



BY MICHAEL PETERS

# SIGHTLINES

## Distorted Proportion

WHERE HAVE ALL THE BEAUTIFUL BOATS GONE?

**M**y old friend and mentor, Sal Guarino, surprised me last weekend while on his way to Siesta Key to look at a private collection of museum-quality ship models and invited me to join him. Sal and I are both model collectors, although of varying types of vessels. Where I prefer pond yachts with lots of patina, he leans towards finely crafted ships and builder's models. Even more than the fine detail and craftsmanship that goes into these, we both especially appreciate the beautiful and complex curves of the older hulls. To naval architects, these are things of beauty.

There are few boats built today that inspire a love affair with their hull shapes. Just look at modern container ships and cruise ships and you instantly understand the priority given to simple construction and maximum volume. You do not see ships like the SS *France* or the SS *United States* with sculpted lines from bow to stern anymore. Instead you see serviceable ships with long, flat-sided midship sections and bow and stern modules abruptly stuck on, all in the name of commercial efficiency. It is difficult to imagine that a model collector would someday pay up to \$50,000 for a model of something as ungainly looking as a modern cruise ship, even if it does come with a climbing wall and a wave machine.

One of the first things that strikes you when you look at these old models is how much more dominant the hull is than the superstructure. The design trend was for a small, understated house to sit atop a larger, more developed hull. The emphasis was on the hulls, which were shaped by the demands of the sea. They incorporated graceful sheers and fair lines from bow to stern and evoked the beauty of the entire boat without the need of elaborate superstructures.

Modern boats have turned this equation around, favoring the demands of the boating public over beauty and those of the sea, enlisting oversized and gratuitous houses to accommodate massive interiors, all in the name of commerce. Naval architects were the masters of the classic proportion and were solely responsible for the beauty of the boat. The new aesthetic, brought on by this reversal of pro-



Compare the sheer of the SS *United States* (shown) to those of today's cruise ships. Then share your thoughts with Michael at [Inbox@pmymag.com](mailto:Inbox@pmymag.com).

portion, requires a modern stylist to camouflage the hulking superstructure and save the day. The adage "a man would rather own an imperfect, but beautiful boat, than a perfect, but ugly boat" seems very outdated indeed. There was a time when the beauty of a boat was its very inspiration. "Cocktails at five in

the skylounge" seems to be the modern inspiration.

At the 2008 Yacht Vision symposium in New Zealand, the keynote speaker was the world's greatest living yacht designer, Olin Stephens. The audience was made up yacht designers and custom builders from all over the world, all of whom had such reverence for the man they would have hung on any word he said. To everyone's surprise, he chose that occasion to lament the loss of all the beautiful boats. Gone were the days of fine hulls with graceful lines, narrow beams, and beautiful sheers. What had happened to his beloved profession? Yachts had become distorted by people's demands instead of being shaped by the sea. At least he got his chance to shame us all and get this great disappointment off his chest before his death at 100 later that year.

Shortly after my return from New Zealand, I got a call from Marilyn Mower at *Showboats* magazine. She was doing a follow-up article on Olin Stephens's speech. For her article, she asked if I agreed with him, that boats are now ugly and not always designed with the best of naval architecture in mind. She was a bit surprised to hear that I wholeheartedly agreed with him. I explained that I had had to make a decision a long time ago between being a traditionalist or a commercially successful yacht designer. In a perfect world, I would design nothing but wooden boats with beautiful lines and be true to my artistic self, but I am a realist. I know that even Olin Stephens could not succeed in modern times with low-slung hulls and narrow beams with 5 feet 6 inches of headroom. That generation had passed and even he would have to adapt.

Thankfully there was a generation when boats were inspired by beauty alone and we are left with that legacy. □