

## Retrieval of *Titanic* Artifacts Stirs Controversy

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Ninety years ago this week, the world's most famous ocean liner sank to a frigid grave in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. More than 1,500 passengers and crew lost their lives on the *Titanic's* maiden voyage, and a culture of myth and controversy emerged that shows no signs of abating.

For years, the stories of survivors and rescuers were the only links to the famous event. But in September 1985, the ship's story took a dramatic turn when the wreck was finally found under 12,000 feet (3,657 meters) of water near the Grand Banks of Newfoundland.

The joint U.S.-French team that located the ship, led by the expert underwater explorer Bob Ballard, initiated a new and often contentious era of *Titanic* history.

Since the discovery, debate has raged over the increasing number of visits to the wreck site, and the removal of historic artifacts from the area.

*Titanic* china has been exhibited in museums. Video footage of the site was part of James Cameron's blockbuster film *Titanic*. Even pieces of coal from the ship have turned up for sale as commemorative keepsakes.

"This past summer, a couple in a submersible took their wedding vows on the deck," said Ballard, adding: "It's kind of over the top."

### Artifacts from the Deep

After Ballard and his team located the ship, they returned in July of 1986 to explore the wreck in three-person submersibles. The team took pictures to document the ship's condition and investigate its sinking, but recovered no artifacts. In fact, the team left a commemorative plaque requesting that the site be left undisturbed as a memorial to the dead.

But the period of peace lasted for only about a year. In 1987, a controversial salvage operation set up as a limited partnership retrieved china, jewelry, and other artifacts from the luxury liner and exhibited them in Paris. The venture was subsequently sold to a company called RMS Titanic Inc.

In 1994, a U.S. district court gave RMS Titanic Inc. sole authority over the salvage and ownership of any items recovered from the *Titanic* based on a legal precept called salvor-in-possession rights.

Dik Barton, a vice president of RMS Titanic Inc., said the company salvages the ship's artifacts for exhibition. The company has made six expeditions to the site and recovered more than 6,000 artifacts from the seafloor.

The relics include such notable items as the ship's bell and whistles. Among other items also found in good condition were suitcases, silver, letters, and other personal effects.

The removal of such artifacts is particularly discouraging for Ballard, who views the site as a memorial to those who lost their lives in the disaster.

"It's really sad to watch," he said. "The ship deserves much more than this. Can you imagine them doing this kind of thing on the U.S.S. *Arizona* in Pearl Harbor?"

Edward Kamuda, president of the Titanic Historical Society, also thinks that retrieving artifacts from the site is inappropriate because of the wreck's significance as a memorial gravesite, especially to families of the deceased. "We know of three *Titanic* survivors who have died and had their ashes scattered on the site," he said.

One of those people, Kamuda noted, was a man named Frank Goldsmith, who was nine years old when he survived the sinking. "His father perished on the ship, so Frank had his ashes scattered on the site," he said.

Because of the historical society's position that the wreck should remain undisturbed, its museum exhibits only artifacts that were saved from the doomed ship by survivors, according to Kamuda.

### "Sharing" the *Titanic*

Barton has a different perspective. "We currently have three exhibitions around the United States," he said. "We want to bring the story of the *Titanic* to life through exhibits featuring historical vignettes and artifacts recovered from the seabed and painstakingly restored."

He said the company is not allowed to sell artifacts from the ship other than the pieces of coal, which were sold to help cover expedition expenses.

Barton said RMS Titanic sees its mission of recovering the artifacts as a responsibility because the ship is rapidly deteriorating on the ocean floor. "We estimate that the wreck—the bow section at least—will implode and be destroyed," he said.

But some scientists have estimated that the process could take several hundred years. In an article published by *Canadian Chemical News* 18 months ago, D. Roy Cullimore and Lori Johnston described the results of their study of the ship's condition. They concluded: "There appears, at this time, to be evidence not of a catastrophic structural failure about to occur in the near future, but rather of a gradual collapse that would follow a somewhat predictable pattern."

Burton argues nevertheless that his company offers an important service by making the history and artifacts of the *Titanic* widely available. "We want to document, record, and share this special wreck with the world and not just the few fortunate and privileged enough to get down there," he said.

Adventure tourism has entered the picture in recent years, with customers paying steep prices to visit the undersea wreck. By one account, about 100 people have dived to the site, although some of them have been researchers.

### Virtual Dives

Ballard also would like to share the *Titanic* with others, but favors leaving the site intact and making it widely accessible through technology. "I have no problem with visitors. I think that will increase as the technology does," he said.

"My vision of the future," he added, "is that *Titanic* will be much like the *Arizona* or Gettysburg [Civil War battlefield], where people can visit and pay their respects."

He favors outfitting the sunken ship with lights and high-definition digital and video cameras, including some mounted on remotely controlled moveable vehicles. Such a system, he said, would enable people to virtually visit the wreck site via computer and view it closely from many angles.

"These cameras could actually give you a much broader and more complete view" than would be possible by diving to the site in a small submersible, he said, because views of the ship's interior from a submersible would

be limited to gazing through a porthole.

Ballard and his team hope to test such a system at the wreck of another ship, the *Brittanic*, which lies in more accessible waters near Greece. If the approach is found to be effective, such a system could be implemented for the *Titanic*.

The depth of the *Titanic*'s watery grave that once made it difficult to reach the site is no longer a major problem, thanks to technological advances. "12,000 feet seemed like an incredible depth," Ballard said, "but it's not a great challenge anymore."

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