

A Corner of the Nation's Attic

ROBERT C. POST

In the 1830s, when James Smithson bequeathed the equivalent of \$550,000 to the United States to establish an institution “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men,” he fostered a dilemma. What manner of institution? Because people had such different designs on this substantial sum, the “Smithsonian problem” was debated for more than a decade. Finally, in 1846, Congress passed a bill providing for a laboratory, a library, and a repository for “objects of art and of foreign and curious research,” all to be housed in a building on the Mall that emulated a twelfth-century Norman castle and presided over by a “secretary,” the title given to members of the president’s cabinet.

As it turned out, the first secretary, Joseph Henry, was partial to scientific research and less than thrilled with the idea of establishing a public museum. But in 1858 the Patent Office managed to shift custody of its “National Cabinet of Curiosities” to Henry. Even though Congress appropriated \$3,650 for setting up the United States National Museum in part of the Castle, he was still not pleased. Almost to the end of his days he sought to divest the museum, perceiving that it would ultimately define the identity of the Smithsonian more so than its scientific work, and, worse, expose it to the dangers of “direct political influence.”

With little or no help from Henry, the Smithsonian’s collection of technological apparatus kept growing in the 1860s and ’70s, mostly instruments used in getting a measure of the land, along with Native American devices that explorers like John Wesley Powell picked up in the course of their fieldwork. Then, in 1876, the Smithsonian was designated the final repository for artifacts exhibited by government agencies at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In addition, many foreign exhibitors left behind what they had brought to the United States, and eventually twenty or thirty (or a hundred—accounts vary widely) boxcars full of miscellaneous stuff were spotted on a railroad siding near Washington’s Tiber Creek, designated for the National Museum.

Joseph Henry might have been inclined to leave them there, but, as it happened, he died in 1878 and was succeeded by Spencer F. Baird, a man of

JULY
2001
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An eclectic array of watercraft on exhibit in the 1920s in the Smithsonian Institution's Arts and Industries Building, forerunner of the Museum of History and Technology. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.)

different enthusiasms. Baird liked museum displays. Soon enough, Congress voted funds to erect a new building for the National Museum on a site just east of the Castle. It was in the form of a square 327 feet on a side, with a complex arrangement of interior spaces, but had neither basement nor attic—an irony, because this was the building that got dubbed “the nation’s attic.” In 1911 it was officially designated the Arts and Industries Building when the Smithsonian completed a new National Museum of Natural History across the Mall and left the attic for historical and technological artifacts.

The growth of the technological collections had been nothing if not haphazard. There was the potpourri from Philadelphia. There was an antique locomotive, the *John Bull*, acquired because the Pennsylvania Railroad lobbied Congress to support efforts to perpetuate “the history of the birth and development of steam transportation.” There was early telephone apparatus because a man on the staff had worked for the Bell Telephone Company. And there was an accumulation of model fishing boats because Secretary Baird had also headed the U.S. Fish Commission, which set up displays at international fisheries expositions. In 1884, one Joseph W. Collins (1839–1904), a veteran of the Gloucester cod fishery, became curator of the Smithsonian’s Section of American Naval Architecture and maestro of its Watercraft Hall.

This photo, dating from the 1920s, shows part of the Collins’s legacy. One can see that he had amassed not only a fleet of rigged models but also vast numbers of builders’ half-hulls, a designers’ device used in “fairing” lines and assuring symmetrical dimensions port and starboard. Above the half-hulls are Native American craft from the Bureau of American Ethnology. At the right is a model of a passenger liner donated by one of the transatlantic steamship companies. Much older was the full-scale prototype of Frederick E. Sickels’s steam-assisted steering gear, at left, and, in the middle, one of Joseph Francis’s metallic life cars, used in rescuing passengers from ships that had stranded.

After World War II the U.S. Maritime Commission donated models of standard merchant vessels, and more models came from commercial firms such as Canadian Pacific. Then, in 1957—in anticipation of the opening of the new Museum of History and Technology—the Smithsonian hired Howard I. Chapelle (1901–75), quite a famous naval architect and expert on ship design, who commissioned models of the storied sailing vessels from America’s high-seas heyday: clippers, packets, downeasters, schooners.

In 1964, the Museum of History and Technology opened with an expansive new maritime hall planned by Chapelle. But, except for up-to-date display cases and lighting, things looked much the same as they had in the Arts and Industries Building. Chapelle may have been a fine scholar, but by then even his admirers were dubious about his exhibit philosophy—models upon models, “stick ’em out there, as many as you could get,” was how

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Robert Multhauf, who hired him, put it. Not long after Chapelle retired, a new Hall of American Maritime Enterprise opened, with many of the models consigned to storage in order to make room for narratives built around simulations of an engine room, a tobacco warehouse, an underwriter's office, a pilothouse, and a tattoo parlor.

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Throughout its history, the Smithsonian has remained a malleable institution, the course taken by its various departments and bureaus often determined by the zeal of strong-willed individuals. Joseph Collins was enthusiastic about contrasts in ship design, and so was Howard Chapelle; hence their versions of the maritime exhibit. Chapelle's successors have been more attentive to the relationship of technology and culture, and their exhibits have taken a different tack.