

# Shipping Legitimacy and Identity The Danish Maritime Museum, 1915 and 2013

Sørensen, Anders Ravn

*Document Version*

Accepted author manuscript

*Published in:*

International Journal of Maritime History

*DOI:*

[10.1177/08438714231197762](https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714231197762)

*Publication date:*

2023

*License*

Unspecified

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Sørensen, A. R. (2023). Shipping Legitimacy and Identity: The Danish Maritime Museum, 1915 and 2013. *International Journal of Maritime History*, 35(4), 532-547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714231197762>

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# Shipping legitimacy and identity: The Danish Maritime Museum 1915 and 2013

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## Abstract

In this essay, I describe how the creation of the Danish maritime museums in 1915 and 2013—both generously funded by maritime foundations and actors—were perceived by the shipping industry as initiatives that would help market the industry in the eyes of the public. I argue more generally that national maritime museums constitute narrative focal points for disseminating narratives that legitimate maritime activities and establish these activities as symbols of national identities. I suggest that maritime historians, curators, and scholars reflect on the relationship between maritime industry actors and museum exhibition narratives and that they consider the interests and capital that potentially underpin museal and curatic decisions.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** maritime museums, national identity, Denmark, shipping, industry interests

## Introduction

The sea and maritime activities are potent sources of individual and collective identities. States and nations, too, have been associated with maritime historical narratives or traits constituting them as “seapower states” or “maritime nations”.<sup>2</sup> Surly, some nations are, from a geographical perspective, more maritime than others. But the mere measuring of coastline, navy size, or annual shipped tonnage in the merchant fleet are spurious indicators of what defines a maritime nation – or how collective maritime national identities are historically constructed. Coastlines, port cities, and ship docks alone do not create national identities. They only become important elements of national identities when they are interwoven in collective symbolic practices and emplotted in national identity narratives. National maritime identity needs to be continuously enacted and narrated. Other identity narratives, again, are more deliberate. Strategic, even, constructed with specific purposes and ends. These ends can be political, like the strengthening of national identities as part of ideological agendas – or they can be economic, to promote specific industry or company interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical material and quotes from museum actors, providing the basis of this paper’s argument, has previously been used to write a short museum review of The Maritime Museum of Denmark: Anders Ravn Sørensen, ‘Museet for Søfart, Elsinore, Denmark. Opened 2013’, *The American Historical Review*, 125, No. 5, (2019), 1814-1816.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Andrew Lampert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World* (Yale, 2018); Anders Ravn Sørensen, *Danmark som søfartsnation* (København, 2020); Geoff Quilley, *Empire to Nation - Art, History and the Visualization of Maritime Britain, 1768-1829* (Yale, 2011).

In this essay, I use the establishment of a Danish Maritime Museum in 1915 and again in 2013 as exemplary cases of such strategic identity-cultivating efforts. In both instances, separated by almost 100 years – Danish shipping industry actors thought of the museum as a showcase for the industry and a means to increase the legitimacy and public awareness of shipping.

While only a handful of studies have focused on the practices and narratives disseminated by maritime museums<sup>3</sup>, existing research on museums and public history has shown that museums (and especially large public and corporate museums) are essential vehicles for the production and reproduction of regional and national identity as well as collective memory.<sup>4</sup> But despite museums' obvious propensity to affect public discourse, identity, and collective memory – and despite the renown and success of many large maritime museums like the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum and Rotterdam Maritime Museum, few studies have focused on the role of maritime museums in legitimizing specific industries as parts of a broader national identity narrative—nor have they focused on the role that industry actors play in this process through funding these institutions.<sup>5</sup> Such analyses are necessary because they potentially shed light on the role that museums and industry actors play in producing and reproducing narratives that legitimate certain companies or even entire industries.

### Image 1

*Image 1: Opening of The Maritime Museum of Denmark. October 5, 2013. From left museum director Camilla Mordborst, Prince Henri, the regent of Denmark Margarethe II (a bodyguard), and CEO of the Danish Shipowners' Association.*

Governance structures and funding models differ between museums and national contexts. Most European maritime museums are wholly or partly funded by state grants (like the Danish Maritime Museum, where 1/3 of the budget is funded by the state, 1/3 by private donations, and 1/3 by ticket sales). In contrast, many American museums often rely on private funds and donors.

Notwithstanding the exact proportion of state funding, private donations and funds matter to most maritime museums. Museums are arenas for struggles over political interests as the

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<sup>3</sup> One example being: Lars U. Scholl, 'Maritime history at maritime museums', *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 32, No. 2 (2020), 434–443.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Nissley and Andrea Casey, 'The Politics of the Exhibition: Viewing Corporate Museums through the Paradigmatic Lens of Organizational Memory', *British Journal of Management*, 13, No. 2 (2002), 35-45; and Flora Kaplan, ed., *Museums and the making of "ourselves": the role of objects in national identity* (Leicester, 1995).

framing of exhibitions can be used to disseminate narratives that legitimate specific ideologies or economic practices.<sup>6</sup>

This essay demonstrates how museal representations of Danish maritime history were influenced and sponsored by actors in the shipping industry. It shows how the seemingly philanthropic contributions to the creation of the museum—the establishment of the first maritime museum in 1915 and later the new museum in 2013—were perceived by industry actors as means to produce and consolidate specific narratives that legitimized the Danish maritime sector as a natural and historically integrated part of the Danish industrial landscape. Thereby increasing the industry’s political and cultural clout and opportunities for recruitment. Using both archival material and contemporary interviews with maritime- and museum actors, I contrast and compare the creation of the museum in 1915 with the creation and opening of the new maritime museum in 2013. I point to the potential role that these museums had in producing and reproducing industry-legitimizing narratives, and I argue that industry actors, both in 1915 and in 2013, perceived the museums as showcases that helped underline the societal relevance of Danish shipping.

## Maritime history, museums, and identity

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the connection between maritime history and national identity.<sup>7</sup> Investigations into diverse topics such as German transatlantic steamships, Finnish icebreakers, British marine paintings and natural resources from the sea have been analyzed to shed light on their identity-cultivating qualities.<sup>8</sup> In a maritime museal context, Bruggman has analyzed how industry interests affected the curatic decisions of the whaling museum in Nantucket, and Leffler compared a series of maritime museums in Britain and the U.S. to show how museal representations of maritime heritage contributed to U.K and U.S national identities<sup>9</sup>. The American maritime museums in particular, disseminated narratives where, according to Leffler, “American capitalism, entrepreneurship,

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<sup>6</sup> One example is ‘Australia’s Productivity Narrative’ which was propagated by Australian museums. See Ian McShane, ‘Productive Nation? Museums, Cultural Policy and Australia’s Productivity Narrative’, *Museums & Society*, 14, No. 1 (2016), 131-145.

<sup>7</sup> One example being Duncan Redford, ed., *Maritime History and Identity. The sea and culture in the modern world* (London, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Tom Kristiansen and Roald Gjelsten, ‘The Small Country as a Maritime Great Power: The Case of Norway’ in *Maritime History and Identity. The sea and culture in the modern world*, Duncan Redford, ed., (London 2014); Geoff Quilley, *Empire to Nation Art, History and the Visualization of Maritime Britain, 1768-1829*, (Yale, 2011); Mark A. Russel, ‘Steamship nationalism: Transatlantic passenger liners as symbols of the German Empire’, *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 28, No. 2 (2016), 313– 334; Saara Matala and Aaro Sahari, ‘Small nation, big ships winter navigation and technological nationalism in a peripheral country, 1878–1978’, *History and Technology An International Journal*, 33 No. 2 (2017), 220-248.

<sup>9</sup> Seth C. Bruggman, ‘“A Most Complete Whaling Museum”: Profiting from the Past on Nantucket Island’, *Museum History Journal*, 8, No. 2 (2015), 188-208; and Phyllis Leffler, ‘Peopling the Portholes: National Identity and Maritime Museums in the U.S. and U.K.’, *The Public Historian*, 26, No. 4 (2004), 23-48.

social mobility, and success loom large.” In these narratives, “Maritime commerce provided the means for enormous growth by sea, which eventually fueled the development of American industry, and was the base upon which American strength was built.”<sup>10</sup>

While Leffler, coming from the fields of public and oral history, focused her analysis on the museal impact on national identity as a way of inventing a collective maritime heritage and forging an imagined national community, she essentially concludes that American maritime museums collectively inscribed ‘maritime commerce’ as a central element of American industry and greatness—and in doing so—legitimated an entire industry. As such, the maritime museums on both sides of the Atlantic contributed to public discourse and collective memory through their exhibitions and museal activities. Here, museums became focal points for disseminating specific narratives about maritime commerce’s social and economic importance.

The above studies on the role of museums in propagating national and regional identity and placing industry and business at the heart of such identity claims warrant further analyses of the relationship between museums and maritime industries. This is not to say that all industry museums use their exhibitions to engage in covert manipulation, nor that they deliberately frame their beneficiaries in a positive light. My ambition in the following analysis is more modest: to cultivate a scholarly and practitioners’ sensitivity to the fact that industry actors consider museums important in framing public discourse in the context of their specific business or industry. And because of the identity cultivating the potential of every museum and the legitimizing potential these museums have by making the past relevant in the present, it matters a great deal who pays for the exhibitions and whose interests, if any, the different curatic choices and deselections stand to benefit.

In the following analysis, I flesh out the entwinement of industry interests and public history in the creation of the Danish maritime museums in 1915 and 2013.

## Sources and analytical strategy

The empirical basis for the analyses in this essay springs from my involvement in a large research project on the cultural history of the Danish maritime sector. In connection with this project, I have had the opportunity to work with and interview employees at the Danish Maritime Museum, visit the archives of the Danish Shipowners’ Association, talk formally and informally with industry actors, and participate in different receptions and festivities connected to museal- and industry activities. As such,

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<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Leffler, ‘Peopling the Portholes: National Identity and Maritime Museums in the U.S. and U.K.’, *The Public Historian*, 26, No. 4 (2004), 46.

the essay is based on various data types—as well as different methodologies—from semi-structured interviews, an ethnographic endeavor of taking notes and recording speeches at different gatherings and meetings, to traditional archival research. The result is an essay that falls into two distinct parts: one part laying out a historical narrative based on sources from the early 20th century—and one part based on interviews and notes and recordings from interviews and public gatherings.

The first part describes the establishment of the original maritime museum in 1915. Here, I show how key maritime stakeholders exploited the maritime industry's economic and technological momentum to establish a cultural institution that would render the industry a much-desired cultural resonance. I base this part of the analysis on archival material from the Danish Maritime Museum, The Danish Shipowners' Association (DSA), and government documents deposited in the Royal Danish Library.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the establishment of the present-day museum in the old dry dock close to Kronborg Castle in Elsinor. This analysis relies on interviews with central stakeholders involved in establishing the new museum. Through two semi-structured interviews with shipping and museum actors, I detail the considerations that went into establishing the new museum—with an explicit focus on the interests and motivations on behalf of the Danish shipping industry. The interviewees include the former director of Danish Shipowners Association (DSA, who coordinated the conglomerate of Danish shipping foundations), as well as the former and present museum directors. The interviews are supplemented with information obtained from the interviews with internal documents from the industry and with publicly available sources such as the museum yearbook and newspaper articles. As such, the first part of the analysis relies on more 'traditional' historical research methods, while the second part is based largely on the oral accounts of industry and museum actors.

**Table 1: Sources and data**

Theme	Sources	Duration
<b>The 1915 museum</b>	Archival material from the archives of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Maritime Museum (<i>Søfartsmuseet</i>)</li> <li>- Danish Ministry of the Interior</li> <li>- Danish Ministry of Commerce and Trade</li> <li>- Contemporary newspaper articles</li> </ul> Secondary historical literature	
<b>The 2013 museum</b>	Semi-structured interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dan Pode Poulsen (Former director at the Danish Ship owners' Association and financial coordinator behind the museum foundation)</li> <li>- Jørgen Selmer (Director of the Danish Maritime Museum 2007-2013)</li> <li>- Ulla Tofte (Present day director of the Danish Maritime Museum)</li> </ul> Speech by Østergaard, 2018. Recorded by the author. Speech by Tofte, 2018. Recorded by the author.  Public and internal documents concerning the new museum: yearbooks, newspaper articles, and press releases.	1 h 01 55 min. 52 min.

### The first maritime museum at Kronborg 1915

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Danish maritime trade and technological advances were booming. Since the establishment of the Danish Shipowners' Association in 1884, shipping- and related maritime companies had come to play an increasing role in the national economy—although still heavily dominated by the agricultural sector, which employed about 80 percent of the Danish workforce. Large Danish shipping companies such as East Asiatic Company, led by the omnipotent industrialist H.N. Andersen and Danish shipyards such as Burmeister & Wain were making hefty profits. In 1912, as one of the world's leading shipbuilders, Burmeister and Wain, sponsored by H.N. Andersen, had managed to construct the first-ever diesel-driven ocean-going vessel, *Selandia*. It was a technological accomplishment that hailed enormous praise both domestically and internationally.<sup>11</sup>

Time and again, directors such as H.N. Andersen and his partner Admiral de Richelieu (head of the board of the largest Danish shipping company DFDS)—lamented the press, politicians, and leaders from agricultural organizations, for not acknowledging the maritime sectors' social and economic contribution. It was a comprehensive public campaign—and it seemed to be working. When British Secretary of the Navy, Winston Churchill, in 1912 visited *Selandia* in London, a prominent Danish newspaper quoted him for noting how:

<sup>11</sup> Anders Riis, *Selandia: verdens første oceangående motorskib* (København 2012).

We have accustomed ourselves to Denmark taking the lead in the field of agriculture, but that Denmark is also showing us the way at sea is a veritable surprise, which only augments our admiration for this wonderful little nation<sup>12</sup>

Danish shipping was experiencing economic and cultural momentum. But still, in the 1910s, there was no museum to tell the history of Danish shipping and trade - a situation that the industry and politicians were eager to remedy.

In 1913 museum inspector Emil Ferdinand Svitzer Lund was fired from his position as curator at the Frederiksborg Museum—a large cultural-historical museum at Frederiksborg Castle in Northern Zealand. Lund was a musician and art enthusiast, but he had no professional background in shipping. On the other hand, he was well-connected and came out of an influential maritime family. In 1833 Lund's grandfather founded the large *Svitzer Salvaging Enterprise*, later merged with the largest domestic Danish shipping company DFDS. After his firing, Lund had to look for a new job. Previously he had publicly aired the idea that the old castle at Kronborg should be transformed into a museum of the arts. Now, in the fall of 1913 Lund wrote a letter to the minister for public work and outlined his vision for an art museum at Kronborg.

In 1913 on October 22, he was invited to present the idea to the Minister of the Interior, Ove Rode. On the evening of the same day, in his hotel room close to Danish Parliament, Lund typed out a letter to Ove Rode—introducing an altogether new idea: "According to advice that I have been given, I am convinced that a museum for trade and shipping at Kronborg Castle would win great support".<sup>13</sup> With its strategic location overseeing the Oresund (the entranceway to the Baltic Sea), Kronborg castle had, since the middle ages, played a crucial role in commanding Oresund Toll—one of the primary sources of income for the Danish crown throughout centuries.

Now, without having previously talked about a maritime museum, Lund proposed to Ove Rode that he “appoint representatives of institutions for trade and shipping to form a museum board”. Lund pointed explicitly to the companies *East Asiatic Company* and *Burmeister & Wain* whom he had been told would “exhibit models of ships and machines”.<sup>14</sup> Exactly who had suggested to Lund the idea of a maritime museum, he did not disclose in the letter. However, one must assume that Lund's shipping connections played a role. His hotel was placed directly adjacent to the headquarter of East Asiatic Company, and he had only had to cross the street to visit the influential director H. N. Andersen.

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<sup>12</sup> Churchill quoted in Riis, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Emil Ferdinand Svitzer Lund, 22. Oct. 1913, *Unpublished letter. The archive of M/S Denmark's Maritime Museum. Letter from Lund to minister of the interior Ove Rode.*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



Notwithstanding whom Lund had been talking to that October afternoon, it is evident that there was considerable political and economic power behind the museum-ambition. Within two months of Lund's meeting, the minister had followed his advice and put together a museum commission consisting of heavyweights within Danish shipping and the political establishment. The commission included, among others, H.N. Andersen, director of DFDS, Cold, the minister of trade, and Ove Rode himself. The commission further established a four-person board to lay the groundwork for the museum. This board consisted of Martin Dessau (director of the shipyard Burmeister & Wain), Johan Hansen (former minister of shipping and commerce and director of the Danish Shipowners Association) Emil Glückstad (son of one of the founders of East Asiatic Company), and industrialist Harald Klitgaard. These four men worked enthusiastically with Lund to make the maritime museum a reality. In a central Copenhagen newspaper, the board members lobbied for the museum cause and argued that "practical life" deserves its own museum. A museum should not be reserved for arts or sciences." To make the project a reality, the board pleaded for all Danish companies of commerce and shipping to contribute to the new museum.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, half of the funding needed for the new museum came from industry actors who were making large profits during WW1 profiting from Danish neutrality.

### **An industry in need of love**

In a remarkable swift effort, with only 14 months of preparation, the museum opened its doors in Kronborg Castle in August 1915. At the opening ceremony, Admiral Richelieu gave a speech in which he succinctly described the purpose of the new museum as he saw it, as well as the motivations on behalf of the maritime actors for sponsoring such an initiative:

In the past, we have heard a lot about how agriculture—and I would like to admit our excellent agriculture—has become our country's primary occupation [...] but when Denmark, in recent years has risen to progress and prosperity around the world, it is due to our industry, trade and shipping; These sectors feed and clothes about half of Denmark's population and they provide occupations for our ever-growing population [...]. We all see our industry, because it is scattered all over our country and close to all of us, but maritime and overseas trade is less visible. They work quietly and unseen by most, and although maritime professions in recent years have bolstered our country's reputation most beautifully and have rolled waves of gold into our shores, they have, however, not been embraced with the interest and love that I think they deserve.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 'Kronborg-Museet', *København*, April 16, 1914.

<sup>16</sup> Admiral Richelieu 'Tale ved Musæets Aabning 1. August 1915', *Helsingør Avis*, August 2, 1915.

In Richelieu's view, the museum would serve to increase the reputation of the maritime industry and hopefully incite the kind of affection it was rightfully owed by society. And he wrapped up his speech with a forceful finale:

Every nation lives not only in the present but also in its past and memories. It is now understood that any industry, such as maritime and overseas trade, has a past and a history that is of the greatest importance to future developments and future collective memories. Such memories will now shine like beacons of the greatest importance to posterity because they render to future generations courage and power to know what their ancestors have been able to accomplish in these areas.<sup>17</sup>

Richelieu considered the museum a catalyst for constructing a collective memory in which the shipping industry was framed as the foremost contributor to Danish welfare and prosperity. He hoped that the museum would inspire future generations and inscribe maritime industries at the center of national Danish history and identity.

On display at the new Kronborg museum were, as Lund had envisioned in his 1913 letter, ship models and equipment from East Asiatic Company, Burmeister & Wain, DFDS, and the Svitzer Salvage Company. In its first years, the museum was regularly sponsored by shipping companies and other maritime businesses—but the museum was struggling economically due to low revenue streams. In 1920 Johan Hansen and rising shipping magnate A. P. Møller convinced the board of the DSA to donate a lump sum of 100,000 kr. to the museum to secure its future survival.<sup>18</sup> As a comparison, back in 1914, the museum had been established on a 20,000 donation (10,000 kr. From the Danish state and 10,000 kr. as collective private contributions).

### **Museum in the dock 2013**

While the previous section focused on the establishment of the museum in 1915, the next section focuses on the creation of the new museum that opened in 2013. Ten years earlier, in 2003, the Maritime Museum was still located at Kronborg Castle—but the narrow hallways and rooms in the Renaissance castle were not ideal for a museum. In fact, from a museal perspective, they never had been. The exhibition halls were dark and crowded, and with its large display of ship models and exotic maritime curiosa, the museum came across as somewhat dated.

The museum received an annual grant from the Danish state to supplement the income from visitors. When the Danish Ministry of Culture in 2003 produced a report that evaluated all state-

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes from the DSA board meeting. DSA archive. *Bestyrelsesprotokol*, April 3, 1919.

funded museums, the Ministry gave the Maritime Museum a lukewarm review. The ministry suggested that the museum be merged with The Fisheries and Maritime Museum, located more than 300 km away in the western part of Denmark in the city of Esbjerg. Traditionally, since the founding of the harbor in 1868, Esbjerg had been an industrious fishing port and the gateway of Danish agricultural exports to the British markets. Adding to this, back in 2000, Kronborg Castle was granted UNESCO World Heritage status, which further accentuated the idea that the museum should be relocated.

As such, the board of the Maritime Museum at Kronborg (which consisted primarily of representatives from Danish maritime companies) faced an ultimatum: Find a new location or suffer the very likely risk of being merged with the fisheries museum in Esbjerg. To DSA and its director Peter Bjerregaard in particular, the merger was undesirable. Merging with a fishing museum would risk diluting the Kronborg museum's profile as a shipping museum that told the story of maritime commerce.<sup>19</sup>

At a board meeting in September 2004 DSA director Peter Bjerregaard underlined how it was of great importance that: “the relocation of the Kronborg-museum insured the continued existence of a maritime museum in Denmark—and in that process, the museum should undergo a revitalization, so as to better promote the industry of shipping and maritime commerce”.<sup>20</sup>

As DSA representative on the museum board, director Dan Pode Poulsen, began investigating the possibilities for relocating the museum to a better-suited location. These possibilities were discussed in a report authored by Poulsen in November 2004 and included, amongst other locations, the old Burmeister & Wain shipyard facilities at the harbor front in Copenhagen. However, the aging and influential shipping magnate Mærsk KcKinney-Møller — who, as head of the A.P. Møller foundation, was one of the most likely financial contributors to a new museum—found that Elsinor, with its historical ties to Danish Maritime commerce, a preferable choice (It was Mærsk McKinney Møllers father, A. P. Møller, who in 1919 had secured the museum its 100,000 kr. donation).<sup>21</sup>

When an old dry dock adjacent to Kornborg Castle became available in 2006 it was identified as the most obvious location. As a member of the museum board and director of the DSA, it was Dan Pode Poulsen who coordinated the planning and funding activities necessary to make a new museum a reality. From the beginning, it was clear that the A. P. Møller Foundation would only fund about one-third of the costs. The rest of the expenses had to be financed by contributions from a handful of other actors—most of them within the shipping industry.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Poulsen, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Danish Shipowners' Association, *Minutes from board meeting*, September 8, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Selmer (2018) and Poulsen (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Poulsen (2018)

Following an architecture competition Bjarke Ingels and his BIG-Group was chosen to make the drawings for the new museum. The winning suggestion by BIG was to place the museum below the waterline—not in the dock itself but carved out of the concrete walls—as an innovative solution that would considerably raise construction costs. Now that the blueprints for the museum had been outlined arose the matter of actual funding this expensive endeavor. The A. P. Møller Foundation had made an unofficial pledge to fund parts of it, but most of the contributions still had to be solicited from key foundations.

As part of his tactics, when talking with potential contributors to the industry, Dan Pode Poulsen underlined how: “a least 30 percent of the activities at the museum should be dedicated to contemporary issues. The maritime industry must have the opportunity to inform the public about the industry – and to raise present-day issues such as, for example, CO2 or plastic pollution”.<sup>23</sup> In the view of Poulsen and the DSA; the museum should serve as a tool to promote the industry in the eyes of politicians and the population. “To potential contributors, I framed the museum as the industry’s showcase. The museum should be the industry’s ambassador”, Poulsen recalls in a research interview. “An interest organization needs to explain what their industry is about to muster a broad political and popular support”.<sup>24</sup>

## Image 2

*Image 2: Maritime Museum of Denmark in the old Elsinore dry-dock with Kronborg Castle only a couple of 100 m. away.*

These were some of the arguments that swayed 11 foundations and private charities to raise enough capital for the project. These arguments were also explicitly articulated in the museum’s 2004 report. Here, the museum was framed as an initiative to potentially bolster the staggering recruitment to the shipping industry by appealing to children and youth.<sup>25</sup> In the report, the museum was described as an institution that would not only tell a story about the industry’s historical importance but also about the present-day and societal relevance of the entire maritime sector. And in doing so, the report stated, there would be an element of “marketing” on behalf of the sector.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Handels og Søfartsmuseet på Kronborg, Unpublished report, *Udkast. Handels og Søfartsmuseet på Kronborg. Oplæg til fremtidig profil og fremtidig placering af museet* (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Danish Shipowners’ Association, *Minutes from board meeting*, September 8, 2004.

After almost 9 years of preparation, the new museum opened in October 2013. Inside the dock, the museum organized a handful of thematic exhibitions, starting with the cultural impact of seafaring, the harbor, navigation, war at sea, and trade and globalization.

### Image 3

*Image 3: The Dream Ship. The museum playground with a host of maritime activities for the youngest museumgoers.*

In the first year, more than 100,000 visitors walked through the exhibitions. Both the building itself and the exhibitions were lavished with praise by newspapers and reviewers who readily confirmed the historical and societal importance of maritime commerce. In an interview with the large business newspaper, *Børsen*, Dan Pode proudly explained how Danish maritime commerce had always played a crucial role in Danish history and had become a “part of the Danish national soul”.<sup>27</sup> Both politicians and the media eagerly reproduced this narrative. In the large Danish newspaper *Berlingske*, one reviewer noted as a final remark, quoting the engraved inscription on an old gold coin at display in one of the exhibitions: “By navigating the seas, we prosper”. Yes, the reviewer remarked, “We have prospered ever since. Denmark is indeed a great seafaring nation”.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it seemed the museum was bolstering Danish maritime identity and promoting the shipping industry.

In another interview with the same newspaper, museum director Camilla Mordhorst accentuated the perceived omni-temporal relevance of the shipping industry: “The most exciting thing about maritime commerce is that the industry has just a long life ahead, as it has a history behind it. Denmark has always been a seafaring nation. To me, the exciting thing about being at a museum is how the past and the present are connected”, she told the interviewer while pointing at the nearby Oresund that is passed through by more than 30,000 vessels annually.<sup>29</sup>

In 2018 the museum opened a new exhibition alongside its other thematically organized exhibitions focusing on areas such as port life, maritime culture, navigation, and warfare. The new ‘Magic Box’ exhibition was, in effect, an upgrade of the existing globalization exhibition. It was financially sponsored by the shipping company *Norden*, the maritime foundation *D/S Orients Fond* and *Danish Maritime*—and a lobby organization for Danish producers of maritime technologies and services.

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<sup>27</sup> Karen Fredslund Ellegaard, ‘Manden bag søfartsmuseet’, *Børsen*, October 10, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Torben Weirup, ‘Anm: Havet omkring Danmark på museum’, *Berlingske Tidende*, October 5, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Henrik Dannemand, ‘Nyt museum i den gamle dok’, *Berlingske Tidende*, October 2, 2013.

It was launched at a festive event on April 25. The guest list included members of the board in DSA, industry leaders, and politicians—and the Danish Crown Prince Fredrik had been invited to cut the exhibition chains with a bolt cutter. Before the opening, the head of the museum board and director of the board Danish Transport and Logistics Association Erik Østergaard delivered a speech explaining how he saw the museum and its role in society: “We consider ourselves, here at the museum, as display window”, Østergaard told the guest, “Underlining both a historical and contemporary relevance ... It is my hope that the museum will continue developing exhibitions such as The Magic Box, which highlight the maritime industries’ great importance for Denmark and our country’s global role as one of the leading maritime nations”<sup>30</sup>.

The new museum director Ulla Tofte, in her opening speech, focused on the environmental agendas in the new exhibition:

Themes like climate and CO2 emissions were not relevant to Danish shipping companies. Such issues were, to some extent, taboo within the industry. Today, DSA and Danish Maritime are focusing on climate issues. They have made such issues a source of competitive advantage. Areas where Denmark needs to be an absolute first mover in the future <sup>31</sup>

As an accentuation of the revolutionary importance of containerization, the deceased shipping magnate Mærsk McKinney-Møller explained, in a permanent film installation about the efficiency and historical importance of the container. In addition, quite many of the different exhibits and accompanying texts told stories of new climate-friendly fuels and “green” ships, from battery-driven vessels to modern sails.

## Image 4

*Image 4: The Magic Box showcases with models of fuels efficient vessels.*

As such, part of the exhibition told a story about the maritime industry’s effort to develop more climate-friendly transportation.

The symbiotic relationship between the Danish shipping industry and the museum raises some obvious questions about the role of the museum in legitimizing the industry, providing it with a particular cultural resonance. The relationship between museums and industry simultaneously raises questions about the level of industry criticism that can be formulated through museum exhibitions.

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<sup>30</sup> Speech by Østergaard, 2018. Recorded by the author.

<sup>31</sup> Speech by Tofte, 2018. Recorded by the author.

While the exhibition on globalization was relatively harmless, in the eyes of the industry, one could easily imagine more controversial themes and exhibitions that would raise eyebrows in the boardrooms of the supporting foundations. Or, as the former director of the maritime museum from 2007-2013, Jørgen Selmer pondered in an interview, sitting in his new office as head of the Royal Museum of Rosenborg Castle, which had just opened an exhibition about the Danish crown prince in celebration of his 50 year birthday:

“The issues of industry criticism that was potentially present in our exhibitions were never discussed when I served as a director at the maritime museum. It was more of an implicit understanding that we, as a maritime museum had no obvious interest in deliberately framing the shipping industry in an unfavorably light. Just as we, in the exhibition about the Crown Prince here at Rosenborg, do not emphasize how the Crown Prince, in his youth, sometimes got drunk and partied out on the town”.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions

This kind of “implicit understanding”, akin to politicizing curatic decisions, is a component of most museum governance.<sup>33</sup> Museal decisions, framings, and narrative choice are critical tasks for any curator – be that on national art galleries or maritime museums. However, as maritime activities have historically and today remained part of an important industry sector with financial and political capital to pursue particular policy aims and promote maritime narratives and identities, it becomes essential for curators and maritime museums to reflect on the relationship between industry actors and museum governance to safeguard curatic autonomy.

By using the establishment of the Danish maritime museum in 1915 and 2013, I have shown that The Maritime Museum of Denmark, funded by maritime industry actors with the explicit aim of highlighting the maritime sector’s historical and cultural importance, thereby increasing the sector’s cultural and political legitimacy. In both cases, the maritime museums were created on the initiative of industry actors. In particular, the Danish Shipowners’ Association in the early 2000s thought of the museum as a display window targeted at children and youth that made out the pool of prospective recruits to the industry.

The museum connected past and present in forceful identity narratives about Denmark’s maritime past. At the same time, the museum was perceived, both by industry actors, directors, and

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Selmer, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Clive Gray, ‘*Structure, Agency and Museum Policies*’, *Museums & Society*, 14, No 1 (2016): online publication DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v14i1.629>.

curators, as a museum for the present. A museum whose job it was to accentuate the contemporary relevance of the Danish maritime sector. This agenda of presentism was illustrated in the exhibition, *The Magic Box*, with the explicit ambition to show how shipping and maritime activities played an often unnoticed but crucially important role in our daily lives. Not only did the exhibition offer an opportunity to underline the relevance of the shipping industry as service providers that bind the world together—the display of full-efficient vessels in the exhibition furthermore underlined the industry’s commitment to a global environmental agenda.

The above analysis does not imply that the Danish Maritime Museum, or other museums that receive funding from private actors and industry foundations engage in manipulative practices and abuse history in ways that frame them positively. On the other hand, it is similarly evident from the accounts in this essay that the ambition of 100% professional objectivity is elusive—if the mere existence of the museum is founded on precisely the mission of disseminating the history of Danish shipping and maritime commerce. There is no way around for a museum, such as The Danish Maritime Museum, to tell the story of Danish shipping. And in doing so, the museum continuously accentuates the past, present and future relevance of that industry. This dilemma was not only pertinent on the level of the curatic decisions in the virtual exhibitions. As the former director Ulla Tofte told me, as the regular government grant to the museum does not even cover daily operations, the museum inherently depends on support from foundations. This relationship constantly accentuates considerations about what kind of exhibitions and activities the museum can engage in. “Outside interests do not dictate the museum”, Tofte told me. “But I must constantly evaluate new initiatives in the light of what these external stakeholders and financial supporters might think of them”.<sup>34</sup>

The original museum from 1915 constituted a deliberate attempt to make the Danish public “love” Danish shipping and create a national maritime identity, as formulated by the late admiral Richelieu. Today, the renewed museum is engaged in an ongoing struggle, trying to resist industry efforts to use its public history strategically. A situation that is most likely not an isolated Danish phenomenon but pertinent in all cases where distinct interests inform maritime museums and public history initiatives. While this essay has focused on a specific Danish case, the case is potentially relevant in every context where industry means are invested in disseminating maritime history.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Tofte, 2018.