

Figureheads: A History

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The crafting of figureheads is a tradition dating back to prehistoric times. Rock carvings dating as far back as the stone-age “depict vessels with bows and sterns carved in floral and animal forms.”ⁱ Figurehead sculpting and ship decorating was a tradition carried on leaving early surviving Egyptian examples from 3000 BC. Interestingly, the origins of figureheads occur independently in variegated geographical locations and for diverse purposes. Peter Norton suggests that the utility of these figureheads and instances of naval decoration lay not only in the “universal instinct to decorate objects of utility, and most particularly their extremities” but, also, in the “mystical attitude towards the boat or ship itself.”ⁱⁱ

The figurehead tradition was appropriated in Europe by the Romans, Greeks and Vikings, as a valued avenue of artistic expression, allowing each ship to “see” its way safely through the waters. As boats became increasingly used for the purpose of sea battle, their stern and bow decorations came to symbolise the national origins of each boat.ⁱⁱⁱ Scholars have noted a shift towards increasingly ornate decorations leading up to the eighteenth century. Formally speaking, the ornate artistic programs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were slowly reduced during the eighteenth century due to both economy and taste. Accordingly, in her *Silent Pilots: Figureheads in Mystic Seaport Museum*, Georgia W. Hamilton describes figureheads of this time as surviving “after the decline of lavish ship decorations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” with their design being affected by “changes in bow shape as well as by artistic and economic factors.”^{iv} Also, during this time, animal and human figures became recognisable and popular icons depicting the spirit of each ship.

As figureheads were seminal in representing the spirit of each ship, their construction and sculpting was approached meticulously and considered a fine art. In fact, Hamilton writes, “numerous drawings and sketchbooks of the period survive today indicating that it was an important occupation equal to that of the architect and sculptor.”^v In *Figureheads*, Peter Norton writes of French sculpture “artists set a high standard in figurehead design and it is significant that [...] in the late 17th century an artist of the stature of Puget should have been employed in this respect.”^{vi} Naval warfare, which continued well into the eighteenth century, starting with the Spanish Succession and culminating with the Napoleonic Wars from 1793-1815, meant that the production of frigates and, thus, figureheads excelled during this time.

Though there are few remaining examples of eighteenth century figurehead sculpture, as figureheads are made of perishable material and, oftentimes, carved from soft wood, there exists a wealth of surviving information about the sculptures located in archives, museums and city directories.^{vii} Norman Ruben notes that these sources reveal an “active body of carvers, gilders, joiners, painters, sculptors, and turners who were involved at least on a part-time basis in ship decoration, and it tells us something about the styles and design

elements employed by individual carvers” located specifically in Quebec. Similarly, the figurehead of the *Abénakise*, a large frigate designed and constructed under the direction of the French navy and selected topic of this class, is lost. However, the process through which its depiction could be recovered and reinvented was largely built on threading together information from both the French and English maritime archives and plans. Existing plans of the frigate, drawn by the British Navy after the ship’s capture in 1757, were fundamental in positioning the figurehead and understanding its configuration for instance.

Though the ephemeral art of figurehead sculpture is not currently practiced with the same vigour as the pre-nineteenth century era, it remains an indicator of shipbuilding traditions. Figureheads craft a narrative centred on nationhood, conflict and pride and are valued avenues for the transmission of national ideals and values that can be studied today.

ⁱ Georgia W. Hamilton, *Silent Pilots: Figureheads in Mystic Seaport Museum*, (CT: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1984), 12.

ⁱⁱ Peter Norton, *Figureheads* (Chicago: Crown Publishes, 1976), 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton, *Silent Pilots: Figureheads in Mystic Seaport Museum*, 12.

^{iv} Ibid, 11.

^v Ibid, 12.

^{vi} Norton, *Figureheads*, 3.

^{vii} Ibid, 1.