

'Floating Palaces': the Transformation of Passenger Ships, c. 1840 to 1914

Bernhard Rieger

'I shall never forget the one-fourth serious and three-fourths comical astonishment, with which ... I opened the door of, and put my head into a "state room" on board the *Britannia* steam packet ... bound for Boston...' It was Charles Dickens who found his sense of humour severely tested as he was setting out in January 1842 from Liverpool to cross the Atlantic for a journalistic assignment that would result in the publication of *American Notes*. Instead of the 'gorgeous little bower' that a 'masterly hand' sketched for advertising material the novelist had been shown when he booked his passage, he beheld an 'utterly impractical, thoroughly hopeless, and profoundly preposterous box' of a cabin, which he and his wife would share during a voyage lasting more than two weeks. Wondering how he would cope with this cramped space, he slouched onto 'a kind of horsehair slab or perch' that served as his berth. 'Nothing smaller for sleeping in was ever made except coffins,' Dickens mused. His distress was only increased by the 'pretty smart shock' that followed the realization that 'a long narrow apartment, not unlike a gigantic hearse with windows at the side' was in fact the saloon in which the travellers would socialize and take their meals. Even one of Dickens's friends, who had come aboard to see the writer off, was appalled: 'Impossible! It cannot be!' his companion cried – or so Dickens claimed.

By describing his embarkation as a descent into the netherworld, Dickens brought his trademark satirical hyperbole to a highly conventional motif in Western culture. Ships, most people on either side of the Atlantic would have agreed at the time, possessed deep-seated associations of danger and death and thus symbolized the precariousness of human existence. Nothing evoked such morbid themes more readily than the age-old image of nutshells struggling on raging seas. The sombre overtone of Dickens' opening paragraphs was thus a

nod in the direction of conventional wisdom that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, maritime travel still involved substantial risk and discomfort – as the novelist found out over the course of his eighteen-day voyage from Liverpool to Boston. Dickens describes his storm-tossed passage as an extended ordeal that began with a debilitating bout of seasickness. Although he could never shake off a general feeling of queasiness, he recovered sufficiently after a few days to overcome initial speechless apathy and record an 'extraordinary compound of strange smells' that added to his misery as did persistent freezing cold due to the absence of a proper heating system (in January). Transatlantic travel, Dickens confirmed, remained an unsettled affair in the 1840s.¹

If Dickens rehearsed well-known motifs by narrating his voyage as a physical and mental trial, his account simultaneously illustrates that maritime travel had begun to change. The novelist may have been disappointed by *Britannia's* interior architecture and passenger accommodation, but, with a length of 207 feet and a beam of 34 feet, she was a large ship by contemporary standards that had been launched by the recently founded Cunard Line only in 1840. These proportions allowed her to house its 115 passengers in two-berth cabins and operate a dining saloon that served customers a varied diet throughout the trip. (Image 1: *Britannia*). Dickens, having chosen the most inauspicious time of the year, could be sure to reach Boston in well under three weeks because *Britannia* complemented its sails with steam-powered paddle wheels that propelled her steadily even against powerful headwinds. Indeed, her eighteen-day trip compared extremely favourably with the 40 to 90 days a westward passage took on a sailing vessel. Irrespective of his suffering, Dickens steamed across the Atlantic in virtually unprecedented style and speed.

¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York 1883), pp. 585-7, p. 594, p. 601.

Britannia highlights the process that Dickens's contemporaries hailed as the 'conquest of nature.' Throughout the nineteenth century, humankind harnessed new forms of energy, developed a bewildering range of materials and constructed mechanisms small and large that struck contemporaries as mind-boggling 'modern wonders.' Of course, steam technology was the most potent early symbol of the new powers at society's disposal. First used commercially in mining and manufacturing in the eighteenth century, steam began to recast travel in the early nineteenth century. At sea, steam promised to advance the 'conquest of nature' through faster and more regular travel in hostile aquatic environments. Over the course of the century, steam became a more effective motive force for ships through the development of powerful, more fuel-efficient compound engines with which vessels were equipped from the late 1850s. While new forms of propulsion such as the screw propeller enhanced the speed and regularity of ocean-going services, these powerful components could only be fitted on vessels constructed from sturdier materials. Isambard Kingdom Brunel had demonstrated the superiority of metal over wood in hull construction since the 1830s, a process culminating in the 692-foot long *Great Eastern* in 1858.

It was the adoption of steel as a structural material for hulls and decks in the 1880s that laid the foundation for vessels whose proportions began to exceed the dimensions of Brunel's *Great Eastern* after the turn of the century. Steel reduced a hull's weight, enhanced its stability and allowed the construction of larger vessels with spacious decks. The quest for size became a particular mark of transatlantic passenger ships. Colonial routes, which attracted less passenger and cargo traffic, were served by smaller, yet still substantial vessels. The *Egypt* (1897), which the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) operated between Britain and Bombay, was less than two-thirds the size of the largest transatlantic liners around the turn of the century. As ships' dimensions increased, so did their speed thanks to continuing advances in propulsion technology. At the eve of World War I, Europe's leading

shipping lines operated transatlantic services that cut travel times to five days. And in conjunction with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the duration of a voyage between Europe and India more than halved to under fourteen days in the nineteenth century.² Not even the sinking of *Titanic* in 1912 could dent the conviction among contemporaries that the 'conquest of nature' had made stunning strides.

Nations at Sea

The construction and operation of these large and powerful symbols of humankind's increasing technological confidence required heavy investments that went beyond shipping lines' financial capacities. State subsidies therefore played a crucial role in passenger shipping throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Governments supported these companies because they considered civilian vessels as part of the national infrastructure. Steamships were ideally suited to provide the reliable lines of communication that proved crucial for the administration of Britain's expanding empire. To ensure a steady flow of mail between metropole and imperial possessions, the Admiralty offered subsidies to liner companies in the form of mail contracts. Upon its foundation in 1837, P&O expanded quickly by relying on several of these financially lucrative agreements. Its steamers served as Britain's 'flagships of imperialism,' as a scholar put it.³ Founded to operate a transatlantic service in 1840, Cunard's existence also rested on a mail contract. As the world's leading colonial power by wide margin, Britain pioneered a pattern that other European nations were to adopt. No matter whether one turns to the French, German, or Dutch colonial empires at the end of the nineteenth century, they were all served by shipping lines operating with substantial state subsidies through mail contracts.

² Peter Padfield, *Beneath the House Flag of the P&O* (London 1981), p. 57.

³ Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire From Its Origins to 1867* (Manchester 2006). See also David Howarth and Stephen Howarth, *The Story of P&O* (London 1994), pp. 9-46.

By then, intensifying national rivalries in Europe began to lend passenger liners new public and political resonance that led to the construction of the unprecedentedly fast and large transatlantic vessels whose names echo to this day. Around 1900, Britain's mid-century claim to be the predominant 'workshop of the world' no longer rang true, because Japan, the United States and Germany had emerged as industrial rivals that matched or even surpassed the United Kingdom. After decades of virtually unchallenged British commercial supremacy, the arrival of competitors spurred concerns that the nation was beginning to 'decline.' Within Europe, Germany fuelled British anxieties after William II's ascent to the throne in 1888 by turning its back on Bismarck's commitment to maintaining international stability. From the mid-1890s, the German government embarked on a series of diplomatic and military forays designed to enhance the *Reich's* weight in international as well as colonial affairs. As William II grandiloquently put it, Germany aspired to 'a place in the sun.' These policies culminated in a battle-fleet construction programme that challenged Britain's long-standing global naval supremacy. Britain responded by launching its own naval scheme that led to the construction of the Dreadnought class of ships in 1906.

The armaments race between the German and British navies provided the backdrop against which passenger ships gained international political salience, as the scramble for the Blue Riband highlights (Image 3: Hales Trophy). While a variety of British lines held this unofficial prize for the fastest transatlantic crossing since 1856, the Bremen-based North German Lloyd, which had grown substantially in part due to mail subsidies, signalled its global ambitions in 1897 with the steamer *Kaiser Wilhelm der Große*. Launched by William II and designed to be the largest and fastest ship afloat, the vessel's name paid homage to the emperor's grandfather during whose reign Germany had been unified in 1871. Had most German lines previously ordered their flagships on British shipyards, *Kaiser Wilhelm der Große* had been built in Germany, an achievement that underlined the country's expanding industrial strength and

maritime presence.⁴ In the year of her launch, *Kaiser Wilhelm der Große* became the first German ship to set a transatlantic speed record. (Image 4: Painting by Fitger). German vessels articulated the young nation's maritime ambitions through artworks on board. North German Lloyd's *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, which captured the Blue Riband in 1902, featured an allegorical canvas by Bremen-based academic painter Arthur Fitger as the centrepiece of the smoking room. Entitled *Our Future Lies Upon the Water*, it confidently interpreted a statement by Emperor William II and depicts a muscular youth holding a trident and a German flag ready to conquer raging seas.

Since the capture of the Blue Riband by the North German Lloyd in 1897 predated the start of Germany's battle-fleet construction programme, the British political establishment did not meet this feat with anxiety. Yet, it provoked a determined response from Albert Ballin, who oversaw the rise of North German Lloyd's rival Hamburg-American Line (HAPAG) to global prominence. From a modest Jewish background, Ballin worked his way up in the shipping trade in Hamburg, securing a reputation as an energetic manager with superb tactical and negotiating skills. After HAPAG appointed him to its board of directors in 1888, he successfully revived the struggling company's fortunes and became its general director eight years later. Through a series of take-overs and deals with competitors to curb potentially ruinous price wars, Ballin succeeded in establishing HAPAG as the world's largest shipping line by 1898. HAPAG's ambitious director considered it a matter of national and international prestige to underline his company's ascent with a record-setting ship. Entering into service in 1900, the *Deutschland* not only exceeded *Kaiser Wilhelm der Große* in terms of size but duly won the Blue Riband for HAPAG (Image 5: Photographic Portrait of Albert Ballin). Until

⁴ Arnold Kludas, *Die Geschichte der deutschen Passagierschiffahrt: Band II: Expansion auf allen Meeren 1890 bis 1900* (Hamburg 1987), pp. 147-8.

1907, the race for the fastest voyage across the North Atlantic – previously an exclusively British affair – turned into a contest between two German companies.⁵

After the turn of the century, British observers began to read this development as an assault on Britain's leading international position – and not just because it accompanied the growth of the German navy. Between 1899 and 1902, Britain struggled to suppress a rebellion by white settlers of Dutch descent in South Africa in the 'Boer War.' The protracted nature of the campaign against a militarily inferior opponent not only took many Britons by surprise and reinforced concerns about the future of the UK's global pre-eminence; it also heightened awareness of the strategic importance of passenger ships for military purposes. In return for state subsidies to liner companies, the military had long reserved the right to requisition civilian vessels owned by British companies as troop transports in wartime. Given the global reach of Britain's colonial sphere of influence, such 'merchant cruisers' were seen as vital for 'imperial defence.' When it emerged that an American shipping trust led by financier John Pierpont Morgan had seized control of the British White Star Line, the Admiralty conceded that it could no longer employ this lines' vessels in a military conflict. The loss of control over one Britain's largest shipping lines, the inability to bring the Boer War to a speedy conclusion, and Germany's naval challenge raised the spectre of a Britain with a diminished capacity to project itself globally.⁶

In a political atmosphere that struck some contemporaries as 'panic,' the British government took the decision in 1902 to grant Cunard a loan of £2.6 million on favourable terms for the construction of two liners which surpassed recent German vessels in size and speed. When opposition politicians castigated this subsidy, Secretary to the Admiralty H. O. Foster-Arnold

⁵ Eberhard Straub, *Albert Ballin: Der Reeder des Kaisers* (Berlin 2001), pp. 32-41, pp. 54-62.

⁶ Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* (Cambridge 2005), pp. 227-236.

reminded them of the dramatic circumstances that required the exceptional step: [extract] 'What would be the position of the Admiralty and of the country if, in a naval war, no vessel carrying the British flag could cope with merchant cruisers such as those we might find employed against us? The Admiralty had to consider the cheapest and most efficient method of meeting this menace – for menace it must be considered – and they took advantage of the great mercantile lines.⁷ [extract] The loan put Cunard in a position to restore Britain's supremacy on the transatlantic route through *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*, which entered into service in 1907. The correspondent of *The Times* breathed a sigh of relief after inspecting *Lusitania* at the start of her maiden voyage. No German boat 'could in any way compare' with her.⁸ Once the liner had recaptured the Blue Riband, the *Manchester Guardian* was confident that British leadership was secure for years to come: [extract] 'The *Lusitania* . . . has made a clean sweep of all the Atlantic speed records, and has proved (what, of course, we all knew) that she is the fastest liner on the ocean. She may, and almost certainly will, break her own records from time to time, but until her sister ship, the *Mauretania*, joins her in the service, she can have no possible rival . . . We shall thus have a domestic instead of an international competition, and one of much more genuine interest; for, after all, there is no particular glory in beating a German steamer of considerably inferior size and power.'⁹[extract] Indeed, *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* kept the record for the fastest transatlantic voyage until the North German Lloyd's *Bremen* seized it in 1929.

Cunard retained the Blue Riband for more than two decades not least because of the unforeseen technical difficulties that beset the high-speed liners of the early twentieth century. When operated at full steam, *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* suffered from strong vibrations that led to complaints from customers. Although Cunard sought to control this source of

⁷ Hansard, House of Commons, fourth series, vol. 127, col. 1104.

⁸ *The Times*, 9 September 1907, p. 10.

⁹ *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 October 1907, p. 8.

discomfort by reinforcing the ships structurally, both vessels remained prone to the problem. The losses these liners generated added to the management's headaches because operating ships at high speeds involved exorbitant costs. For technological and economic reasons, the quest for prestige on transatlantic route shifted from speed to size between 1907 and 1914. White Star Line was the first company to challenge Cunard by ordering a set of three ships. Had *Lusitania* boasted around 31,500 gross registered tons (GRT), White Star's *Olympic*, *Titanic* and *Britannic* (the last did not enter into passenger service before World War I) encompassed 45,000 GRT (Image 6: Poster of White Star Line "Triple Screw Giants"). Acutely sensitive to status issues, HAPAG's Albert Ballin promptly countered White Star's initiative by ordering another trio of liners with a tonnage between 52,000 and 54,000. Passenger number reflected this increase in size, too. *Lusitania* could accommodate 2,165 passengers, of whom 563 travelled in first class, 464 in second class, and 1,138 in steerage. HAPAG's new vessels were designed to house almost 4,600 passengers. Around 970 people found space in first and second class respectively and a further 2,700 in steerage.¹⁰

The launch of the first new giant HAPAG flagship in May 1912 turned into 'an exceptionally impressive event,' a journalist found. In his christening speech, Hamburg's lord mayor Johann Heinrich Borchard praised the new liner as the culmination of the 'glorious development [of] our navy and our merchant marine,' whose growth had been fuelled by the emperor's enthusiasm and Germany's 'flourishing, self-confident middle class.' After the local notable's address, William II, who attended the launch with Secretary of State for the Navy Alfred von Tirpitz, stepped forward and released the obligatory bottle of champagne with the words 'I hereby christen you Imperator,' sending the hull into the water. It was a fitting name for a 919-foot long vessel that would establish a commanding presence on the maritime scene, or

¹⁰ For the figures, see Anne Wealleans, *Designing Liners: A History of Interior Design Afloat* (London 2006), p. 59, p. 65; William H. Miller, *The First Great Ocean Liners in Photographs, 1897-1927* (New York, 1984), p. 12, p. 63. (The steerage number for HAPAG combines travellers categorized in 'steerage' and 'third class', a distinction for which no precedent existed.)

so Germany's ruler and middle class hoped.¹¹ By the time the First World War broke out, passenger liners counted among the most prominent national symbols that staked out claims of power and prestige. (Image 7)

Goods – Migrants – Plutocrats

As much as these ships were tied up with nationalism, they would not have come into existence without the economic globalization that characterized the nineteenth century. Before the Great War disrupted it, international commercial interaction reached levels that the world achieved again only in the 1980s. Contemporaries located passenger vessels in this growing global interdependence, praising ships for quite literally connecting mankind by establishing new links between faraway places and enhancing commerce. Irrespective of the state subsidies they received, shipping lines could only build these expensive artefacts because they speculated on business opportunities in an expanding global economy. Between 1800 and 1913, the volume of world trade increased twenty-five-fold. Three quarters of this growth was concentrated in commodity exchanges between North America, Western Europe and Australia/New Zealand, turning the Atlantic into the prime commercial water of the second half of the nineteenth century. International commodity trade did not directly prompt the construction of large passenger ships because bulk goods including cotton, wheat and meat were transported on cargo vessels. Yet, it bolstered shipping lines' balance sheets and put them in a position to undertake the heavy investment required for liner construction.

In addition to growing international trade, the cross-border movement of people shaped nineteenth-century globalization and directly underpinned the construction of increasingly sizeable passenger vessels. Between 1850 and 1914, 40 to 45 million Europeans emigrated

¹¹ *B.Z. am Mittag*, 23.5.1912, p. 1; *Berliner Tageblatt*, 23.5.1912, (evening edition), p. 5

overseas, primarily to North and South America. (Image 8: Stieglitz photo) At the same time, 11 million Indians, Chinese, and Japanese left their birthplace to work as contract labourers in far-away lands.¹² For shipping lines, international migration became a highly profitable business because, for much of the nineteenth century, most global migrants were prepared to travel under Spartan, if not downright degrading conditions in overcrowded, badly ventilated and unsanitary steerage compartments. Until the outbreak of World War I, emigrants remained a crucial source of revenue for shipping lines, a circumstance reflected in *Imperator's* almost 2,700 steerage passengers. To prevent potentially ruinous price wars, Cunard, White Star, HAPAG, North German Lloyd and other lines formed a cartel that set annual quotas and prices for steerage passengers travelling from Europe between 1892 and 1914.¹³ The emigrant trade was less significant for colonial lines such as P&O because destinations in the European empire attracted considerable fewer settlers than the Americas.

While most passengers crossing the Atlantic booked passages in the hope of beginning a new life, liner companies profited from a shift in the social composition of their clientele towards the end of the nineteenth century. A recent study of passenger lists has shown that the proportion of travellers booking steerage voyages on German liners fell from almost 90 per cent to 70 per cent between 1880 and 1897. Next to those seeking to escape poverty, passenger ships attracted more customers who were sufficiently prosperous to book themselves into a cabin. Among these, traders and shopkeepers as well as farmers were the largest groups. Although the share of emigrants among better-off travellers remains unclear, some of them were likely to return to Europe after an extended visit of North America for business reasons or as seasonal workers. Their increasing prominence among voyagers reflects the expansion of the European middle class in the second half of the nineteenth

¹² Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton 2005), pp. 76-79.

¹³ Dagmar Bellmann, *Von Höllengefährten zu schwimmenden Palästen: Die Passagierschiffahrt auf dem Atlantik* (Frankfurt am Main 2015), p. 57.

century.¹⁴ At the same time, Americans with a desire to visit Europe swelled the passenger pool. Students, artists, businessmen, engineers, and other members of the middle class traversed the Atlantic eastward, seeking intellectual, professional, and commercial contacts in Europe. Yet, the most prominent American voyagers were, of course, the Astors, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Guggenheims – plutocrats, in short, who were amassing enormous fortunes in the late-nineteenth boom that Mark Twain labelled the 'Gilded Age.'¹⁵

Style Aboard

Luring these diverse groups aboard amounted to a substantial challenge for liner companies in the late nineteenth century. Irrespective of liners' enhanced size and speed as well as their ascent to national icons, operators needed to design and present new vessels in ways that overcame the overwhelmingly negative associations of ocean travel. Seasickness, for instance, remained a common and much-feared affliction on board well into the twentieth century. To counter deep-rooted scepticism, shipping lines emphasized the splendour, luxury and comfort that travellers encountered on board towards the end of the nineteenth century. Passenger ships had turned from spaces of danger and disease into 'floating palaces,' the industry insisted. This label had come into fashion for vessels with improved passenger facilities as early as the 1820s, but many voyagers – including Charles Dickens – found a gap as vast as the Atlantic ocean between promise and experience once they boarded.¹⁶ This discrepancy only began to recede with the adoption of steel in the 1880s, which put companies in a position to construct ships with expanded decks for communal and private spaces facilities. Companies staked the huge investments necessary for steel vessels on attracting prosperous travellers who promised higher financial returns than steerage

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 58-68.

¹⁵ Mark Rinella and Whitney Walton, "Planned Serendipity: American Travelers and the Transatlantic Voyage in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Social History* 38 (2004), pp. 365-383, esp. pp. 368-9.

¹⁶ Bellmann (cited note 15), pp. 119-122.

passengers. Above all, liner operators had their eye on the upper classes because attracting the rich promised prestige and profit.

Shipping lines recognized that they required professional expertise if they wished to replicate the tastes and service standards that upper-class travellers expected on land. Having previously relied on skilled tradespeople and artisans to furnish and embellish interior spaces, maritime companies approached academically trained architects to develop and oversee interior design schemes in the late nineteenth century. After 1896, P&O collaborated repeatedly with Arts-and-Crafts architects J.J. Stevenson and Thomas Colcutt. Colcutt's reputation had received a boost from his extension of the Savoy Hotel in 1889 and the upmarket Holborn Restaurant in 1894. The most influential architecture firm for liner design, however, was headed by Charles-Frédéric Mewès. He had trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, which gave its name to the eponymous classical style of architecture. Mewès's fashionable designs were inspired by French eighteenth-century architecture in various Louis styles – a winning formula since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that witnessed a craze for collecting French eighteenth-century art and decorative arts. Around the turn of the century, Mewès made his name by designing the Ritz Hotel in Paris before remodelling the Carlton Hotel in London and designing the Ritz in London with his junior partner Arthur Davis as a celebration of Beaux-Arts.

Albert Ballin was profoundly impressed by Mewès's hotels and commissioned the Frenchman to design the First Class public rooms on HAPAG's *Amerika* (1905), which proved a success with customers. Their business partnership lasted for almost a decade, culminating in the interior designs for the First Class on *Imperator* in 1913. Mewès and his partner Davis were also among the architects on whom HAPAG's competitor Cunard relied to attract upscale travellers. On the medium-sized *Franconia* (1910) and *Laconia* (1911), which sailed between

Liverpool and Boston, they provided the plans for the First Class Reading Room that sought to convey cultivation through a neoclassical approach featuring a shallow moulded frieze and delicate semi-circular windows. (Image) Cunard must have been very satisfied with the result, because they hired Arthur Davis to oversee the interior designs on their new flagship *Aquitania*, which entered into service in 1914.¹⁷

To enhance their appeal in this exclusive market, companies strove to match the exacting standards that upscale travellers expected on land in terms of both service and style. To this end, prominent vessels relied on traditional upper-class architecture and innovative trends in high-end consumption. In addition to the gentleman's club and the aristocratic house, hotel architecture served as models for liner interiors in the first class. In particular, the hotels Charles M  w  s designed for C  sar Ritz in London and Paris around the turn of the century proved a resounding success with upper-class customers. The *Ritz* in London offered more than deluxe rooms furnished in Louis XVI style and Escoffier cuisine. With its long staircase for ostentatious entries into the Grand Hall and its bright, airy Palm Court in which guests took tea under a skylight, this hotel offered itself a cheerful stage for upper-class social display. Around the turn of the century, the material splendour of ships and the illustrious passengers travelling first class lent the formula of the 'floating palace' a far more convincing ring than in the days of Dickens.

Davis spelled out in 1914 what he considered the main architectural challenges for a successful liner design. 'It must be remembered that on a ship a number of people are imprisoned together for days, and sometimes for weeks.' Moreover, voyagers could not pursue their usual routines but 'are forced to live a life altogether different from that to which they are accustomed on land.' Even on the most recent liners, Davis conceded, a voyage could

¹⁷ Wealleans, (cited note 12) pp.31-2, pp. 66-7; Russell (cited note 18), pp. 236-7.

'often [be] tedious.' Some travellers found relief from boredom in idiosyncratic on-board pastimes ranging from bets on the distance covered each day to sports contests to party games. Those for whom these activities held little appeal, Davis knew, were 'compelled to look to the ship herself' to relieve potential ennui. In the early twentieth century, liners boasted amenities which Charles Dickens, who had spent most of his voyage in a cheerless dining saloon, could only dream of. Since mealtimes continued to structure days on board, the first-class dining saloon still counted among the facilities that determined a ship's success and consequently ranked highly among architects' priorities. In the 1860s and 1870s, these rooms still had a cramped atmosphere deriving from low ceilings and large communal tables with long rows of bolted swivel chairs (Image 9: swivel chair). After 1900, voyagers entered high-ceilinged rooms stretching over two decks that were lit by a domed skylight and seated guests on chairs that moved freely around numerous separate tables for dining parties of varying sizes. In the decade before World War I, the most upscale liners also operated *à-la-carte* gourmet restaurants catering to travellers wanted to enjoy *haute cuisine* outside set mealtimes.

Designs by architects, shipping companies hoped, would lend the generous spaces reserved for the first class an aura of sophisticated splendour and attract a solvent clientele. To ensure economic success, most shipping lines chose a conventional aesthetic repertoire that was familiar to the upper classes in Europe and North America. Given the popularity of period styles in representative architecture around the turn of the century, it comes as no surprise that the majority of liner designs adopted a historicizing aesthetic. Period styles indirectly underlined humankind's advancing control of nature. After all, the taming of nature was a precondition for transferring artistic sophistication to otherwise inhospitable surroundings, or so the argument ran. Indeed, liner companies celebrated this very theme in artworks on their ships including a carved clock panel on the White Star vessel *Olympic*. First-class passengers passed it while descending the 60-foot high and 16-foot wide staircase that connected the

promenade deck with the reception and dining room. Entitled *Honour and Glory Crowning Time* (Image 10), it invoked ancient artistic motifs in an accessible manner. Chastely draped in flowing gowns, Honour and Glory appear as angels of virtue that frame Time in the shape of a clock. Honour attentively keeps a record, her foot casually placed on a globe while Glory's elbow rests on the clock, her hand extending a palm branch symbolic of victory over Honour's head. Honour, this emblem suggests, records mankind's virtuous triumph over time and space, a theme further underlined by a laurel wreath – a further victory symbol – that leans against the clock pedestal.

COMFORT; RESTORE SOME DAVIS QUOTE; PUT IN SOMETHING ON THE ROOMS

Above all, period styles bestowed cultural prestige on liners and invested them with an air of sumptuous, aristocratic luxury. When North German Lloyd began its quest for global prominence at the end of the late nineteenth century, it adopted lavish neo-baroque interior design schemes by Bremen architect Johann Georg Poppe (1837-1915). Arthur Davis probably had these ships in mind when he warned against the 'temptation' to 'overcrowd a room with heavy ornament and meretricious decoration' that resulted in 'tawdry magnificence and over-elaboration.' Instead, he continued, architects should restrain their decorative instincts and aim for a calm 'air of repose and comfort in the appearance of the different rooms.' To avoid 'monotony' and minimize the risk of boredom among travellers, he favoured ships that derived aesthetic 'variety' from a series of public rooms each of which embraced a specific period style.¹⁸

¹⁸ Davis (cited note 21), p. 89, p. 91.

In the early twentieth century, many liner companies strove to lend their flagships aesthetic distinctiveness through combinations of period styles. OLYMPIC STYLES HERE;
REFERENCE THE TITANIC PANEL HERE

The *France*, with which *Companie Général Transatlantique* competed on the route between Europe and North America from 1912, employed this strategy with particular success. Although she was much smaller than leading British and Germany ships, she proved highly popular with affluent travellers due to her interior design. Boasting Louis XIV, Empire, and orientalisising Moorish revival styles, her suite of public spaces, which were linked by corridors decorated by carved wooden panels with gilded ornaments, extended across the whole 500-foot boat deck to allow travellers to promenade and people-watch (Image 11: panelling from *France*).¹⁹ Arthur Davis was responsible for *Aquitania*, which Cunard's promotional material praised as 'The Ship Beautiful' for her luxurious public rooms in Jacobean and Georgian styles that also featured elaborate carpets and copies of artworks from the National Gallery in London (Image 12: design for carpet on *Aquitania*).²⁰ Efforts to offer solvent clients refined surroundings were by no means restricted to vessels serving transatlantic routes. Travellers booking a P&O passage to the British empire could look forward to sumptuous stately rooms paying stylistic homage to the British past. In keeping with their purpose, these vessels' decorative schemes included colonial themes. Several P&O liners featured elaborate tile work by leading Arts-and-Crafts designer William de Morgan with orientalisising motifs similar to a colourful panel depicting an arcade enclosing a mosque and minarets (Image 13; de Morgan tile panel). Ships on imperial routes thus not only underpinned European colonialism but celebrated it aesthetically.

¹⁹ Philip Dawson and Bruce Peter, *Ship Style: Modernism and Modernity at Sea in the Twentieth Century* (London: Conway, 2010), 20-21.

²⁰ Wealleans (cited note 12), pp. 66-7.

While historicizing aesthetics prevailed on most international liners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this approach to maritime interior design attracted increasing critical scrutiny in Germany after 1900 in more than one respect. Nationally minded commentators vocally questioned the patriotic credentials of German ships on which they detected undue foreign aesthetic influence. Irrespective of its launch by William II, *Imperator* caused controversy in patriotic circles for the Louis XIV, Louis XVI, and Empire styles that Méwès and Davis had chosen for the public rooms. The involvement of foreign architects and the preponderance of French styles on a ship that represented Germany abroad was a thorn in many a nationalist's eye. The influential cultural reform periodical *Der Kunstwart* hurled an acerbic charge of aesthetic high treason against HAPAG because, on *Imperator*, 'Louis XVI appears to be the real emperor.' This publication considered *Imperator* a faulty national symbol for failing to showcase distinctly German cultural achievements to the wider world.²¹

These attacks possessed punch in Germany because of the alternative designs that emerged after the foundation of the *Deutsche Werkbund* (German Union of Work) in 1907. Led by a group of architects, designers, entrepreneurs and public intellectuals, this cultural reform organization gained a sizeable following among sections of the German middle class that found the prominence of period styles in contemporary culture anachronistic. Social change and new modes of industrial production, the *Werkbund* argued, had propelled Germany irreversibly into a novel historical era: modern times. Rather than revive the styles of the past, this new age called for its own, distinctly modernist forms of expression. Liners, which contemporaries counted among the technological artefacts that quite literally embodied modernity, exemplified the cultural dilemma of the early twentieth century. Leading *Werkbund* architect Bruno Paul observed in 1914 that 'nowhere was the contrast between

²¹ "'Imperator' und 'Vaterland,'" *Der Kunstwart* 26, (1913) no. 19, pp. 67-68. For a more extended discussion, see Russell (cited note 18), pp. 240-1.

advanced technological development and ... the inadequacy ... of the decorative arts more palpable than in maritime interiors.' As towering technological achievements, these huge ships possessed a novel 'technological beauty,' Paul wrote, that had to find an aesthetic equivalent in interior designs. Embellishing ships with 'a kind of Louis XIV-style with lots of gold' struck Paul as 'snobbish deprivation.'²²

To the *Werkbund*, *Imperator* appeared as a setback because its members had previously succeeded in securing commissions for maritime interior designs. As early as 1906, Bruno Paul, Joseph Maria Olbrich, and Richard Riemerschmid were responsible for the decoration of 30 passenger cabins and suites on the North German Lloyd vessel *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*. Partly inspired by *art nouveau*, their interiors received praise from critics and customers alike. The armchairs Richard Riemerschmid designed for the breakfast room in the "Imperial Apartment" highlight the *Werkbund's* approach. Rather than employ dark carved hardwood and patterned fabrics, Riemerschmid selected wicker to create a light, unadorned chair to enhance the room's bright and airy atmosphere. (Image 15: Light-up model of *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*; Image 16: wicker chair by Riemerschmid). While the North German Lloyd's management was prepared to experiment with new German designs, HAPAG's general director Albert Ballin was more conservative. Fearing that *Werkbund*-inspired decorations would clash with the tastes of an international upper-class clientele, he opted for tried-and-tested period styles on liners including *Imperator*.²³

While the sumptuous surroundings for first-class voyagers established vessels' reputation as 'floating palaces,' the presence of thousands of steerage passengers aboard raised the spectre of social tensions between rich and poor. To counter potential image problems and attract the

²² Bruno Paul, "Passagierdampfer und ihre Einrichtungen," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes* (Jena 1914), pp. 55-58, here pp. 55-56.

²³ For a more detailed account of design reform on German ships, see Dawson and Peter (cited note 23), pp. 26-30.

custom of emigrants and less affluent travellers who provided vital revenue, shipping companies tirelessly drew attention to the improved facilities for poorer travellers. Beyond providing better gastronomic services and larger public areas, they began to move away from large dormitories for steerage travellers and replaced them with simple cabins of two, four, and six berths. Even the poor could cross the seas in unprecedented comfort, or so public relations material suggested. Furthermore, the management enlarged the 'second class' and equipped it with more comfortable cabins for customers with sufficient means to avoid travelling in steerage. Above all, shipping companies emphasized measures that enforced social order and prevented conflicts on board. In addition to separating travellers in different classes, operators enforced strict discipline among a workforce filling, for instance in boiler rooms, some of the most dangerous and dirty jobs the Industrial Revolution had created. The notion of the 'floating palace' was thus predicated on a sanitized image of the ship as a hierarchical social microcosm devoid of the tensions that increasingly characterized class relations on land after the 1890s.²⁴

Since the late nineteenth century, 'floating palaces' have embodied seductively beautiful, carefree dreamworlds of consumption and provided an idealized image that has fuelled a lasting fascination with passenger ships and ocean travel. The ever-increasing popularity of cruises as a luxury holiday draws on it to this day. In the 1840s, when Dickens described his Atlantic crossing as a sickening ordeal, the idea of traveling the world's seas had a distinctly unappealing ring, as P&O found out when it offered the first cruise trips through the Mediterranean in 1844. After only a few years, the line abandoned the experiment for lack of customers.²⁵ In 1891, HAPAG undertook a new attempt at Albert Ballin's suggestion. The initiative turned into a commercial success that other lines soon emulated – thanks to ships that the interplay of technological innovation, state subsidies, nationalism, globalization and a

²⁴ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity*, pp. 168-175.

²⁵ Howarth and Howarth (cited note), pp. 47-52.

changing clientele had thoroughly transformed and that now warranted the label of the 'floating palace.'²⁶

²⁶ On the origins of cruises, see Straub, *Albert Ballin*, pp. 107-109.