand, promising predictions. Imagine the boon to history if films found within cameras from the Titanic retain a latent image! How can any thinking person not be excited at the prospect?

According to Hutchinson, no less than 10,000 still photographs were taken during the 1987 and 1993 salvage operations, and doubtless thousands more in 1994. Despite this deluge of fresh and illuminating imagery from the wreck site, through which the public may learn so much about the Titanic, as yet there is no substantial book detailing the salvage dives and including a definitive photographic inventory of what has been brought up. As a Titanic historian, I hope such a volume is in the works. The profits from the sales of such an eagerly anticipated publication would finance conservation work. These are important, enlightening photographs, and should be shared with all as a source of study.

While the subject of Titanic salvage continues to be debated hotly, it should be looked at from a calm and realistic perspective. We can’t “un-ring the bell.” The wreck has been found, and salvage has been undertaken for nearly a decade. If the ship is to be considered a grave site, it can be argued that it was sacriligious even to want to find and look at it in the first place. Why is the Titanic’s discovery and close-up, probing photography to be applauded, while recovering an object, no matter how tiny or far out in the debris field, is somehow the most grievous of offenses?

RMS Titanic, Inc., and the National Maritime Museum, perhaps the most prestigious such museum on Earth, together have formed the Titanic International Advisory Committee to find ways to safeguard the wreck and her retrieved artifacts. Let us wish them well. The world’s eyes are upon them, and if what we are being told is true, it seems that all parties concerned are doing the most that reasonably can be hoped for to assure that objects from the Titanic are handled properly and that her memory is respected.

The world wants to see and touch recovered artifacts from this historic ship. It is understandable and inevitable. Perhaps we are lucky that RMS Titanic, Inc., is in charge. It could have been a lot worse.