

Figureheads



A figurehead is a carved or painted figure or emblem ornamenting the bows of a ship. It will often relate to the ship's name or purpose. The origins of the figurehead probably lie in the earliest days of seafaring, when their purpose was religious as well as decorative. For early seafarers the figurehead was literally the head of an animal sacrificed to the sea gods to ensure a safe passage. Eventually a symbolic head was substituted for that of the animal. The figurehead was also believed to embody the spirit of the ship itself, as it was believed that the ship needed eyes to find her own way across the seas, whilst the figurehead also provided a means of identification. The figurehead was originally located on the beakhead of the vessel but later was located on the continuation of the stem below the bowsprit.

The seafarers of all of the early Mediterranean civilisations fitted their ships with figureheads. The ancient Egyptians mounted figures of holy birds on the prows, whilst the Phoenicians used the heads of horses to symbolise both vision and swiftness. Greek ships had a boar's head for both its quick sight and ferocious reaction and Roman ships often carried a carving of a centurion to indicate their prime fighting quality. William the Conqueror's ship pictured in the Bayeux Tapestry had a lion's head carved on the top of her stem; by the 13th century one of the favourite figureheads was a swan, possibly in the hope that the ship would then possess the same mobility and stability on the water as the bird. Some Danish ships portrayed a dolphin or bull, while a serpent was also popular in Northern Europe.

The figurehead as we know it today was an effect of the change in the design of the ship, which came about in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. The beakhead gradually disappeared into the bow and the figurehead became more upright, finally reaching the perpendicular by about 1700. English, Dutch and Spanish Naval ships favoured the Lion as their most common figurehead whilst French ships carried, in general, more elaborate Figureheads. The Lion finally went out of fashion as a figurehead in the second half of the 18th century, being replaced by carvings usually indicating the name of the ship.

Merchant ships, up until about 1800, followed Naval practice fairly closely, and most vessels favoured the Lion as the figurehead until the advent of the Clipper ship, when the figurehead became more usually a single figure in full or half length, with women being rather more popular than men, and often reflecting a superstition of seamen by having one or both breasts bared – Women in general were thought to be unlucky aboard ship, but a naked woman was supposed to be able to calm a storm at sea. The technological changes brought by steam and iron spelled the gradual end of the Figurehead and figureheads for larger warships were abolished in 1894 in Britain. Merchant ships also stopped the tradition with the advent of steam power, as the loss of the bowsprit meant no place to mount the figurehead. Some shipping lines are now reviving the tradition for decorative purposes.

Sources

Peter Kemp, Ed. *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea.*